Ciudat Atragerea

by Jubalii

Summary

Their's was an unconventional relationship, founded by whimsy and fueled by loyalty. When those aren't enough, something more is born from the ashes. (AxS, AAxI, and Walter is the fifth wheel)

Notes

Author's Note: For those of you who care about such things-ESCAPE is a real radio drama that aired in the 1950s. It can be found online in both html format, and as a recording that you can listen to for free.
I reached for the cigarettes. There was only one left in the packet. I lit it. I threw it on the empty fire…and watched it burn.

Seras stared at the fire, when suddenly a voice pierced through the dim room.

“Under the direction of Norman Macdonnell, ESCAPE has brought you “The Birds” by Daphne du Maurier, specially adapted for radio by Robert Ryf, starring Ben Wright with Virginia Gregg. Featured in the cast where John Deh-” Walter clicked off the radio and Seras stretched before pulling herself off the floor.

This was a Thursday night tradition of theirs: relaxing in the sitting-room while listening to a channel that still played old radio shows-chiefly the half-hour thriller ESCAPE. Seras enjoyed it because it was the closest thing to television that she was able to get in the boring mansion; Walter enjoyed it because the outdated shows reminded him of his youthful days.

They listened together; Seras often sprawled on her stomach on the rug, Walter in “his” comfy chair with closed eyes and a smile on his face. They both escaped the rigors of their lives for 30 minutes, wrapped in up in the retelling of “The Most Dangerous Game” or “The Fall of the House of Usher” (Seras’ personal favorite). They’d heard the stories at least a thousand times, but it seemed as though neither of them cared as they kept meeting up at exactly 6:59 pm each week.

In all honesty, Seras often looked forward to their ritual; it relaxed her before she went to train with Alucard or on a mission with her men. She was pretty sure Walter looked forward to it as well; the one time that she was forced to miss it, he’d given her a sad glance-although he’d brushed her apologies aside.

Shaking the thoughts from her head, she bid Walter bye for the moment and made her way down to Alucard’s chambers. They hadn’t had a mission in two days, and already Seras was feeling antsy as she walked through the cooler air of the lower levels. That wasn’t a good thing….if she was bored, that meant Alucard was bored, and a bored Alucard wasn’t something very beneficial to have on your hands.

The hairs on her neck rose slightly but she didn’t falter, continuing her stroll. Contrary to her outward indifference, she was actually on high alert as she tried implementing her training. Alucard’s mentorly advice rang in her mind as she walked, branching out her sixth sense as easily as she did her sense of sight or hearing. After a long moment she stopped and stared a spot next to her, looking at a blank cement wall.

“I see you,” she called in a sing-song voice. Her master emerged from the spot, a satisfied expression on his face.
“Very good; much faster than last time,” he said with a nod. “But it took you far too long to find me. I’d have killed you by now if I wanted to.” Seras frowned slightly, making a mental note to work harder on observing her surroundings. “Where were you?” he added, falling into step beside her on their way to the basement. “Your mind was elsewhere this evening.”

“I was with Walter,” Seras replied with a shrug. Alucard gave her a look but said nothing. They reached his chambers and Seras waited, as always, until he invited her in with a wave of his hand. Even if he never asked permission to enter her room, she’d never felt right about just barging in his although she was pretty sure that he didn’t mind. In fact, she had half a mind to believe she was the only one allowed in his room at all.

“You’re right,” he said in answer to her thoughts, although he didn’t clarify which one he’d meant to answer. Maybe he meant both? His outerwear vanished with a wave of his hand, leaving him in his suit and boots. Seras looked around the sparsely furnished room curiously. She’d never been inside farther than his chair, but she saw the only other furnishings were his coffin and an old cupboard. Feeling bold, she walked over to the cupboard and looked at the items littering the top of it. A tiny hand mirror caught her eye and she picked it up, admiring her image in the glass.

“Do you often stay with Walter when you’re not with me?” he asked, not bothering to look around the chair and see what she was up to. She put the mirror down and picked up a leather-bound book.

“Yeah, I do most of the time. Every once in a while I used to visit Sir Integra but since she’s currently…unavailable I suppose that’s out of the question.” The poor woman still had a full three months of prison left, and Alucard refused to take her to visit.

She flipped the pages and frowned when she found it was in a foreign language. Going to the last page, she found that part of the book was empty, but the last written page had her name on it, familiar against the strange words. Maybe it’s Master’s memoirs? she considered before returning the book to its former spot.

“And for how long?” he asked quietly. Seras stopped, looking at the back of the throne before moving down to open the cupboard door. It was filled with golden objects. Making a face (money didn’t seem so important anymore when you supposedly lived forever) she closed the door and moved over to view the coffin.

“Um, about thirty minutes or so? Maybe longer—it depends on how many chores he has to do. Most of the time we have to make anything we do rather hasty. We still have fun though.” She fought the urge to finger the beautiful lettering on the lid. A vampire’s coffin was a sacred thing; you didn’t just touch it without the owner’s permission. Suddenly she felt his mind spear her own and she jumped with a yelp. She put a hand on her temple and spun to face the chair.

“Ow! I wasn’t gonna touch it, I promise!” she half-moaned and stomped back around to the front of the chair, her exploration over for the moment. She wavered when she saw his hands clenching
the armrests, his knuckles white against his already-pale skin. “What’s the matter?” she asked hesitantly. “Master?”

“No. Do not do anything with Walter again. I forbid it.” His voice was deathly quiet and forceful. Seras blinked once, twice before the meaning sat in. No more Thursday night radio? No more helping with the laundry or training together? Unacceptable!

“Master, no!” she gasped. “Walter’s one of the only friends I’ve had in my entire life! Don’t do this to me!” she said angrily. Alucard looked up sharply, his eyes boring into hers.

“What do you need friends for?” he sneered. “You’ve got me for eternity, since you won’t drink my blood.” Seras shook her head in exasperation, trying to think of a way to make him understand.

“Yes, that’s right! I’ve got you for eternity; can’t I enjoy Walter while he’s still young enough to do things with?” she reasoned, half-hopeful. She saw immediately that that was the wrong thing to say. He growled low in his throat, throwing himself from the chair to tower over her menacingly. She gasped and backed up, her instincts screaming at her: Run away, stupid bloke!

“No! He won’t have you—you’re mine,” Alucard hissed and grabbed her wrist, trying to drag her to him despite her boots scrambling as she tried to get away. He tightened his hold and she heard her bone cracking and squealed in pain, jerking her arm.

“Master!” she cried in disbelief, trying to pry his fingers off before he crushed her. He let go and she went crashing to the floor, sprawled out on the hard stone with an aching tailbone. She whimpered and pulled her wounded arm to her chest, looking up at him, tears in her eyes. She began to realize that there was no reasoning on the matter; her heart clenched at the thought of losing her only friend and she resorted to pure begging. “Master, please don’t do this. Don’t keep me away from him, please.” She saw the answer in his eyes and stood; her heart breaking as it felt the weight of his judgment.

She spasmed and her vision completely blurred as she let out a broken sob, unable to hold back any longer. Turning, she ran out of the room and slammed the heavy door, sprinting up a level to her own room and slamming her own door as well. She flung herself on the bed, not caring whether she turned her nice white sheets red with bloody tears. She just held her pillow and cried as loudly as she could, feeling more alone now than she ever did as a human being.

Hours later, she felt the sun beginning to rise but she remained where she was, rocking her pillow as she sat against the wall. She’d sobbed until she threw up from overexertion, but as soon as she was done she’d sat in the bathroom next to the toilet and began to cry again. Part of her was reminded of her human days where she’d had PMS and had sat alone in her flat, blubbering like an idiot because she forgot to buy paper towels at the store. But this felt different: after all these years, she’d finally found a true friend only to have her master’s orders keeping them apart.

It wasn’t as if she had to follow his command—sure, she wanted to please him but she’d
disobeyed before and didn’t die from it or anything. It was more out of fear of what he’d do if she disobeyed. He could hurt her, but worse than that: he wouldn’t hesitate to maim or kill Walter. She’d never forgive herself if that had happened.

She finally sniffed for the last time and wiped her eyes on a blood-soaked bath towel that she’d been using as a makeshift hanky. She listened to the sound of silence, punctuated by the ticking of the clock on the dresser. When she’d first begun her breakdown, she’d heard Walter pounding on the door, but that was the last thing she’d needed so she ignored him for the moment. She’d heard him go away soon after, and part of her rationalized that her master may have made him leave her alone.

As for Alucard, he’d tried to worm his way into her mind, but she’d imagined her mental-self slamming a door in his smug face and suddenly he was gone. She realized that she’d just learned something, but half-heartedly conceded that although he didn’t, he could have crushed her mental block into fine dust without breaking a sweat.

The man in question popped from the brickwork above her head and she looked wearily at him, emotionally drained. He sniffed at the bath towel in disdain before stepping fully from the wall to address her.

“Have you finished with your little womanly display?” he asked in irritation. “You seemed dead-set on busting my eardrums. Things echo in this basement, you know—and enhancing your sobs with your powers doesn’t help much either.” Seras closed her eyes, not wanting to look at him.

“I wasn’t enhancing my sobs with my powers,” she muttered. Now that she’d quieted down, she felt exhausted. I thought crying was supposed to help you feel better, not worse.

“Au contraire. They sounded through the entire grounds. You had all the soldiers running up to the doors because they thought it was some new alarm system,” Alucard continued. “You certainly know how to make a nuisance of yourself.” From his tone, one would have assumed he was pleased as punch that she had created such an uproar.

Seras felt the first edges of anger curling at her mind. She fingered the sopping towel thoughtfully, a plan working in her brain. She vaguely heard her master ask her something, but she ignored him, instead reaching down to find herself—more specifically, the seat of her powers.

“Answer me. Are you listening, Police Girl?” Alucard asked, and she looked up to glare at him balefully. He narrowed his eyes slightly and crossed his arms, preparing for another fight on her part. She mimicked his stance, crossing her arms and turning slightly on the bed to keep him from her direct line of sight. When he prodded her again to answer, she turned her head and stuck her nose in the air. If he wanted to treat her like a spoiled child, then by God she was going to act like a spoiled child.

Alucard pressed his lips in a thin line. Seras kept her powers focused on him but her eyes closed, using her other senses rather than sight alone to keep her master in check. She heard a snarl and her chin was jerked around violently in a vice grip. She opened her eyes to glower at him, her mouth
turned in an angry pout. He repeated his question a third time, and she replied by trying to yank her head out of his hand. When it didn’t work, she looked down until he was forced to get close to her face. Gathering her courage, she quickly prayed to whatever god would listen before spitting dead in his left eye. He jerked back in surprise, blinking his eyes rapidly before scowling and back-handing her across the bed. She twisted in the air and landed on all fours without a sound, just like he’d taught her on the training field.

He wiped the remaining spit rolling down his cheek with one thumb as he clomped over toward her, his lip curling and showing the edge of one fang. She bristled like an animal, reminding herself that she was only doing this to make a point (although at this point, it didn’t seem to be getting across too well).

She stood, refusing to give in to the fleeting urge to run away from the incoming danger. He raised his hand to hit her again and she caught it mid-slap, pushing against it in a power struggle before giving up when he clearly won, using the momentum from his arm to maneuver out of the way. His nostrils flared and she glanced up to see his eyes were mere slits, a surefire sign that he was beyond pissed.

“You are mine and yet you dare to rebel against me? Do you honestly need to be taught your place?” he gritted out around his teeth, clearly showing an enormous amount of restraint.

“Maybe I don’t want to be yours anymore!” she shouted defiantly. “Maybe I want to be free, so I can be with my friends! What next; you’re going to force me to stay in this room because a soldier smiled at me on a mission?” Rather than yelling back, Alucard seemed to freeze for a long moment.

“You would rather be free,” he said plainly, more a simple fact than a question. He gave her a stony look before biting his wrist and offering it to her. “Be free then.” Seras stared at the blood dripping down his arm. She felt a strange twist in her stomach: she couldn’t give up now, but she didn’t really mean that she wanted to be a No-Life-Queen just yet!

Weighing her options, Seras gulped and moved toward him, her ego not allowing her to admit defeat. She gave him a sorrowful look, their eyes meeting briefly before she leaned forward, sticking her tongue out to catch the first drop of blood that was going to fall from his forearm. Before she was able to get a single lick in, he jerked his arm away, giving her a strange look.

“You really would have,” he said in amazement. Seras stared up at him in confusion. Didn’t he want this—didn’t he offer her the exact same thing back when he first turned her? What changed between then and now? He offered no explanation, simply turning away silently and phasing down through the floor. Seras blinked in surprise before stomping her foot hard in annoyance, leaving a crack in the solid cement. Grumbling to herself, she went to bed. Crossing her hands on her lap, she watched the lid close on her with an infuriated expression, heavy with the thought that she never got the message across to her boneheaded sire.
Across the town, Sir Integral Fairbrook Wingates Hellsing lay in the same position on her flimsy prison mattress. She cursed and rubbed her shoulder. You’d think that the royal prison would have better quality cells. But then again, it was a prison. She grumbled quietly and noticed a peculiar set of cracks in the old ceiling. She turned her head on the pillow and glared at the cracks, trying to see an image in the new distraction in her boring cell. If she squinted, she decided that she could see Paladin Anderson doing the Limbo with a Munchkin.

As if she’d summoned him with her thoughts, the guard gave three short raps on the door. Turning face down in the pillow, she groaned softly.

“Come in,” she called, her voice muffled by the pillow. She heard the door open and the familiar sound of boots clomping along the floor, just as they did every Friday at 11:00 am. She didn’t even bother acknowledging her visitor, instead pretending that she could smother herself in the pillow.

“Ach. Lady Hellsing, is this any way to treat a guest in your room?” the heavily-accented voice asked from somewhere near her head. She wearily pulled herself from the pillow to come nose-to-nose with the admirable Alexander Anderson, who had kneeled next to the bed. She gave him a deadpan look, furrowing her brows. The vampire slayer smiled darkly and flicked her glasses askew before taking a seat at the table. Integra tchched when she realized that (like all other times) he was going to be staying.

“Do me a favor, Father. Get me some cigars in this place. I’m irritable without my cigars,” she spat, sitting across from him and running an anxious hand through her hair. Integra Hellsing may not be the most emotional of people, but a year with only a tiny cell and an adjoining bathroom would make anyone a little loopy. Not to mention the cuffs she was still forced to wear unless she was bathing. The Father gave her a rather sympathetic glance and shook his head.

“I cannae do that. Try to hold out; you only have three months left,” he reminded her. She sighed and put her head in her hands, staring at the grain of the table.

“I know, but my orders are to try every week just the same,” the paladin said with a shrug. “Besides, don’t you like having someone to talk to?” he added. Integra frowned; he had her there.

“I don’t like the jokes Alucard makes about it. He can smell that you were here, you know. I’ve heard so many celibacy jokes that I can’t stand it anymore. If I had my gun, I’d of shot myself already.” She shrugged and tapped the wood nervously, needing for her hands to do something.
Anderson rubbed his stubble thoughtfully, chuckling to himself.

“I’m not though…funny that the heathen was once one of our flock, and he still mocks what he doesn’t know.” Integra blinked at him blankly before holding up her hands.

“I thought all Catholics were abstinent.” Anderson rolled his eyes.

“It’s more of a discipline than a doctrine. It’s to become closer to God. I probably would if I weren’t an exception. I have to sire the next Regenerator in line.” He grimaced at the thought with an air of expected resignation. Integra nodded slowly; she too had certain obligations in the same area.

“I understand. I have to have an heir someday to the Hellsing line, but…” they finished her thought together.

“who can handle being part of such a burden?” they looked at each other in surprise, both coloring slightly before exhaling in unison. “You too?” Integra asked, her tone gentle. Anderson nodded. “Not many women want a man who is stalked by unholy beings each night. Even the other Iscariots have their own spouses, or have indeed chosen abstinence. It’s hard to accept that fairytale monsters exist, when you grow up being blissfully unaware.” Anderson mimicked her posture, his chin on one fist.

“Over half of my soldiers think I’m really a suppressed homosexual, and my job doesn’t allow me to socialize much anyway.” Integra twirled a strand of bangs around her finger, her mouth set in a thin line. “I guess that maybe the police girl could set me up with a blind date. She gets out often enough, I think.” The pair sat quietly, lost in their own slight self-pity at what fate had thrown them. Anderson’s watch beeped and he glanced quickly at it.

“ Noon.” He said dismissively. Usually, he left at this time, reminding her that he’d be back next week. This time was no exception and he rose, calling for the guard. He reached the door and turned, completing the ritual. “I’ll return next week, Lady Hellsing,” but his tone lacked the usual sarcastic edge. Some understanding passed between the two and Integra dismissed him with a nod, going back to the bed to sit and await her servant and his usual mockery.

Chapter End Notes

- I have posted this story also to fanfiction.net and destiny's gateway. While I will be preserving most of my author notes from those sites faithfully here, I do plan on omitting some that I find are no longer necessary to the story. So don't be confused if some Juju-isms aren't where you remember if it you happen to be rereading it on this site!
“How dare you say that; after I just sat here and told you all the mean things he’s done!” Seras stalked across the grounds with the Harkonnen slung over her shoulder, heading for the training grounds. Her second-in-command Harry Stevenson panted after her, tugging the heavy metal case of ammunition.

Seras enjoyed Harry’s company. When he’d first arrived as a freckle-faced rookie, she’d been wary of his inexperience but he’d proved himself time and time again to be a strong and strategic soldier and moved up the ranks quickly, especially during the crucial training days following the Valentine massacre. The two soldiers had grown close, although they’d had a short falling out when he’d given her the pet name “Mum”. It took a whopping two weeks for the nickname to spread through the manor and now everyone from the Corporals to the kitchen staff called her that, much to her chagrin. She knew why- she couldn’t help but feel like they were her children. They’d come to her as wet-eared recruits from the armed forces, but with her nurturing and constant grating she’d smoothed the imperfections and the result was a well-oiled team of troopers that belonged in the top ranks.

“Give the bloke a break, Mum. His last missus was over 200 years ago. He’s a bit rusty is all.” Seras turned on a dime, not flinching when Stevenson ran headfirst into her cleavage and bounced off. The man’s eyes rolled from the impact and he stumbled, dropping the heavy case with a thud.

“Don’t give me that, Harry! He’s not trying to get me into a relationship—he’s just destroying the ones I have already. It’s just not right.” She stared up at the moon while she waited for him to recover and pick up the ammunition again. “I just don’t get what his problem is,” she added melancholically. She turned and almost smacked her partner upside the head with her cannon. Harry scratched his head, noting how his commanding officer seemed to be more distracted than usual. Poor Mum’s really taking this to heart. If he didn’t make me want to piss my trousers, I’d give that vampire a piece of my mind. He finished the long haul to the gun-field, watching as Seras took the case from him as though it weighed next to nothing. He flared his nostrils at her display of strength but said nothing as she knelt and began to load up for the first shot.

“Well, what exactly did you tell him before he became angry?” he asked casually. The kitchen maids usually paid well in extra rations for gossip on the resident undead, but Seras didn’t need to know that. It was enough that he seemed interested in her problems. Seras looked up at him and narrowed her eyes.

“I just answered his questions about Walter,” she said offhandedly, leaning into the barrel of the gun to make sure it was assembled properly. “I mean, I know that I spent a lot of time with him after the whole Tower thing blew over but the man was injured and I felt bad. Was it wrong of me to help an injured old man?” her voice was muffled but he clearly heard the snide tone through the barrel.

“Of course not-just, what did you say exactly? Sometimes you don’t word things in the best way.” Harry averted his eyes as she sent him another death-glare.
“I said that I meet up with Walter for about 30 minutes a few times a week.” Her frown became more pronounced when the soldier’s eyes bugged from his head and he collapsed into booming laughter. “Is something funny, commander?” she ground out. Harry saw her eyes flashing and sobered quickly when he saw she was becoming a “Code-Crimson”, as the veterans called it. No one stayed around Seras when her temper flared. It wasn’t good for anything: living or undead.

“Well, that’s it then Mum.” When she stared at him blankly, he rubbed his chin and sighed. He cared for the woman, really: but sometimes she could be so damn innocent! Did she not even understand what she was implementing when she phrased things like that? “Seras, think about what you just said. If I told you that I met up with Integra Hellsing for about 30 minutes a few times a week, what would your mind immediately think about?” He almost laughed as the thought settled and the Draculina’s nose wrinkled in immediate disgust at what must have been a vivid mental image. Suddenly she caught on and gasped, her face turning redder than her eyes. She jumped up and threw the Harkonnen to the ground, running back towards the manor with a keening wail of mortification. Harry chuckled under his breath before looking down at the hefty weapon and its equally heavyweight ammo, both of which would have to make it back to the manor sometime before the dew settled on it.

“Oh, fuck it.”

Alucard sat in his chair with his fingers laced in front of him when a distant cry reached his ears. He glanced up at the ceiling, wondering what in the world his fledgling could be whining about so early in the night. It was Friday so she should have been at the training fields at this time, gallivanting around with that scraggy commander. In fact, he’d heard her boots stomping extra loudly by his door as she went towards the upper level- a sign that she was still vexed with him. That’s too bad, he thought. My decision rests. The police girl will simply have to learn to whom she belongs. It’s not as if I ask for much. He ground his left fang against his bottom teeth as he pondered his little childe’s change in attitude and how it seemed to affect him, strangely. His thoughts were missing the dedication they had felt last night, and some tiny part of him wondered if he acted a bit too hastily. Of course, that tiny voice had been quashed almost as fast as it arose, but it seemed to be coming back with more and more ferocity. Almost like boots pounding away at his mind and cracking his resolve…nothing had ever made him rethink his decisions before, but now this little blundering blonde was slowly softening him. I don’t think I like it, he decided. I’ll have to put a stop to that.

He looked up in surprise when the mental pounding didn’t cease and he realized it was real boots pounding at the floors. Someone was in a very big hurry, it seemed. Either that, or Walter had finally gone senile and began allowing overweight soldiers into the regiment. Suddenly his door was kicked in violently. He jerked upright, one hand on each of the armrests as he prepared to behead the fool who so rudely entered his private chambers. He only relaxed slightly when he caught the whiff of Seras’ scent in the air. The girl was red from head to toe and was taking unneeded breaths, as though she were worn out from her little run. She gave him a long, scathing look before pulling herself together and stomping a foot on the ground.

“I AM NOT SLEEPING WITH WALTER!” she roared and immediately covered her mouth
with both hands. The entire manor was silent; one could hear the rumbling of the pipes in the walls. Suddenly, raucous laughter rang from the above levels and Seras moaned. She hadn’t meant for the whole house to hear her confession, but she was so humiliated that her Master had thought that she and Walter had been… She shuddered and closed her eyes against the onslaught of wrong mental images that came to mind. She opened one eye slightly and peeked at her master through her lashes. He was staring at her with a dumbfounded expression, his mouth hanging open wide enough for her to make out the individual points of his fangs. She could make out the outline of his unnaturally wide eyes behind the glasses and gathered what was left of her dignity when she realized he was still watching. She stood ramrod straight in the doorway, her arms crossed in front of her and her eyes slightly accusing.

“How could you even imagine such a thing? Walter is like my grandfather or something. I don’t like him in that way,” she said shakily. She felt as though she might cry, although she couldn’t exactly pinpoint why. Alucard closed his mouth and she waited, noticing that the corners were twitching as if he were trying not to laugh at her. She gave a small huff and looked away, staring at the stones on the wall as if they were the most interesting thing she’d ever seen. She felt something on her head and gasped when she realized it was her master’s hand ruffling her hair. He chuckled darkly, rubbing her head hard enough to chafe her scalp slightly. She looked up at him, perplexed. Wasn’t he supposed to be angry with her?

“My innocent little Police Girl. Of course you wouldn’t, would you?” She didn’t exactly know how to reply to that, but was saved the trouble when the tall man knelt down and came nose-to-nose with her, his hand snaking down around her shoulder and pulling her closer. She gulped, part of her realizing that their faces hadn’t been this close since the night he turned her into a vampire. She smelled the blood on his breath and grinned awkwardly, subtly trying to shimmy out of his hold on her and upsetting his hat slightly with her movement.

“Um, Master? My personal space is—well, I mean…” She wracked her brain for a way to politely ask him to move away from her, coming up short. Damnit! Why can’t I talk to him as easily as I can all the other soldiers? We should be closer than I am with them—he’s my master, for Christ’s sake! A question popped into her mind and she blurted it into his face without thought. “Master, do you hate me?” She was close enough to watch his eyebrows disappear into his hairline as his eyes widened in surprise. She adopted a neutral look as she waited for his answer.

“Not at all.” He gave her a small frown, somehow different from his normal scowls. It seemed as though he was actually offended by the question. “How did you come to that conclusion?”

“Well, it’s just that I don’t seem to make you proud or seem to be good company for you, so the opposite of that is that you just don’t like me. I mean, how else can you take such a personal interest in my—well, what I mean by that is—You act as if you want me to be alone forever and I don’t understand why you care,” she tapered off, unsure of how to explain her feelings to him. It was the only logical explanation. HE didn’t seem to care whether she was around or not other than that weird blood thing last night, and he certainly never said that he was proud of her or that he enjoyed her company. The only other explanation for his abnormal behavior was that he hated her and didn’t want to see her happy. Maybe it was an unspoken vampire thing that you couldn’t live a happy undead existence? That you had to be a shut-in like Helena, or a sadistic psychopath like Alucard? “I just want us to be able to talk,” she ended lamely.
“Talk.” The one word seemed to hold too much meaning for Alucard; he looked weary and Seras felt a slight concern that he was unwell. Could vampires get ill? He straightened up, keeping her close and her nose barely brushed his vest as his hand weighed on her shoulder. “What does it mean-to talk.” It was neither a question nor a statement, and Seras frowned at the puzzle he presented. His voice had taken a weird quality-no, he’d developed an accent at some point. Seras tried to see his face, but the hat cast a shadow on him and only the orange lenses shone in the dim lighting.

“Well, Walter and I talk about lots of things. Like how the house is and how Sir Integra’s faring in prison and-well, what sort of things I miss about being a human; that sort of thing. And I talk with my men about their families and battle maneuvers and stories about our childhoods.” Seras leaned up to look at him, unsure if he was even listening or not. Her heart ached acutely and she bent her head, wringing her hands slightly as she stared at his vest buttons. “I just want us to be close.” Even as she spoke the words, some part of her knew that she was asking for something almost unobtainable.

After a long, tense moment he still made no move to answer. Seras sighed, breaking his hold on her with little effort as she turned away. “I just hoped—it doesn’t matter. I’ll catch you later, Master.” She left the room, glancing back when she reached to doorway to see him standing in the same pose, as if frozen in time. She shook her head and pulled the door to, going up to find Walter. She had a hunch that her master wouldn’t mind them being together now. And besides, if he did she’d just lather, rinse, and repeat until he washed his hands of her entirely. It’d kill me I’m sure, but if that’s what it takes, she considered sadly.

There are twelve bricks in the wall lengthwise, and fourteen widthwise. If I multiply them, that makes 168 total bricks in the wall. Multiplied by four walls, there are 672 bricks that make up the cell. No, that’s only 668 bricks, when you count the four that would have made the window being gone. Wait; now the door is a variable. How many bricks would have made up the door? Let’s see-there are three bricks across the top and-

Integra was pulled out of her mind-numbing brick counting by the nearly-silent arrival of her servant. She smiled coolly at him, rather happy to see the red-clad man. She waited for a snub about the priest being in the room, but none came. Looking closer, she realized that the arrogant grin that so often graced his features was missing. He seemed almost…bewildered. Which was utter hogwash; nothing had ever bewildered Alucard in the entire time she’d known him. There must have been a variable—but what? Suddenly, the answer came and Integra shot him a knowing look.

“Having trouble with your little prodigy?” she simpered. Alucard shot her a hateful look and took a seat at the table. Integra didn’t bother getting up, only shifting to a slightly more comfortable position on the bed. “I told you what to do if you couldn’t handle her—” A low growl cut her off and she tcched in reply. They sat in bitter silence for a long moment before Integra coughed.
“You know, Anderson’s not celibate. In fact, he’s practically deflowered every female in London. It’s a new method to stop vampires from being created.” She smiled slightly at her own joke, but Alucard didn’t react. Okay, now she was worried. “Alucard, I demand that you tell me what’s the matter.”

“My Master should keep her long nose to herself,” came the harsh reply. Integra growled and swung her legs off the bed, preparing to go and knock her annoying vampire into the wall. He finally spoke when she made the move to stand. “The police girl is an enigma.” Integra checked a tic on a mental scorecard: Integra 1, Alucard 0. She just knew that Miss Victoria had something to do with his sour mood. Her thoughts quickly turned towards the “problem”. Alucard wasn’t sure how to deal with this new, unexpected constant that he’d just picked up willy-nilly in a church and now he must be second-guessing his actions. Right?

“Are you having second thoughts about taking on an energetic little snippet like her? I’ll admit, the police girl isn’t an eyesore but when you get down to it, she’s quite the handful.” Integra felt the grin slip off her face as Alucard shook his head.

“It’s not that-do you really believe a little idiot like her could bring me down? It’s just that I don’t understand what it is that she wants from me.” Integra blinked and pulled herself back into a reclining position, closing her eyes.

“What do you mean?” she felt the nagging withdrawal headache as she waited for him to speak. He sat silently for a long moment, and she opened one eye to peek at him. He slowly straightened up and squared his hunched shoulders before turning to her, his characteristic smile in place.

“No, she’s just confusing because she carries too much of humanity in her still. Patience is what is needed here. Not explanations.”

“What?” Integra looked at him wearily, trying to follow his conclusion. “You’re talking nonsense.” Alucard shook his head, chuckling.

“No, my Master. Talking is nonsense. I’ll take my leave of you now. Pleasant evening.” And with that, he vanished into the wall. Integra stared at the spot he’d occupied before sighing and running a hand through her hair, tugging at it in frustration.

“Damnit all. This is why I need my cigars.”

Chapter End Notes

*PSA*

I'm sorry if the formatting is a little confusing. I'm not used to c/p where I have to back
through the chapters (that are sometimes more than 11 pages long) and look for italicized marks and such. I've tried to separate the paragraphs to make it easy on the eyes, but I'm afraid that it's harder than it looks to format this stuff!

Sorry! I hope it doesn't distract from the story! :O
Integra smiled as she watched the fireworks shooting off into the night. The flickering bonfires lit her from behind and the shadows danced across the lawn. Seras lead the troops in a rendition of “God Save the Queen,” her voice echoing beautifully across the grounds. All in all, it was a wonderful Bonfire Night. Something was nagging at the back of her mind, though—wasn’t she supposed to be somewhere else? She turned to find Walter and ask him but ran face first into a warm chest, the breath escaping her lungs in a whoosh. She colored slightly, looking up to apologize only to see that she’d run into Alexander Anderson.

“What’s he doing here at my party?”

“Who can handle the burden?” he asked desperately, his rough hands on her cheeks as he held her face in his hands. She sputtered in confusion as a firework exploded just above their heads. Too close! The lawn will burn, she thought absently. She glanced back at Seras to ask who had invited the Paladin when she realized that Seras was leading a flock of pigeons in a three-part harmony instead of troops. Still, something wasn’t right. She just felt it deep down. She shook her head rapidly, trying to clear the fog that was settling in her mind. The pigeons’ song was echoing in her ears; its sound both familiar and distant. She was sure she’d heard it somewhere, but where? It was as if a childhood memory lay at the edge of her mind, but she couldn’t quite grasp it.

“Alu-“ she started, before stopping and looking around. Who was she about to call? A-a-Anderson? He was already there, standing with her by the bonfire. That blasted song was stopping her from thinking! She dug her nails into her hands, feeling blood pooling in the gashes that hurt much more than they should’ve. Tears sprang to her eyes and she covered her hands with her ears as something in the bonfire exploded, sending her flying.

Integra jerked awake as the blast propelled her—along with over 650 bricks—into the inner halls. She had no time to do more than gasp in pain as the floor collapsed, bringing her down with over a ton of twisted metal and cemented brickwork. A shard clipped her glasses and her left eye’s vision shattered in a world of broken glass. Luckily, the pieces did little more than scratch her but that was the least of her worries as she plummeted three stories to the hard foundation along with the debris. I’ll be buried! I’m going to—oh God, I’m going to die. She realized her fate rather calmly despite her situation, and the world slowed into slow motion as she focused on the one tear she shed for herself, wobbling as it was borne upwards by its lesser density. Her heart pounded loudly in her ears, drowning out the scream that she half-realized was her own. The tear flashed for a fraction of a second and she blinked before something slammed into her side, throwing her into the half of the second-floor corridor that wasn’t collapsing with the rest.

She hit her head on the concrete flooring hard, rolling twice before coming to a stop with something on top of her. She moaned and opened her eyes, her now-useless glasses barely hanging on by their frames. She saw two blurry blue eyes and realized that it was her reflection in a familiar bayonet. Something clapped onto each side of her head and she turned in fright to gaze into green eyes. She fought to get free but the much larger priest held her down, shaking his head and mouthing something over and over.

“What?!” Integra yelled, trying to pull his hands off of her ears, only to have him press harder against her and shake his head violently. He looked frustrated for a moment before leaning down
and almost placing his mouth directly on her ear, barely moving his hand to cup around his face.

“Sirens-you-can’t-hear-the-song,” he muttered almost incomprehensibly before pressing his hand back to her ear again. He pressed his lips into a thin line and jerked his head to the ruined half of the building beside them. Integra blinked up at him before giving a sharp nod, realizing the need for calm in the apparent danger that they were in. *Was that the song-the one from my dream?* She tried to remember how the song went, but for some reason she couldn’t remember the rhythm or the words, just the vague impression of pigeons swaying in time to a tuneless tempo.

Having dealt with supernatural creatures all her life, she wasn’t entirely surprised to hear of a Siren existing, although England was the last place she expected them to be. Why were they here and why were they attacking the prison? Even so, where was her organization? They should have already been here, combating the destructive creatures. She had to get in touch with Walter!

She opened her mouth to ask but Anderson shook his head, giving her an “I’ll-explain-it-later” look and making a move to stand, taking her head with him. She wobbled as they tried to balance together, finding a way for him to lead her while still holding his hands over her ears. She glimpsed something in his own, making the assumption that he had stuffed his ears so that the song wouldn’t tempt him. She glanced behind them as best she could to see the entire side of the building had been blown away, with several other smoking parapets and collapsed piles of debris where before there had been magnificent buildings. *Fireworks…* Integra stared at the wreckage, spellbound. It was almost too much to take in at one point. *How did I sleep through this? It must have been that song, perhaps?*

Anderson led her up down hallways and up flights of stairs, presumably to the roof where she knew the helipads were. It would explain how he was able to get here, although she honestly had no idea if he’d even left London after yesterday’s visit. They moved quickly and carefully, Anderson checking around corners for any presumed threat. They met with no one on the way through the maze of cells. There was no screaming, no shouts from the guards, not another living soul besides their reflections in the broken glass that littered the hallways from shattered windows. Integra wanted to glance into the doors as they passed to see if the rooms’ occupants were asleep, but Anderson wasn’t stopping for anything, tugging her along impatiently when she slowed the slightest bit. A part of her wondered why he was rescuing her and not any of the other prisoners, but she chalked it up to him seeing her fall and deciding to take her with him on a whim. She couldn’t imagine anything to suggest otherwise; the Vatican would surely have cheered over her dead body, and even Anderson was unmoved by her Protestant ways, although he had been polite with her whenever his moral sense won over his mission objectives.

She pondered as Anderson kicked open a door and the pair climbed another flight of steeper stairs, finally arriving at the roof where a lone helicopter awaited them. He nodded at Integra and led her over, turning her around awkwardly to lift her into the copter without having to let his hands off her ears. Their noses touched as they maneuvered into the machine and she glanced at him only to see him look over her shoulder and tug her back immediately, making her lose her balance and fall over his shoulder. She hit the ground with a thud and her brain compelled her to cover her ears, but her tiny, slender hands didn’t do the same job as the man’s and she really only succeeded in slapping herself with the broken chains on her handcuffs, which were still locked onto her wrists despite the beating they’d been given in the explosion.
She first heard the tiny refrains of music and turned thoughtlessly to see three of the handsomest men she’d ever laid eyes on climbing out of the helicopter. They were bare-chested and sculpted, far more gorgeous than any Adonis could ever have been. Their eyes were varying colors of the deepest shades she’d ever seen, and they smiled and reached out to her, one blonde, one brunette, and one raven-haired. She barely registered her feet moving as she made her way towards the compelling men, their baritone voices echoing in her mind. Her hands fell from her ears and she drank in their song, blind to their sharp, rotten teeth that oozed black venom. She didn’t notice the flicker of movement to her right, nor did she react to the tackle that would have knocked the breath out of her normally.

It was only when she was pushed over the edge of the building and began the descent that she snapped out of it. She looked up at the blue sky, black smoke staining the bright color. Freefalling-it was a joyous feeling; she felt like she was flying and nothing was going to drag her down. She felt Anderson hold her tightly and she closed her eyes, not caring about whether she’d hit the ground. She heard fluttering around her and peeked beneath her lashes to see pages flying up around them and her body jerked before everything went silent.

“What the hell were you doing? I told you that you cannae hear a Siren’s song!” Anderson threw her to the ground, his eyes flashing green fire as he pulled what looked like wax from his ears. Integra sat splayed on the ground where she fell, the cloudiness taking its sweet time lifting from her mind. She absentmindedly gazed at the green fields all around them. Anderson lifted her onto her feet and growled in her face. “Did you want to die?”

“I dunno. I can’t think,” she replied wearily, slumping against him. She wanted to sleep, but she had the feeling that she was forgetting something important; but the thought flew away as fast as it was born, leaving behind pleasant emptiness in her mind. Was she in another dream? It didn’t even matter anymore. Her companion was nice and unnaturally warm, body heat radiating off of him in waves. She closed her eyes and heard him sigh, the sound echoing through his broad chest. “I’m sleepy,” she added unnecessarily. Anderson shook her shoulder slightly and she opened her eyes and rested her chin on his chest, beaming up at him childishly. “Those men were handsome.”

“You heard too much of the song. You’re drunk from the magic, you stupid woman,” the priest declared, but there was no bite to his words. He turned and grasped her arms, practically throwing her onto his back like a rag-doll. She obediently wrapped her arms around his neck and he grabbed her legs, hoisting her up in an oversized piggyback. She went limp once more and he began to walk down the path they were on, talking quietly. “The effects will take a while to wear off, Hellsing. You should probably just sleep.”

“Mmm.” She swayed on his back, pulling her chin to his shoulder to speak in his ear. “Those men were pretty.” The paladin nodded.

“Because you like men, you saw handsome men. The Sirens will take the form that you would desire most. It may be generic men or women, or more tailored to your personal wants-if you have a love interest, or perhaps young sailors who see their little burds and perish on the rocks, if you’re thinking ancient times.” Integra leaned forward more, practically killing her leg muscles to talk directly in his ear.
“You saw pretty ladies, hmm? Did you see a familiar pretty lady?” She tittered slightly, feeling rather carefree at the moment. “You can tell me. I won’t blab,” she whispered conspiratorially against his skin. Anderson hesitated for a moment before shifting his hold on her, causing her to fall back into her original position against his back.

“Quit that havering. We’ll reach the next town by sunset, so just relax and sleep now. You’ll feel more normal when you wake up.” Integra tried to focus on the path before them, but without her glasses it seemed to waver and she collapsed against him, staring instead at the tiny blonde hairs on his nape. He was right, she was sleepy and the swaying wasn’t helping her. She closed her eyes and rested in the crook of his neck, sighing once before dropping off into a dreamless slumber.

Alexander Anderson paused to readjust the woman on his back, flicking his sleeve back to check the time on his watch. 6:00 p.m.: he’d been walking for well over eight hours, but he wasn’t tired in the slightest. *Never tired, not like a human would be…* he shook off the bitter thoughts and continued his journey, knowing that any moment they’d come upon the town he was heading for. He had a personal motel room there- one of the many scattered around the world for his use during missions for the Vatican. He glanced once more at the hands draped over his shoulders, covered in dry blood and deep, gravel-filled gashes and quickened his pace. He needed to tend to her wounds and soon or else run the risk of infection. As if hearing his thoughts, the hands twitched slightly and he felt her head move back from his neck to his shoulder as she turned in her sleep. Her breath was cool against his neck and he shook his head and pressed on hurriedly, the ghost of lips still tingling on his skin from hours earlier.

A farmer walking a cow down the road passed a strange pair on his way home from town. A ragged, bloodstained priest carried a beautiful, unconscious woman on his back, practically running in the opposite direction. The farmer barely had time to tip his hat before they’d passed, the man muttering something about temptation under his breath. He watched until they’d vanished over the knoll before scratching the stubble on his chin and turning to the cow.

“Didja ever see such a sight, Betsy? I hate to say it anything about a godly man, but I think he was a bit looney! Oh, c’mon. We’re late as it is, and the missus will never believe that we stopped to take in a sight like this.”

Seras sat on Walter’s desk, watching him piddle about the room in the strangely entertaining way that only old men can pull off. He was talking to himself as he straightened stacks of paperwork, sending some down the chute to the furnace in the basement while others he stuck outside in file folders for soldiers to ferry to other places for him. It wasn’t very often he had to be in such a state, but Seras knew that he was still catching up on all the missed work that had built up during his recovery period.

She’d never really thought about all the stuff Walter did for the house until he wasn’t around to do it anymore. There were potential employees to interview, payrolls to file, mission reports to relay, emails to reroute, meals to plan, people to boss, and on top of all that a house to clean and taking care of Sir Integra’s needs and seeing about herself and Alucard’s meals and day-to-day activities, all before 10:00 p.m. It was truly mind boggling! It was no surprise that he’d been back at work for
a while now but was only just getting caught up. As it was, she tried her best to help him, although
she could only busy herself with the less demanding tasks. Tonight, she was copying soldier’s
reports neatly into ledgers. It took quite a while, as she had to decipher the chicken-scrawl of the
soldiers.

“And… done!” she shouted happily, stacking the papers and tapping them into shape on the desk.
“You need anything else, Walter?” she asked. The man paused long enough to shake his head,
offering her a grateful smile.

“No thank you Miss Victoria. You’ve helped me so much already. I don’t know how I ever
managed without you,” he admitted. Seras smiled tightly, a flash of anger towards her master
flickering through her at the butler’s words. You have no idea how close you were to finding out.
Walter had remained blissfully ignorant of the nature of the resident vampires’ scuffle, only
knowing that Alucard had once again hurt Seras’ feelings, and she retaliated; now they both were
sulking in their own way. Alucard stayed holed up in his chambers, and Seras became a workaholic
until her anger simmered down into melancholy. Then, nothing could rouse her from her coffin
save hunger and the eventual need for a shower.

Seras jumped off the desk and handed him the papers, almost throwing them in the air when the
phone began to ring. They both whipped around and stared at the blinking red light on the phone,
signaling an outside line was trying to make contact. They looked at each other before glancing at
the clock on the bookshelf- 9:45.

“Quarter-till; who in the world could be calling at this hour?” Walter murmured as he picked up
the phone.

Integra woke to her left hand burning, as if being thrust into a flame. Gasping in pain, she made a
move to sit up only to have a hand push her shoulder back down. She turned to see Anderson
dressed in his under-jacket and pants, his hand holding hers palm-up. She stared in confusion
before the events of the day came rushing back all at once, making her eyes almost roll.

“Keep still. I have to get all the debris out of the cuts before ye get sick.” His stern words shocked
her back into reality and she stared at her free hand, the deep gashes ugly against her pale skin.
Nodding, she lay back down and closed her eyes. He tugged gently on her arm to move her closer
and lay it on his leg, her hand under the table lamp’s glow. There was silence for a moment before
he drew a sharp breath and let it out slowly. “It’s in deep. I’m going to have to dig around in there.
This is going to hurt a bit.”

“Do what you have to.” Integra didn’t mean for her words to sound so cold, and her tone softened.
“I’ve dealt with worse than a few tiny scrapes.” Slicing your own throat? That hurt. She felt his
thumb barely chafe hers before he spoke.

“I’ll move as fast as possible.” He paused for a moment. “It’s alright to cry.” Integra nodded but
scoffed internally. She wasn’t going to break down in front of Angel Dust Anderson! She was a proper Englishwoman, unused to making scenes. Still, his statement made her feel slightly better about the whole situation. She could see how he was well-liked at the orphanage where he worked. Surely the children viewed him as a giant, able to take care of anything from monsters to scraped knees.

She gritted her teeth as he dug down into her hands. She tried to focus on the plinking of the gravel and glass into the ashtray as he removed them. True to his word, he worked quickly and quietly and she managed to not utter a sound throughout the entire procedure. He finished and took a bottle of rubbing alcohol from the bedside table, pouring it carefully over her palm before wrapping her hand in gauze. She watched him warily from her position on the bed, taking note of his deft fingers as he tied off the knot.

“You’ve done this many times,” she said finally, her voice loud against the silence of the room. “For your Iscariots?”

“Nay. I was a soldier once. With doctors dying left and right, we had to learn to dress each other’s wounds. But that was a long time ago.” The light reflected off his glasses and Integra could just picture a younger, less scarred boy tying a tourniquet with the same amount of focus and skill. He looked up to see her still staring at him and cleared his throat. “The other hand, now.”

“Oh, yes.” She sat up, swinging her legs off the side of the bed and holding out her hand. They both leaned over; watching as the silver tweezers expertly parted the wounds and probed for any remaining dirt. Anderson wasn’t surprised when Integra didn’t make a noise. He’d seen grown men cry at the same thing, but he knew the Ice Queen wouldn’t let a single whimper escape her. This hand didn’t have as much in it, and it seemed no time before he was wrapping it as well. He watched her through his lashes as she stared at her hand while he bandaged it. Without her glasses, her face seemed softer, more womanly somehow. He frowned and turned his attention back to her hand. She’d be home at Hellsing tomorrow, and he’d be rid of such distracting thoughts.

“I should probably call Walter. He’ll be worrying about me.” She eyed the phone sitting on the table and picked it up, testing her hold on it until she found a way that didn’t make her hands throb. She punched in Walter’s personal office line and held her breath, watching as the priest tidied up the bloody mess on the ashtray. She heard Walter pick up and let out a breath.

“Walter.”
I’ve been getting a lot of reviews and PMs about whether I plan to make this an IxAA fic as well as the predetermined AxS fic.

As you all pretty much know (or should know), I’m a pretty big fan of IxAA, even though it’s not canonical and technically is more of a crack pairing. However, given the nature of the-is it too bold to call them requests?-I received; I decided to add more than the subtly-hinted-at IxAA that I was originally going to go for.

But I’m a stickler for trying to keep IC when writing and both Integra and Anderson are just…eh. They both have like 0% sex drive it seems. So writing them into a relationship becomes very difficult and relies on a lot of loopholes.

Luckily, I’m very good at writing myself through loopholes because I forget the plot of my own story.
Ostatic Dispus

Seras heard Integra’s cool, slightly relieved voice on the other side of the telephone line and watched Walter’s face shift between confusion, astonishment, and worry. She heard his heart skip a few beats and a flutter of anxiety. Walter didn’t need any big surprises in his condition. She bit her finger and watched him through her lashes as he struggled to find something to say. She felt Alucard’s concern through their bond; he’d felt her nervousness and was curious as to what was going on. She relaxed slightly, knowing that if Integra was in any danger her master wouldn’t still be here in the manor.

*What is it, Police Girl?!!* Her master’s curiosity finally won over and he snapped impatiently in her mind. She ignored the jab as best she could.

*Sir Integra’s on the line, Master. She surprised Walter and his heart-he’s still recovering.* She felt Alucard relax and the floor shifted beneath her feet as he phased through the floorboards to stand next to her. Walter saw him and held up a hand, mouthing “wait a moment”.

“Sir Integra-where are you?” Seras heard Integra’s voice asking something, and a deep, barely audible baritone answered her. Wherever she was, it was with a man. She heard Alucard grumble slightly and looked up to see his eyebrows knitted. She barely touched his sleeve and he looked down at her as if noticing for the first time that she was there with him. Walter gasped and both vampires glanced back at him. “Ireland? How-how-” Walter sputtered and went quiet as Integra’s voice drowned him out, her tone urgent. Seras listened curiously to the one side of the conversation that she could hear. “Ah, yes. Yes. No, it hasn’t-the fax machine was broken when we moved it during the-ah, okay. Yes ma’am. Alright. No, no- we’re fine here, Yes, I’ll be sure to get in touch with them. I’ll do my best. No, Alucard and Seras are both here. Hmm? Oh, of course; hang on a moment.” He held a hand over the receiver. “Miss Victoria, Sir Integra wishes to speak with you directly.”

“Hmm?” Seras blinked in surprise. She’d never been particularly close with the woman, but she was friendly enough; she couldn’t think of a reason Integra would want to speak to her. “Oh, right!” she hurried forward and took the offered phone. “Hello?”

“Seras. Are you alright?” Integra sounded almost happy to hear the Draculina’s voice.

“Yes, I’m fine. But are you alright? I thought you were supposed to be-well, incarcerated?” Seras blushed slightly even though the woman couldn’t see her over the phone line. Integra made a sound that sounded like a mix between a giggle and a groan.

“Yes, well; there have been a few unforeseen problems and now I’m technically an escapee. Not by choice, of course but still…” Integra went silent for a few moments as the male voice spoke loudly. Seras couldn’t understand half of what was being said, between the man’s accent and the static of the phone line. “Go find your own phone! I’m talking to my soldier,” she barked and the voice snapped back angrily.

“I don’t care if the Pope himself is expecting your call! Surely there’s more than one phone in the entire town!” Seras choked as the words sank in.
“Sir, are you with; I mean, is that voice A-alexander Anders-son?” She felt Alucard stiffen behind her and her hand flew subconsciously to her neck, rubbing the spot the blessed blade had pierced. The priest terrified her; over 6 feet of bigoted flesh and a walking arsenal of anti-demonic weaponry didn’t paint a pretty picture, and the creepy Bible verses didn’t help much either. Integra screamed once more in her ear and a door slammed. Seras winced and Integra groaned quietly.

“Yes, and his holier-than-thou attitude is rubbing me the wrong way. I’m one slur away from shoving one of those bayonets down his throat and twisting it.” Seras giggled nervously and switched the receiver to her other ear, ignoring the way her master was practically breathing down her shirt in an effort to eavesdrop. “Listen Seras, I need you to bring me some things.”

“No, England isn’t safe for me right now. I’ll explain it all to Walter—I think the Vatican knows more than they’re letting on, and I don’t like it. I’m sticking to Anderson until I get to the bottom of this.”

“Of course Sir, but wouldn’t it just be better for Walter and some soldiers to come and get you? I mean, maybe we can work around the system to fix your sentence.”

“But how are you going to convince him to take you to the Vatican? You don’t even get along all that well. You almost sound like—” Seras was about to compare them to an old married couple, but caught herself in time. “like a bunch of schoolchildren,” she finished lamely. She could practically hear Integra’s grin as she explained her plan.

“He’s a good man, even if he is a bit maniacal at times. He won’t leave a helpless woman all alone in a foreign country while her motherland is being attacked. All I need are my clothing, my spare set of glasses, and some personal items: I’m sure I don’t have to tell you which ones. Can you get that for me?”

“Roger, Sir! I’ll bring them as fast as I can!” Seras chirped into the phone, saluting the air. “Wait, what attack?” she added alarmingly.

“Never mind! Just hurry before the sun rises. Give the phone back to Walter. He can give you directions when you’re done. Just don’t bring Alucard; I don’t want a bloody brawl in my hotel room.”

Alucard sat on Integra’s bed and watched his childe scurry around the room, looking for Integra’s personal belongings. She stuffed them as neatly as she could into a large knapsack and paused to count off the mental checklist on her fingers.

“Alright, we have a toothbrush, deodorant and lady-things; nightgown, knickers, two sets of day clothing, hairbrush, her handgun, spare glasses and another set of shoes.” She turned to Alucard and frowned as she noticed his sullen appearance. “Don’t be sad, Master. I’m sure it’s for the best that Sir Integra doesn’t want you there.” After she’d left for upstairs, Walter had relayed the woman’s orders to her vampire servant, who immediately retaliated with such force that Integra had to get him on the phone and order him to stay at the manor. “You don’t have to worry: if he hurts Sir Integra, I’ll be sure to protect her.” She glanced over to the bookshelf and rearranged a spot in the sack. “Can never know when you need a good book,” she murmured to herself.
“My master can fend for herself quite well. It’s not her I’m worried about.” Seras absently nodded as she bent over to look at the books. Picking up a regency romance, she flipped through the dog-eared pages and nodded to herself. Clearly the book was a favorite—it had been read through many times. She tossed it between her hands and turned to motion to Alucard.

“There’s room for one more book. Which one should I pick?” Alucard picked himself up and walked over, only to immediately pull out an old book of world myths and hand it to her. She frowned at the expensive binding. “I dunno; she’s going to be traveling and this book may get messed up. It’s really old.”

“That one,” Alucard insisted and Seras shrugged, sticking it with the romance into the bag and closing the top. He watched as she slung it over her shoulder and tested the weight to make sure Integra could handle carrying it.

“I think that about does it,” she said, looking around the room with a final nod. “I suppose I better hurry up and go down to see Walter. If I have to go to Ireland tonight I had better get going!” She turned to leave and a gloved hand pulled her back. “What’s the matter?” She stared down at the silver gun in his other hand.

“Take this with you. You can’t carry that cannon to a peaceful meeting, but you can hide this. It packs enough of a punch that even Anderson will have to take a moment to recover. Just in case.” Seras frowned down at the Cassul; the gun that took away her life and gave her a new start. She felt a mix of feelings toward it, but he was right. She knew firsthand what sort of power lay within the unassuming weapon.

“Master, I’ll be fine,” she protested but took the Cassul anyway and slid it into her uniform pocket. “Don’t worry about me. I can handle this.” She grinned up at him and scratched behind her ear awkwardly.

_Yep, this is definitely the right place_, Seras thought sarcastically as the sound of helicopter blades faded into the distance and were replaced by shouting and the occasional smash. She gathered her willpower and walked to the door, knocking rapidly. She almost turned tail and ran when Anderson slung open the door with a look of absolute frustration and fury mingled across his features.

“Ah-er, I um,” she began, feeling the hairs on the back of her neck stand straight. She gulped and looked around Anderson to the interior of the room. It looked as though a hurricane had struck; chairs strewn and items littering the floor everywhere, with an angry blonde woman tapping her foot impatiently in the middle of it all. She saluted, slipping easily into her soldier-state of mind. “Sir! I brought the requested items,” she prattled off professionally, trying to ignore the livid Scotsman that stood within arm’s reach away.

He didn’t reply, only patting her head affectionately and vanishing back into the floor from whence he came. Seras re-fluffed her hair and turned to head back to Walter’s office, a tiny grin etched on her face.
“Of course, Victoria. Thank you,” Integra said nonchalantly, elbowing the priest in the side on her way to the nervous vampire. Anderson hissed and pinched the bridge of his nose, his restraint only betrayed by his grinding teeth. Seras winced in sympathy for the man—she knew what it was like trying to deal with a stubborn person who was clearly used to having orders obeyed; she’d often noticed the parallels between her master and Sir Integra. He glared at her and she offered a pitying smile as she handed over the knapsack.

“Can’t you take your whore home with the rest o’ your lot?” he snarled, jerking his head in the direction of the circling helicopter in the distance. Not knowing how to address the question, Seras simply shrugged and looked pointedly at her master’s master. Integra narrowed her eyes.

“No, she can’t: I told you that I’m staying with you. I won’t tolerate you Papists thinking that you can run information in circles around my organization and we won’t notice a thing!” Seras backed away at the shrill edge to Integra’s tone; clearly she was getting too worked up, but what to do?

“I won’t let you! I’m not sharing my room with a filthy Jessie!” he roared and tried to shut her out of the hotel, but Integra somehow managed to slip through the crack as it closed.

“If I can tolerate your brown-nose for a while then you should have no problem with me,” she hissed loudly. Seras leaned closer to the door with a hand over her mouth to keep the laughter from escaping. Boy, Master’s going to love this! she thought gleefully.

Oh, I am most certainly enjoying these sweet sounds of battle, he purred into her mind and she rolled her eyes. Do you think they really harbor such hate, or is it all just sexual tension? Seras almost let a guffaw slip out and turned, running away from the hotel to meet the helicopter in the designated pickup area.

No idea, Master. No idea.

“It seems that Sir Integra was right. England is under attack; not by vampires, but by Sirens,” Walter explained as he moved around the office. Seras sat on the desk and Alucard stood by the door, both of them trained on the old man as he paced the room.

“Sirens; you mean like mermaids?” Seras asked as she stifled a yawn. She was usually asleep by now, but Walter had insisted she come for a briefing after she returned from her “mission”. Alucard shook his head.

“Sirens aren’t like the stories, Police Girl. They have legs like you and I.” He turned his attention to Walter. “Although in my experience, they do stay situated in Southern Europe near the coastlines. What would drive them so far north?”

“No idea, although I doubt they’d do this on their own. Sirens are not the world’s smartest creatures, but they’d probably make an effort if there was something in it for them, wouldn’t you think?” the butler replied. Alucard hummed and rubbed his chin thoughtfully. Seras tried to hide another yawn, but her master caught the action.
“It’s late in the morning and sleep beckons us both, Seras. Do you wish to stay here and listen to old men talk of pending war?” he asked teasingly. Seras blinked groggily at him.

“I don’t presume to know what’s best, Master. If you need me here, I’ll stay.” Walter smiled knowingly and turned to peruse the bookshelves that lined his office walls. He plucked one out and eyed the cover before handing it to Seras.

“Miss Victoria, this book is a handwritten account of monsters from some of Hellsing’s finest historians and field agents. I needn’t enlighten you that there are worse things out there than your kind; of that you’re already well aware. But still, you should read this. I daresay you’ll find it interesting.” Seras opened the book and flipped the pages, admiring the eerie illustrations and side notes scrawled in the margins. She tucked the book under her arm and thanked Walter, who simply bowed. “Alucard, what should I do about the soldiers?” Seras turned in the doorway to watch the two men once more.

“Separate them into categories of married and unmarried. The Police Girl and I will do the rest tomorrow evening and with any luck we’ll begin the counterattack.” Walter picked up the phone and called the front desk to announce an assembly and began to scribble notes on a spare sheet of paper. Seras bid him good day before Alucard placed a heavy hand on her shoulder and guided her down to the basement.

Integra tried to hide her victory smile as Anderson griped into the phone. After calling his superiors the second time, they’d told him to “take the Hellsing woman hostage and don’t let her out of your sight”. After his hour-long shout fest with whoever was on the other end of the line, he’d finally given up and sat like a scolded child as he listened to his orders. She mentally patted herself on the back for correctly anticipating the Church’s reaction to her being out of jail and in Anderson’s “custody”, occasionally giving him smug looks as he glared daggers at her. Finally he ended the call and remained in the chair, giving her the once-over and rubbing his stubble.

“I just dinnae know what to do with you now,” he sighed in vexation. “If I had a right mind, I’d kill you and say it was an accident.” Integra scoffed and turned her attention to the bag Seras brought her, fishing through the contents.

“We both know you’d never do that,” she replied curtly. “You follow orders too well.” Her eyes flitted up to meet with his and his scowl became more pronounced as he saw the triumphant gleam in them.

“I agree, and now look what at what I’ve gotten myself into. All of my rooms are one-person outfits, Hellsing.” He gestured to the tiny space they now had to share for the night. “Where do ya think you’re going to sleep?”

“Oh the bed, of course. Same as you.” Integra pulled out her nightgown and toothbrush, looking over to the bathroom absently and missing the incredulous look the paladin gave her. “Are you daft? We’re not-” Integra turned back and flashed him a haughty smile.
“Oh, I’m not worried. A priest wouldn’t do anything unholy to me, I’m sure,” she interrupted. Her smirk widened at the look on his face. “In fact, I bet that I could undress right here and you wouldn’t peek. That’s how righteous you are, right Father?” At his silence, she hummed in satisfaction and sauntered into the bathroom. She’d barely gotten her top off before he flung open the door and she whirled around with a gasp. He arched one brow at her plain-featured bra before giving her a wide grin.

“I wasn’t always a Catholic, you know,” he leered before slamming the door again. She stood frozen for a long moment before feeling the heat rush to her face. Turning away, she smiled in the mirror as she waited for the water to heat up.

*If that’s the sort of war you want, I’m more than happy to oblige.*
Integra got comfortable under the covers and sighed, placing her glasses on the bedside table. After a long and drawn out argument that included her almost tackling Anderson onto the bed and suffocating him with a pillow, the two had agreed to a temporary truce.

“If we’re going to be working together from now on, we need to at least try to be civil to one another. I won’t say anything about your Catholic scumbag ways, and you don’t call me a whore or talk about my Protestant heathenism. Got it?” She had held out her and after a long moment, the man had shaken it.

“You’re right, Hellsing. My orders are to not let you out of my sight, and that’s going to be hard enough. We shouldn’t fight.” He’d eyed her angrily. “But when this is over—”

“I agree wholeheartedly. When this is over, don’t expect any mercy, Father.” She dug her nails into his glove and he almost crushed a few bones in her hand before they let go, each smiling viciously at the other.

Now, they’d worked out a bed system until Anderson could get in touch with the Vatican’s accounting office and ask for better hotel rooms. Integra was to sleep under all the blankets since she stayed chilly even in warm weather, and Anderson was always warm enough to stay on top of the covers. Apparently, his enhanced abilities as a Regenerator had also increased his metabolism to a level where his body radiated warmth from the overactive cells.

Even though it was almost 10:00 am, Anderson had been awake for over 24 hours and Integra felt as though she had, too. Anderson had warned her that being under the influence of the siren’s call would drain her and he was right. She rested her head against the comfy hotel pillows and let her mind wander to Alucard. He was asleep at the moment, his mind slow and steady as ocean waves. If she focused long enough she could catch fleeting mental snapshots of his dreams, which were a mix of his memories and modern day experiences. Sometimes she’d see herself and Walter mixed in with faceless armies, although now most of his dreams usually involved Seras in some way.

“Is the ceiling really so interesting?” Anderson’s voice startled her as he walked into the room, dressed in a baggy, plain, white shirt and his normal pants. He hesitated a moment before taking off his glasses and putting them next to hers, crawling carefully on the bed as though he expected it to explode. They both squirmed around to try and find a comfortable position that didn’t involve touching each other. The bed wasn’t made for two and they were quite cramped. Finally, Anderson gave up and flipped over on his side with a sigh, facing her. They blinked blurrily at each other before Integra yawned.

“Actually, I was watching Alucard dream,” she admitted. Anderson huffed quietly and stretched out on the bed, his feet hanging off the end.

“What does the monster dream about, pray tell?” Anderson quipped, but she could hear the curiosity in his voice. Integra considered telling him some story about Hell and demons before rolling her eyes at her own imagination.

“Mostly Seras nowadays.”

“I wouldn’t know,” Integra said with another yawn. “I only get a fraction of a second to view the dream before it fades away again. I don’t know how he feels about her. Sometimes I wish I could understand their conversations.”

“Conversations? What, has he taught her another language or something?” Anderson didn’t even try to hide his curiosity now.

“No I hear them in my mind. If I think about it, that is: it’s only there if I actively seek it out.”

“Some form of—*yawn*-telepathy I suppose?” Anderson pushed his arm up under the pillow and closed his eyes.

“I guess. The same kind that lets me talk to him. But don’t laugh at how corny it is; they sound like two bats chirping at each other in my mind. Just squeaks and trills. Walter said that it might be because they aren’t human anymore, so their brains work in a more advanced way that I can’t comprehend.” She closed her eyes and heard his weary reaction.

“Huh... tha’s something else, vampires with advanced brains.” She simply made a agreeing sound and relaxed. She felt him do the same on the other side of the bed. His body heat was like an electric blanket and she could smell the toothpaste on his breath. She barely had time to think about the absurd intimacy of it all before her torpor won over and she floated off.

“Amen.” Integra opened her eyes and stretched leisurely, reaching across the empty bed for her glasses and slipping them on. Anderson was kneeling by the bed already dressed and ready, having just finished his prayers. He gave her a neutral stare. “Sleep well, Hellsing?”

“I slept very well, thank you.” She stretched again, stifling a yawn and rubbing one eye under the glasses. “Did you?”

“Well enough, I suppose. I thought I had woken you trying to shove you off of my legs, but you can sleep through anything, it seems.” Integra blinked at him before realizing that she was indeed out from under the covers. She shook her head and shrugged; she was hungry and she didn’t function well on an empty stomach.

“I can’t help what I do in my sleep. You probably had your legs in my personal space, didn’t you?” she shuffled through her bag for some clothing and came up with a conservative shirt and pants. “What? She didn’t pack me another suit in here?” she grumbled. Walking around him, she headed for the bathroom to change and freshen up.

“You’ll never know,” he called after her. “I’ve got my men bringing us some dinner and me an enormous stack of paperwork. With any luck we’ll be heading to a better hotel tomorrow.”

“Good.” Integra slipped on the clothing and began brushing knots out of her hair. She’d just finished brushing her teeth when she heard two female voices from the other side of the closed door, followed by what sounded like a bellowing bull. Slipping out into the room, she saw a livid Anderson staring at the paper and a two women trembling and backing away. Well, she thought it was two women, as one wore a priest’s garb and looked as though she could pass for either.

“But Father Anderson, we did try! I don’t think it’s fair either, but...” the raven-haired nun mumbled in a thick Welsh accent, wringing her hands. She caught sight of Integra and took one look at the woman before blushing and scurrying to stand behind the man/woman/priest.
“Ja. Dey said you’ve been racking up too many expenses lately. Dey don’t have money in de budget for higher priced hotel rooms,” the cross-dressing (nun, thank goodness) said, tapping the paper with one finger.

“What sort of expenses? I don’t see any expenses on here!” Anderson roared and Integra walked around to peer over his arm and look at the letter. *We apologize but your request for funding has been denied* - The timid nun poked her head around her partner.

“Demolition cost, media suppression, extensive property damage; you know, the same as your usual missions,” she said helpfully. Anderson gave her a withering look and she squeaked and pointed at Integra. “Let me get your food for you, Miss…Hellsing?” she asked anxiously, looking between Anderson and her partner. The blonde nun looked skeptically over her glasses at the woman.

“You don’t look like de pictures. Are you really Integral Hellsing?” Anderson was still fuming over the papers and walked over to the phone, dialing it hard enough to crack the casing. Integra arched an eyebrow at his temper before turning back to the nuns.

“I am,” she stated. The pair looked her over as one before muttering to themselves. Finally the timid one shrugged and adjusted her glasses, walking over to the bags and peering inside.

“Vell, perhaps you just look different without de suit,” the cross-dressing one acknowledged. “I am Heinkel and dis is Yumiko.” She jerked her head over to the nun currently unpacking boxes of what looked like pasta. “I feel sorry for Anderson, having to babysit you while doing his own work,” she added venomously.

“Your boss doesn’t have to “babysit” me at all. I can take care of myself. Your superiors only ordered him to take me hostage because I wasn’t planning on leaving in the first place.” Yumiko fumbled with the packaging and sent Integra a frightened look. Heinkel just looked annoyed and shrugged.

“Call it what you vant, left-legger.” Anderson looked up from his call to send the nuns a look.

“We’ll have no name-calling in this room, Wolfe.” He turned back to the table again. “I don’t care if they don’t want to talk to me! I have orders from Maxwell himself and if I don’t get a better room, I swear to God above that—” At the sight of the three curious women he snarled and dropped his voice to a quiet monotone, turning to face the wall.

“Um, here you go.” Yumiko motioned to the spread that now took up most of the table. “You may have to eat standing up but I was told that this is the best food this town has to offer.” Integra looked eagerly over the repast before jumping as Anderson slammed down the phone.

“Tha’s it. I’m going to kill every accountant in that city when I get back,” he vowed angrily. Integra looked over and sighed.

“Does this mean I won’t get my cigars?”

Seras stretched out her legs and rested her hands on her knees, leaning forward slightly and looking over the edge of the parapet. In the distance, the soldiers were walking formations and their patterns reminded her of birds flying south for the winter. She hummed happily to herself and
turned her eyes to the full moon in the sky hanging low over the landscape. With her vampiric eyesight it was as if she was staring at it through high-powered binoculars; each crack and crevice was laid bare to her crimson gaze.

“So beautiful,” she murmured and closed her eyes, letting the light wash over her. Even if she couldn’t stand in the bare sunlight for more than a few minutes, she’d always have the feel of the moon’s cool beams.

“A lovely night, isn’t it?” Something pressed on her back and she opened her eyes and twisted her head to see that Alucard had decided to join her, mocking her position with his back against hers. “It’s nights like this that make me want a bite to drink.” He grinned at his own wordplay and she rolled her eyes and leaned against him. 

“Cor, but he’s as stiff as a wall! Doesn’t he know how to lighten up?” She sighed and let her neck loll back on his shoulder, staring up at the multitude of stars scattered across the inky sky.

“You’ve been around for a long time, huh Master?” she asked quietly, her eyes trained on the twinkling dots. She shifted against him and curled her knees up to her chest.

“Do you even have to ask?” His tone oozed smugness. Seras scoffed and nudged him with her shoulder. “What’s on your mind, Police Girl?”

“Nothing really. I just was thinking that you’ve seen lots of things, haven’t you? I wonder what sort of new things I’ll have seen when I’m as old as you.”

“Who knows? Humans are so changeable. They always want something better, something new. They can’t be happy with the things they’ve been given,” he replied. His voice vibrated against her back, tickling slightly and she shifted again. “It’s impossible for you to be still, isn’t it?” he complained lightly.

“Humph. At least I can relax, unlike you,” she teased back, nudging him again. They collapsed into companionable silence and watched the soldiers train in the darkness. Seras closed her eyes again and listened to the sounds of the night echoing from the forests and meadows around the manor. If she concentrated enough, she could hear the faint bustling of London just over the horizon. I could take a nap right now, she thought. Alucard’s back was solid and almost warm against her own, and he rocked her slightly with every shallow, unneeded breath he took. She basked in the comfort of the night, allowing a smile to rest on her face. If only I could stay like this forever… the thought came unbidden. Could she stay like this forever, watching over Hellsing and its inhabitants with Alucard? Would they just sit up here on the parapets together every night like a pair of breathing gargoyles? Perhaps. “Master, I never want to leave this place,” she admitted confidently.

“Then you’re an idiot,” he answered. “The world isn’t limited to England, Seras. There are so many places to see. You shouldn’t stick to one place forever until you’ve travelled a bit.” Seras twisted around to look at him. He was staring at the moon like she was, but his eyes were distant. What was he remembering? His own travels and the incidents that led him to the place he was now? She rose up on her knees and tugged his sleeve.

“You’ll take me one day, right? To see the world.” He looked contemplatively at her for a moment before nodding.

“If that is what you wish.” Seras beamed up at him and plopped back on her heels. She could just imagine; when her master took her around the world, what would he show her? Magnificent castles built into mountainsides? Frothy, rolling black oceans at the end of the world? She was sure that if she asked, he’d be able to find some and show her. Where to go first? Seras
didn’t care if he meant tomorrow or a thousand years from now. She was going to plan some stops that she wanted to see, but what did she want to see?

“I want to see the place you were born,” she finally declared in excitement. Alucard frowned and crossed his arms under his coat.

“No, you don’t. It’s nothing more than a heap of ancient stones and cursed memories,” he spit bitterly. Pulling in closer to himself, Seras saw the beginning of either a tantrum or a depressing sulk-fest; neither of which were good for her or Walter as they would have to deal with the vampire sometime later. Seras thought for a moment before shaking her head.

“Well, you’ll just have to go rebuild it. I want to see,” she shot back. When he didn’t answer, she shrugged and reached up, pulling the glasses carefully off his nose. He made a sharp sound and she ignored him, slipping the frames on curiously. The world went orange for a moment before her eyes sharpened and she looked around. With the glasses on, the glare of the moonlight was cut and she saw that the lenses seemed to work as sunglasses for nighttime. “Ooh, I want a pair of these!” she crowed happily, admiring how much better she could see with them on. No wonder he wore them on missions. You had no chance of missing your shot!

“Too bad. They’re one of a kind and I’m not giving them away,” he grabbed her chin with one hand to hold her still while he pulled the glasses off her nose and tucked them into his pocket. Undeterred, she grabbed the hat from his head and slid it on next, laughing at herself childishly. “What, is it my necktie next? Do you plan on undressing me up here?” he growled in annoyance as she pulled at the brim, making it flop over her blonde locks. She winked at him from under the hat and he made a move to grab for it. She jumped up out of reach of his long arms and stuck her tongue out daintily; ignoring the warning hiss he sent her way. She jumped with a laugh, holding tightly to the brim as she tumbled towards the ground. Landing on her feet, she set off around the side of the manor in a dead sprint, hearing him land inches behind her. She barreled around the corner and passed by the front doors when someone shouted her name. Sliding to a stop, she turned and grinned sheepishly as Walter waved the dust cloud she’d created away with a kerchief and coughed slightly. He pursed his lips at her and they both looked as a seething Alucard stalked his way towards them.

“You try my patience, Draculina,” the vampire ground out as he held out a hand. Seras took the hat off her head, snapped the brim to get any dust off, and stood on her tip-toes to sit it on his head, knocking it askew as she stumbled slightly. He fixed it and set his jaw, his irritation on full display. She gave Walter a sly look and he sent her back an exasperated one that let her know she was playing with fire.

“Now that Miss Victoria has finished her flirting,” he started and paused as Seras let out an embarrassed eep, “might I remind you both that the country is under attack?”

Chapter End Notes

Original Post:

Author’s Note: I’m trying to put the events in chronological order as to what time of day it is. (It’s even hard for me to keep track of what night delves into what day. TT_TT) So here’s a brief timeline of events that happened:

Day 1: (Thursday): That’s Chapter 1.
Day 2: (Friday): Chapter 2- morning, Chapter 3- night
Day 3: (Saturday): Chapter 4- morning, Chapter 5- night.

So now we’re on Sunday. Wow, this was a busy weekend for our little characters huh? The chapters won’t always follow this format- for example; this chapter covers Sunday and Monday. I just wanted to make sure we were all on the same page. (Flails helplessly) I’m really bad at organizing times. This is why I’ll never be a good time traveler.
Integra watched Anderson push his two subordinates (minions) out of the hotel room, both protesting wildly at their new orders. He’d given them a sealed letter with strict orders to give it personally to Maxwell.

“You know that they always shoot the messenger! Can’t you just call them instead?” Yumiko was practically in tears as she tried to reason with the irate priest. Integra watched in sympathy as the two women pled their case.

“I already did, and that didn’t work as you can tell. Now quit your whimpering and get that letter back to the Vatican ASAP. I don’t want to spend more nights than I have to with the Human Freezer sticking her cold feet on my calves!” The women nodded dutifully before scurrying into the night.

“Wake up!”

Integra’s eyes shot open and she looked up at the woman standing at the foot of the bed. The stern, motherly glance had her on her feet in an instant, clutching her nightgown for dear life. Anderson had volunteered to use the last of his pocket money to trek into town for her “damned cigars”, under the notion that she was to stay put and get some more rest. His cell phone, which Heinkel had brought from where he’d left it at the orphanage, lay forgotten on the nightstand. Integra was alone, face to face with-

“M-Margaret Thatcher?” The Iron Lady pursed her lips and crossed her arms irritably over her chest. “What are you doing here? Is this a dream?” Integra looked around for any sign of strange happenings, as the former Prime Minister currently looking with disdain at her starchy nightgown wasn’t enough.

“The better question is: what are you doing here! Your comrade is in trouble, and here you are sleeping the night away!” Integra floundered for a moment, trying to figure out what the woman meant. “I’m your Spirit Guide; you’re supposed to listen to me, no matter how unpopular I seem in the polls!”

“I understand, ma’am. But…” Integra jumped on a limb and decided they must be talking about Anderson. “I have no idea where he is; what am I supposed to do; run out there in my dressing gown and start shooting blindly?” The woman pointed to the table, where the priest’s supply of beeswax had been placed “just in case”.

“Of course you aren’t! That wouldn’t be very English of you, would it? But you can’t be letting someone die while you sit around like a ninny. Go out and save him, but make sure you use that wax, and liberally apply it too. Then those unholy creatures can’t harm you. Now hurry, there’s not any time to lose!” The woman nodded as cannons boomed in the distance and red-clad soldiers marched in formation across the hotel room.

“J-just what’s going on?!” Integra sat up and realized she was back in bed, in a hotel room thankfully empty of British Prime Ministers and victory marches. She took one look at the cellular on the table before jumping up and grabbing the wax, stuffing it inside each ear and running out
the door, gun in hand. “Stupid Catholic! How can he keep track of an orphanage of children and still be so scatterbrained?” she growled to herself as she took a chance and ran down the path leading north. Despite her anger towards the priest, her heart still thudded with anxiety. What if it turned out she was too late? What sort of hype would fall on her shoulders? There’d be another Crusade for sure: she could hear them now. *Those English dogs did this on purpose!* She willed herself to run faster as she met with a hill, leading her back towards town (she hoped). It didn’t help that any sounds of bustle were dimmed by the thick wax in her ears.

Running onward, she crested the hill to see two figures at the bottom, at least 15 feet ahead. It was no trouble to place Anderson, who seemed to be both trying to fight the man on the other side of the road and walk towards him willingly. The strange man held out his hands imploringly, his short blonde hair waving in the breeze and Integra’s heart skipped a few beats at the implication. She heard terrible screeching coming from the creature’s open, venomous mouth and realized with a start that it was singing. The beeswax didn’t muffle the song; it simply allowed Integra to hear the true nature of the beast that stood down the lane. *How does that work?* she wondered for a moment before snapping to attention. Anderson was in grave danger, and unless she did something quickly things would be out of control!

“Here’s what we know about the creatures we’re up against. Thankfully, our contacts in the Mediterranean countries have found that the Greeks knew well the dangers of Sirens. It’s not just another half-truth in a story, I’m afraid.” Walter looked out at the weathered, attentive faces of the soldiers. Seras was on the front row squished in between Harry Stevenson and Alucard, both of whom were glaring daggers at each other; Stevenson protectively, Alucard possessively. Seras seemed oblivious to both of them (though Walter decided that she was intentionally ignoring them by her body language) and had her eyes trained on the instructional PowerPoint that Walter had on the projector. Walter cleared his throat and continued, trying to hide his amusement.

“I say thankfully, because our Greek fellows kept a good record of their dealings and they are accessible to us now, although it cost us an arm and a leg to look at them.” He pressed the button on his laser pointer and the slide changed to a bulleted list of facts. “Sirens live in groups near the rocky cliffs that line the Europe’s southern oceans. They enjoy this region because of the lack of vegetation.

“This is point number one: beeswax. Beeswax is a natural thing, created by bees of course. Sirens are susceptible to it, as well as to wood such as hawthorn or ash. Christians will tell you that this is because Sirens are unholy creatures, although whether that’s true or not remains to be unknown. We all know from experience that sometimes myths aren’t all they seem.” Everyone looked pointedly at the two vampires on the front row. Alucard grinned back viciously at the crowd and Seras ducked under their scrutiny, her face flaming.

“Yes, well: point number two: Sirens only seem to be able to hunt the unmarried. While vampires and other creatures can create ghouls from virgins and the like, Sirens can’t hypnotize the married, divorced, or widowed; the Greeks didn’t find this out, although the Romans did years later. This is bad for us, because of one thing. Please stand if you are married, or *were* married at some point.” Alucard stood, as well as about a hundred soldiers. Seras looked around curiously. The married population was definitely in the minority, but she accounted that to the young, fresher faces of new men. *Wow, if this had happened before the Valentine’s attack; I bet over half of those men would have been able to stand.* Her heart twisted as she remembered the countless new widows at the graveside funeral, which seemed so long ago now. Turning back around in her chair she eyed Harry, who met her glance with a grim nod. He too realized the point Walter was trying to make. The men sat back down, now abuzz with newfound unease.
“Yes, that’s exactly my point. The ones who remained sitting aren’t going to be able to fight; they’ll stay at home here, protecting the manor.” Seras raised her hand and Walter acknowledged her.

“But Walter, what about the beeswax? You just said that they negate the effects of the song.” The butler nodded.

“Yes, that’s true but this brings me to point three: defeating the creatures. You see men: even if you have enough beeswax for every one of your troops, you still have to be able to see a Siren’s heart and pierce it. Now, if you’re unmarried still, the Siren will appear to you in the form you think most attractive. For instance, you may find yourself in combat with your girlfriend or a beautiful, helpless woman.” He turned slightly pink and coughed before continuing. “Some of you may even see men, I suppose. Still, the one problem remains. Each Siren’s heart is located on a different part of its body. These are not uniform creatures like you and I. Each one is uniquely and grotesquely shaped. I’ve heard it’s quite the horrific sight.” Seras looked around as a man she didn’t know in the back of the crowd stood and spoke with a raspy voice.

“So married men can see their hearts?” he sounded confused. “I mean, that would be pretty damn weird but if my wife had a pulsing heart where her right eye should be, it probably wouldn’t be that hard to shoot her.” Another man on the other side of the room guffawed.

“If I saw my ex-wife, it wouldn’t be hard for me to shoot her at all!” The men fell into laughter at the confession. Seras covered her mouth as a giggle escaped and Harry was trying to remain serious, his cheeks turning blue as he held his breath to keep from chuckling. Walter smiled indulgently at the men before clearing his throat and letting the laughter subside, knowing that it was born from their need to do something to relieve their growing apprehension at the upcoming battle.

“Very funny; but I’m afraid you mistook my meaning. It’s not that you would see your wives in place of gorgeous women,” he narrowed his eyes as another ripple of laughter worked through the crowd at his words. “In all seriousness, you would see the creatures for what they really look like, not an illusion.” The butler repressed a slight shudder as he hit the next slide. Seras jumped back in the chair with a shriek; the men let out a collective gasp at the picture on the slide. Only Alucard seemed unfazed by the image.

“This is a picture of a Siren, taken by a courageous, or foolish, photographer. Since pheromones can’t come through photographs, everyone can see its true form here on the screen. Not beauty pageant material, I assure you.”

That was an understatement. It was hard to see that the creature was alive or even something that was real and not in an R-rated horror film. It was humanoid in only the vaguest sense of the word. Its skin was jaundiced; cracked, peeling, and oozing yellowish-green pus that trailed like tears down its face and limbs. Its eyes were dim and either extremely bloodshot or naturally orange and black. The misshapen, thin arms hung past the knobby knees and ended in thick black claws. Its mouth was open in a gaping maw that revealed blackened, rotting teeth covered in mucus and slimy excretions. On its side, a translucent, fluid filled sac covered in thick veins served as the heart. Walter allowed the crowd time to adjust to the horrible image before clicking the slide and revealing the end of the slideshow.

“Yes, I agree wholeheartedly with your reactions. It looks like something out of Bruegel’s works, in my opinion. But this is what we are fighting against: this is our enemy.” His eyes narrowed and he stood ramrod straight, resolve written across his features. “Hellsing will not back down to this threat any more than we would vampires. These are unholy creatures that need to be silenced in
order to preserve Country and Crown. I expect nothing less from the best soldiers our country has
to offer. Meet with your individual Captains for orders. Unmarried men will be under Captain
Victoria. Married men will work with both Alucard and Captain Penn.” With that, he ended his
lecture and walked offstage.

There was a deafening clamor that followed as chairs scraped the floors and men separated into
two groups. Alucard stood at the head of one, looking out over the minority. The raspy-voiced man
from earlier stood at his side. Seras looked over at them before studying the amassed men before
her, many more than was necessary for what she’d be in charge of doing while the others were
fighting. She saw Walter and waved him over, motioning to whisper in his ear when he walked her
way.

“I honestly don’t need this many men in charge of security and reconnaissance. Do you need help
in ammunition and distribution? I can spare more than a few.” Walter eyed the troop before
nodding his assent and pointing out ten burly men.

“You lot, come with me. I need your help carrying boxes and guns.” The men looked to their new
Captain, who nodded and shooed them away teasingly before turning to see if she had any familiar
faces from her own troop in the crowd. There was Stevenson, of course; a bandy-legged fellow that
was relatively new named Roans, a dark skinned man who looked as if he belonged in jail who
went by the name Stash… other than that, it seemed everyone was unfamiliar to her. Good, I
always enjoy getting to meet new people. I just hope they’ll feel the same way.

That should be the least of your worries, Police Girl. Seras fought the urge to whip her head
around and look at her master, who was currently letting Captain Penn say his piece to the men.

I know. Besides, I’m not the one having to worry. You all had better be careful out there, Master.
She felt her unease for the men grow. She didn’t have to worry about her Master; something this
trivial wouldn’t be a problem for him to clear up. But she doubted they’d all get out without any
casualties whatsoever. Humans are so fragile.

You act as though I’ve never commanded soldiers before. He couldn’t keep his delight at the
upcoming battle out of their bond and she frowned at the feeling. It was a slightly uncomfortable
emotion for her; although when she first heard that they were going to war she had felt the ghost of
excitement as well.

No sir. I’ve simply read how you treated your military before. I care for a good number of those
men. I don’t want… she wrinkled her eyebrows and set her jaw; she refused to even imagine that
possibility. If she thought about them dying, then they may as well have been dead. She trained her
men better than that-as their commanding officer, she should be confident in their abilities!

Do not worry yourself. His tone was actually sincere for once and she felt a phantom touch brush
her head before the soldiers left the room to get ready for battle. She smiled and turned back to her
own men, explaining the details of their part in Walter’s grand scheme. She truly didn’t need to
worry; she had a kickass Master who would have things taken care of before anyone had time to
think twice.

The gunshot echoed through the countryside. Anderson backed up in confusion, his eyes flashing
towards Integra. The strange man jerked as the bullet pierced through his head, but acted as though
it was nothing. The screeching song ceased for one moment as the creature’s brown eyes flitted to
where Integra stood at the base of the hill, her gun in her outstretched hands. It hissed; a thick,
gurgling sound that made every hair on Integra’s body stand straight. She squashed the fear
bubbling inside her as she unloaded another shot in the Siren’s stomach, trying to bring it down.
The shot worked and it fell to its knees, vomiting a slick, oily mess of sludge and venom. She took the moment to run towards the pair, moving towards Anderson with the intent on pushing him out of harm’s way for the time being until she could stuff some wax down his ears.

Something snagged her gown and she fell flat on the hard-packed dirt, the gun clattering out of her hands. She looked back to see the Siren had the tail end of her gown in hideous clawed hands, causing a large tear to rip up the side and angle across her back. He leered at her, the gurgling sound rising to another screech. She smirked, turning her head to one side in a mocking way. The Siren seemed to notice that its song had no effect and the screeching sound rose in pitch until it became a scream. Anderson flung his hands over his ears, his face contorted in pain. Integra winced, but kept her ears uncovered and watched as the Siren turned blue, then purple. Suddenly, its eyes bulged and its head exploded. Integra couldn’t help herself; she gagged as thick chunks of black mess splattered across her ripped gown. The stench was unbearable. The now-headless body wiggled a few seconds before relaxing and dissolving into black swill. Integra looked at the body with a morbid fascination. *I just watched someone literally sing themselves to death. He was so obsessed with making me suffer, he sang himself to death. How…strange.*

She carefully stood, looking in disgust at the ruined gown. There was no way she could ever scrub the odor out of it. She adjusted it to where it wouldn’t be right up on her neck, unbuttoning the collar down to the last button. She looked over to see Anderson staring blankly at the mess on the ground and made her way over to him after she retrieved her gun from where it had landed.

“Are you alright?” When he didn’t answer, she stepped closer and peered up into his eyes. The usually-brilliant emerald orbs were dulled and vacant. “Paladin Anderson?” He noticed her, looking down at her face for a moment, but still silent. “Alexander?” she tried again. He seemed to look right through her, but a moment later he smiled cheerfully.

“It’s not often I get to see the same girl’s chest twice in one day,” he crowed. Integra blinked up at him before gasping and holding the collar to her gown shut again. He chuckled at her actions before his eyes narrowed. “Hey, I know you.” He put one finger on her nose and pushed slightly with every word. “Integra. Fairbrook. Wingates. Hellsing.” She slapped his hand away, realizing what was going on. *Drunk on magic;* the words flew back into her mind unbidden and she sighed heavily, understanding what she had to do.

“You’re drunk. Come on; let’s go back to the hotel.” Anderson gave her a bewildered look that dissolved into anger.

“Hey!” he snapped, swaying as he tried to tower over her. “I am not drunk. I haven’t drank in over-40 years now, so don’t you start on me, lassie!” He swayed a moment longer before practically falling on top of her. She managed to hold him up with his arm flopped over her shoulders. “Whoa. The ground is shaking. Must be an earthquake or somethin’” he slurred and looked around.

“Just come on. We need to get to the hotel room, okay?” Integra hadn’t ever dealt with any drunkards. She hoped that he wouldn’t get too angry and start swinging at her, although in his current state she wasn’t sure that it would do much damage. She started walking and to her relief he followed her, letting her guide him down the road.

“Ah, if you just wanted a little nip you coulda come out and said it. No need to be shy and all.” He laughed in her ear, although she wasn’t sure if there was an actual joke in his sentence or if he was simply laughing for the pleasure of it. She watched the countryside as they walked, wary of any more attacks by unseen forces. Now that she looked closely, she could see evidence of a battle. *Just how long was he out here? If I was brought down by a small amount of exposure, what in the hell’s*
What indeed?

OCP:
I’m sorry if I’ve been confusing people with the two separate stories going on. I promise that they’re going to be slowly merging into one bigger story. (Sighs) I actually never intended for this to span more than 3 chapters. Why do I always do this to myself?! (Not that I mind, actually. This story is quickly becoming my baby right now, until something else comes along)
The mild-mannered farmer stood at the end of the drive with his wife, looking at the break in the fence in the fading light. On the path, Betsy the cow chewed her cud at her ease. The wife growled something sharply and the poor farmer took off his weather-beaten hat and scratched the little bit of hair he had left.

“I just dunno how it happened, if’n it wasn’t that creature. Betsy didn’t do this much damage, I know. She’s too old.” The farmer plopped the hat back on his head and shrugged to his wife. “I’m guessing I’ll get to fixing it after supper.” The wife nodded vigorously before bending down to pick up Betsy’s lead.

“First you see strange priests on the roadside, now you spout something about monsters breaking the fence and screeching at night; I’m starting to think you’re addled after 60-odd years in the sun,” the sharp-tongued woman scowled. The man gave her a half-hearted look and sighed wearily.

Suddenly, a cheerful shout sounded from over the hill and the pair turned to see a scarred priest running pell-mell down the hillside, being chased by a blonde woman in a torn nightgown holding a gun. The pair watched as the priest passed down by the drive, calling out a cheerful “God be with you, friends!” before the woman caught up, jumping on his back in a tackle before nodding quickly to the farmer and his wife as she grabbed the man’s hands and lugged him back in the opposite direction. They managed to make it back over the hill before disappearing. The goodwife looked over at her husband, who took the cow’s lead from the shell-shocked woman and walked away while whistling a jaunty tune. Sometimes it took seeing it with your own eyes to realize that there were some strange people in the world.

Integra turned the lock on the door after sliding the “Do not Disturb” sign on the outside, hoping to keep meddling maids from cleaning and waking them all up in the morning. She sighed, wracking her brain in an effort to think of a way to keep Anderson from running out the door in his state. He’d managed to break away from her three times on the way back to the hotel, running down the lane and shouting about how he had to spread the word of God across every countryside in the world. She’d barely been able to catch up to him the last time, and much too tired to offer an explanation to the puzzled old couple that had been watching the spectacle from the safety of their driveway.

“Alright, I think that we need to-” she said exhaustedly as she turned before shrieking and covering her eyes. “What in the hell are you doing!?” The now-shirtless man paused his fumbling, holding his belt in both hands and staring at her like she was out of her mind.

“I cannae sleep in such messy clothes. It’ll ruin the bed,” he explained matter-of-factly, as if undressing in front of a practically strange woman was a natural occurrence in his life. She rubbed her flaming cheeks and strode across the room to grab the belt from his hands, eyes trained on his face. He’s *not* himself-he’s not himself-he’s not himself; her personal mantra was confirmed when she caught the blissful, fuzzy look in his eyes as he smiled at her, his glasses hanging askew.

“Ah-er, I think that your pants are well enough to last tonight. We can clean the bed sheets tomorrow. Um,” she looked around and spied her book laying on the nightstand where she’d begun reading it while he was gone before turning in. Even though it was a sappy romance, she still
shoved it into his hands and pushed him on the bed, fluffing the pillows to try and get him comfortable. He looked up at her expectantly as she readied the bed around him.

“You just stay here on the bed and read the nice book. I’ll be back in a moment; I need to change, too.” She patted his shoulder awkwardly before searching around the floor for something to use as sleepwear until she could buy a new nightgown. Her old clothes were covered in dirt and glass, and she needed to use the new ones the next day. Spying something white, she picked it up to see it was Anderson’s oversized designated sleeping shirt and shrugged to herself. She needed something, and he could sleep without a shirt for one night. He was too intoxicated to care right now, anyway. She slipped into the bathroom and brushed her teeth, combed through her hair and stripped in record time, keeping her bra on and pulling the shirt over her head. It billowed around her legs and came to rest at her knees, although the sleeves hung low on her ribs, slipped down over one shoulder, and showed far too much of her skin to be ladylike. Well, she could take it or leave it, and leaving it wasn’t an option.

She peered back into the room to see her book back on the table, but thankfully Anderson was still in the room. He was staring out the tiny window, pulling the curtains back to gaze up at the moon, his jaw slack. She fiddled for a moment with the front of the shirt, trying to get it to stay up on both shoulders before giving up and walking over to join him. She decided to just play along until she could convince him to get into bed and eventually sleep it off. He turned to look at her as she made her way to his side, his face weary.

“The moon is beautiful.” He sounded almost lucid, and Integra wondered if his Regeneration powers allowed him to process the magic faster than a normal human. “Don’t you ever just stop and look up and see how beautiful it is?” She shook her head slightly, staring up at the crescent shape as well.

“No. I haven’t got time for things like that.” It was true; she was always busy keeping Alucard out of trouble, or stopping childish fights among the ranks. Paperwork, meetings, online conferences, emails, telephone calls; she barely had a moment to breathe and relax, much less look into the sky to see if the big, dead ball was still hanging on up there. Anderson made a small sound in the back of his throat and she looked over to see him staring at her, his face still lit in awe. “What is it?” she asked, trying not to sound too impatient. He was clearly still slightly inebriated, despite his enhanced blood. Besides, (from what she remembered) he had been patient enough with her. She should return the favor.

“Tha’s my shirt,” he informed her softly, and she nodded and fingered the material, quietly admiring the worn-in feeling rubbing softly against her skin.

“I hope you don’t mind; that damned creature ripped my-” she froze mid-sentence as he brushed her hair off her shoulder, picking up the fabric slightly before letting it drape back down over her shoulder. He followed the path it took with his fingers, brushing lightly as he dipped down past her collarbone. He murmured under his breath and Integra gasped, feeling the blood rush back into her face as her muscles locked. If his hand kept with the curve of the collar, he’d eventually reach-she unfroze and grabbed his hand tightly, pulling it away. When the touch was broken, she was finally able to inhale normally and she looked up sharply in alarm to see his gaze roaming over her curiously.

“You know, I wondered what your skin felt like, back when I had you pinned against the wall in Badrick,” he declared unashamedly, rubbing his fingers together as they hung at his side. He made his way woozily to the bed, flopping down on it and stretching out with a sigh. Integra considered crawling over him to reach her spot for a full second before making the conclusion that that was a bad idea. Instead she walked over with the intent of pushing him over onto “her” side and sleeping
against the edge tonight. She shrieked loudly when he pulled her down and over him, rolling them both onto their sides and pulling her close, his arm around her. She hissed angrily and pushed against him to no avail; his arm was like a chunk of steel holding her down.

“Let me go!” she shouted, slapping his chest with her free hand hard. It hurt her more than it did him, and she shook her hand and swore in a very unladylike fashion. The thought that her father would have blushed at her words passed through her mind before Anderson caught her hand in his, turning it over to see if she’d hurt herself smacking him.

“Next time, punch me. It will put less strain on your bones and your wrist,” he explained expertly, pressing her slender hand into a fist, her thumb tucked safely beneath her fingers. “Be sure to hit with your fingers, and push the brunt to your knuckles for maximum damage.” She looked at the fist before rearing back and punching him hard in the chest. It didn’t hurt her, but the sound thumped in his chest and he let out a breath before chuckling. “Not me! You can’t really hurt me, even if you tried. You would have to be bigger.” She groaned and looked up at the ceiling as he let out another breathy chuckle and patted her hand gently. Tonight is not my night.

Back at Hellsing Manor, Walter was second-guessing his previous judgment that these were the finest England had to offer. He’d only heard one update from Penn, saying that the front against the sirens in London were so far, so good. Walter had been assured that this would be so, and the forces protecting the manor were just a precaution. After the Valentine’s attack, both he and Integra had adopted a personal policy of “Better Safe than Sorry”, which always ended up being the best policy anyway. However, as he watched the bored men under Captain Victoria’s care, one would have thought that it was the day of the company picnic.

“Queenie, Queenie, who’s got the ball?” Seras turned around and put a mock-thoughtful face on, walking in front of the men lined up with their hands behind their backs. She stopped before a few, looking deep into their mirthful faces like a buxom Sherlock Holmes before stepping back and putting her hands behind her own back.

“Aw, c’mon Seras! Pick one already!” one soldier yelled out. The others started to goad her as well until she singled out a man in the middle. He grinned and showed his hands, shaking his head. Walter sighed and felt the years practically flying away on the wind. How did watching over grown men and a vampire turn into being playground monitor for a bunch of childish soldiers? Rolling his eyes, he nevertheless pointed out a man on the end.

“No cheating, Rodgers! I saw you stick that in your belt.”

Alucard busted the head off another Siren, laughing as it fell to the ground in a twitching mass of black gore and twisted limbs. It was quite entertaining, clearing the filthy streets of this filthy town of filthy vermin. And killing the Sirens was proving to be fun, too.

He couldn’t help thinking about his little blonde pet as he shot both humans and Sirens at his own pace, leaving the army far behind under the control of the captain. He wished she were here by his side; she was simply mouthwatering when her eyes were deep crimson and she drank in the battle like a true vampire should. He had never said the young woman didn’t have any potential. If he’d thought that, he’d never have changed her. She was gorgeous and violent in her own special way, yet at the same time she could be playful and silly. Yes, he’d grown more than fond of the little fledgling he’d picked up in the cathedral that fateful night.

Stomping the legs of a Siren to dust just to hear its scream of pain, he gazed thoughtfully at the blood-red moon that hung low over the horizon, following his unconscious command. He’d
willingly agreed to let her tag along and show her the sights of Europe, without any thought about how that would slow him down in whatever on-the-fly plan he’d indulge in next. Do I value her happiness that deeply? He hadn’t really considered it before, yet the more he looked at it the more he found that yes, he did.

It floored him slightly and he almost missed watching the spray of congealed blood that spurted from the creature beneath his feet as he shot absently. He’d never cared about much before in his life. Even his wife, whom he’d chosen on a mix of lust and the need to have one around just because; he hadn’t cared all that much about the woman. Yes, he’d been fond of her in his own way, but she’d never loved him and only killed herself from fear of what his brother’s forces would do to her once his castle was stormed. By the time that happened, he was already long gone from that place, and her body had been left on the rocks. He might have saved her, if she’d had faith in him. Maybe.

But Seras was different, it seemed. He didn’t enjoy seeing her disappointment as much as he should’ve. But that wasn’t the only thing; time and again she’d defied him, disrespected him, embarrassed him, and yet time and again he’d let her go and even forgotten her transgressions in favor of her triumphs that filled him with a sense of pride and accomplishment.

He even dreamed of her, a backdrop against the nightmares of his memories. Often it was her being impaled by the Turks, and he was trying to get to her before it was too late with her screams of pain echoing in his ears. But then again, his dreams often melded with hers between their minds and he felt the horror of her own repressed pain. He’d watched from her eyes as the men raped her mother brutally more times than he could count. He’d felt her fear and sorrow as the life drained out of her, his own self a shadow in her memory bending down to end her existence. But unlike his own dreary unconsciousness, she also dreamed of peace and happiness, and he realized very quickly that he was always, always in those dreams. Was her only happiness his presence? Surely he wasn’t that great to be around.

Shaking his head, he adjusted his glasses and continued his spree, resolving to ask the girl why once he returned to her side. Perhaps that was why they were so good for each other; he never minded having someone like her to return to, partly because he knew she’d always come back to him, too.

“I’ve never been in your room for a visit before, even though we’ve been partners for a while now.” Stevenson walked around the room, looking curiously at the coffin. However, he’d been warned not to touch her bed, and he understood what the word “boundaries” meant well enough to choose to sit at the carved wooden chair instead, placing his tray of chicken and gravy down and opening the accompanying napkin packet to get to his fork. Seras joined him on the other side of the table, placing his drink beside him before taking the seat opposite him. She had put her blood in a glass with a straw for his benefit; he said he could stomach the sight of it when he could dismiss it as some sort of rusty-smelling fruit juice. Noticing her staring at his chicken, he pushed the plate to her without thinking. “Want some?”

“I used to like chicken and gravy. Hmm.” Seras reached out and placed a drop of gravy on her pinky, sticking it in her mouth and looking pensive. Noticing her companion’s bated breath, she smiled sadly and shrugged. “Tastes like ash, honestly.” She washed the dusty tang down with her blood, ignoring the bolt of sadness in her chest. She knew that the tiny amount of gravy wouldn’t make her sick, but she was sad to see it tasted awful. For a fraction of a second, she thought she might be able to handle human food in miniscule amounts, like some diabetics could with sugar. Wouldn’t master laugh at me right now.
“You do drink stuff other than blood, right? I’ve seen you order fruit drinks at the pubs when we all go out.” Stevenson shoveled another mouthful as he watched the sad look on his captain’s face. She still got depressed thinking about humanity and herself, it seemed.

“Mhmm. I can drink fruit juice and even alcohol. It’s basically wheat blood, just with lots of added stuff, so it’s more like a soft drink: not good for you, but still tasty.” She smiled and took another sip of blood. “I guess Master enjoys his wine, although it’s a little too sweet for me. I never tell him that, though.”

“Peer pressure gets us all,” the human teased as he inhaled his meal. Seras shook her head and rolled her eyes before starting. Stevenson watched her eyes blank for a moment before she downed the blood in one fell swoop and stood.

“My master has returned, and he’s got important news!” she said excitedly. Stevenson nodded and swallowed the rest of his meal in two bites before getting up and following her out the door and upstairs.

Integra lay stiffer than a board in the bed. It was bad enough that she was being manhandled by a drunken Scottish clergyman, but it was actually affecting her in ways she’d rather not mention (or hear Alucard crow about later, if he was paying any attention). She kept numbering the reasons in her head she shouldn’t be getting flustered: he was a Catholic, he worked for Maxwell, he was her enemy, he was a bigoted jerk- but her mind kept jumping to the fingers trailing patterns over her ribs and the fact that a thin scrap of shirt was the only thing keeping them from touching her bare skin. The jerk in question heaved a quiet sigh and she resisted looking up to see what the matter was.

“You know, it’s been over 50 years since I touched a woman at all. Can you believe it? Half a century.” His hand brushed the opening to the sleeve and she gritted her teeth, the conflicting emotions making her want to tear her own hair out.

“Why so long?” she managed after a moment, her jaw locked and her fists clenched. He chuckled above her head and rubbed her tensed arm, making goose bumps rise as she fought the shiver trying to work its way across her body. When he finally spoke, his voice was laden with something undefinable.

“When I was young, I lived the life of a sinner. I was born to two perfectly Christian parents, but I rejected their ways and went my own path. I drank, smoke, gambled… women in my bed every night, and a perpetual hangover every day. It was Satan’s life, and I foolishly reveled in my materialistic greed. But then when I was drafted and became a soldier, I almost died. God led the Church to me, and with His help I became a new man. He gave me the Church and the orphanage, and I’ve spend the past 55 years obeying His command and trying to repay Him for what He’s done for me. My earthly existence could have sent me to Hell, but God’s glory gave me a second chance.” He paused for a moment before nodding. “And I’ve been that way ever since.”

Integra shifted to look up at him, more than a little dumbfounded. She’d never imagined that Alexander Anderson, holier-than-thou Anderson, Papist-or-heathen-no-in-between-them Anderson would ever have demons that ran so deep. He gazed back at her, his eyes meeting hers and he smiled, reaching out to touch her hair softly.

“And now, Maxwell says I must marry. What to do?” he whispered mournfully, as if marriage was the last thing he wanted to think about. Integra could understand to some extent; she didn’t want to marry either, but she knew she had to do so. Unlike her, Anderson already knew the carnal life and he had turned away from it, only to be forced back by his superior. It must be eating him up inside.
She sighed and pulled his hand away from her face, but couldn’t bring herself to let go of it.

“A wife of noble character who can find? She is worth far more than rubies.” Integra quoted, squeezing his hand gently before placing on the mattress between them and finally moving away the slightest bit, to give herself some breathing room. Anderson nodded sagely, offering a quiet “Amen” before looking thoughtfully at her, his green eyes wavering in the dim light of the room.

“She speaks with wisdom, and faithful instructions is on her tongue; she watches over the affairs of her household and does not eat the bread of idleness.” He moved closer, sitting up to lean over her and grasping her hands. “Amen. She dinnae stare at moon, either.”

“What? No-no! I’m not, I didn’t mean that-” Integra backed up from under the hulking man and shook her head, her Scripture backfiring in her face. She only meant it to be comforting, that he’d have a hard time finding a suitable wife, because it said so in the Bible. He’d used the same damned Proverb to draw his own conclusions, the bastard! He moved closer, boxing her into the corner and sitting close but not touching. His eyes stared at her determinedly and she shook her head, feeling for the second time in her life like a small, helpless little girl. “I’m not the one you want; you’re drunk,” she tried to reason softly.

“Wrong. I haven’t touched a drop in over 50 years, Hellsing. I’m not drunk. I’m having an epiphany,” he said with a warm smile. She glanced down at a movement to see him holding out his hand, a tarnished silver ring in his palm. She’d caught sight of the ring before whenever he’d taken off his gloves, but hadn’t asked what it represented.

“What’s that?” she said shakily, pointing to the ring. He looked down before holding the dull silver up to catch the light, turning with an expression of pride on his face.

“No matter how deep into sin I fell, my da never disowned me. Even on his deathbed, he called me his son. And my inheritance was the family ring, which has been the eldest son’s since the dawn of the family name. It’s not much, but it’s all I have to offer right now.” He held the ring out to her again, patiently waiting for her answer.

Integra stared at the ring, feeling faint. The voices swirled in her head and she tried to pull them into focus. Sir Irons stood in her mind’s eye, listening to her pleas even as she knew they fell on deaf ears. “Nonsense, Integra. You’re going to have to produce an heir, whether you like it or not. Now, I’m sure you can find a nice young gentleman to get acquainted with and marry. I don’t care who, as long as it will get us a new leader. You know as well as I do what he’d do with free reign if the Hellsing blood ever died out.” Alucard and Seras had both alluded to the inevitable future when a child’s feet could be heard pattering all over the house, and Walter had even started suggesting getting her old things out in an effort to subtly spur her on.

Still, Anderson was under the influence of the magic… right? He seemed much more reasonable and clear now than he had been even a full hour ago. Maybe he was being serious in his roundabout offer of marriage. Would he even remember it tomorrow? She gulped and looked at the silver circle that represented her future. One syllable from her, whether positive or negative, could change the course of her entire life. Then all of a sudden, the weight that was bearing down on her just… disappeared. She felt clear-headed and logical, and she smelt the hint of mahogany leather in the air. Father?

She lifted her head to see Anderson still staring at her, his expression one of blank patience. He didn’t seem as though he’d noticed anything, but she could have sworn- looking at the ring again, she considered her answer. It would certainly benefit everyone. Irons would have his heir and Anderson would have his next Regenerator, Integra wouldn’t have to go on awkward blind dates, and Alucard would still be subservient to England. Of course, he and Anderson would duke it out
on more than one occasion, but she could always handle that. She and Anderson would fight, but most married couples did anyway and she never really felt all that emotionally wrecked afterwards. The only problem was…

“I don’t love you, though,” she admitted. Anderson didn’t bat an eye, only shrugging half-heartedly.

“What is matrimony, but the "status of being a mother"? We don’t have to be married for love: most Iscariots aren’t, since the Church usually decides for them. “When given proper air and cared for, fondness and respect can blossom to love.” That’s the unofficial saying.” He gave her a doe-eyed look and to her surprise, turned slightly pink. “I respect you and… I’m fond enough of you. You’re not bad company, when you try hard enough.”

“Well, I’m a Protestant! You’re not forcing me to change.” Again, he waved her words away.

“I can ask permission for a mixed marriage. You won’t have to change you heathen ways, since you’re still basically a Christian.” He arched a brow at her. “Any more objections?” Integra grumbled and shook her head, trying to think of a reason he didn’t have a loophole for. Finally, she sighed and allowed the trembles that had been threatening her all night go through her spine. It was the only weakness she’d ever allow to show to anyone, much less him. She reached out and tentatively took the ring from his warm palm. It was too broad for her fingers, instead having to go onto her thumb, the only place where the knuckle caught it before it slid off.

“I guess I’m fond enough of you too,” she muttered, still feeling rather warm from his caresses. “And it’s for the greater good. I’m literally lying back to think of England, I guess.” She rubbed her face wearily- she was fatigued from chasing him down the back lanes all afternoon, and the stress didn’t help. He looked at her with concern and pulled them both back to the bed. This time, she didn’t even bother trying to get him to let go. She was just too tired.

“When this all is over,” he whispered in her ear, his lips brushing the skin, “I will let you have whatever sort of ceremony you want. Integra.” She shivered again and he pulled the sheet over her, missing the red face that turned over to hide in the pillow at the sound of her name.

Chapter End Notes

Generic drunken scene is generic, right? I guess so, but even I’m allowed one or two overused cliches in my own story.

OP:
I swear I love this farmer. He’s actually modeled after my grandfather, who does indeed have a pet cow named Betsy. My granny isn’t quite as harsh as this goodwife, though.
Chapter Summary

Alternately titled "The Taming of the Shrew" for the duration of writing it.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“So you take the high road, and I’ll take the low road; and I’ll be in Scotland afore ye.” Anderson looked at the tiny transistor radio on the windowsill that faithfully crooned the old, familiar song to the fields beyond the wooden platform. He rubbed his eyes and looked around at the familiar decorations on the walls, where they’d always been from his first memories to the day he left forever. A plump woman with her hair in a braided bun hummed along with the song as she stirred something on the stove. She turned when he shifted to stand, the stray hairs curling from the heat around her face and framing her glittering green eyes. She wiped her hands on her apron and went to sit across from him at the table, picking up a wooden circle of embroidery. *Idle hands are the Devil’s playthings, ye know.*

“So you’re to be married now. How wonderful!” the woman exclaimed after a silent moment. Anderson looked at her, feeling like a child again even though he towered over the woman and the table in his seat. “And to a nice Christian lassie. I knew you’d find someone someday.”

“I’m to be married?” Anderson frowned in confusion and rubbed a hand through his hair, wracking his brains. He barely remembered a silver ring glinting in the light of a hotel room….

“Oh, aye. I just wish you had my wedding gown to marry her in. Something old, you know and that gown’s been in my mother’s family for ages.” The woman smiled fondly and reached over the table to pat the broad hand that rested on the other end. “I know you’ll be a good husband. But take my advice. A marriage must have respect and trust. Just look at your da and me; we may not have known each other long before marrying, but it lasted all the same, because we built it on trust.” She waved her finger in the air at him, her face becoming stern. “God sees everything, Alex. You can’t be untrue without three souls knowing.” Anderson nodded obediently.

“Ma, I don’t know if I can get married. I’m worried that-” He colored slightly and frowned. He never talked much with either of his parents about what he was doing when he went missing. They’d treated him like the prodigal son when he returned, but they’d never asked where he’d been and he’d never told them. It shamed him that he disrespected the Anderson family name in such a way, and besides the entire village had known about it when he left for Edinburgh. “I’m worried that I’ll fall back into old habits,” he finished neutrally, looking up at the kind woman with a saddened expression. His mother clucked and shook her head.

“God gave us partners to keep us out of temptation, Alex. You know the Scriptures. And besides, she’s enough of a firebrand to keep you out of the whiskey and smokes. You’ll have a rough time breaking that horse, as your da would say.” She smiled and placed her embroidery back on the table, getting up and flicking the scraps out of her apron before walking over to the stove. Anderson watched her with a smile before looking over at the radio, still playing the song amid crackling static.
“Ma,” he began as he rubbed his chin. “This isn’t real, is it? You never had a transistor radio. They weren’t even invented until after you passed in ’47.” The woman grinned impishly from the stove, waving her hand dismissively.

“Of course it’s not real. ’Tis only a dream, after all. You’re still in Ireland.”

Seras swung her legs out childishly; she closed her eyes and listening to the whispering winds move in the trees. It spoke of change, and she was certain that she understood. Change was coming, but was it for the better? Only time, or her Master, could tell.

“Ow! Fucking bugger, Victoria!” She stopped mid-kick and opened her eyes to see one of her men rubbing the back of his head, angrily glaring up at her. She smiled apologetically and crossed her legs under herself to keep from accidentally beheading someone with an errant kick. She saw Alucard arch his brows and she slid off of the banister, coming to stand closer to him while the other soldiers filed in slowly and take their seats.

“Seras,” he acknowledged almost indulgently, bowing his head as she drifted nearer. She smiled and stood as close as she dared, the corner of his sleeve barely brushing her bare forearm. They never touched each other in public settings; such an intimacy was saved for when it was just the two of them. People would begin to talk about relationships and other humanly things, which were of course all lies. Seras and her master weren’t “an item”; they simply shared a higher plane of existence that humans neither could nor should understand.

Seras was pretty sure there were higher tiers of intimacy, if you will, but she wasn’t sure if she’d ever find someone to reach it with seeing as Alucard seemed to have the sex drive of an elderly hamster. Sure, he would crack jokes about sex and even go so far to tease his prude of a boss, but the entire time she’d known him he’d never taken a lover or even seemed interested in pursuing a woman. She had wondered for a time if he was gay, but she highly doubted it (although with the way he fawned over his guns, she still was wary of it sometimes).

No, that wasn’t all true; she didn’t give him enough credit. She’d caught him staring once or twice at her when she ran to the vans for missions or climbed stairs or… anything that involved her chest moving in any way whatsoever. Perhaps he was just more subtle about his needs, or—well, there was another way, and he did spend an awful lot of time alone, didn’t he? Seras winced and pulled her mind out of its current train of thought. Forget the gutter; she was going straight into the sewers with her mental images.

Police Girl, please try and pay attention. I have no time or patience to give you a private briefing, her master chastised when he saw her absent expression. Seras jumped to attention and stood to the side, out of the way of the podium as Alucard looked over his audience. He looked at Walter, who nodded curtly and pressed the button on the projector. A map of England, Scotland, and Ireland popped up and Captain Penn tapped a pointer against the flimsy screen.

“As some of you know, we managed to destroy all of the enemy forces around the city of London, with many civilian fatalities but only minimal casualties on our side, which lead me to believe you men weren’t trying hard enough.” A sinister grin reminded the assembled of how lucky they were that Alucard wasn’t their permanent commander. “In the process, I managed to choke down enough Siren blood to see their plan. Unfortunately, Sirens are incredibly dense. They can only follow basic orders. Even Ghouls are more competent.” He looked vaguely irritated for a moment before his face was schooled back into the default creepy smile. Captain Penn pointed to a tiny place in the corner of the map, near the bright blue expanse of ocean.

“Liverpool,” he said in a bored tone. “The Sirens are based in Liverpool, and have been traveling
all over the country wreaking havoc in closed numbers. Small towns can be drained of people in a week’s time, but larger cities need higher numbers as we are seeing. Now, we can’t send every eligible soldier to Liverpool to fight, so we need a new plan of action.” Alucard leaned against the podium, nodding in time with the captain’s speech. The men whispered among themselves, but Seras looked to Walter, who had his hand on his chin. He was clearly working up a Plan B.

*Master, what of Sir Integra? We’ll have to debrief her on this too, right?* Alucard didn’t move his head, but Seras could still feel his eyes boring into hers from behind the orange lenses.

*Yes, my little Seras. My master should be pleased with my progress, no?* Seras shrugged discreetly and turned to leave the room. She wasn’t needed anymore; the men wouldn’t be given orders until Sir Integra had been fully informed, so she might as well go and try to salvage a few extra hours’ sleep.

Seras ran down the corridors, dodging men in turbans who leered at her breasts as she barreled by. She knew she had to reach someone important, but she wasn’t sure who, or even why. Part of her wondered at the awe of the unfamiliar, yet somehow nostalgic feeling of the imagery that flew past her peripherals. Finally, she turned a final corner and something compelled her to stop at a plain, unassuming door. She heard moaning, screaming, and cries for both God and Allah coming from all around her in the crowded hallways from both men and women, but whoever was behind the door stayed quiet. She assumed her best pose and ran at the door, shrieking like a demon before rearing up and kicking it inward, shattering the lock.

It was a child, no more than twelve-years-old at the most. He wasn’t chained to anything, but sat among rats and general filth and looked at her. His ebony hair was matted and hanging in his face, and his skin was so dirty she couldn’t tell what color it was originally supposed to be. She didn’t smell anything aside from the horrid stench coming from the corner, and looked against her will to see a rotting corpse lying there among refuse. She looked back to the boy to see him staring at the door absently, his eyes shining a brilliant blue against his black hair. He stared without any sort of emotion at all; he was a blank slate, empty and erased. She felt tears spring to her eyes and she ran over, slipping and sliding in the garbage and rat feces to hold him. He didn’t respond to her touch; he could have been a breathing doll for all anyone knew.

“I’m sorry. I tried, but I’m too late,” Seras whispered against his cheek, letting the tears fall for the both of them as she stroked his dingy hair. She felt something brush against her arm and looked down through her sobs, ready to kick the rat away. Instead, what she saw floored her and took her breath away.

A tiny hand clutched her forearm, the first and middle fingers barely stroking her. She choked in a breath and looked to see the blue eyes were looking at her instead of through her. She smiled and pressed her forehead to his: she didn’t know who this boy was, but he was precious to her and she’d never let anyone hurt him ever again.

“It’s alright; I’m here now,” she said softly and let the swirling world of screams and moans fade away, leaving only the two of them in the darkness together.
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Alucard heard a thump close to his head and his eyes opened immediately. Was someone in his chambers? Branching out, he felt his childe’s presence and opened the lid. She must have been sleeping on top of his coffin and rolled off, otherwise she wouldn’t have made a sound as she was still sound asleep, a goofy smile written on her face. He glowered at her, wondering what a suitable punishment would be for defying his orders.

He was still almost… embarrassed that he’d called her unconsciously. She’d called him before; it compelled him to answer immediately, even if she was still asleep. He’d stayed by her until her soul calmed itself with his nearness. It was clear she’d been determined to do the same for him, even if she had no idea what it meant. He, however, knew exactly what it foretold of his little police girl. He made a face and reached down, brushing her bangs off her nose.

He’d known for the longest time that she loved him in some way. She certainly wasn’t the first woman to fall in love with him, but she was the first to not do anything about it. She helped him in battle, and provided companionship when he felt benevolent, but she’d never forced herself on him (other than calling his soul to her side, but that was unintentional so he’d always let it slide). But until now, he’d always assumed it was in the way a student could grow to love a mentor, or a father-daughter sort of thing.

Yet, in the dream she’d been-no, forget the dreams. They mean nothing to me. He shook his head and considered the young woman on the floor again. Maybe he should wake her up by throwing her off the roof. Yes, that would work. Then, he’d break a few bones to help the lesson sink in.

Smiling cruelly, he climbed from his coffin and lifted the sleeping girl in his arms. She nestled against him and muttered something in her sleep. His smile faltered and he looked at her for a long moment before sighing and placing her in his coffin, shutting the lid. Damn. She’d probably sleep through the pain anyway.
“And that was “The Bonny Banks O’ Loch Lomond”, which celebrates over 200 years of tradition today. Next, your local weather.” Anderson frowned at the loud voice. It didn’t do anything for his pounding temples. God in Heaven, my head!

“Fuck, do I have a hangover?” he muttered into the pillow, muffling his voice for his own sake. To his dismay, his pillow vibrated with a chuckle and a voice echoed in his ear from somewhere above it.

“No, you’ve “not had a drop in over 50 years,” or so you keep telling me.” Anderson’s eyes shot open and he lifted his head to see he’d made a rather impressive pillow from Integra’s lap. He groaned at the sudden movement and opened his eyes to see a cup of coffee swimming before them. Taking it gratefully he took a deep drink, not caring that it scalded on the way down. His mind slowly began to clear as the headache pounded itself out of existence, and finally he was able to focus his eyes on something longer than two seconds before getting dizzy. As he sat silently, mental images from the night before slowly trickled into his mind.

Well, he’d made a right fool of himself, but that’s what he got for being forgetful. Time and time again he’d tried to curb his bad habit of running out to battle before preparing fully. When you could summon divine weapons from white space, you didn’t always have the best plan in mind for keeping up with belongings. He was always leaving behind his cellular, or his Bible, and now apparently essential beeswax. He’d held his own against the singing demon for quite a while, but now he remembered that as soon as he was about to succumb to the she-beast, Integra had swooped in like a pajama-clad avenging angel, even sacrificing her clothing to make sure he was alright. Not only that, she’d managed to chase him down and eventually drag him back to the hotel, a feat in itself when you compared how tiny she was next to his bulk. The last thing he clearly remembered was looking over as she walked out of the bathroom, using his shirt for a makeshift nightgown. After that, everything was a blurry haze of cool skin and muddled thoughts.

“What happened last night?” he finally gave in and asked. Integra snorted into her coffee and sat it down on the nightstand, turning to face him with the ghost of a smile on her face.

“Well, long story short- I saved your life and now we’re engaged.” It didn’t get the spit-take reaction she’d hoped, but he did choke on his coffee and she ended up pounding him on the back. He managed to regain control of his own breathing and gawked at her wordlessly. She met his eyes, her own face quite serious. She wasn’t sure what he was going to do; would he claim he was under the influence? Would he accept what he’d done?

She hoped he’d find some way to blow it all under the rug, but a tiny voice in the back of her mind insisted that she hadn’t minded his arms being around her all night and that she might enjoy being married to him. She growled and told the little voice to keep its opinions to itself, only to be snidely reminded that marriage was in fact the best option for everyone. She snapped out of her introspection to see Anderson staring quietly at the ring on her thumb, which was quite visible around the Styrofoam cup of coffee she held.

“So we are,” he said softly with an air of finality. He wasn’t going to fight her about it? If Integra didn’t know any better, she’d of said she’d brought home a Siren instead of the priest; surely he was going to make a big fuss about being married to a Protestant woman, much less the main rival of his superior!

“And you’re okay with this?” she countered, waving the hand around so that the ring caught the light. Anderson groaned and rubbed his face, getting up out of bed and throwing the empty cup in the tiny wastebasket before heading slowly to the bathroom. Integra frowned after him before shaking her head. Turning back to the telly, she watched the rest of the morning news for any signs
of Siren activity. When nothing in particular popped out at her, she turned off the set and lay back down. Closing her eyes, she dropped back off into a doze as the sounds of the shower lulled her senses into stupor.

A warm hand on her forehead woke her and she sat up slightly, unsure of what was going on. Anderson had one hand on her head and the other was holding the phone receiver. He gestured to her and she yawned, taking the phone from him and murmuring her greeting into the line.

“Pleasant dreams?” Walter’s friendly voice echoed from the other side sardonically. She smiled despite herself: he always had asked her that whenever she’d woken him up as a child, frightened from monsters under the bed and shadowy images that seemed to creep around the house.

“As always,” she answered wryly, brushing her hair out of the way to hold the receiver on her ear. “What’s the news, Walter?”

“Yes sir.” He resumed his formal air and began giving her a mission debriefing. “Yesterday at 7:00, I sent out the eligible troops to London to clear the city of any Sirens. While completing this mission, Alucard managed to gather some information from the Sirens’ blood.” Integra’s mind jumped to the thick black ooze that now coated her nightgown.

“I doubt it was the most appetizing thing he’d ever eaten,” she said. She almost felt a hint of pity, but part of her schooled the information away. She could always feed him Siren blood for a week or two if he misbehaved. That would fix him up nicely.

“I agree, but everyone has to take one for the team now and again. Anyway, we learned that the Sirens have been entering England not through the Thames, as we originally thought, but through the city of Liverpool.”

“Liverpool?” Integra repeated, clutching the phone. Liverpool was a large city, well situated near the ocean. It would be nothing for Sirens to hide among the masses there. “What have you done about it?”

“Nothing, as of yet. We were waiting to hear your thoughts. You and I both know we can’t send all our men to Liverpool. The public would get suspicious.” Walter sounded uncertain. She knew he was hesitating to send either of the vampires without her permission and she understood why. If things got ugly, it would fall on her head.

“Listen, Walter,” she said slowly, looking at Anderson who was torn between blatantly eavesdropping and pretending not to listen. “I’ll have to call you back. Let me talk it over with Alexander; maybe the Catholics can spare a few scouts to place in the big port cities. I’ll get in touch with you before tonight, alright?” Integra looked over to him, knowing that he could hear the older man on the other end of the line. Anderson gave her a half-shrug in return and she glowered for a moment before flashing him an evil smile.

“Of course, sir. Alexander, hmm? So you’re both now on a first-name basis, I presume?”

“Naturally, Walter. Why would I not be on a first-name basis with my dear fiancée? Bye!” She hung up the phone on the sputtering butler and laughed as Anderson let out a long string of curses that should never be falling from a godly man’s lips. “That’s what you get,” she snapped.

“I really didn’t know! I’m not Maxwell!” he shouted back. Integra shrugged and he gritted his teeth, his hands clenched on the table. “Don’t know what I’ve gotten myself into,” he muttered angrily, looking daggers at her. She crossed her legs and huffed.
“Well, if you are planning on marrying me you had best get used to it. I’m not going to lie down and let you walk all over me, just because we’re husband and wife.” She gestured to her pantsuit lying on top of her knapsack. “I do happen to wear pants too.” Anderson gave her an incredulous look before turning around to address her angrily.

“Oh, no. You aren’t going to think that just because you’re used to being in charge—I’m the man in this relationship, and you are the woman. I make the rules,” he argued.

“No, I don’t think you do.” Integra tensed for a fight; she could feel it brewing underneath their skin and she was looking forward to it. She half-worried that she enjoyed fighting too much, especially with the Catholic. It was even more entertaining than yelling at Alucard, because unlike the vampire Anderson was liable to get worked up and yell back rather than smile and disappear through a wall or the floor. Of course, that annoying voice in the back of her mind was right there to suggest that it was a bit of a turn-on to see him angry, but she managed to temporarily kick that voice out of her brain on its ass. She really needed to get rid of that.

“Listen here! I am the husband, I am the head of the household and you will be my equal, but still you will obey!” Anderson stood up and they squared off. “We can do it the easy way or the hard way, it’s up to you.” Integra tapped her shoe impatiently on the floor until he finished.

“Say what you want, but I’m a bit used to having my way. I’m not giving that up.” Anderson’s face turned a darker shade of red and he hissed as he took in a quick breath and tried to calm down. He took a step forward and she growled, raising her hand slightly. “Take one more step and—”

“Eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth.” He looked at her raised hand. “You hit me and I’ll hit you back,” he promised. Integra narrowed her eyes. Half of her wanted to take him up on that, and the other half was actually kind of shaken by how big he was. He could probably knock her through the wall if he wanted to. Still, she had to walk the walk, as it were. He took another, more calculating step closer and she reared up and slapped him without really thinking. She was actually just as surprised as he was as she watched her hand meet his cheek and the smack rang throughout the room. Granted, it hurt her hand much more than it hurt him, which was probably not at all although it left a nice red handprint. He touched his cheek lightly before grunting and, as promised he slapped her back. It wasn’t half as hard as hers was, and it didn’t even leave a mark although it did sting a bit.

They stayed still for a moment, each measuring the other before Integra went in for another hit, furious that the stupid man would dare lay a hand on her. She had half a mind to call Alucard here to have him shoot the blonde freak in the head a couple of times. She had half a mind to shoot him herself, now that she thought about it. He caught her hand mid-swing and held her without any effort. She felt like screaming and instead kicked out at him, not even thinking that she was in her bare feet and that it was going to hurt when it hit. Anderson rolled his eyes and kicked her other foot out from under her, making sure she hit the bed and not the floor. Somehow, she managed to take him down with her and they struggled for all of five seconds before Anderson had her pinned down, a bored look on his face.

“Easy way or the hard way,” he repeated as she struggled to break free of his hold. She finally stilled and instead affixed the ugliest frown she could manage on her face. Anderson gave her one look before chuckling, unaffected. “Say that she frown; I’ll say she looks as clear as morning roses newly wash’d with dew.” Integra blinked for a moment before the voice jumped back in. Oh, he knows Shakespeare!

“Are you implying that I’m a shrew?!” she shrieked, trying her best to maneuver her leg up enough to kick him and make sure that marry her or not, he’d never have children. He nodded with a grin.
“Well, you aren’t in much of a place to argue anyway, are ya?” he reminded her, looking down at their bodies on the bed. Integra seized the opportunity to head-butt him, her forehead trying to push him off of her and failing miserably. He sighed in frustration and pinned her head to the bed as well, practically covering her. “You just don’t learn, do you? Just give up, Integra!” A look of surprised crossed his face, as if he hadn’t meant for her name to slip out.

“Never.” They stared each other down, neither wanting to be the first to give up. To admit defeat would be to let the other have a higher standing, something neither of them wanted. “Face it, Alexander. We’re both too stubborn to even move off this bed.” Anderson didn’t reply, and for the first time it dawned on her how close his face was… and how much of their bodies were actually touching… and how damn warm he was through the thin shirt. She felt her face coloring slightly and averted her eyes, not wanting to admit how affected their proximity was making her. The voice in her mind crowed self-righteously. If you want him to get off you, do something about it! Or are you enjoying this too much?

“Let me up.” When he didn’t move, she relaxed, letting his body fall closer to hers unintentionally. “Please let me up.” she finally conceded, not looking him in the face. The grip on her wrists relented and he moved to get off the bed. She grabbed the lapels of his jacket as he moved, dragging herself up to whisper in his ear. “This is far from over,” she promised. She’d get revenge, and with a good helping of interest built on to what he was due. He chuckled and when he spoke it sounded as though he were excited by the prospect.

“I didn’t expect anything less.” He pushed her back to the bed and walked to leave, grabbing his cellphone as he passed the table. “I need to make that call to the Vatican, I suppose.” He shut the door firmly behind himself, leaving Integra alone to get dressed. She crossed her arms and looked around the small room in irritation. What was she supposed to do now? Spend the rest of her life as a prolonged battle with a man she didn’t-exactly-care about?

Chapter End Notes

Originally I had posted some lyrics from the (then) new earworm Blurred Lines. Now, seeing the criminality of even mentioning that we once enjoyed that song, I'll remind you that you can see more of my work at my tumblr, heyheyitsjuju.tumblr.com.
Seras flipped through the book Walter had given her. She had enjoyed reading the highlighted tales of sirens, but most of it was false, except for the bits that Walter had already told them about at the briefing. Now, she was indulging in fanciful tales of Celtic druids and fairies. Turning the page, she was greeted by a pretty blonde woman with the title “mermaid” glittering in embossed gold above her head. Smiling, she rolled her eyes at the highlighted pages beneath her hands. Surely mermaids and fairies weren’t real. Maybe Walter was playing a trick on her or something with this book. Still, it was very old and Walter wasn’t the type to bring a prank so far as to ruin a perfectly ancient book with a highlighter.

Seras… Seras…. SERAS. Seras looked around the room. Alucard called her, but she thought he had already turned in for the day. She focused on his room down below, but he wasn’t in there. Looking in the ceiling and all over the walls, she shrugged and went back to her book, disregarding the disembodied voice. If he really wanted her, he knew where she was. She looked back down at the book to see two glowing eyes smack-dab in the middle of the pages, the voice growling playfully. She was so shocked, she could do nothing more than shriek like a banshee before her mind caught up and she realized that it was her master. Dark chuckles filled the room and she frowned as the eyes vanished and Alucard phased through her mattress to join her on the bed. She tapped his head lightly with the book when he bent over to accommodate for the lack of space where she hadn’t raised the lid to her bed all the way.

“Master, you’re so mean sometimes. Can’t you quit your teasing for one night?” she grumbled as she moved over to give him more room. He spread out, crowding her into one side of the bed and she gritted her teeth and buried her nose in the book, determined to not let him see any sign of irritation on her part.

“I might; but it’s daytime now, not nighttime. And yet my dear fledgling is foregoing her beauty sleep to read. Such a little scholar, you are.” He seemed just as determined as she was to make her blow a fuse as he pressed every button she had. He began to fiddle with a stray thread on her nightgown, tapping his foot loudly against the side of the coffin and looking around her arm to see what she read.

Taking a deep breath, Seras gave in and let him worm an arm around her, laying her head on his shoulder and lifting the book up so that he could see as well. He was apparently planning on staying around for a while judging by the lack of outerwear and even his vest, leaving him only in his undershirt and pants, sans boots. For Alucard, that meant two things: 1-he couldn’t sleep because of any number of factors ranging from a nightmare that he’d never admit to having to thoughts that wouldn’t settle; or 2- he was bored and not ready for bed yet, so he decided to get some entertainment from her. By his lack of clothing and shoes, she opted for number one.

“Are there really mermaids out there?” she asked him. If anyone had seen a mermaid, it would have been him. He probably was the first one to kill a mermaid, too. He gave a snort at her thoughts and pulled her closer unconsciously in his effort to see the page.

“I haven’t, actually. But I know that they’re out there, because others I’ve spoken to have. In fact, a Nereid told me that she’d met quite a few. They are some of the better creatures in the world. They keep to themselves and hardly come out of the ocean.” Alucard yawned, covering it with his arm.
“That’s what it says here, too,” Seras said as she scanned the highlighted portion. “What’s a Nereid?”

“Have you ever heard any of the Greek’s tales? Calypso is a Nereid,” he answered softly. “They are the opposite of Sirens, beautiful and wise. They help those they deem worthy of assistance. I’ve met three in my existence.” Seras turned to him in interest.

“What were their names? Did you meet Calypso?” she asked. She’d heard the story of Odysseus in her schoolchild days, and had always felt terrible for Calypso’s fated relationship with the hero of the story. Of course Odysseus must find a way back to his beloved Penelope eventually—he’d never be allowed to stay on an island with a beautiful goddess, unable to leave.

“No, my inquisitive little one. Their names were Dione, Thaleia, and Maera. Each helped me in a different way. Maera even kept me from being shipwrecked.”

“Wow.” Seras smiled as she imagined what beautiful creatures they must have been, if they were opposites of hideous Sirens. “We could use the help now, huh?” She turned the page away from the mermaids to glance at the woman depicted in a beautiful Oriental gown. “Yuki-onna…” she murmured. Alucard took one look at the picture and let out a barking laugh.

“She looks nothing like that. She’s a vampire, but she takes the form of a small child. Her name is Yuki, though. They have that right.” He closed his eyes and Seras let out a yawn of her own. It was getting rather late in the morning.

“Master? Aren’t you going back to your room? I think I want to go to bed now.” She placed the book on her nightstand and grabbed the remote that worked the lid to her bed. Alucard made no move to get up, instead curling his legs slightly and getting more comfortable.

“Hmm? You should read if that’s what you want. I was only teasing about the beauty sleep. You don’t need it,” he dismissed with another yawn. Seras frowned and nudged his feet out of the way before lying back down and hitting the remote’s button. She didn’t mind it if he stayed and he knew it, so why did he have to beat around the bush?

If he wanted to sleep with her today, he could just say it. It’s not like they hadn’t done so before a thousand times when Seras had been having horrible nightmares about Incognito and the fall of the Tower of London. She had ran down to her Master’s coffin and he’d (albeit hesitantly and with lots of arguing and pleading) allowed her to curl up and gain some small margin of comfort from his stiff form in her rest. She was pretty sure he came to lay with her for a while whenever he had nightmares as well, but he never stayed until morning and she never woke up fully enough to figure out if it was real or a dream.

He said nothing to answer her unspoken questions as she snuggled into the crook of his arm, her mind already becoming more sluggish in the dim light and shared warmth. She agreed with her previous thoughts that humans could never understand the nature of what she shared with the man beside her—if any of the soldiers knew that she shared her coffin she’d be the talk of the town. As it was, only Walter knew and he was always the perfect picture of confidentiality.

“Master?” she asked sleepily. When he grunted she continued. “Did you have a bad dream today?” He humphed and shifted around against the wall of the coffin, his back in the corner where the wall met the mattress.

“I don’t have bad dreams, Seras. I am not a child.” She opened one eye, thankful for her enhanced vision. His face was tense and he had his eyes screwed shut. Bull shit.
“And here I thought you valued honesty,” she jibbed, wrapping both her arms around one of his to let him know she was only teasing. He sniffed haughtily.

“I abhor liars, but I’m not lying. I don’t have any bad dreams.” He paused for a moment. “I have bad memories.”

“Are you sure this is going to work?” Integra looked around at the room, making sure for the millionth time that they hadn’t forgotten anything in their hurried packing. She was dressed in her last clean outfit, her knapsack slug on her back. Anderson frowned and rolled his eyes, motioning her over to the center of the room.

“It worked in London; it will work here.” He noticed her examination of the room and growled under his breath. “We’ve already checked everywhere. It’s all in your bag, and if it’s not it’s a simple matter of coming back for it.” Integra arched a brow, but joined him under the cheap lighting.

“So says the man who’d leave behind his own head if it wasn’t screwed onto his shoulders,” she noted she looked him over before hopping up onto his back, looping her arms over his shoulders. “Come on, let’s get this over with so we can make that reservation in Liverpool,” she muttered in his ear. She wasn’t being truthful—she was actually just excited to get to travel by—page?—without being loopy and missing the experience. Anderson nodded his assent and reached deep into his jacket, pulling out a worn bible. Before she could rein it in, she let out a small sound of awe.

“Can he really just hide anything in there? Or is it some sort of… holy magic-mumbo-jumbo? She had the sudden urge to crawl in there and see if she fell down a rabbit-hole or a wardrobe or something.

“Hold on tight now. I don’t want to have to go looking for your body parts if you happen to slip.” She had all of a millisecond to wonder if he was joking before the bible flipped open of its own accord and the fluttering of pages filled her ears. It sounded like thousands upon thousands of flapping wings accosting her eardrums and she tightened her hold on the man who was now her only anchor to reality. It all became too much and she closed her eyes to clear the dizziness from her mind before gravity righted itself and the fluttering subsided, only to be replaced by bustling city noises. She opened her eyes cautiously to see that they had landed in an alleyway outside of the hotel they’d made reservations at. She looked up at the towering building before sighing, slumping against his shoulder. That wasn’t as fun as she imagined it was. He shook his shoulders slightly, trying to get her to let go of her death-grip on his shoulders. “Come on; we’re here now. Let’s check in, right?”

“Right.” Integra slid off his back and stumbled slightly, still shaken from the ride. Anderson looked back and shook his head before grabbing her arm and leading her out to the front doors.

Chapter End Notes

The original post was this humorous side note:

Has anyone else ever thought about how Anderson’s nicknames are a mouthful? If you’re a vampire, you don’t have time to say “It’s Off-With-His-Head-Anderson!” before you die. Personally, I like my own blunder-filled brain’s opinion, which made me spout off “Pixie-Dust Anderson” once. (He was one of the Lost Boys, right?)
Clamor. It was pure clamor all around as people ran to and fro. They pushed past him in their hurry to escape their inevitable fate, no longer caring that they dared to touch their ruler. Outside, the sounds of breaking walls reached his ears, but he no longer cared. He only waited for the signal that announced that all was ready for him to leave. Then, once everything was alright and he was in control again, he’d make sure that that bastard he once claimed as family paid dearly for what he was doing. That gay freak would probably enjoy his impalement a little too much, no matter what side it came from.

“No! I can’t take this anymore!” He looked towards the balcony to see the woman balancing precariously on its edge and felt torn. Should he stop her? Or let her decide her own fate? She turned to him, her dark hair whipping around her face in the wind. “I will be in charge of my own death!” He said nothing; if she couldn’t trust her own husband to protect her, it was better that she died. He had no room in his life for people who couldn’t put faith in him, even if he’d never let them down before. She stood for a moment longer, her eyes searching his before she smiled. “I never loved you, you know.”

“I know.” And he did. She hadn’t cared about anyone other than herself. If she had, she’d of stayed by his side instead of choosing this. At his confirmation she nodded almost sadly, as if she felt there was some unresolved regret between them. Her face grew more determined than he’d ever seen it before, and she seemed to have something else to say but wasn’t sure how to phrase it. Finally, she bowed slightly, hardly thrown off balance despite the winds that always seemed to hang over the mountain fortress.

“Good luck. I’d say that God be with you, but He won’t be with either of us now.” She looked to the Heavens, her mouth moving in a soft prayer. She took a step back, the action throwing her off-kilter. “We’ll meet again in Hell, my husband.” And with that, she disappeared and he heard the hollow thuds as her body bounced down the mountain and into the river with a splash.

Alucard woke, disoriented and his muscles tensed involuntarily until he caught the scent all around him. Relaxing, he looked over to see his fledgling was fast asleep, her body showing all the signs of being freshly dead. He knew that if he listened, he’d hear neither a heartbeat nor a breath escape her. Even her eyes showed no signs of dreaming, although from the soft, steady waves he felt through their bond he knew she was dreaming something peaceful. Her brainwaves calmed him and he found himself getting drowsy, both from her cool touch on his arm and from the stuffiness of the coffin.

That memory, though. He hadn’t thought about that day in years. Shifting around to lay his chin on Seras’ head, he frowned as the replay of his dream-memory ran through his mind again and his arm flexed against hers. The action woke Seras unintentionally and she stirred, moaning slightly.

“What’s the matter?” she mumbled in confusion, most likely trying to figure out why he was up so early in the day. “Everything okay?”

“Sleep, Seras. Don’t trouble yourself,” he whispered back, trying not to hurt her ears from his booming voice echoing around the tiny space. She sighed and turned over onto her stomach, her head using his forearm as a pillow. She promptly fell back asleep, her breathing stopping and her
brainwaves slowing back to the soft rhythm that was seemed so familiar to him, as if he’d known her forever instead of just over a year. He closed his eyes too, willing his mind to stop thinking so that he wouldn’t be tired come nightfall. After what felt like an eternity, he gave up and stared at the wood of the coffin lid, letting the delta waves wash over him and calm him. However, his thoughts kept jumping back to the last sight of his human wife.

Throwing herself off the wall of Poenari. That was the ultimate show of selfishness and cowardice. He felt his face twist in disgust and looked back at the girl sleeping on his arm. That’s why he enjoyed being around Seras more. She wouldn’t have thrown herself to her death; no, she would have stayed to fight, defending him to the death. A heroine’s death. She was worthy of being called Queen, where the others, even Lucy and Mina both, had failed him.

Was it fitting that she wasn’t the sort of girl he would have made a vampire? Perhaps. He’d never tried for the truly innocent ones before. Lucy had knowledge of carnal doings, no matter if she’d admitted it or not. And Mina-she was married. But this little unspoiled thing… she was more of a woman than all those before combined. And that’s why he waited for her. An apple only tastes its best when you wait for the right moment to pluck it from the tree. He’d waited over 500 years for a bride worthy of himself. He could wait another 500, if that’s what it took for the police girl to fulfill her full potential.

A loud knocking on the lid of the coffin had him scowling and wincing. Seras groaned and covered her ears at the sudden noise. After a moment, the knocking subsided and Walter’s panicked voice came through the wood.

“Miss Victoria, I need you and Alucard to come out immediately.” The butler sounded astonished, uneasy, and concerned all at the same time. Seras sighed, stretching in the cramped space before opening the lid. Light immediately flooded the space and both vampires squinted against the unusual brightness of the basement.

“Cor, Walter! It’s still daylight, what’s wrong?” Seras rubbed her eyes hard and blinked up at him. Alucard pushed an arm over his eyes and gritted his teeth.

“Walter, this damn well better be important. You know I don’t like waking during the day.” Not that he’d been asleep, but that was better than being blinded by daylight and the sun-warmed air always made him sluggish. Less reaction time wasn’t a good thing in his profession. The butler bowed and wrung his hands.

“Well, I beg your pardon but I’ve just gotten off the phone with Sir Integra. And she’s to be married.” Seras squealed as Alucard shot straight up in the coffin, knocking her over the rim and out onto the floor in the process. She rubbed her forehead and worked on righting herself, pulling up on Walter’s apron to try and stand. She let out a loud yawn.

“That’s great,” she said sleepily. “But couldn’t this have waited a few hours, Walter? I’m tired.” She scratched her head and yawned again. Alucard looked up at the old man, his eyes flashing.

“She is getting married… to whom? Last time I checked, she’d told me that there was no one in the entire country worthy of her hand,” he said with a frown. Walter cringed and looked around the room like he was just now second-guessing his reason for being here. Well, too late now. Seras glared at Alucard, mouthing “Donny-downer” behind Walter’s back and pointing a finger at him threateningly. He arched a brow; bride or no, she really was getting to be a bit too uppity for her own good. He’d have to remember to take her down a notch.

“Ah… ahem.” Walter looked over at Seras pleadingly, but the blonde just shrugged and tilted her head at him, puzzled. Alucard looked between the two, realizing that Walter wanted her to protect
him just in case. In case of what? “It just happens to be someone we all know,” he hinted. Alucard forced back his disapproval. He hated when people decided to beat around the bush instead of just coming out and admitting their purposes. He’d killed his own subjects for that very reason. It took away from his patience.

“Are you going to make us guess?” Seras teased. “Alright, but I have you know I’m better at this with a full night’s sleep.” Walter gave her a “quit-being-ditzy” look and swallowed before spitting it out.

“It’s Paladin Alexander Anderson.” The room was deathly quiet for a long moment before a chunk of Seras’ coffin came apart in Alucard’s fist as he clenched his hands together, a tic showing up in his eye.

“What?!?” he roared and Walter covered his ears. Seras trembled and held a hand to her throat, looking in fright between Walter and her master, who was shaking with rage. She watched his hair elongate and spill over the rim of the coffin and along the ground, his body fading with the power that rippled around him. “I will **murder** that Judas Priest! He’s taken advantage of my master, and now they must be married to cover it up? I’ll stick him up in the town square, left to rot for weeks!”

“I don’t think it’s quite like that, Alucard,” Walter began, but backed up when the shadows pooled around the stonework and the vampire stood, his face a distorted mask of wrath. Seras gasped, but seemed to carry no self-preservation as she ran to her sire in her pajamas. “I mean she called me on the phone and-”

“What else would it be?” Alucard snarled and Walter bowed in submission. He didn’t know how to answer that, and instead looked over to the blonde: his last resort. Seras jumped to her master’s side and waved her hands around in a calming motion.

“Don’t worry Master. Perhaps it was Sir Integra’s idea of a joke. Ahaha…” she laughed weakly and jumped when she realized he was preparing to leave. “Wait! Er-let me go with you!” **Sir Integra’s going to kill me. I’m supposed to keep him and Anderson apart!**

“Please don’t let him do anything rash, Miss Victoria!” he called as she latched onto Alucard’s arm and the shadows swirled around to consume them both. “Please!” Seras nodded, or at least he thought she did; with the wavering air around the pair it was hard to tell. They disappeared in a flash of darkness, leaving the aged man alone in the basement with an empty coffin and a heavy heart, praying to God above that the damage would be minimal.

“I’m not throwing my limited funds to feed your addiction!” Anderson crossed his arms and growled as the blonde witch in front of him danced around angrily, her glasses almost falling off her nose.

“And I’m telling you; I’d be much easier to live with if you’d let me smoke!” Integra huffed and set her shoulders as the priest opened his mouth to retaliate. “You were willing in Ireland to pay for them,” she argued. Anderson shook his head.

“That’s what almost got me killed! Your cigars got us into this mess in the first place. Now Maxwell is tearing apart the Vatican because they granted my request to marry you, which was a surprise in itself.” Integra stopped mid-shout; she hadn’t heard that the papi-Catholics had given her companion the “A-Okay”.

“Oh? Why would they be so eager?” Anderson shrugged, but before he could let out two words
they both jumped a mile as the door to their room was kicked in. Integra looked around Anderson-
who she was now using as a shield of sorts- and saw a livid Alucard and a sheepish Seras, the latter
clothed in nothing but a nightgown. Seras giggled nervously and waved at the pair inside the room.

“Top o’ the afternoon, I suppose. I heard about-well, congratulations,” she said lamely, trying
desperately to grab ahold of Alucard’s sleeve to keep him out of the room. She failed and the
vampire stomped in, his expression furious as he singled out the paladin.

“I’m killing you this time, Judas Priest;” he said with cold authority. Anderson chuckled darkly, his
hands already balled into fists. Integra ran over to slap Seras, who ricocheted in surprise and
clutched her cheek with a pout.

“What did I tell you about not bringing Alucard?!” Integra hissed and looked over to the two
freakishly tall men sizing each other up. Alucard growled and reared back, only to have Seras flail
and run, jumping like a basketball player to catch his arm and missing. He caught Anderson in the
chin, snapping the man’s neck up with a sickening crunch. Anderson cracked his head back into
place with one hand, the other coming up to return the favor with a swift punch to the vampire’s
stomach. Alucard gagged slightly and backed up a full pace, reaching for his gun and holding his
gut. Seras paused for a fraction of a second and then hissed like a cat and ran at the priest with
arms outstretched, all fear forgotten as she tried to protect her creator when the telltale glint of
bayonets glittered in Anderson’s sleeves.

“Seras! Alexander!” Integra watched the chaos unfold helplessly as Anderson caught Seras mid-
jump, his arm moving almost too fast for her eyes as he caught the Draculina in the stomach as
well, and Integra heard the poor girl’s arm snap with the pressure that was put on it as she rocked
back. Seras could only gasp in pain, her breath ending in a high-pitched whimper as she hit the
floor. Alucard’s head shot up, and he took one look in his fledgling’s direction before a low growl
escaped his throat. He lunged for the paladin, his eyes showing deadly intent and Integra realized
that he was going for the kill, angered beyond words not for Integra’s sake, but for Seras’. She
broke into a run herself, determined to reach them before any more lasting damage could be done.
“Alucard! Do not punch him!” she ordered fiercely.

“With pleasure, Master!” he howled in delight, his arm jerking up to shoot blindly at the still-
standing man. He realized his mistake a moment later, his eyes seeing Integra run up to grab
Anderson’s arm. Anderson looked over at her; Seras’ eyes grew wide as she clutched her broken
arm, Alucard made a move forward and his shadows curled along the ground: it all happened in
slow motion as Integra saw the gun flash and the bullet whistled in the air on its way across the
room. Then the room spun as she was pushed out of the way, the bullet hitting another home and
Anderson grunted in pain.

Integra lay on the floor and looked up at him; his face was contorted in agony and the bullet
plinked on the ground, bent and smashed as Anderson’s body knitted itself back together slowly.
Alucard reached the pair, his face still bearing signs of anger. Seeing that she was alright, he
turned tail and knelt a half-second later at Seras’ side, looking over her wounds. Integra reached out
for his mind, startled at the horrid vengeance that bubbled within at the sight of the police girl’s
broken arm and bruised stomach. She had no idea that he truly felt so protectively of the woman.
But there was a time to think of that, and that time wasn’t right now. She touched Anderson’s
shoulder gently, making sure his body was finished before backhanding him. He didn’t even
flinch; he just stared down at her crossly as his muscles rippled with the aftereffects of the
regeneration.

“You bloody idiot!” she snarled. “What the hell was that? Don’t go attacking my men!” A second
passed and she raised herself up to look at his shoulder. “Are you alright?”
“I’m fine, you miserable harpy. And in case you didn’t notice, your man attacked me first! I was protecting myself from a tag-team match!” Anderson let her up and rotated his shoulder, making sure it had healed properly. Across the room, Alucard’s shadows diminished and Seras looked at her restored arm in awe, flexing it and smiling gratefully up at her master.

“Just shut up. I’ll deal with Alucard.” Integra scrambled to her feet, fixing her rumpled clothing before swinging a kick at Alucard’s head. He looked up at her in irritation.

“He attacked my Seras. I’m not going to let him live now,” the vampire spat and Integra fought the urge to shove his face into the carpet with her boot.

“You have some gall kicking the door down and attacking people. Not only that, but you could have killed me, servant!” Seras looked up meekly at her, cowering away as Integra turned her icy eyes. “And you! I told you specifically not to let him come at any time, and you not only disobeyed, but you attacked as well!”

“But-but Sir Integra, he’d hit Master in the-”

“I don’t care if he hit him into next week! You’ve got orders, Captain!” Seras bowed her head and looked as though she wanted to disappear into the carpet forever. Alucard huffed, still glaring daggers at the priest in the corner. “Alucard, I forbid you from fighting Alexander Anderson again without my specific permission.” The vampire jumped up, his eyes burning crimson against his messy black hair.

“No! I told you-the priest doesn’t live beyond today! No one attacks my-”

“Keep your fat head shut, vampire!” Integra grabbed the gloved hand and made towards the bathroom door. “You and I are about to have a little heart-to-heart, it seems. Seras, stay here because your turn’s next.” Seras raised a hand feebly before the door slammed shut, leaving her alone with the man who’d just broken her arm.

She took one frightened glance at him before running over to sit on the far bed, her hands in her lap and her eyes jumping around the room restlessly. Anderson smirked before walking over to the other bed and sitting on it, facing her and mimicking her posture. She licked her lips before gulping and closing her eyes. When she opened them, a new strength burned deep inside and she squared her shoulders. She no longer looked like a frightened mouse in a cage; she was now a fierce tiger, unleashed and on the prowl.

“You aren’t planning on hurting Sir Integra, are you? I mean hurting her emotionally-getting married and attached to you and then you running off and cheating or… or something. I’m not going to stand by and watch you break her heart.” Her voice shook, but the resolve behind it more than made up for her fear. Anderson chuckled and shook his head.

“Nay, little monster. I don’t plan on hurting your dear master’s owner. She and I have an agreement to a marriage of convenience of sorts, you see. And Catholics aren’t like you filthy heathens—we intend to stay married for life, especially as high up in the Church as Section XIII’s members are.”

“You better not, because if you do-well, Master isn’t the one you need to worry about then. I’ll kill you myself.” Seras’ voice was pure steel; it was clear she held a great deal of regard for the woman, even if she was scared of the authority. It was quiet in the room for a moment, the muffled sounds of Integra’s fierce words and Alucard’s protests leaking through the door.

“If that happens, I’ll slay myself. I’m not one to mistreat a lady, not anymore.” Seras looked up to
see the solidity of his words etched into his face and nodded. “Besides, you monsters are the type to do things like that, not me.”

“I’m not a monster,” she countered. Anderson shrugged dismissively and met her gaze. Green eyes searched crimson for something, and seemed to come up blank. “What?”

“Do you have any idea what that monster intends for you?” Seras looked over at the bathroom door, following his gaze. She shook her head and looked back in concern.

“What do you mean? I’m guessing that you mean Master, not Sir Integra?”

“Aye, Draculina. The Hellsing isn’t a monster, although she acts that way sometimes.” Seras folded her arms across her chest, waiting for him to explain. He never got the chance, though, as a fuming-though slightly subdued- Alucard stalked out of the bathroom and took a place beside Seras on the bed. Integra poked her head through the door like it was a waiting room.

“If you can’t talk civilly, don’t even look at him. That means you too, Alexander.” She commanded. “I swear, it’s like babysitting a bunch of kindergarteners. Seras, get your ass in here now.” Seras looked over at Alucard helplessly, but he was too busy growling under his breath at the priest to notice her silent cry. She sighed and picked herself up off the bed, following the trail of light into the bathroom where the door shut, more quietly this time.

The two men met each other in a silent face-off, each refusing to look away and trying to think of something to get under the other’s skin with. Finally Anderson crossed his legs and leaned on his knee, a common position for him when he heard Confession.

“So, when are you planning on telling the wee Draculina what you plan on making of her?” he asked casually. Alucard gave him a sharp-toothed grin and crossed his own legs, but didn’t lean down.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about, Priest.” Anderson laced his fingers together in front of his face, calling on whatever patience he had left today.

“Don’t play with me, vampire. I’ve destroyed entire covens of you monsters with my bare hands; vampires are notoriously selfish creatures.” Alucard nodded regally.

“Thank you,” he sneered. “It’s so nice that someone finally noticed. We’ve been trying so hard to change our image over the last thousand years, it seems.” Anderson breathed deeply and continued.

“As I was saying, vampires are selfish. There’s no way they go so far to protect their own kind when injured. Not only that, they hardly ever attack for revenge over another of their kind being in pain. Unless…” He waited for the vampire to finish, but Alucard simply glared at him over the rim of his sunglasses.

“Go ahead; finish what you started. Unless?”

“Unless they’re mated, of course. Naturally, they feel enough towards their spouse to attack from anger. But you and the Draculina—”

“Are not normal vampires,” Alucard cut in. “We don’t follow the same rules as the lesser of our kind. We have no need for the protection of a group. We are singular; walking alone. I don’t expect or even think that you could understand our way.”

“And yet you keep her by your side and refuse to force her to drink and become free of you? It’s clear to both of us that she’s more than ready to become lone.” Anderson tilted his head back and
studied the dark being sitting across from him. “Don’t tell me you’ve become too fond of her to let her go. That’s not your way.”

“I am **not** fond of her!” he snapped. Anderson laughed deeply, leaning forward even more to meet the crimson gaze head-on.

“No, it’s gone much deeper than that, hasn’t it. Are you as dependent on her as she is of you? It’s clear to see that she cares very deeply for you.”

“I don’t have to explain my reasons to anyone, much less a half-bit priest like you.” Alucard’s eyes flashed with hate before he blinked slowly, adopting a neutral expression.

“Aye, so defensive…” Anderson smiled as the door opened and the two blondes walked out, both seemingly calm. A childish part of him laughed at getting the last word in; a one-up on his nemesis. Seras bounded to her Master’s side, her cheerful mood having returned sometime in the bathroom.

“Master, Master! Please, oh please will you let me come back for Sir Integra’s wedding! It’s not going to be very big, and you don’t have to stay, but I want to be there! I love weddings!” Alucard looked up petulantly at the bouncing girl standing practically on top of him and snapped his teeth.

“What business do you have to come back? I’m not your chauffeur,” he said testily. Seras gave him a sullen look before bending under his hat to whisper something in his ear. He listened, his eyes lighting up slightly before he pulled back. “Honestly. Our mission is to find and eliminate the Sirens in Liverpool, Police Girl. Not do a-” He glanced at Integra when Seras sharply smacked his shoulder. “Plan surprises.”

“Yes, our mission is to destroy Sirens, not travel around kicking down doors and picking fights, but you got to do that.”

“We’ll see.” He stood, pushing his hat back down onto his head from where she’d upset it. “If that’s everything, my master?”

“Yes, get the hell out of here. And fix that door on your way!” Integra looked as though she were about to cry or jump out the window, whichever one was easier. Alucard smirked and his shadows shot out to slide the door back into place as he left, pushing a chattering Seras out in front of him. The sudden silence reigned in and Integra collapsed on the bed, rubbing her temples. “God help me.”

“You’ve got quite a handful with those two,” Anderson agreed and she glared at him around her fingers.

“Don’t act like you’re innocent. You didn’t have to break her fucking arm!” She winced at the sound of her own voice. “You should have known Alucard would have killed you for it.”

“So you know then? About them?” Integra sighed and blinked at the ceiling before turning off the bedside lamp and letting the daylight filter in from behind the curtains.

“Of course I know. I’m a vampire expert, after all. It’s my job to know, and besides these things don’t happen in my house without me getting an idea about it. And Alucard’s already as good as told me when he brought her home that she was going to be a Queen one day.”

“And you’re okay with that? Even with what it means for the girl?” Anderson asked incredulously. Integra smiled and shook her head.
“You don’t understand it like I do. Whatever the hell they have between them—it’s like nothing I’ve ever seen. Seras can handle it, too. Alucard bends over backwards for her to get her way. All that arguing is just a cover-up. I don’t think he’s ever really denied her anything if it was in his power to get it for her. She’ll be at that wedding, you mark my words. I don’t think she even realizes how much influence she holds with him. It’s astounding.”

“Astounding,” Anderson echoed. “It’s hard to imagine monsters having that depth of feeling. They’re usually so cold.”

“The difference between your monsters and my vampires is simple, once you figure it out.” Her eyes were closed, but she felt the bed sag as Anderson sat somewhere, supposedly near her waist. She could almost feel the curiosity rolling off him. She opened one eye and grinned—a real smile, not her usual smug grins that she flashed when she knew she was going to get her way. “They never forgot their humanity. It doesn’t matter if they wanted to or not. Even Alucard still remembers his human life and the lessons it taught him.”

“And so you’re saying that by remembering that life, they can remember and access those feelings as well.” He rubbed his stubble thoughtfully. “That’s one interesting theory. I’ll stack it up there with advanced vampire minds.” Integra frowned until she saw the good-humored look he was sending her. Rolling her eyes, she sat up and looked carefully at the hole in his shirt where the bullet had passed through. She couldn’t see his skin thorough the layers of clothing. She touched it and he winced only slightly, though if it was pain she couldn’t tell. “Are you sure that the bullet didn’t hurt you bad?” she felt her cheeks warm and cursed her own silliness. “Thank you, by the way. I could have died, if it weren’t for you.” He only grunted in response, and she pressed around his shoulder again, prompting him to move away. “You are hurt,” she accused quietly.

“No, it’s just the bone. It’ll take longer to repair than any o’ the muscles. I’m fine.” She made a move and he jerked back. “Quit touching it! It’s sore.”

“Let me look.” When he didn’t move, she sighed and reached around his shoulders to pull of his jacket. He protested and she pushed his chin around to make him look at her. “Let me see your shoulder. I’m not going to hurt it; I just want to make sure it’s going to be alright.” He gave her a mean look, but began to take off his jacket. She helped him get it over his shoulder, followed by his other garments until all that was left was the undershirt, which was clearly stained with a good amount of blood. Other faded spots told of similar mishaps. She pushed the soggy shirt up his back carefully and took a good look at the wound, reaching over with her free hand to turn the lamp back on for more lighting.

His back was stained with drying blood, the hole covered in fresh, paper thin skin. Holding her hand over the wound, she could feel the vibrations of his body as it worked to get the wound filled. It made sense that it would take a while; not even labs could build full working body parts in an hour. She sighed as she felt the immense heat pouring off of his shoulder, laying her hand carefully away from the wound before pressing slightly on the bone. “Does this hurt?”

“A little,” he said through gritted teeth, his knuckles white as he clutched his knees. She sighed and released him.

“Hold still; I’m getting something to clean all this blood off with.” He felt the bed move as she hopped off and went to grab a washcloth. He relaxed, allowing himself to breath. It hurt a little more than he let on, that was true; it was her cool hands soothing his back that made him stiff as a board, trying not to let her show what she was doing to him. It was the closest thing to torture he’d ever been to; a part of him begged him to let go and forget about duty and religion—it wanted to just throw her on the bed and make her scream. The other, more godly side reprimanded this
testosterone-fueled voice that she was supposed to be nothing more than his wife, and that this marriage was one that benefited both parties, nothing more.

Still, she was being so gentle with him—he could even see that she was worried about his safety. No, she was only grateful that he had shielded her from the bullet and was repaying her thanks with a kind gesture. Or was it that she cared more than she showed, but was afraid he didn’t feel the same? Even so, was that how he felt? Should he talk to her about it? He groaned softly and rubbed his forehead. This was getting too involved for him; in all honesty he’d brought it upon himself by asking her to marry him—but he was crazy at the time, right? No, that’s wrong. If he was crazy, he’d have not remembered the entire thing at all. But he did, and he knew what he was doing at the time, too. He even remembered the feel of her skin beneath his fingers and her soft gasp when he passed his hand across her bare shoulder… *the spirit is willing, but the body is weak.*

The cold cloth on his back made him jerk and he felt her slender hand on his other shoulder, holding him still while she methodically cleaned the blood from his back. She murmured something noncommittal as she slid the cloth down his back, her hands feeling as though she were touching everywhere at once and making his skin crawl.

“There, that should do it.” He felt her breath barely brush his shoulder and turned without thinking to look at her. She glanced up at him, his heated glare catching her by surprise. She opened her mouth slightly and made a questioning sound, looking from one eye to the other as her cheeks began to glow. “I wasn’t too rough, was I? Is that what it was?” He couldn’t help himself sliding his gaze away from her face, he traveled down her body and back again, reaching her face in time to see that it had turned fully red and she had cast her eyes down to his stomach where she was watching his muscles with a sort of fascination as he breathed. The room oozed tension as they watched each other until finally Anderson turned away, intent on finding some escape be it the city or just going downstairs to the lobby to breathe.

She caught him by the wrist, asking something insignificant and he no longer had control over himself. Twisting out of her grasp, he pinned her to the bed, watching her eyes widen and the speech catch in her throat. She twisted under him in panic, each move singing to his baser urges and still he fought—he’d fought for decades against this very thing, but it was so close now that could practically taste it between them in the air. He could see how the vampire couldn’t deny that blonde fledgling of his; if she made *him* feel even a fraction of the need he felt now, he wouldn’t have batted an eye at the ancient being falling on his knees in front of her police boots.

“What do you want from me?” he asked, a part of him disgusted at how tortured he sounded. Her pupils dilated slightly at his tone and she pulled back, her eyes catching his. They both breathed heavily and he saw mingled confusion and lust in her icy depths and closed his eyes, blocking out the sight. Her hand came up to brush non-existent hair behind his ear and he couldn’t stop the growl that escaped him.

“I’m sorry,” she proclaimed softly, her voice unsure. It wasn’t her fault, but he couldn’t help but blame her for his own weakness. He opened his eyes and tried to reclaim some of his composure, only to see her watching him pensively. Suddenly, the shame of what he’d admitted bore down on him and he found he couldn’t meet her eyes, instead focusing on the way her hair spilled onto the neatly made coverlet and made patterns.

“I am weak.” The words tumbled from his mouth before he could snatch them. She didn’t scoff or laugh at his confession, although he’d expected her to. She instead petted his hair like a dog, her eyes understanding.

“We all are, in some way.” She leaned forward to speak in his ear. “Don’t think that it gives you
free right to jump me whenever you feel like it, just because we’re engaged.” Her voice was
mischievous, and between that and her hand running through his hair rhythmically it took all he
had not to pin her back down again. “Now, how about those cigars?” He couldn’t stop the grin that
flickered briefly across his face. Always with the addictions; she just wasn’t going to give up, was
she?

“Perhaps in exchange for something from you?” he teased. He hadn’t been lying when he said he
was low on funds, and those cigars weren’t cheap. She could cough up the cash, or get her vampire
to deliver it to her anyway. She frowned before an evil glint lit up her eyes and she leaned forward
to kiss his cheek briefly, her cool lips doing nothing to stop the fire in his face as he froze.

“Please?” she whispered against his skin, making a restrained tremble work its way down his
spine. Blessed God above, but she was good. Manipulative little—he stood quickly, ignoring her
victorious leer as he picked his shirt up and made his way down to the city streets. If she’s like this
now, what is it going to be like when we’re married?

People gawked as the tall, ebony-haired businessman slinked his way down the street. He was
missing his suit coat only to see it moments later on a businesswoman who was running a few steps
behind him, clutching the coat around her shoulders against the night air and wobbling only
slightly on her high heels. They seemed to be together, dressed similarly with matching glasses, the
only differences being his bright orange lenses where hers were dark. They seemed ethereal,
sliding through the night as though they owned the streets.

Seras looked behind her at the people who were stopped in their tracks, mouths agape as they
watched her and Alucard walk down to the main district. She knew that they had dressed nicely to
blend in with the crowds, but there was no need to stare, was there?

“Master,” she panted as she tried to match his long strides. “What’s with them?”

“They’re easily manipulated by our looks, my dear. And I see why; you look quite the figure in that
skirt, though I probably should have taken more off the bottom.” He smirked down at her and she
pulled the short pencil skirt down with a scowl.

“Master, why are you always picking on me?” she whined, looking around as she moved closer to
him. Something didn’t seem right; she was picking up some sort of power that kept following
them, only to be lost amidst the human crowd.

“Because you allow me to, that’s why. You’re so easy to irritate, Seras.” He slowed his pace and
wrapped an arm around her shoulders. To passerby, it looked as though they were perusing the
jewelry shop window (which Seras was), but Alucard bent down to point out a necklace,
whispering in her ear.

“You’ve felt that before I did. Very good.” She looked up at him in surprise and he nodded. “Yes, I
only caught it through your apprehension. Someone is hiding from us, and hiding well.” He gave
her a proud look. “Although not well enough, it would seem.” She beamed, accepting his praise
with all the grace of a small child before looking back at the window, pointing out a pretty ruby
bracelet.

“I like that one,” she admitted aloud. Alucard followed her finger to the bracelet and chuckled.

“Ah, my frivolous little childe. Rubies, indeed.” He chuckled again and patted her head. “I have
something for you, one day. It will fit you much better than rubies, but you must wait for my gift.”
Seras sighed.
“Well, all good things come to those who wait, I suppose. Still, I can’t wear something like that every day. I work too hard and it’ll get all scratched.” She pawed at the window sadly. “I guess it’s not meant to be.” Alucard bent down far enough for her to be able to see his eyes behind the orange lenses, instead of the glare burning back at her.

“I have stones in my personal collection that far outweigh any of these little baubles. One day, I’ll let you have your pick.” Seras’ eyes lit up before she shook her head.

“You don’t have to give me anything.” Alucard shrugged before pulling her along.

“What am I going to be doing with black opals anyway? I promise you: one day you’ll never have to work again, and I intend to cover you in millions of dollars’ worth in jewels.” He began pulling her along the streets, both of them beginning to hunt-tempting their shadow to come out of hiding so that they could find out what’s going on. “I’ll keep you safe in a castle that overlooks the mountains, and every day people will come to lay presents at your feet. Wolves will be your servants, and the rats and all the creatures of my kingdom will obey your every command. You’ll want for nothing.” His voice grew distant, imagining once again his fortress, rebuild from the ancient stones that now wasted away to nothing on a desert mountainside. It would all belong to her, a token of his devotion. What woman wouldn’t want such a treasure? Seras giggled softly as she let him tug her down the street, the window displays flicking in her peripherals.

“That’d be nice, but I’d rather just stay with you. I don’t need wolves and rats.” He stopped and she ran into his back, her eyes rolling slightly. “Ouch.”

“If that’s what you wish,” he agreed. “Perhaps one day we’ll speak more of it and I can convince you otherwise. Until then, let us go interrogate our new friend hiding in the alleyway ahead.”

Chapter End Notes

: Juju says- Have sex more than once every half-century, otherwise you’ll be overcome with violent sexual tension. You better just hope your significant other gets turned on by that. (*_*_ )
“Stay still.”

“Master, there’s no way blood was splattered in thenaaaah!” Seras jumped back away from the shadows; she was now clean of the splatters that had coated her as she watched Alucard complete his “interrogation”.

“Don’t argue with me,” Alucard ordered, but his shadows slithered away, fading into the darkness of the alley and carrying the dead Siren with them. Alucard cracked his neck, looking musingly at the carcass as it was dragged away. He placed his jacket on his shoulders, the sleeves billowing in the breeze that blew in between the tall buildings. “I wonder….”

“Hmm?” Seras walked to his side, feeling rather tall in her high heels. She could actually look over his shoulder now. “Is something wrong?” Alucard shook his head, letting out a dark chuckle before linking his arm through hers and blending them back into the crowd on the main street seamlessly. They walked back the way they had come. They passed the jewelry shoppe again and Seras craned her head to catch one last look at the ruby bracelet before it disappeared behind a heavyset man and his thin wife. Alucard pulled her along effortlessly and she almost fell, still getting used to being back in heels. She always wore her combat boots everywhere; it had been years since she’d even looked at a pair of high heels, since she wore flats when she was a human. She wondered why Alucard had dressed her in them when he’d used his powers to shape her outfit. Maybe he simply assumed that all women dressed up in heels when they went out.

“Have you ever heard of a woman that went by the name of Erzsébet Báthory?” Alucard asked suddenly. Seras looked up at him, seeing that he was looking rather subdued. Usually, he was glorifying in the bloodshed he’d been wallowing in. But tonight, he seemed more distant than usual although it had only come about after he’d forced himself to swallow the disgusting-smelling blood of the Siren he’d decapitated and gutted.

“No, I don’t think I have.” They walked together among the people, passing by a group of American tourists who were drooling over one of the many Beatles monuments that scattered the city. Seras stopped to look at a sign for a spa that advertised fish pedicures, giggling at the thought of sticking her feet in a bucket of fish in order to feel relaxed and refreshed. But a trip to the spa did sound nice; she hadn’t been to one since she was a young girl and had won a radio contest. The orphanage had let her go, simply because it was all-expense-paid. “Master, what about this?” she asked, pointing to the sign. Alucard took one look and rolled his eyes.

“No. Now come along.” Seras sighed, waiting to hear some snide comment about fish nibbling her toes. When nothing came, she began to get worried. Her master really wasn’t acting like his normal self anymore, not since their little alleyway “chat” with the creature.

“Um, so about that Báthory woman? You were saying?” she tried to get him back on the subject he’d brought up. Perhaps he was just preoccupied with other thoughts, and not feeling ill from the blood. Hadn’t he said that he’d eaten it before, in London? Surely he could handle a little rotten blood, although when he’d ripped the creatures heart out she’d been unable to keep her supper down from the putrid stench.

“What?” He looked at her snappily, but his eyes focused and he nodded. “Oh, yes. Well, she was also called Elizabeth, which is what I think she still goes by today. I’m pretty sure that she’s behind these attacks.”
“What? Why?” Seras tried to fall into step with him, but he was practically jogging through the streets and she just couldn’t keep up with her high heels and short legs. “What’s she got against England?”

“It’s not England; or at least I don’t think it is. Not right now, anyway. It’s just the Siren’s thoughts. They go more by their sense of smell than they do anything else, and the Countess’ perfume is… distinct.”

“Oh? Did you and she… well, is she a vampire?” Seras felt the fleeting pang of jealousy and unconsciously pulled closer to him, not sure if she wanted to hear the answer.

“Yes, and a damned good one at that, although she was sloppy enough to be found out by the humans and put on trial. Ask Walter; I’m almost certain that he’s got a book about her that’s fairly accurate, but if not I will explain in more detail tomorrow night.”

“Right. Yes.” She managed to pull him back into a slower walk, but she wasn’t sure he even noticed it. His eyes told her that his mind was elsewhere, and he seemed to be almost edgy, as if he had something to be nervous about. She gathered her courage and tugged on his arm to get his attention. “Master, what’s bothering you? You aren’t talking as much as you normally do.” Alucard patted her arm, sighing.

“I’m thinking about our next plan of action; I need a body that can spy on the Countess for me, and tell me what’s going on and why. I have an old comrade by the name of Ruthven. He’d do this for me seeing as he owes me a debt from three hundred years ago, but the only thing that stands in our way is my master. Integra has never looked kindly upon my inhuman acquaintances.” Alucard hummed softly to himself and looked up at the sky, which was beginning to lighten with the telltale coming of dawn. “But that can wait, I think. We need to return to London and update Walter, and get some more food into you. Aren’t you hungry?” Seras felt her stomach clench at his question, a subtle reminder that her meal had been puked up into the alleyway and she was running on empty.

“I’m starving! Let’s hurry and get back. Then you can tell me more.”

Integra lay quietly on “her” bed with her hands resting in her lap as she stared at the ceiling, lost in thought. She wasn’t a stupid woman- contrary to her natural hair tone, she had been taught from the earliest age to be curious about the world around her. Her father had drilled it into her mind during her lessons; Hellsings were scientists, they lived off experiments and enjoyed learning. She had always shared her father’s love of research and investigation, and tried to apply it to her everyday life. So far, it had been quite the success. Even now, she was turning over the recent events in her mind, cataloguing them away and trying to sort them out into feelings and logic. It helped her sleep at night, if nothing else. Now, as she lay alone in the hotel room with only the bathroom light casting shadows, she allowed herself to think about the whatever-it-wasthat had happened between her and Anderson.

It wasn’t the physical aspect of it that befuddled her: well, not entirely. She knew what it was, and of course she’d done her own “experiments” as a young, confused teenage girl growing up in a world of men. She’d even snuck onto Walter’s computer at times in her youth to look up crude Internet videos that left her feeling hot and shaky. Even so, there had been a big difference between her lone escapades and being pinned down by a muscled-up deadweight.

She certainly hadn’t expected it when she had touched his wrist-she had only been trying to get his attention to see if he was still planning on a trip to the store. But when the initial shock and fear had worn off and she had managed to calm herself, she realized that having him on top of her felt rather…delicious. His body was not the same as hers, his sculpted abs and tense muscles creating a
nice contrast that rubbed against different places with every ragged breath he forced out. It had left a familiar throbbing in her lower stomach, and she’d found herself wishing that he’d stop moving so that she could properly examine the feeling of his skin against hers.

“What do you want from me?” he had asked her. His voice had been so deep and sultry, and at the same time he had been practically pleading for her to release him from whatever she’d done. The sound had made her limbs melt, warmth spreading all through her and she had realized with a jolt that it was desire she was feeling. She’d felt it before once, in the few awkward months of her teenage years that she had actually considered Alucard to be dark and sexy. But that little tickle was nothing compared to this. It was frightening, consuming. It left her craving more. He’d looked at her, his eyes echoing the hunger that she felt. She’d felt guilty about putting him through what appeared to be torment for him, although she couldn’t imagine why unless it was because she was a Protestant that he shouldn’t be lusting after. She’d apologized cautiously, reaching up to stroke his short hair. He’d growled warningly at her, but it had been only a half-step away from a groan.

Thinking back, she kicked herself for not taking more opportunity. As a natural-born scientist, she couldn’t help but want to go back in time and relive it again, perhaps even prolong the contact for more research. A part of her laughed at the thought of treating foreplay like a dissection, but it was true. She had the strangest urge to figure out a way to get him back on top of her so that she could use all her senses to try and figure out the strange priest, to see what made him tick. Besides, he was slated to be her husband and she found that deep down, she didn’t care all that much about religion he was anymore. As long as they were able to give each other a small amount of peace; for some reason, even Alucard didn’t bother her half as much when Anderson was on her side of things. Maybe adding another human to the mix evened things out mentally.

Integra sighed and rolled over, rubbing one eye wearily. She knew that Anderson had been mortified by the whole ordeal, and it was unlikely that he’d touch her all that much even when they were married. Didn’t he tell her that he would rather have chosen abstinence over marriage? He’d never bring himself to care about her in any significant way.

That didn’t bother Integra too much; although her father had certainly loved her and Walter cared a great deal for her, she’d never grown with the unconditional love that other children had from their mothers and extended family. She was fine with being a bit lonely for the rest of her life. But whatever had passed between them, swimming thick with tension and lust and mutual fondness; that had been damn close to what she always thought love had felt like, or at least judged from the movies she’d seen and the books she’d read. But something deep down told her that she wasn’t there yet-only standing on the cliff and looking down, unable to make the leap. It would be easy to make a false step and fall over into the canyon that spread beneath her, but it would probably break something when she fell.

She really ought to talk this over with the man when he returned. He’d be like normal men and deny and fight and complain about talking feelings with anyone, but she knew that things had to be alright between them come wedding day. Come to think of it, they needed to talk about that too. She fingered the silver band on her thumb idly, trying to wrap up her thoughts. She turned back over when the door swung open and Anderson entered, carrying a small bag and looking at her rather crossly.

“I don’t have a picture ID for the cigars. They refused to sell them to me without one; as if I look like some troublemaking child.” He handed her the bag. “I got something to eat and drink, though. Not a lot, but something.” He refused to look at her as she poked her nose in the bag, pulling out two cans of soda and two sloppily wrapped packages that turned out to be hamburgers. She sniffed one burger cautiously before taking a bite. Once she managed to ignore the thick taste of grease, it was edible.
“That’s all right; I’ve decided that I’m probably not going to be able to smoke until this whole Siren thing blows down and I can go home. Besides, the name I told you are my substitutes. My real cigars have to be imported.” She took another bite and watched him eat his own hamburger sullenly.

“I called the accountants again. They promised to wire me a little bit of cash tomorrow. We’ll have to go down to a bank.” He wrinkled his nose at the taste of the burger and picked up the can, downing what looked like half of it in one gulp. Integra sipped her own drink, trying not to smile at the vexed expression. I can see why the accountants must hate him. He probably requires a truckload of food for himself every day. She wondered if his metabolism worked overdrive when he was injured. They finished the rest of the meal in silence.

Walter pursed his lips as he looked over the bookshelves, finally pulling out a tiny novel. He handed it to Seras, who looked at the cover curiously. The dark-haired lady on the front was gorgeous, although her face looked as though she wore a perpetual frown.

“This is the book Alucard was referring to, I think. Like he said, not all of it is true, but it does paint a particularly grotesque picture.” Seras looked back up at him, her brows furrowing.

“What in the world did she do? Let the bodies lay up in the streets? It’s not hard to hide evidence that you’re a vampire, but Master said that she had been caught by humans.” She tapped the cover of the book absently as Walter made a disgusted face.

“No, she didn’t leave them out; but she did take the young virgin daughters of nobles and slaughter them viciously. It’s said that to remain young, she bathed in their blood.”

“Wouldn’t that stain her skin?” Seras blurted out. It was a horrid picture in her mind, a young pretty woman bathing in a pool of thick, congealing blood. She heard Alucard purr in her mind at the picture and frowned, trying to shove him back out of her thoughts. Walter shrugged, already going back to his desk and the never-ending stream of paperwork that rested on it.

“I wouldn’t know.”

Seras sat at the little table in her room, flipping through the pages of tiny print. Thankfully, there weren’t any pictures of bloody bathtubs but overall the book looked rather boring. She wasn’t looking forward to reading it. Why couldn’t Master just tell me about her and be done with it?

“Do you want me to read it to you?” a voice answered in her ear and she fell back in her chair with a screech. Two deft hands caught the chair and righted it before she crashed to the ground in a heap. Their owner laughed cruelly, taking the book from her hands and looking at it himself. Seras glared at him reproachfully as he slowly turned the pages, his eyes lighting up with mirth as he read. After a moment, he placed the book on the table and stood behind her. Seras was slightly startled when his cool hands landed on her shoulders, rubbing them as he spoke to her.

“Police Girl, when I tell you to read something, it’s because I don’t have the time or the patience to teach it to you myself. If I wanted to fill your head up with stories, I most certainly would. As it is, you need to read classical vampire literature. It will teach you in the end.” His nails dug into her shoulders and she winced.

“Yes sir.” She felt his hands stop their painful massage and slip down her arms as he bent to her level, almost kneeling on the ground. She looked over and met his eyes.
“Read the book, Seras.” He leaned in closer, his nose less than an inch from hers.
“Tonight.” She nodded, picking up the book once more in obedience. He sneered and vanished into thin air, another chuckle escaping as he jerked the chair’s legs out from under it. She managed to grab onto the table before the chair hit the ground, cursing loudly and kicking at the leftover mist. When nothing happened, she hugged the book to her chest and bent down to grab the chair. What’s got into him? First he was nice to her, then he was distant, and now he was chastising her, all in one night at that! He was acting moodier than a schoolgirl! She frowned, walking over to her bed and turning on the reading lamp. Maybe he had been turned down by Sir Integra and was taking it out on her. No, he’d have made a bigger fuss than that. He was probably just bored and wanted someone to push around, the big bully.

You’re not reading! The accusatory voice chimed in her head threateningly. A warning push on her psyche a moment later and she was cracking open the book, hunched over the first page.

I’m reading! I’m reading!

“Please! Don’t kill me! My father is rich; he can give you anything you want, really! Don’t—” the young lady’s cries were cut off into choking gurgles as the young man drew a knife across her throat, letting it empty into the large vat. After she was properly drained and disposed of down a hole in the wall, he stirred the waters luxuriously and turned to the gilded vanity in the corner of the large room.

“Madame, your bath is ready.” A young, beautiful woman stood from the vanity and made her way to the tub, letting her robe slide down over her shoulders. Her naked body shown in the bright light of the moon that hung low over the castle. Her crimson gaze looked on the tub with delight as she settled into it, reveling in the way the thick substance slid across her smooth skin. Looking up at him, she smiled and crooked her finger. When he leaned in close, she picked up a goblet from the floor next to her and dipped it in the blood, holding it up as a reward. He took it and sipped gratefully, licking his lips. “Delicious. A perfect specimen; only the best for Madame.”

“Oh, how you pamper me, boy.” She laid her head back on the tub, her neck arching as she soaked languidly. “Tell me; won’t you join me this evening?” He bowed, a small smile flickering across his face.

“No, Madame. The steward says that he found a poorhouse boy that was willing to come to be my personal… servant, if you will. I’m looking forward to spending time with him when he arrives tonight, and it won’t do any good for me to be seen with wet hair.” The woman tittered, her hand over her mouth daintily.

“Ambrose, you naughty thing! What am I going to do with you?” she cooed, ruffling the blonde locks that hung down around his shoulders. She sighed, relaxing even more and bringing the goblet to her own ruby lips. “How is my plan coming along?” Ambrose paused and she opened one eye, pouring the rest of the blood back into the bath. “What is it? Answer me, boy!” she snapped, feeling a nervous rage come upon her. Ambrose was unfazed by the shouts.

“Well Madame, our hired forces are being slaughtered left and right by the English. Most notably, the Hellsing Organization.” The woman cursed and flung the goblet across the room.

“Those half-brained beasts! I’d have had more luck sending the girls out there!” She sunk into the tub until her chin touched the blood. “Wait, Hellsing? Where have I heard that name before?” She pulled one hand out of the water and scratched her temple, the blood running down her cheek like tears. Ambrose retrieved her goblet and handed it back to her, coughing quietly.
“They’re the Organization that claims control of the vampire Alucard,” he explained, sinking down to sit beside the tub with his elbows propped on the rim.

“Alucard? Alucard…” The woman looked up at the chandelier before smiling and snapping her fingers. “Oh, Vlad! How is he these days?” Ambrose smiled; this was the question he’d been waiting for his Mistress to ask.

“Word on the street is that he’s got a fledgling. A little blonde bird that goes by the name of Seras Victoria.” He pulled the laminated image from his coat pocket and handed it to her. She tilted her head, looking at the police ID with a smile.

“What pretty coloring she has. I bet her blood is scrumptious. I wonder if he’d give her up, for a good price? The prince always did enjoy a variety of women. Don’t you think it’s strange that he’s limited himself to this one childe?” She waved the likeness at the boy, who shrugged.

“Rumor has it that she’s to be the new No-Life-Queen. I’ve heard she’s quite the spitfire, and no stranger to battle.”

“I want her. I really do want her for my collection.” The woman put a hand to her face, blushing as she looked on the image. “I want her, Ambrose. Get her for me.” When no answer came, she looked up sharply to see that her fledgling’s face had lost turned a sickly color.

“I cannot, Madame. The No-Life-King’s own fledgling? That’s a death sentence! Don’t think like that!”

“Oh, I suppose you’re right,” the woman pouted. Her voice raised into a whine. “But I need her!” She looked over at the window. “Call Ruthven. I want to see if he can bargain a price for this little Victoria. Surely Vlad will see reason. I need her.”

“Certainly, Madame.” Ambrose raised himself off the floor and walked out of the room. After he was gone, the woman tenderly caressed the picture and smiled to herself.

“Soon, my little Victoria. You will be mine, the way it should be,” she crooned.
She watched his shoulders sag and he shook his head. He lifted his head and his eyes grew steely at the sight of her expectant face.

“Not at three in the morning, we don’t. I’m going back to bed.” He pushed past her roughly, throwing the towel on the tiled floor. She followed after him, turning off the light. She heard him settle back into bed and flipped on the switch for the lamp, standing up beside him with her hands on her hips. He squinted at her and frowned when she crawled to sit on the bed beside him. He sat back up, pointing at the other bed. “No, you’re not sleeping here,” he commanded as if she were a dog. “Go over there.”

“Not until you and I sort this out. Besides, you might as well get used to sleeping with me. We need to hurry up and decide a wedding date, you know.” He snarled angrily under his breath and turned away to glare at the wall, his back to her.

“I’m not going over this right now with you. Go to bed,” he ordered again. She put her hands on his shoulders, feeling the way he strained under her touch. She rubbed, not really sure how to ease the tension. “Stop.” She obeyed, one hand moving up to rub an uneven patch of hair at his nape where it tapered off to skin while the other felt the heat of his wound. It wasn’t as much as before, but it was still much warmer than the skin around it. She scratched his head lightly with her nails, humming and waiting for him to turn back around and acknowledge her. Finally he snapped and swung around, slapping her hand away.

“What do you want?” he roared, his eyes narrowed. She felt exasperation bubble up in her gut. Why was it so hard for him to just admit things? He’d all but said that he was attracted to her when he had her pinned beneath him, and she thought it had been pretty obvious that she felt the same way. It’s not like she’d been screaming rape or fighting all that hard to get him off of her!

“I want you to listen to me!” she shouted back, coming nose-to-nose with him. He grunted and grabbed her shoulders, forcing her away from him. She sat back on the bed, grinding her teeth as he stared her down.

“Well, I don’t want to listen to you!” he retorted, crossing his arms and backing away from her as far as the bed would allow. She felt so frustrated that she almost burst into tears. She was beyond aggravated.

“What do you want then?” she cried, throwing her hands in the air. If this was the way it was supposed to be when they were married, she was going to end up shooting herself. Even her cigars wouldn’t have helped dissipate this much stress. He didn’t answer; he just blinked at her, his face slowly becoming blank as he banished his anger and God knows what other emotions deep to wherever he pushed them. She could see how he distanced himself from the creatures he killed; he was trying to do the same to her. She pulled him by his shoulders, trying to shake him and rattle his brain into answering. “Tell me!” she begged, weary beyond words. She was exhausted from trying to figure out what he wanted from her. A wife? A companion? Nothing?

He glared bleakly at her and she felt her hands moving of their own accord up his neck, lightly brushing his chin. Research, she reminded herself mentally but her body was already reacting, begging to be pushed up next to him and soak in the warmth he provided.

“Stop touching me,” he demanded, but his hands were inching up the bed towards her legs. She almost groaned out loud from sheer impatience when he reached her knees and stopped. The damned man was trying his best to fight her, despite what he felt. She finally was able to maneuver enough to rest her forehead on his. He had screwed his eyes shut, refusing to give in.

“Is it me?” she finally asked. “Do you really hate me that much?” At her words he opened his eyes
and pulled back.

“It’s not you,” he admitted. “It’s what I am. Or who I was, at least.” Integra gave him a blank look, trying to decide what he meant. At her confusion, he looked away. “It’s none of your concern. I’m a priest; I shouldn’t be having… doing things like this with some woman anymore.”

“I’m not just some woman. I’m your fiancée.” It was the first time she’d actually said it out loud and meant it; she was just irritating him when she’d used it with Walter. “We’ve been cleared by your Church, right? Surely then they can’t say anything about this.” She lowered her voice, feeling that familiar hunger pulling at her bones. She leaned in again, looking as though she were going to share a secret. “What is it that you want?” she whispered. He swallowed, drawing her attention back to his neck. She pulled her fingers back to his shoulder and dipped down farther along his collarbone, feeling the wiry chest hair running across her palm as he took a deep breath. “I’ll tell you what I want.”

She felt his surrender, the relaxing muscles under her as he pulled her onto his lap, his hands running over her bare legs repeatedly. He took a shuddering breath, keeping his eyes shut as she took the liberty of touching him everywhere she could reach: his arms, his back, always ending back up in his hair as she let herself be tugged closer. She could hardly stand the feeling; it was the sweetest torture she’d never imagined.

“I want a husband.” Now, they were both on that cliff, each waiting to see who would push the other off first. Fuck this, she thought as she wrapped her arms around him and pressed her lips to his. She’d just drag him over the side with her, since he wasn’t planning on taking any initiative. She broke away after only the quickest brush, leaning down to pepper his jawline with soft kisses. “They all want me to be cold and heartless; I’m exhausted from living up to their expectations of me.” She nipped his ear and he jerked her closer, his breath hitching in his throat as he practically vibrated under her touch. “I want a husband who can respect and honor me, who will understand what I have to do each day. I want a husband who can give me a moment’s peace from daily life and be comforting.” She pulled back and looked at him, a serious look on her face. “Can you do that?” He gave her a look of mixed desire and fatigue.

“That’s a heavy burden to have on a body,” he said finally. “I can try.” He leaned back to rest against the headboard, taking her with him unthinkingly. She felt his hands catch on the hem of the shirt and looked down at him, her hair falling around him like a curtain.

“That’s all I ask.” She traced one finger over his chest and down the middle of his stomach, delighting in the way he flexed under her touch. “And in return,” she murmured, leaning in to press her lips against his forehead. “I will try too. I will try to honor you, and respect you.” She paused when he caught her hand when it reached his pants.

“And you will submit to me?” he asked incredulously. “Wives, submit to your husbands as is fitting in the Lord.” He arched a brow at her, prepared to hear her lecture about being her own woman and never letting anyone command her. She froze above him, her face turning a mottled red before simmering back down. She lay on top of him, her nose brushing his.

“Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her,” she quoted back. “When you love me, I’ll submit to you.” He exhaled slowly, pushing her off him gently as he rolled over.

“I’m going to bed, Integra. It’s early in the morning.” He closed his eyes, waiting for her to move back to her own bed. When she didn’t move, he peeked at her from under his lashes. “I said that I’m going to bed.”
“I’m serious about sleeping here tonight.” She moved closer to him, seeking the warmth that radiated from his bones. He rolled his eyes and pushed her to the far side of the bed before turning off the light.

“You can stay here, but stay on your own side. Goodnight.” Integra yawned, feeling the aching void in her stomach slowly vanish. She’d have time to work on him, of course but tonight was a good start.

Seras felt a tug on her shirt and jerked awake, pulling the book off her face quickly.

“I was only taking a break, I swear!” she squeaked, only to relax as Alucard lay down next to her with a thump. “Master, I’m tired but I’m trying to finish the book tonight.” She held up the book helpfully and turned the page, eager to prove herself an honest Draculina. He sighed and pulled the book away, turning the ribbon bookmark to the page and throwing it across the room like a Frisbee. It landed on the table, skidding across the wood before coming to rest in the far chair.

“Forget about the book,” he muttered, burying his face in her shoulder. When she shifted away he jerked her back, holding her still in an iron grip. Seras clucked and patted his hand, wondering what was wrong this time. “I tried to contact my master, to ask permission to find Ruthven. She was a bit preoccupied with the Judas Priest, so I have to wait.”

“Preoccupied?” Seras’ eyes strayed to the digital clock on the wall. “At three in the mor-oh. Well, they are going to be married and have children so it’s only natural that they would have-”

“Don’t you dare use that term in the same sentence that you’re speaking of the priest in.” He hissed angrily, pulling her even closer despite her protests. “It was bad enough I got a taste of the emotion, much less any sort of deed.” Seras caught a whiff of pheromones in the air and almost licked her lips. Her poor master… he couldn’t help but be turned on by second-hand emotions. It was worse than her own labored hacking whenever she accidently inhaled some of Sir Integra’s cigar smoke. She wriggled out of his grasp and pushed him away firmly.

This had happened once or twice before, but she’d never thought much of it. Still, it was unnerving to look at his eyes, glowing with hunger in the darkness of her coffin. He’d never acted on any feelings, although the first time it had ever happened she was sure he was going to either rape her or tear apart the mansion. All she had to do was keep him calm until he dropped off to sleep.

“I wasn’t mocking you when I told you that I’d keep you in that castle,” he admitted, pulling her back to his chest and almost snapping her arm in the thoughtless gesture. “I want to keep you for myself.” He buried his face back into her hair and she sighed, trying to get comfortable despite the arm digging into her lower back.

“Master, you’re very selfish. I’m not some toy you can just hide away because you don’t want anyone else to play with it,” she admonished gently. “I’m a living person; I have needs too. What I need is for you to let me go, unless you want me to throw you out of here.”

Her threat wasn’t empty. She had given him permission to lie in her coffin, but she could just as easily take it back and make him leave her alone. It would infuriate him beyond all reason, but hey—she could just hide in her coffin until he managed to coax her back out with promises to spare her life and not beat her for her insubordination. She knew she could; it had happened once before and the incident had almost ended in disaster until Walter had finally convinced Alucard that threatening his fledgling’s life probably wasn’t going to make her want to leave her temporary sanctuary.
“Don’t order me around, you little upstart.” However, he let her move away and she found a comfortable position near the other wall. He lowered the lid and growled to himself, choosing to bury his face in her only pillow instead. She glared at him and made a pillow out of her arms, trying to go back to sleep. His mind was racing with thoughts, many of them flying by too fast but still making her antsy through their bond. After a moment, his thoughts slipped away into nothing and she felt a hot tongue lick the back of her hand. Lifting her head, she looked at the multi-eyed hound that was where her sire had been and patted its head. Reclaiming her pillow she let her master lay his now-fuzzy head on her stomach and drifted back to sleep, listening to the simple, repetitive thoughts of a dog. He’d often slipped into a dog’s form when he couldn’t sleep due to restless thoughts, but it was becoming rarer to see the black hulking beast make his way through the halls. For some reason, he’d rather just bunk with his childe.
Seras walked carefully among the knee-high grass. She was at the southern edge of Hellsing property. Here, the gardeners didn’t bother clearing since it was situated so far away from the home. It was used as a dumping ground for old garden plants and flowered planters that had overstayed their welcome, and the not-so-dead flora had taken root here and there among the shattered urns. It was beautiful, in a slightly creepy way. It reminded Seras of an old, ancient civilization that had sprouted new life among the ruins.

But she wasn’t here to sightsee or play around; she had a job to do. She was on patrol, her pistol slung into its holster around her waist. Still, she couldn’t help but make her way slowly through the grass. It was a nice night, with the half-moon being more than enough to light up the grounds. The rusty wrought-iron accent along the top of the stone fence creaked in the breeze. Seras looked out through the bars that came down to her waist before molding into solid stone. While empty fields covered the three main walls of the manor, the southern end opened into a dark forest that seemed to stretch on forever.

The breeze changed directions and a strange scent caught her attention. Her nose twitched once and her eyes shifted to the right, her gaze searching down the fence though her body didn’t move. Her heightened awareness was one of the vampiric powers she was appreciative of; otherwise, she’d never be able to catch the telltale signs of an intruder. You could try to hide, but you will always smell like something that doesn’t belong. Here, fresh sweat and the fragrance of mahogany leather definitely weren’t natural odors.

She caught sight of the would-be trespasser at the end of the fence, where it turned along the property line and was held up by a decorative brick pillar. At first glance, the man seemed to be simply observing the property and not bothering to scale the fence to gain entrance. But something about him didn’t seem right. Seras moved slowly, her combat training at work as she casually made her way down the boundary. *Scrutinize- details are always important.*

The man was handsome- or would have been if he didn’t look so ragged. His clothing was in tatters, the jacket hanging in ribbons that fluttered in the breeze and his pants had tears all up the sides. His shoes were muddy and his white undershirt was stained with something that looked suspiciously like bodily fluids. His hair was a mess of kinky ebony curls that would have framed his profile nicely if it had been styled. Instead, it was messy and embedded with twigs and leaves. All in all, he looked either seriously roughed up or homeless.

“It’s a pleasant night, isn’t it?” she asked nonchalantly, walking loudly through the brush and hitting urns purposely. She didn’t want to alarm him, and besides she needed him to realize that she was there. He didn’t look at her right away, and she had the thought that he may have been one of the millions of mentally ill roaming London’s streets. He could have wandered away from the lights and been lost in the forest before ending up here as a freak accident. He certainly looked as though he didn’t care for his appearance.

She reached the spot where she stood opposite him and was astonished to see that he didn’t smell all that bad. If he was a destitute, he hadn’t been one long enough to gain the unmistakable stench. His eyes were closed and his head downcast, forcing his face into shadow. She quickly drew her pistol and tapped it lightly against the metal bar. “Sir, please look me in the eyes and present some ID. This is private property, you know.” She had a concern that he was up to something. Humans
shouldn’t be this far off the main road, but he just didn’t seem to be… normal. Her suspicions were confirmed when he finally looked her in the eyes. She bit back a startled cry as she saw that his own gaze was a watery orange, with wide pupils that made him look like a demonic deer. He looked her over, taking her in and fell against the bars desperately, his face smashed against the cold iron.

“Seras Victoria,” he gasped out. She backed away a step, holding up her gun warily. He held up his hands to clutch the bars, looking around fearfully before motioning her over. “Please, don’t be frightened. I’m not here to hurt you.” When she didn’t move, he became even more frantic. “Please! I don’t have much time left!” Seras redoubled her thoughts that he may have been a little mental, but held her gun by her side and moved closer warily. He was a Midian, and he looked as though he were in trouble. Her instincts told her that she didn’t have anything to fear from him. He was more worried about whatever was on the other side of those bars than he was about her.

“How do you know my name?” she blurted out. The man pulled a scrap of paper from his jacket and handed it to her. Seras let out a gasp as she recognized herself. It was a paper copy of her laminated police ID- the kind she’d had as a human. Bloodstains covered the right-hand side as if someone had been holding it with bloody hands.

“Listen to me: my name is Ruthven Ioa. I was told to come and kidnap you, the girl in that likeness,” he pointed at the picture in Seras’ hand, “for the Countess Báthory.” He shook his head, curls flying wildly. “But I can’t do it. I just can’t. They can say that I’m a weasel and a slime ball and everything else that crawls in the dirt. But they can’t accuse me of not knowing where my loyalties lie.”

“Why are you telling me this?” Seras asked helplessly. Countess Báthory? Alucard was right- she did have something to do with this. “What is this, some sort of takeover?”

“It’s a crime against the crown, girl!” He leaned in as close as the bars let him and Seras copied him until their noses touched through the gap and she could smell his irony breath. It mixed terribly with the leather scent, which she recognized as aftershave. “My cards lie with the King. Vlad’s helped me too much in my lonely years on Earth for me to even think about betraying him. I’m hoping that by saving your life, I can repay that debt in some small way.” He smiled sadly. “You’re in great danger. You, your mansion, and your country. In fact, the entire Western nations will be nothing if that woman has her way. You’ve got to stop her.”

“Hold on; let me run back and get Master. You should tell him what you told me. He can help-” The breeze picked up into a rough wind and Seras cringed. The air from the forest smelled absolutely putrid. Ruthven took in a sharp breath and looked over his shoulder at the leaves fluttering in the trees.

“No time.” He turned and assumed a defensive stance, his panicky eyes meeting hers one last time. “I’ll hold them off for as long as I can. Run away. Find your master and don’t leave his side.” He smiled, and Seras noticed that the gesture lit up his face, making even the bags under his eyes seem attractive. “I’m happy that I was able to meet you. You’ll do him a lot of good, just like my darling Aubrey was to me. I’m looking forward to seeing her again.” She was about to ask what he meant when she saw the glowing eyes slowly appearing all in the forest. Ruthven was outnumbered. “Run!”

She broke into a dead sprint, trying to ignore the sounds of battle behind her as she ran to the house. She called her master mentally, trying to get him to come to her quickly. If she could double back in time, they might be able to help Ruthven and save his life. He had put his faith in
her; she couldn’t let him down. Her country depended on it, if what he said was true. She reached
the door within five minutes and Alucard met her there, his guns in hand.

“Where?” he asked. She pointed to the south, noticing that her hand was trembling from
her taxed nerves. He took a whiff of the breeze and she heard the sharp click as he snapped his
fangs together in anger. “Show me.” She ran back, feeling him fall into place beside her and urged
herself to go faster. She was worried beyond all reason. This unknown Midian had risked his life to
save hers. It was for her master’s benefit and not hers; but she still felt obligated to like him for it.

She hit the southern fence with a slam, shaking the stones in their foundation and they
almost cracked. Beyond the fence, all was quiet but the thick stench in the air was undeniable;
decaying flesh and blood. It was a different smell then that of a Ghoul- the flesh was rotten, but it
still held a weird tang to the scent that she couldn’t figure out. She wrinkled her nose and clenched
the bars as she looked out into the night, accidently bending them in her grip.

“Stay here.” Alucard ordered and phased through the bars, walking into the words
without a second glance. Seras felt the urge to scale the fence and follow anyway, but if those
things out there were after her, she may be better off staying within the fence. Besides, she’d pretty
much said that she’d stay by her Master’s side, and part of that was following his orders without
hesitation. And so she waited for him, listening to his footsteps until they were indistinguishable
from the other sounds within the forest.

When he returned from the gloom, she saw his face was twisted in rage and disgust and leaned
forward anxiously. He went back through the bars as if they weren’t there and held his hand out to
her. In his palm was a handful of bloody ash. He emptied it on the ground and they watched as it
scattered in the wind.

“Master.” She looked up at him, her eyes questioning. “What- why…”

“It was the Countess Báthory. She set her girls on Ruthven. I scattered the ashes so that he couldn’t
be desecrated even more. He was too noble to be seen that way.” Alucard looked away, his hands
clenched into fists. “She will pay for her transgression here tonight.” Seras looked down and
realized that she still held the bloody ID in her hand. She held it out for him to see.

“He gave me this. He said that he knew where his loyalties lay, and he hoped that by saving me
that he’d repay some small part of what he owed you.” She looked sadly at her grinning face on
the card. “He said that the Western nations were in trouble, unless we stopped her.” Alucard
gingerly picked the card up from her outstretched hand, looking at the bloody prints.

“She was after you.” It wasn’t a question. Seras nodded and looked back towards the dark trees.

“You said she set her girls on him. You mean the girls that she killed? Her Ghouls?” Alucard
shook his head and removed his glasses. His eyes were weary, the way they always looked when
he was saddened by something. Seras always felt the most for him in those moments; he looked as
though the world rested on his shoulders and there was no relief in sight.

“It’s better that you not know, Seras. There are some lengths in this world that even I wouldn’t go
to.” He turned, looking one last time at the ash dotting the ground. “Come; let’s go tell Walter what
has happened.” He turned without another word and began to walk slowly back to the manor. Seras
followed, looking back at the whispering woods. The wind shifted once more and the faint whiff of
burnt ash caught her nose, forcing her to quicken her pace and cling to her master’s coat like a
frightened child. Even monsters didn’t like thinking about their demise.
“No! No!” Chairs were flung against the wall, the bathtub was overturned, the vanity was smashed against the fluffy bed, and the bed curtains were ripped down as the woman let out scream after scream. Ambrose stood sullenly in the middle of the hurricane while the Girls cowered in the corner, unable to protect themselves from the onslaught of the Countess’ rage. The red-faced woman spun around and pointed a bony finger in Ambrose’s face. “You were supposed to make sure she was in my hands by nightfall! And that traitorous Ioa goes and does this… I’m so vexed right now!” she screamed. “You should have seen this coming, idiot child!”

Ambrose let out a sigh and the door opened suddenly behind him. He turned in surprise to see the regal-looking man standing there. He stood in shock before bowing quickly, his muttered greeting drowned out by the Countess’ rage. The man’s mustache quivered as he stared at the woman in the middle of the room. He looked around, scratching his beard and shook his head.

“I heard you all the way upstairs; what’s the problem now, wife?” he asked wearily. He looked at Ambrose, who shrugged and pointed to the frightened creatures in the corner in answer. The man curled his nose before sniffing delicately and turning away from the sight. Seeing that the attention had been taken off her, the woman threw herself in her husband’s path.

“That Ruthven! He made me kill him because he was a traitor! All I wanted,” she began, her jowl quivering as she began to cry fat crocodile tears, “All I wanted was the little Victoria girl. That’s all. And now I can’t have her because Ioa tipped her sire off!” The man stared blankly before once again turning to the young Frenchman.

“Your wife became enamored with the fledgling of one Count Dracula, or Vlad or Alucard or Satan: whatever the hell you wish to call him. Ruthven, being the fiercely loyal Count that I told her he’d be, told the young girl of Madame’s plan or a part of it anyway. She is now throwing a tantrum, as always.” He nodded his head. “In the overused words of my people, c’est la vie.” The man rolled his eyes before coughing and patting the distraught woman awkwardly on the head.

“Quiet yourself, Erzsébet. You should have known better. Even when we were humans, Ruthven was loyal to the Dark King beyond all others. Besides, are you really so foolish to think that the king will give up his fledgling? Would you give up Ambrose, for any price?” The woman gasped and held out her hands to the young man, who obediently let her hold him and stroke his hair.

“No! I’d never let anyone take my darling!” she vehemently cried to her husband. He nodded.

“Well then calm down and busy yourself with your… girls. Leave me to my peace.” The man walked on down the hall and out of sight. The Countess stared at the open door before whining piteously and throwing herself face-down on the bed. Ambrose waved the Girls out of the room before closing the heavy door and petting his mistress’ head affectionately. She sniffed dramatically and lifted herself up on her arms, her long lashes fluttering.

“Oh, Ambrose. You’re such a comfort,” she cooed softly. “I’d never let you go.” He nodded, his blonde locks falling around his face and making him seem much younger than he really was.

“I would rather die than be parted from Madame.” He looked at her sadly. “I wish there were some way to ease your suffering. I’d let you have my stable boy, but I accidentally broke him. It turns out he wasn’t sturdy at all.” The woman clucked, shaking her head.

“Even my girls weren’t able to get past the spell on that fence. What am I to do? I need this girl for my collection- I won’t rest until I have her as mine! Just think of how pretty her pale skin would look, covered in lacerations and blood! My claws would rend her smooth flesh like butter. It would be delightful.” She lay back on the bed with a sigh. Ambrose looked at her for a long moment before bending down and giving her a hug, squeezing slightly.
“I will take the girls back to England. I will try to get her for you. I’ll do my best, even if it kills me.” The woman shot up from the bed, clutching his shoulders.

“Don’t say that! Vlad will kill you without pretense, you foolish child. If you want to go to England for me, take the girls and go. But don’t risk your life in that strange country. What am I supposed to do when you’re gone? It’s torture, to lose a fledgling. You wouldn’t know that yet, because you’re still so young.”

“Madame, I’m over two hundred years old,” he laughed. She chuckled and kissed his forehead.

“Yes, still so young and naïve. But go, if you want to. I will stay here and worry my head off like a good dame should. Perhaps I’ll bring up one of the humans to keep me company while you’re away.” She was already looking out the window, her eyes lighting up as she calculated her next torture. “Yes…”

“Did you know him well?” Seras asked, looking up at an angle to try and see Alucard’s face. They were relaxing quietly in his room; well, Seras was relaxing and Alucard was sullen. She was trying to get to the cause of his mood. It could be that he woke up that way; he was unsurprisingly gone from her coffin by the time she finally pulled herself out of bed. Walter hadn’t said anything of importance considering the murder outside of the fence. He’d promised to update Sir Integra immediately, but apparently she was in an important meeting in Liverpool with Vatican representatives and couldn’t be bothered right away. So she’d chalked it up to the vampire’s death itself.

Now, they sat together; him in his chair while she sprawled out on the cool stones, her feet on the armrest. He looked down at her, his face an emotionless void. He sighed.

“Who?”

“Ruthven Ioa. You seemed to be sad when you saw that he died.” He growled and knocked her feet off his chair before slumping with his chin in hand.

“We knew each other well enough. He’s almost as old as I, though not quite as powerful of course.” He looked at the stones on the far wall, his eyes distant. “He owed me a great debt; I’m glad he was able to settle it before he died.”

“So I’m really that valuable?” she asked teasingly, trying to cheer him up. She hated when her master pulled himself into such depressing moods. She almost rather have him livid and trying to kill her rather than irritable and morose.

“Of course not,” he snapped. She couldn’t help but look a little crestfallen. Even if she was only teasing, he didn’t have to be so scornful. She turned over and lay on her stomach, facing away from his chair. She drew patterns in the layer of dust that never seemed to disappear no matter how often Walter swept, feeling her own mood dissipating. It was only a ruse; she was just as affected by the man’s death. Even more so- he was a stranger to her and his first and only impression had been one of kindness. A pair of boots stomped on her, the heels digging into her lower back.

“A vampire’s fledgling is not a plaything, to be bought and sold or stolen and given.” He lightened the load on her back, but still held her pinned to the floor. “A good human parent doesn’t sell his child to anyone. Neither does a good vampire parent, if you can call us that. You should be happy that I take care of you, because I assure you that no one looked after me.” He seemed to consider the statement before taking his boots off her spine. “Then again, I never had my ass handed to me like you do.”
“I’m perfectly capable of looking after my own ass, thank you very much.” Seras tried to jump to her feet but something collided with her posterior and she was slammed back into the stones, her quick reflexes the only thing saving her from having a broken jaw and missing teeth. Alucard’s scathing laughter filled the chambers and she finally was allowed to stand up, her face flushing with humiliation and anger. She crossed her arms and glared at him sulkily. His laughter finally quieted and he looked at her for a moment before his face drew up in annoyance. “What?” he barked. She jumped in shock and looked at him, feeling slightly wounded.

“Nothing,” she muttered back before turning and leaving the room. Clearly he didn’t want her around anymore tonight.

Alucard swirled the wineglass, watching absently as the clear sides were stained a faded maroon. He leaned back in the seat and looked around the empty room with satisfaction. Now that he’d chased Seras out, he could look forward to some solitude. He felt as though he hadn’t had that in so long, before this entire shitty week had happened. Still…

“Seras,” he growled softly. He hated the way she always looked so wounded around him whenever he lost his patience, as if he had some sort of obligation to treat her differently than any of his other subjects. He doted on her indefinitely as it was; he would have given anything at her age for someone to look after him so dedicatedly. Still she was unsatisfied. He was already at his wit’s end with her. He offered her jewels- she laughed. He promised her the world- she pushed him away. It was clear that she was unable to take his offers seriously. But he couldn’t blame her for her naivety. She was still so young in the world; Ruthven was the only other lord she’d ever clapped eyes on before now.

Ruthven. His death was a shame. He had helped the man out time and time again in his life. He understood why Ruthven had opted not to go running to him for help this time, instead resolving to end his life by fighting. Ruthven had been growing drained for quite some time. Alucard hadn’t understood at first- there were so many wars to be won, so much more in the world to look at. He’d even suggested that Ruthven find some human master, just to throw in the wild card like he’d done himself.

But it wasn’t boredom that had Ruthven wishing for death: it was longing. Alucard remembered well when Ruthven had first decided to take a fledgling. Not many of their kind chose to take on a prodigy: even today, the act itself remains a large step in any unlife. Such an intimate act of binding two minds and souls by blood- not many have the stamina for it, and besides it takes an enormous amount of patience and sacrifice to bring up a new vampire in the world. If you do it right, that is.

Nevertheless, the slimy, sleazy Ioa had chosen to bring up a childe, and he had chosen a pretty young thing by the name of Aubrey. However, the pair was doomed from the start. Even after being married by mortal means, Aubrey was unable to be turned into a vampire. Before the process was finished, her brother stormed in and in a fit of passion unwittingly murdered his own sister. Of course, after all was said and done a book was published and Aubrey somehow became associated with the brother’s name instead of the sister, but the damage was already done. Their souls had been connected, even if only for the briefest moment. Ruthven had felt the most torturous emotional pain, and had for months been left alone in solitude. Even after he’d emerged and proclaimed his health, anyone could have seen he was never the same. Midians can’t recover from such a terrible separation.

Vampires thrive on free will. Their children must be ready to fly on their own before they can willingly let go of them. To have one snatched away, for eternity or even a small period of
time or distance, was horror. To have a bond so much more advanced than the average pair of souls requires much more work. Physical and mental contact is practically required, lest both parties be subject to insanity.

Alucard had never been able to fully grasp the pain that his comrade had felt until Seras had come along. He’d never meant to choose her as a fledgling until he laid eyes on her, looking so fragile and courageous as she stared down her death.

They were called together, whether by fate or other means he didn’t know. He’d never even considered that his little blonde had been a gift of the God he’d abandoned so long ago. He simply didn’t believe that he was worth it. But she had called out to him, and he had answered. He’d forced her into it, sure- but in his mind there was no other choice. He’d tried the roundabout way before when he’d tried to take the Englishwoman way back when. All that brought him was servitude and a throbbing pain in his hands. Instead, he took her by force. He’d been cheated out of his time twice; surely the third time was the charm.

He’d finished the job with the police girl, and he had felt it in his bones as their minds merged together easily like they’d been meant for each other. He’d never take another fledgling after this; something so personal was meant to be guarded forever. Now, he’d never give her up whether he liked it or not.

And so now he understood what a terrible agony it must have been. Just thinking about it happening to himself, even now- it made his unmoving heart flip in his chest and he had to stop himself from going to her room and holding onto her, protecting her from all the imagined dangers of the manor. And Ruthven had been longing for so long to look at his Aubrey once more- surely even in his last moments he was at peace with what was to come, be it Heaven, Hell or something else entirely.

Alucard drained his glass and sat it on the table before shaking his head slowly. He felt the need to nap, which meant that somewhere up in her room Seras was already asleep. The damned lazy girl. He felt his chest still constricting from the thought that someone was plotting to steal her away and he narrowed his eyes. Perhaps he should join her.

Chapter End Notes

Original Notes:

Lots of people got the Elizabeth Báthory reference! (Cheers) She’s one of the main reasons I started to read about vampires, after I saw a documentary about her on the History Channel. If you haven’t heard about her, look her up. It’s a pretty gruesome (but awesome) tale about a woman who thought she could remain young by sacrificing virgins and bathing in their blood. Beautiful.

Not as many people got the Ruthven reference. That’s okay. I didn’t hear about Polidori’s The Vampyre myself until I was in college. I forgive you for this minor transgression. In the book, Ruthven was… his last name, I think? But I like it better as a first name. Ioa comes from the real-life city of Ruthven, Iowa.
A slender beam of sunlight fell across Anderson’s face, waking him from his light doze. Wrinkling his nose in annoyance, he opened his eyes and automatically reached across the table for his glasses. Disoriented, he looked around the room and finally remembered that he was in some Liverpool hotel. The intrusive sunlight came from the window where the room-darkening curtains had been thrown open, leaving only a sheer, translucent cover from the glass to the room. He scratched his jaw, his hand running over the rough hairs and he felt the old gnawing wish that he could just shave it all off. Sadly, his body treated a razor as if it was a sword and the pseudo-beard always grew back within the hour. Unchanging….

Looking around the room again, he tried to figure out what was wrong. It was like the old newspaper games he looked at as a boy, where you saw two pictures and had to point out the differences. The first, major difference was the absence of a sharp-tongued blonde woman. He looked towards the bathroom to see the door standing open and the room neat, but empty. He felt his heart drop to his stomach in panic- I let her escape- before he remembered that the order to take Integra hostage was a sad attempt to keep the Vatican from surrendering to one shrew’s iron will. If Integra wasn’t keen on running away before, she certainly wasn’t going to make off when he was asleep. Finally, he caught sight of the clean carpet. The dirty clothing that had been haphazardly strewn around in their hurry to unpack was missing. The only logical explanation was that Integra had taken them down to be cleaned. He half-wondered if she had stuffed her ears before leaving. The Sirens, so far, hadn’t attacked them in broad daylight, instead waiting until dawn or dusk for their maneuvers; it was always better to be safe than sorry though.

He was turning this over in his mind when the words “broad daylight” hit him like a punch in the jaw. Throwing himself over the bed, he grabbed the remote on the other end table and hit the display button on the muted TV. His jaw hit his lap when he saw the time on the digital readout- 12:45 pm. He sat back, flabbergasted. He never slept in. Alexander Anderson never, ever slept in. He was up before the sun, before anyone else in the orphanage. Even as a child, he wasn’t allowed to laze around in bed; there were always fences to mend and cows to milk and goats to feed and besides, there weren’t enough hours in the day as it was.

But it was clear that the sun had woken him up today, meaning that he was dreadfully behind. He looked around for his coat, but was unable to find it anywhere. For once, he was at a loss as to what to do. He couldn’t walk around outside without a shirt or some sort of covering, and he felt that a towel wouldn’t do the job right. He let his gaze travel around the room idly, resting on the blinking light on his phone. He reached for it, seeing that it was a voicemail. That in itself wasn’t that big of a deal; most of the Iscariots had to call him for one reason or another and knew to leave a voicemail if he didn’t answer- he had more things to do than be attached to his phone 24/7. But as he opened the caller ID and spotted the familiar number jumping out at him, he paled. Maxwell’s private line: He was in trouble, and whatever it was, it was serious.

He hadn’t spoken to Maxwell at all since he’d appealed for a marriage. Father Renaldo as well as several of the Iscariots had told him that the silver-haired archbishop had been shocked speechless before flying into one of the biggest rages anyone had ever seen. Sure, they all knew about the man’s legendary one-person-screaming-match/speeches that he was apt to fly into, but this one took all the cake and the plate with it. No one dared make a false move, especially as word got round to the other Divine Secret Organizations. It was bad enough to be shamed by your main
man, but even the lowest of Section XIII blushed as they heard that the *Luke*s were laughing at them. It was absolutely mortifying, being the new laughingstock of the Vatican.

Anderson knew that it wouldn’t be his most popular move, but once people realized that this merger was a good thing, he was sure they’d come around. With Hellsing’s occult magic and his divine powers, surely the next Regenerator would be a work of art. He could already imagine a faceless child following in his footsteps, making him more proud than he ever made his own father as he sliced down monstrous heathens in the name of God. Besides, the child would have a mother with a knack for tactical warfare so he’d already have a more than unfair advantage over uninformed creatures of the darkness.

*Speaking of the devil,* he thought as the door’s electronic lock whirred and it opened to reveal a cassock clad Integra with both arms full of folded clothing. He watched as she knocked the door back with her hip and jogged to the bed before the clothes could fall out of her hands. She gave a satisfied nod before wiping imaginary dust off her hands and looking over at him as he sat in place on the other bed. They stared at each other for a long moment, not saying anything as each looked the other over slowly. Integra cleared her throat, her entire face slowly turning pink as she refused to look away.

“Why are you wearing my clothes?” he asked finally, weighing his words carefully. She clutched the heavy cloak around her tightly and pointed to a neatly folded shirt.

“Well, I had to wash that sleeping shirt and I couldn’t well stand down there like *that,* could I?” she retorted and began to separate the clothing stacks between his outfits and hers. “Hang on a second and I’ll get dressed so you can have it back,” she said as she held up her suit jacket and pants before going back for a suitable shirt.

The implication of her words set in and Anderson almost choked. He couldn’t help but think of her under that coat… *naked.* That body that was on top of him last night; the sacred robe folding over her hips and rubbing against her as she put the folded clothes away in the dresser drawers. The way it would look if she let it slide down around her pale shoulders, giving him that infuriating, maddening smile as it reached her hips… he swallowed although his mouth had turned drier than the Pope’s sense of humor but he could no longer bring himself to close his eyes, instead not even bothering to get himself under control as he watched her move about the room. After long last she made her way to the bathroom with her outfit in hand and the spell was broken the minute the door shut her in. He let out a held breath and rubbed his eyes. It was getting to be too much- he was getting more involved in her than he’d like to think about.

He tried to chalk it up to the time. It had been so long since he’d last let himself think such unholy thoughts. He tried to think of the girls he’d had before in his time; surely he remembered one face, one name. No, they all melded together through the nights, blurred by drunken memory and sheer multitude. If he had any thought, he ought to have thanked the Lord above that none of them had been diseased. Well, they may have well been; the Regeneration process alleviated any mortal disease he had in his human years; no STDs could exist in his body any longer. It was only one of the many blessings that this job had given him. He’d never know if his material ways would have brought about repercussions down the road.

Still, he was a man, divinely oriented or not. And she was a woman- God help him, she was a *woman.* Her hands on him last night had been curious and determined; even in her sexual innocence she was headstrong and overconfident in her own ability. He wasn’t quite sure if that was a good thing or not. Not that it was bad physically; no, it had awakened things he’d thought he’d finally buried forever underneath doctrines about waiting until marriage and staying pure in thought and deed. It was more about her pigheadedness. How was he ever supposed to get her to be
a submissive wife if all she had to do was seduce him into saying yes for every little thing?

“What? Aren’t you going to be getting up, or were you waiting for the shower?” Her voice startled him out of his thoughts, only to see that she had emerged clean and fully dressed in her suit. He stared at the olive material for a moment before motioning her over with one hand. She hesitated, her blue eyes jumping from his hand to his face. She reached some decision and made her way to him, sitting lightly on the edge of the unmade bed. He leaned over and looked her in the eyes. They were confused and self-conscious.

“Your eyes,” he muttered, and she blinked. “Your feelings are showing, Ice Queen. Why do you let me see how vulnerable you are? I could take advantage of you.” He watched the astonishment and slight offense flicker through her gaze. It was fleeting however and before long a newfound confidence filled the blue depths.

“You won’t,” she declared. “You wouldn’t do that. I know.” She nodded once and placed a hand on his shoulder, over the spot where her servant had hit him. She felt the healed skin and smiled to herself. He caught the slight grin and narrowed his eyes. She had such faith in him, a Catholic- her enemy before this entire week had taken place.

Still, even in the prison she’d not been afraid for him to see the boredom or hurt or anger in her expression. She wasn’t really so emotionless after all. Like him, she’d just found a way to cover up until she was around someone she trusted. The question was: when did she start trusting him? She patted his bicep comfortingly and he realized that his face must have been showing his own confusion and pensiveness. He looked up, marveling at how the way the suit broadened her shoulders and hid the curves that he knew were there. He suddenly had the desire to see her in lady’s clothing- an evening dress perhaps. Something entirely indecent and practically begging to be peeled off.

“What?” He looked up, his face still close to hers and he saw his heated gaze reflected back at him in her glasses. He shook his head, leaning even closer. She didn’t back away, even when his nose brushed hers. Her eyes closed and he moved in, deciding to kiss her. He did promise that he’d make a conscious effort to try, after all.

The bed vibrated and they both looked down to see the phone lighting up. Anderson sighed; he still wasn’t ready to face his boss. He shouldn’t have been so wary; he raised the boy, for Christ’s sake. He just knew that he’d get a headache listening to the man’s shouts. Still, he moved away reluctantly and picked up the phone. Integra coughed and backed up off the bed, her expression both annoyed and slightly deterred. He shrugged at her before hitting the flashing green button.

“Anderson.” The voice on the other end gave a harsh exhale, saying nothing for a moment. “Hello?”

“Why did you not call me back?” the archbishop’s hiss was almost spine-tingling. He’s even worse off than I thought.

“I’m a bit busy at the moment,” he said tentatively, eyeing the woman that now had her face plastered to the window as she watched the bustling street below. “I was going to wait until you could have my full attention. Listen,”

“No, you listen.” Maxwell scowled at something in the background, the noise creating static among the line. “I’m halfway to England right now and I’ve got a lot to say to you. I’m going to be at that hotel at 6:00 sharp, and you will be down to meet me with your little fiancée in tow, understood?” Anderson raised an eyebrow at the man’s tone, taking all his self-control into check as he fought to not yell at the over-pompous official.
“I understand, Bishop. For the record, I have a lot to say to you, too.” His growling tone spoke of a fight for the ages. “See you then.” He slammed the end-call button with his thumb, almost bending the casing in two. He threw it onto the table and stood, gathering his own outfit from the still-open drawer. “Maxwell’s going to be here at 6:00. I guess he’ll be bringing that money for us, at least.”

“You don’t sound too happy about that,” Integra said. She didn’t turn from the window, but her hands moved to clasp behind her back. He walked over to her, looking over her shoulder at the people milling about the sidewalks.

“I’m not looking forward to it, that’s for sure.”

Seras tapped her toes on the edge of the balcony, leaning over as far as she could with her arms outstretched. She was balancing on her stomach at that point, but she wasn’t going to let the heavy pillar go no matter what. It was her fault it had fallen, anyway. Well, more so her masters, but he had only punched it because he was angry with her. Better stone than her face, or so Walter said. The butler was currently giving Alucard his two sense about the whole matter; she could see the furious look on the vampire’s face, but he made no move to leave the scene. Almost as if he heard her thoughts, she felt his gaze rest on her and she sent him a defiant look. She hadn’t even done anything wrong this time.

“Miss Victoria!” Seras jumped back to reality and saw Walter frowning up at her. “Did you hear me?”

“No, sorry. What did you need?” she asked politely as she let the pillar go. It fell the last few remaining inches to the ground where it hit with a rumble but didn’t shatter. Walter shook his head good-naturedly and pointed to the door.

“I said that if you still were going out, you had better do it before sunrise.”

“Oh, really!” she looked at the sky through foyer window, which was beginning to lighten considerably. “Yes, you’re right.” She flipped herself over the balcony railing, landing without a sound beside the stone pillar and bounding forwards to hug the old man. “Thanks,” she whispered in his ear. He nodded and patted her back affectionately before pushing her in the direction of the door. She passed by the still-fuming Alucard and considered the man for a moment before sticking out her tongue and continuing out the door.

It wasn’t fair that he was trying to keep her inside. She had a life, too. Besides, she was out of her favorite shampoo. It would take no more than five minutes at most to run to the store and get more, but now that he pitched such a big fit about it, she was going to take at least a half-hour. That would give the poor soldiers time to clean up the basement anyway. Stupid Master. He’s going to pay me back for breaking my table!

Oh, am I? The cold tone bit into her mind and she hurried her pace, half-wondering if he would bother to chase her down. Surely he couldn’t be that angry that she was leaving. She was coming right back!

What’s your problem? She whined as she made her way through the front gates. I know that someone could pick it up for me, but I want to get out and stretch my legs! I hate being locked away in that stuffy old house all the time. It’s nice to see the sights. She felt his wrath in her mind and shook her head, as if it that would dispel the overwhelming pressure mounting in her ears. Leave me alone, please! She broke into a jog, taking the long path around the mansion to get to the main road.
Oh, don’t worry. I’m not coming after you, he admitted with a dark chuckle. No, I’ll be waiting right here for you to come back. Seras wracked her mind and decided that he was probably angrier with her for being a disobedient little bitch and ratting him out to Walter for trying to make her stay behind. Jeez, she wasn’t his kid sister- she was a grown woman and if she wanted to go out, she’d go out!

I’m not scared of you. She wasn’t lying; she could take anything he dished out. She had before and she’d do it again. Break a few bones? Child’s play. Snap her spinal cord with one kick? Yawn. She sniffed and waved her hand. She shouldn’t have to be fearing her master’s rage every time she made a decision. That’s what parents were for, and he wasn’t her parent.

She felt his fury rise at the jab and slowed back to a walk, throwing her hair back. It was high time that he realized she wasn’t a little dog to order around. She was a vampire now. Humans were for ordering. Something about Ruthven made her start thinking about that. He died for her like a vampire, fighting to the last minute. Something was after her, and it wasn’t pretty or holy or even frightening. It was terrifying and dangerous; something that would target a vampire. It was time for Seras Victoria to stop cowering around like a human. She’d never make her master proud that way.

She didn’t bother to listen to see if he’d reply to that. She had reached the main road and looked both ways carefully like Walter had instructed her. She had to make sure no humans were around before she started running. The coast was clear and she gathered her energy into one burst before taking off. The sound behind her was like a sonic bang before she slowed enough to adapt a loping gait down the asphalt. It was much faster than humans could ever see, and she jumped over and around speeding cars as though they were ladybugs. She felt like laughing as she ran; the moon was almost new, it’s light only a sliver but she could still see clearly as she sprinted along. It was always during these times that she felt free, unrestricted. She could forget about her duties and worries, instead focusing on the wind in her hair and the pull and push of muscles that would never burn with exhaustion again.

Exhilarating, isn’t it? The sneer caught up in her mind but she disregarded it, knowing that it was just petty jealousy. Unlike her he had to stay locked up in the manor like a naughty child, unable to leave except under strict orders. Even then, he wasn’t given the liberty of running around freely. She had been debating whether to ask Sir Integra if he could accompany her sometimes, under the clause that she kept an eye on him and not let any casualties arise. She didn’t’ know if he’d want to go run errands with her, even if it was approved. He’d probably enjoy it more if he knew he was doing it without permission, she thought wryly. The answering laugh in her mind confirmed her theory.

She reached London’s borders and slowed down to a human’s pace, walking up to the store at its edge as she always did. She waved hello to the pimple-faced boy behind the counter before running back to the back to grab her shampoo. She hesitated before getting some matching conditioner and smiled as she carried both bottles to the checkout. She hadn’t used conditioner in years, but it would be nice to have soft hair for once. She checked out and was walking out with her bag when she noticed a strangely dressed young man in the parking lot.

He had shoulder-length, wavy blonde hair that shimmered under the streetlight as he looked down the road towards the bright lights of downtown. His face was youthful and very handsome, as well as clean-shaven. He was wearing what looked like a Halloween costume; bright, exotic, and poufy with a scabbard hanging loosely from the cinched waistband. He looked like a rainbow Musketeer. In his hand he held a folded map and was looking at it in confusion. At the sight of her, he waved her over desperately. Seras paused before deciding that it was alright. It was a well-lit area and the boy inside was only steps away if she needed help. Besides, it was only a human. What harm could he do? He looked lost.
“Yes?” she said in a friendly manner as she made her way over. The boy’s eyes were hidden by his long bangs, which had fallen into his face as he stared down at the map. He smiled in return and pointed at the map before chattering something quickly to himself in French.

“Hello there. I seem to be lost; is this the road that takes you to Oxford Street downtown? I thought I was heading the right way, but it looks like I left the city by mistake,” he explained in a lilting accent. “It’s my first time in England, you see,” he added with a chuckle. Seras laughed indulgently and looked over at the map.

“Well, here’s your problem- this map is way too old. You’re going to have to get a newer one.” She turned to point to the store. “You can get one in there, and it’ll have routes marked on the map in colors to show you the way to go.” She turned back to see him brushing his hair out of his eyes. He opened them to reveal a dark burgundy gaze. She froze in confusion as he grinned widely, his fangs showing.

“Thank you, Cher. That clears up so much. However, I think it would be best if you accompanied me. You see, I wouldn’t want to let the girls down. They were looking forward to this trip.”

“Girls?” Seras still didn’t understand until her mind caught the scent in the air. It was the same scent as the night before- putrid and sickly sweet with something, as if whoever it was had been rolling in sugar and silage before arriving. She turned to the source of the scent before her mind blanked in pure horror. The man looked around her and smiled.

“Oh, come here girls. Meet your newest sister.” They weren’t human. They weren’t mortal. Seras wasn’t even sure if they could be classified as demonic. Ghouls would have won beauty pageants compared to these… these abominations of nature.

It was hard to tell that these were once human girls. They had no noses, the holes where they would have been already closed over with skin. The skin itself was almost like a mask- it was cracked in places and chipping off in others, revealing thick black brain matter on their heads and dry-rotted organs and muscles on their bodies. What hair they had left was dead and dirty, stringy and hanging lank around their face. There were no eyes to speak of, only black tissue filled voids that were chapped and oozing around the edges. Their mouths were twisted in cruel parodies of smiles, the teeth yellowed and broken, some even rotted completely. They all wore the same thin cloth covering, almost like a summer shift without any form to it whatsoever. It hid little from view, although their sunken chests and thin appendages weren’t appealing. They were all making noise, not moaning per say; but thick, barely audible chirping noises that sounded like a gurgling bird. It filled her ears and she backed up thoughtlessly into the Frenchman’s arms.

“See? They like you already. Those are their happy noises. You’ll learn them all soon enough; now, let’s get back to Hungary with you and present you to Madame.” Seras balked, kicking at the Girls and flailing her arms as he grabbed her in a chokehold. She caught sight of his exposed wrist and bit hard, hearing his snarl of pain in satisfaction as the bones crunched beneath her teeth. She sprang away from him, looking once at his army of creatures as they made anxious trills, their mouths slack as they waited for an order. She spit out his blood- it tasted too sweet for her, and it was mixed with something dry and evil-tasting that was completely undesirable to her palate.

“Fucking bitch,” he swore as he clutched his crushed wrist, looking at it as he inhaled sharply. She smirked and flipped her hair, feeling her eyes widen as she prepared to fight.

“That’s what you get for trying to take advantage of a vampire that’s stronger than you are. I’m a Draculina; did you really think that you’d have a chance against me, little boy?” she sneered, feeling her master’s blood sing in her veins and pride course through her. He was nothing compared to her. He let out a breathy chuckle and nodded in acknowledgment at the words, giving
her a slight grin before shrugging. His eyes narrowed and he snapped with his good hand.

“Obtenir son, râle!” he crowed and the Girls sprang on her immediately, their teeth snapping as they covered her in their stench. She gasped as they managed to pin her down- they were stronger than they looked, for being slaves. She struggled and twisted in their grasp, looking up at the Frenchman walked over and smiled down at her. He tilted his head, studying her body with interest. “Madame said to get you there alive, but that doesn’t have to mean intact.” He stepped lightly on her ankle, testing the weight before snapping it with one solid stomp. She arched, screaming once before groaning as the pain worked its way through her system. The Frenchman leered at her, closing his eyes. “Ah, what a scream. I can tell already that Madame will enjoy you especially.” He made a motion and the Girls picked her up, carrying her down the darkened street. “Now, we really should be going. It looks as though dawn’s already on the way.”

Seras renewed her efforts to escape with more panic. She didn’t half-understand why she was so terrified. It wasn’t the thought of being kidnapped and carried to a foreign place- no, that was horrifying as it was, but there was something thrumming in her blood that told her this whole thing was just bad. They were carrying her across the ocean, far away from her master and England. She felt her heart clench in dread: what if she couldn’t get back? What if the link between her and Alucard couldn’t last that far? It would stretch and snap and she’d be all alone again, just like she was before. She couldn’t bear such a thought! She’d die from it, she was sure of it! She screamed like a banshee, writhing around and cracking her own bones in an effort to get away, all the time calling for her master. He had to come save her, or they both were doomed!

To her relief, the shadows around them elongated and snared the Girls, forcing them upwards with a thickening crunch before dragging their bodies into the ground and under it. Seras fell to the ground, cushioned by swirling shadows. She lay back into them, comforted beyond words. He wasn’t going to let them steal her. She was just fine. She heard the Frenchman curse and gasp and opened her eyes to see his face drained of all color as he stared behind her.

“Ma-Madame,” he sputtered in fear, looking as though he were going to piss himself. “The Dark Prince,” he murmured before his eyes hardened and he braced himself. Suddenly, his simply… disappeared. Seras caught the glimpse of a jewel-encrusted, slender hand as it grabbed his scabbard and seemed to pull him into himself, vanishing with a pop and leaving only silence. But that was the least of her worries at the moment.

She began to sob, the reality of the situation finally catching up with her. Stupid girl, they almost ruined her existence forever, although for the life of her she couldn’t imagine why she knew it was so. It was one of those more instinctual things that she had learned to just take for granted, like breathing or eating. She felt a presence over her and looked up through her tears to see her master taking off his glasses, his eyes dark with anger. She tried to calm down enough to sound coherent.

“I promise, I won’t go out by myself again,” she blubbered, trying to sit up and look at her broken ankle. She knew he would heal her, but it was going to hurt like hell doing it. She whimpered as she felt his power course within her through the shadows around her body and heal the cracks in her bones, jerking her ankle back into proper position before healing that as well. “I promise,” she repeated quietly, wiping the tears off her cheeks.

He said nothing but wrapped his arms around her, pulling her close with their torsos touching. She murmured in security, burying her face into his vest as she let his reassurance wash over her.

“They weren’t human,” she muttered into his chest.

“No, not anymore,” he agreed.

“They tried to take me away from you.” She began to shiver; was she really that close? It was
maddening, the terror she’d felt erupting into torture in her mind. She’d never have survived on her own, not yet. She felt his arms tighten around her.

“I know.” His arms left her and he took off his coat, wrapping her up in it before picking her up like a child, the same way he’d done the night he changed her. “Don’t worry yourself; it won’t happen again.” She sniffed and nodded, resting her head on his shoulder as he began to walk back in the direction of Hellsing. She saw the shadows coming too, her forgotten grocery bag bobbing in them like a bottle in water.

“I’m sorry,” she said, the tears slowly abiding. She looked up at him as he walked; he was watching the road ahead, but his mind was still entangled with hers. For once, she didn’t mind his intrusion on her psyche. It was a sort of solace to her; they were still attached.

“I forgive you,” he finally replied.

“Will you sleep with me today?” she asked. She didn’t want him to leave her for a while. Her heart was still constricted with fear and she worried. What if he managed to find a way into the manor, into her room and have his Girls carry away her coffin in the daylight? It’d never happen, of course. Walter and the men were there, but she still wanted something more.

“Yes,” he breathed out slowly. “Now rest, little Seras.” She smiled in contentment and lay her head back on his shoulder. It was going to be alright, she was going to be fine. Her master would never let anyone bother her.

Thank you, her mind whispered to his. It said something else too, something that she didn’t catch as she dropped off into an exhausted stupor, but he heard it loud and clear. Although he’d known it-known it for some time, in fact-it still shocked him to the point of stopping dead in the road and almost being hit by a Volkswagen. I love you.

“Ahab.” The man pointed his bony finger, almost knocking Anderson’s glasses askew. “You are Ahab. Going off with that Jezebel, making your whore’s children,”

“Don’t. Call. Her that,” Anderson managed to growl, his knuckles white on his knees and he clenched his legs. It was either that, or wrap them around the archbishop’s scrawny neck. “I raised you better, boy. Don’t mess with me,” he added. Maxwell started to develop a tic in his eye and he visibly shook.

“You dare. You dare call me a child? I am no longer your ward, Paladin! I am your boss, your superior, and you will listen to me!” he shrieked. Anderson stood, happy for once of his enormous stature as it let him tower over the slender man. He pointed one broad finger at the holy man’s chest, using every intimidating bone he had.

“You listen to me, boy. If you’d stop to think, you’d see how prudent of a match this was. We get a merger with the Protestant Church’s best defense against monstrous creatures, and we get the ultimate fighter! Can you imagine how amazing it would be? We would finally be a complete defense!” Maxwell gaped like a fish for a moment before shaking his head.

“I don’t like it; it’s against everything you ever taught me,” he said in a calmer tone. “But I can’t deny the request on that basis alone. Technically, there’s no reason you can’t marry her. But think about it, Father.” He looked up at the man, and Anderson softened as he saw the little boy he’d raised come out of the grown man’s hardened shell. “Is this what you think is best, or is this what you want? We have to think of the greater good here, for both of us. For Iscariot, for His Holiness.” Anderson put a hand on the man’s shoulder, giving it a comforting squeeze.
“It’s both. I do want this, now. The more I think about it, the better off it sounds. And this is what is best, for everyone. Love thy neighbor, Maxwell. Or at least try to tolerate them, huh? It could be worse. She could be a full-blooded heathen.” He smiled, but it dropped away when he saw the conflicted look in the man’s indigo gaze.

“I can’t. I just… God forgive me, but I can’t love her. Love them.” Maxwell turned away to the wall, placing a fist on it and banging softly. The two men remained silent for a long time, the sounds of a piano echoing from beyond the closed door. Maxwell shook his head and let out a heavy breath. “I can’t. I’m sorry.” He turned to look at his mentor. “But if you can, I believe you. You are a better man than I, in some ways. That I can admit.” Anderson nodded and Maxwell went to open the door, showing the paladin out before him.

They were in a simple cathedral, one that Renaldo had chosen for the marriage license to be signed in and the simple ceremony to be held the day after tomorrow. Maxwell had wanted to meet privately with Anderson, having a thirty minute heated argument with him. Integra was probably wondering what was taking so long, he decided. However, when they entered the main foyer they found Renaldo being the one at the piano, with Integra sitting beside him and singing softly. She wasn’t the best singer, but her voice was sweet and softer than he’d ever heard it before. He looked down to see Maxwell staring at the piano before gritting his teeth and assuming a look of polite neutralism. When she finished, they both applauded. Integra jumped and looked over at them, her cheeks flushing slightly before her own mask slid into place and she became the emotionless woman once more.

“I trust everything’s in place then?” she asked as she followed Renaldo past them. Maxwell said nothing and Anderson only nodded as she slid past and went with the priest into the room they’d just vacated. Father Renaldo would explain all of her duties as a wife and answer any questions that she had, before doing the same for him. Anderson wondered if she’d fight the elderly man, but only time would tell as he went to sit down at the piano to pass the time.
Original Note: Well, then. Those Girls are something else. Do you remember Scary Stories to Read in the Dark or something like that? Those creepy-ass pictures of that one girl on the cover? Yeah. I used that as a reference, because frankly it scared me as a kid. That’s why I need therapy.
Integra sat quietly at the table, feeling as though she were about to be in for a big talking-to. Across from her, the elderly priest sat with Bible in hand. She watched his mustache move with every breath and relaxed slightly as he smiled at her. He seemed to be a kindly sort of person. As if sensing her trepidation, he laid the Bible on the table off to one side and clasped his hands.

“Miss Hellsing, I am not just a priest that happens to work for Vatican Section XIII,” he began with a deep breath. “I am solely in charge of the agents’ mental and spiritual well-being, and I have the Psychology degree to prove it.” He chuckled at the woman’s astonished expression. “Why so surprised? Don’t I look like some old Freudian-follower?”

“I’m just trying to decide why all the Church would need to employ a psychotherapist.” Father Renaldo smiled sadly and scratched the side of his cheek as he thought. After a moment, he licked his lips.

“I’m trying to put this delicately, but…. These agents see things in their chosen professions that would send anyone insane. It’s my job to keep them mentally balanced. Also, some carry baggage from their pre-Christian life that is hard for them to bear. I help them with that. I even help with marriages, as you already know.” He sighed. “Sometimes, agents find it hard to adjust the line between work and home, and their marriage suffers for it. I can help them find common ground with their spouses.”

“I see.” Father Renaldo laughed again and pulled the Bible to the center of the table again.

“My job’s a bit easier with you, since you understand how stressful monster-hunting can be at times. But nevertheless, I am here for you if you ever need to talk. I really want to be there to help you- I’m sure you have your own burdens that you carry.”

“I’m fine,” Integra snapped. She immediately felt bad for sounding so harsh, especially after the old man just offered his help. “I- well, what I meant to say was that I have my own ways of relieving stress.” The priest nodded and flipped the worn book open, holding it up in his hands.

“Well, the offer stands all the same. Now, let me get through the important, formal things so that you and I can have time to chat about your… misgivings. Listen carefully, Miss Hellsing. I’m here to prepare you for your new role as a wife and, hopefully a mother.” He cleared his throat and Integra nodded, leaning forward slightly. “The Bible tells us about the Lord’s expectations of a wife. To God, a wife is a beautiful treasure that man shouldn’t take lightly. “A wife of noble character who can find? She is worth far more than rubies”, says Proverbs chapter 31.” Integra blushed deeply and fingered the ring on her thumb as the priest arched a brow. “Is something wrong?”

“No! Um, no. Carry on.” The mustache ruffled with a sharp exhale and he picked up the book again, continuing his lecture. “Yes, the wife’s expectations are many. She’s the head of the household, subservient only to her husband. She commands the servants, the children, and the workers. Her duties are many, and she must bear them accordingly. But she is not alone, because she has her husband to hold her up.” He sniffed and turned to another page.

“Woman and man were meant to come together in the eyes of the Lord, to prevent sexual
immorality.” Integra turned a mortified shade of pink and the priest hid his smile behind his book. It was always fun to read this part, and see even the hardest of Iscariots blush like schoolchildren in Health class. “For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. Likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does.” So says Corinthians chapter 7.” He closed the book with a soft thud.

“All in all, you are expected to respect, honor, and submit to your husband. Naturally, love will come into it if you let it. You must make an effort to spend time alone with your spouse, and talk to him. Let him know about problems so that you can work them out. You are a team now, one unit in the eyes of God. You cannot win alone anymore.” Father Renaldo pushed the Bible away and rested his elbows on the table. “Now, Anderson tells me that you have issues with being the subservient party. Why is it so hard to be compliant? He’s your spouse; you should be happy to let him be assertive.”

“It’s quite frankly none of your business. I’m the boss, I always have been.” Integra crossed her arms, feeling like a scolded child. He had no right to command her to be some meek little housewife. “I don’t cower, and I certainly don’t let other people take control of what’s mine.”

“But it’s no longer yours anymore.” He held out his hands imploringly. “I want you to stop thinking singularly. It’s no longer “I”, “me”, and “mine”. It’s now “we”, “us”, “our”. Think of it as a business merger of sorts, only more intimate.”

“Not really,” Integra muttered. Father Renaldo smiled knowingly.

“Ah. I see you’ve already come across Anderson’s aversion to intimacy. That is his weak point, just as a fear of not being in charge is yours.”

“I’m not afraid of losing control. I just don’t want bad things to happen!” Integra countered. The father’s eyes widened and she bit her lip. Where had that come from?

“So you believe that if you hand over the reins, something bad will happen. Why do you think this?” The priest waited patiently as she squirmed in the seat, trying to think of a way to save the situation. But it was already far beyond her control; a marionette being pulled around by a mustached man with a psychology degree.

“The last time,” she started and grumbled angrily before continuing. “The last time I- was not the superior, I almost died. I really don’t want to set myself up like that again.” Father Renaldo nodded.

“I understand. Can you tell me what happened during that incident? Take as much time as you need.” Integra groaned under her breath, trying to keep the numbing hurt that always surfaced from those memories from floating up to the forefront of her mind.

“When my father died, he left me in charge of the estate. My uncle came after me with a gun 3 days later, the day of Father’s funeral, and shot me. If it wasn’t for Alucard being there to save me, I would have died that day. I was too afraid of standing up for myself at the time anyway- I was always taught to be polite and respectful of my elders, especially Uncle Richard. Look at what being docile got me; a bullet scar and a healthy heaping of nightmares.” She shrugged off her jacket and showed him the pale scar on her upper right arm. Father Renaldo nodded and when she was resettled, he reached over to pat her hand comfortingly.

“I know that the entire incident must have frightened you greatly. Tell me, how old were you when this happened?” Integra frowned at the icy, anemic palm resting on hers but didn’t move away.
“I was thirteen,” she replied curtly.

“A young, pliable age. Of course you would have combined your knowledge of being compliant with the fear of death. I imagine that when you’re not in control you feel helpless and anxious, right? Perhaps you even become highly nervous and upset when someone begins to give orders, instead of you being in charge.” Integra didn’t answer, instead looking around the room and avoiding the gray eyes that were focused on her. The man sighed and his hand retreated back across the table after a long, silent moment. “I want you to start trying for me, please.”

“Trying what?” Integra looked suspiciously at him, her heart jumping slightly in her chest.

“I want you to start putting yourself in situations that make you feel that helplessness, that uncomfortable sense of anxiety. Don’t let it get too overwhelming, but when Anderson gives you an order, stop for a moment before you fight him. Think about it. If he says to you, “Let’s go,” what will happen if you just follow him? Is the world going to end?”

“Of course not, but–” Father Renaldo held up a hand.

“No, no “butts”. Let him order you around for a bit. If he says “I want you to go over there”, then do it without a word. But promise me that when it becomes too much for you, talk to him. Tell him that you feel overwhelmed.” He smiled. “Remember, you don’t have to be this way for everyone. You’re still the boss; the woman is the neck of the household, isn’t that what the saying is? You only have to answer to one person. Can’t you make that sacrifice, for the sake of happiness?”

“I don’t– I’m not sure if…” Integra clenched her hands on the table. “I don’t know.”

“Just try it for me. And remember, he’s got to be part of this too. He has to remember that he isn’t allowed to take advantage of all this. You are submitting to him freely, but there is a line. That’s where communication plays a key part. Understand?”

“I understand,” Integra answered, for lack of anything else to say. That tiny voice in her head was chirping again; *You can do it. It’s only one man. Think of it as a challenge!*

“Good! Now we can stop talking about your faults– it’s time for me to ask something more of you, if you don’t mind.”

“I suppose I have no choice but to say yes?” Integra asked. The priest smiled and shrugged.

“Well, I suppose you’re right. Let’s talk about Anderson.” Integra sat silently, not sure what he meant. What, was she supposed to tell him what she thought of him? After a pensive moment, Father Renaldo spoke.

“Do you know that when I first met Father Anderson, I was a young man? I was barely out of college and in the world. I came to the Vatican to work, and he was already working at the orphanage at the time. The year was 1959. And while I’ve grown old and feeble, Anderson hasn’t changed all that much.” He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “Really, how time flies. 40 whole years.”

“Interesting,” Integra agreed. “It makes me wonder how old Alexan-Father Anderson really is.” Father Renaldo reached into the briefcase he’d brought with him and pulled out a plain manila folder. He handed it to her.

“I thought you may ask something along those lines. So I brought his official file for you to see. He’s going to see the one we have on you that Hellsing graciously faxed to us. It’s perfectly normal to be curious,” he added as she opened the file hesitantly. She looked at the young soldier’s picture attached to the stack of paperwork. His eyes stared up at her seriously from the likeness, his mouth
set into a neutral frown. She flipped the picture aside, only to have her jaw drop at the date written painstakingly onto a copied Bible page. **Births: Alexander Anderson: born April 30, 1919.** Quickly calculating the math, she almost choked. **He’s over 85 years old!** She turned the page to see a draft record and death certificate paperclipped together. According to official records, Alexander Anderson died on September 15, 1949. “1949…” she muttered.

“Yes, that’s the day the Vatican recruited him for a potential Regenerator. He was a 30-year-old soldier who had seen more than enough horror to last five lifetimes. He was one of the ones in charge of clearing the abandoned concentration camps of corpses and documenting the gas chambers and crematoriums; that sort of thing, you see.”

“I see.” She turned back to stare at the picture at the front once more. His eyes were cold as steel, though she could still see the well-hidden weariness in his gaze.

“Afterwards, I’m told he asked to be in charge of the orphanage in between missions. The surviving children in the concentration camps loved him, so the Vatican agreed. But he’s had problems with adapting to being close to adults, especially women. I’ve talked to him about it before, and I’ve come to the conclusion that it’s his own personal fear of relapse.”

“Relapse?”

“Yes. Before he turned to God, Paladin Anderson wasn’t the most… idyllic person. He was wild and jumped from place to place, even after being drafted. And there were many women, I am told. He has taken it to mind that if he familiarizes himself with drink, cigarettes or even a woman, he’s sinning and will eventually relapse into the den of iniquity that he had inhabited before. I’m working on him with this, slowly but surely.”

“I think I understand,” Integra acknowledged as the man’s own words came to her mind like a summons. *It was Satan’s life, and I foolishly reveled in my materialistic greed.*

“I ask you this: be patient with him. It may be hard, but I believe he’ll come around in the end.” Father Renaldo stood, walking by her and placing one hand on her shoulder. He squeezed slightly before motioning for her to stand. “That’s all for now, which I’m guessing relives you a bit, hmm? Let’s return.”

*Thousands of gnashing teeth and tearing claws pulled at her skin, dragging her in different directions. At her feet, the blonde boy laughed maliciously as he held up the book on Elizabeth Báthory. The image on the book laughed too, her face a distorted mask. She fought against them, crying as they bent down to look at her and their oozing brain tissue hit her face with a thick splat.*

Seras jerked up in the bed, screaming and rubbing at the imagined mess on her face as she began to sob. She trembled in fear and began to rub her arms, trying to dispel the nightmare. It was horrible, and she only wanted to sleep. Even as she tried to stop shaking, strong hands pulled her back down to where she lay against her master’s chest. He sighed deeply and held her, unintentionally squeezing her arm hard enough to bruise.

“What am I going to do with you? I’ve already told you, there’s no one here to harm you, now go to sleep.” Seras pulled herself away from him, hiding her face in the corner of the coffin and letting the tears fall.

“They are here. You should know that better than anyone. They may not be real, but they’re still here. In here,” she admitted as she rubbed her head. There was no answer, but insisting hands pulled her back across the mattress again and she sighed as her arms gained another set of bruises.
She was dead tired, and for once she wished that he would leave her to face her nightmares alone. She was already regretting her plea for him to sleep with her.

Cool fingers wiped her wet cheeks and firmly turned her head around. She looked up at him as he pushed himself up and over her, his eyes meeting hers. She watched his pupils contract and her mind began to feel fuzzy.

“Sleep, Seras.” Yes, she should sleep. It was so easy to do, and she loved obeying her master, didn’t she? “Dream of nothing.” Nothing, nothing at all. That wasn’t so hard. Besides, the coffin was warm and cozy and she had him there to protect her from bad girls and boys that tried to- what did they try to do? She couldn’t remember. Her mind was too hazy; it felt like she’d stuck her head in a pile of wool. Her ears were ringing, the sound like church bells and ocean waves. She should obey him. She should…. “Sleep, my dear. Be refreshed.” Yes…. Sleep…dear….

The blonde’s unfocused eyes drooped shut and her head lolled to the side as her breathing stopped entirely. The ancient vampire looked at her, his mind feeling her delta waves rolling choppy, but steadily as they were being forced to do. She’d dream of nothing, and wake up revitalized. He, on the other hand, would have to make do with what little sleep he could pull off. He couldn’t hypnotize himself; he’d tried, but it hadn’t worked and he’d only felt a little foolish.

He sighed and rested his chin on her shoulder, closing his eyes. Time enough for thinking when the sun set.

Ambrose sat with his knees pulled to his chin as he sunk into the soft bed.

“I’ve never been so humiliated in all my existence. How dare she- what, she’s only one little girl! How did she even manage to mark me, and then distract me enough to allow her sire to kill twelve of our best Girls!?” His creator’s cool hand brushed the hair from his face and she showered him with relieved kisses as she stroked his newly healed wrist.

“Shh, don’t be so hard on yourself. I warned you that Vlad wasn’t one to fool with. It’s only natural that his fledgling is as strong as you. He’s a powerful man, and you were stealing away what was his. I’m only thankful that I was able to pull enough of my power together to grab you before he did away with you, too.” She rubbed her forehead against his cheek, sniffing with real tears this time. “I was so afraid when you called me. I felt it; the madness was threatening to overpower me once more.”

“I know, Madame. I’m sorry for frightening you,” the boy conceded. “But still, I now have a new grudge against this little Englishwoman. I want to hear her plead for mercy beneath my boots.” His hands tightened into fists and he buried his face into his knees. “It’s just not fair.” The Countess clucked sympathetically and rubbed his shoulders.

“One day, I’m sure we can make it happen. Right now, we still need to focus on our bigger plan. And I-what is it!?” she growled as a Girl entered the room. “Can’t you see that I’m having a moment with my darling childe?! “ Ambrose looked up, not having smelt the rotten odor that usually hung around the Girls. He laughed when he saw the intruder.

“So, you made a new one? I guess we do need to get the ranks back up,” he joked. “I thought the dungeons might start to get a bit under-packed.” He eyed the sunken eyeballs and five missing fingers as the Girl shuffled over with something in her left hand. “Why did you take off her fingers? She won’t be able to hold much when the decaying sets in.” The Countess tittered.

“Well, she kept trying to undo her bonds and I just couldn’t have that at all. I did warn her, but she
just kept crying so I cut out her tongue, too.” She motioned to the newly-formed creature. “Isa darling, please say hello to my Ambrose. He’s going to be watching after you.” The Girl looked at him and tried to speak, but a gurgling, throaty sound came out instead. Ambrose wrinkled his nose as a trail of congealed blood began to snake down the Girl’s chin.

“I hate it when they’re like this, before the putrefying part happens. It’s still so messy. At least when she looks like the others the sludge just rolls off quickly instead of smearing.” Nevertheless, the boy pulled a worn kerchief from his shirt and lovingly wiped the blood off the Girl’s face. “There we go, my pretty little thing. We need to keep that white skin of yours as clean as possible, don’t we?” The Girl made a sound and he nodded as if she’d made sense.

“Oh, Ambrose, it’s so nice to see how well you treat those Girls. I just don’t have that sort of patience.” The Countess pulled a fan from her breasts and snapped it open, fanning herself languidly. “What does she have in her hand?” Ambrose frowned, the edges of his mouth pulling down and making him look like a sad Greek god.

“Come here, sweet-Isa, was it? What have you got for us?” he treated the Girl like a small child, motioning over and she handed him the silver gun with a slow groan. He hummed and turned the pistol over in his hand, looking at it with a discerning eye. “Where did this come from, now?” The Girl appeared to answer, but of course it was entirely incomprehensible. However, Ambrose sniffed the metal and looked up in surprise. “Why, the Sirens brought it to the castle! I wonder where it’s from.”

“Go interrogate them; I’m curious too. And put Isa away while you’re at it. With the others in cage 8- Amanda or Ariel or Abigail- whatever that last one’s name was.” She lay back on her velvet pillows, a dainty hand on her forehead. “I do believe my weakness is coming upon me again,” she whimpered faintly. “Leave me for now, Ambrose. I must rest, or my sickness will return.”

Ambrose stood with a bow to obey his new orders. “Rest now, and feel better soon.” He placed a hand on the small of the Girl’s back, leading her out the door. He led the mumbling, shuffling creature down the halls to the dungeon, talking to her comfortingly as he went.

“It’s alright, Isa. I take good care of you Girls. I hate it that she keeps you locked up, but she’s Madame, after all and I have to obey everything that she says. But I’ll never forget your name; I don’t forget anyone’s names. You’re going into Cage 8- with Alana, Beatrice, and Olive. It’s actually pretty empty, because the other twelve occupants are dead now. I suppose we can forget about them. It’s my fault they’re dead- no. It’s that Victoria’s fault. She killed the Girls. Not I.” He pulled a key from his pocket and unlocked a heavy iron door, leading the Girl inside. The over packed cages were milling with Girls, at least twenty to a cage, which lined the walls. They looked up in fright before relaxing at the sight of Ambrose.

He knew that many of the other people, his creator included, thought that they were mindless beings. But he knew them - he looked after them, cared for them, talked to them, cleaned the cages and wiped the sludge off their faces as it oozed from their broken eyes. He would come in when he couldn’t sleep and read to them to keep them calm, and he fed them and made sure that they behaved. He spoke to them like people and he usually could understand them, or at least comprehend the nature of their chirps and trills. In return, it was always nice to see the little signs of affection they carried for him; some strange, demonic form of Stockholm syndrome, he was sure but it didn’t matter- they were his Girls, the only beings beside the Countess that ever showed him any sort of love in his long, tiring existence.

He walked the Girl down to the last cage on the block, laughing and patting the hands away as they pulled out of the bars and tugged his clothing lightly, seeking attention. He opened the cage
and stepped inside. He was the only one who was safe when it came to being in the same area as the Girls. Sure, they obeyed the Countess and her husband, but they could turn at any time.

“Alana, Beatrice, Olive! I have some good news- here’s a new sister for you!” he called cheerily as he released his grip on the creature. The other Girls swarmed around her, making curious noises and pulling on her hair and shift before wrapping their arms around her in a broken parody of a hug. The Girl moaned and went over to the food trough, where a thick, cold soup of rat parts had been laid out earlier. She stuck her head in and began to slurp the meal. Ambrose moved around the Girls, checking their water and refuse buckets before nodding to himself and letting Beatrice stroke his hair. He gave her a chaste kiss on the forehead, ignoring the ever-present stench of decomposition as he patted her shoulder. “There’s a good girl. Now, you be nice to Isa, and make her feel welcome, okay?” He waved as he locked them back into the cage and began to make his rounds while he was down there, talking to all the Girls as he checked their food and water. He pulled two of the refuse buckets and emptied them down the drainage hole before moving on through another door.

This one was much louder- the live tank, he liked to think of it as. The human girls were all crying and screaming, begging to be released. He walked past them, peering into the cages and avoiding their hands. He hated the humans; they weren’t restrained and lovable like the Girls were. They tried to scratch him and bite him and beg for their escape, but he took heart to the fact that it was only a matter of time before this filthy human scum would be a true part of his Madame’s collection, and he could truly enjoy them. He filled up the food troughs and checked the water bins before noting the three dead girls in cage 4. He’d have to get someone to take care of that. Sighing, he left the room and the silence rang in his ears as he made his way up to the surface to “interrogate” the Siren that had brought the gun.

Anderson flipped through the folder and paused as a picture of a young Integra smiled up at him, surrounded by a younger looking butler and older men.

“Where’s her mother? She’s not in any of these pictures.” Father Renaldo nodded.

“Yes, her mother was dead not long after Integra was born. She’s spent her whole life growing up in a men’s world.” Anderson looked up at him and humphed as he closed the folder and slid it back across the table. Father Renaldo placed it out of the way and coughed politely. “I believe that’s part of her “problem”, as you put it earlier. She’s always known how to be around men and speak their language but without having a maternal figure in her life, she’s never known how to act the part. Now that she’s faced with the prospect of being a wife- a womanly role – she has no idea how to cope or act. This is a cause of anxiety for her, because when she feels helpless like that she feels as though she’s not in control. This causes her to act out and become defiant in an effort to recreate some sort of balance.”

“So tha’s the excuse you’ve made for her?” Anderson said lightly, tapping one finger on the table. He never enjoyed being forced into one of Father Renaldo’s “sessions”. They only made him more uptight, rather than relaxed. “So what am I supposed to do then?”

“I want you to work on rewording your orders. Instead of, for instance, you saying to her, “I want you to”, ask it as a question. “Would you”, or “How about you” are two good ones to use. As a question, it makes it easier for her to feel more in control. This will benefit you both in the end, of course.”

“Of course,” Anderson parroted back as he leaned down in the chair. Father Renaldo eyed the fingers drumming a rhythm on the table and sighed.
“Now, we have to talk about you.” Anderson groaned and looked away, his eyes already hardening in anticipation of the lecture about to come. “Anderson, you know your place in this- you’re a priest, after all. You’ve got an obligation as a husband to-”

“I know what I have an obligation to do, with all due respect. And I’m thinking about it, trust me- I’m thinking about it. I’m trying.”

“Anderson trying is good, but you need to… initiate these things. She’s your wife- you shouldn’t be afraid to touch her. She seems to already know how you feel about it, and she’s agreed that patience is the best thing but you’re going to have to step up a bit,” the priest stated firmly. The fingers tapped the table faster and he pursed his lips. “Anderson, you’re going to have to get over this fear of having sex.” The hand punched through the table and both men jumped in surprise. Anderson looked in shock at his fist before clearing his throat and reaching down to pick up the shattered wood on the floor. He sat the splintered fragments on the table between them, his face red.

“I’m sorry,” he confessed. Father Renaldo stood, and held up a hand when Anderson began to copy him.

“No, wait here.” He left the room. Anderson stared at the hole in the table until the door opened again. He looked over to see a confused Integra enter and Renaldo motioned for her to sit. “I believe this to be the best way for this to work. You both need to communicate with each other. You’ve got an hour.” He shut the door and they both heard a lock click before the elderly priest walked away.

“What happened here?” Integra asked as she pointed to the table. Anderson turned an even darker red and muttered something about punching it by accident. She arched a brow before settling back in the chair and staring him down until he looked up at her. “Well, are you going to talk or do you want me to?”

“The good Father tells me that you are terrified when you don’t get your way,” he answered bluntly. Integra jerked in shock before her face snarled in anger.

“Well, you are too scared to even touch a woman, much less me!” she shot back. “What, do I dress manly enough for you to be comfortable?” Anderson hissed under his breath at the jab before glaring at her, his eyes green fire.

“I don’t need this,” he finally growled. Integra shook her head, putting a hand on her forehead and gripping the table as if she were stopping herself from leaping at him.

“Why is it so hard for you to talk? You keep beating around the bush and then you just stop every time I think we’re getting somewhere.”

“This is getting somewhere? We’re just fighting like we always do; like we’ve been doing for a year now!” Integra licked her lips and inhaled, clearly trying to remain calm.

“We only fight because you won’t tell me what the problem is!” she growled, standing to brace herself on the table as she eyed him furiously. Anderson stood too, looming over her for a moment before turning and stalking towards the wall. He looked at the cross there before shaking his head.

“What is the problem?” Integra asked again, her voice rising to a shriek.

“This! This is the problem!” he pointed at the cross. “I am a priest! A divine instrument of God!” he shouted, pounding his fist against the wall in time with his shouts. “I don’t have these, these
thoughts; these unholy fantasies. It’s only supposed to be for one thing—a child. I can’t be having these little ideas in my mind of what I want to be doing to—” he cut himself off angrily, turning to face the wall again.

“Yes, you can!” she shouted back. “You’re not some holy, divine being that’s perfect in every way. You’re a human, just like me, just like the father and Enrico Maxwell and everyone else!”

“No,” he countered, his voice subdued. “I’m not a human. Not like you. You were right, what you told me once; I’m a thing,” he said in disgust, looking at his hands. “Not a bayonet, though I’ve strived so hard for it.”

“I didn’t mean it.” He turned to look at her knowingly and she colored slightly. “Well, maybe at that time I meant it, but not anymore.” She walked over to him and hesitated before patting his arm lightly. He turned and seemed to come to some mental agreement before wrapping her in a hug. She stiffened and held onto his arms, her eyes wide and slightly guarded.

“What? I thought you wanted me to be more informal. You look like you’ve never been hugged.” She mumbled something under her breath and he leaned in closer. “What was that?”

“I said that I haven’t been hugged before. It’s… strange.” She braced against him, looking like she was planning on hopping up to the ceiling by using his arms as leverage. Anderson felt his jaw drop slightly before thinking about it. If she’d lived her whole life among businessmen, it was quite possible that no one had ever held her before. He sighed and shook his head. How was it that she could practically start making out with him, and then turn around and not know how to hug someone? He pushed her arms off of him and they hung limply at her sides.

“Just… you know- put your arms around my waist,” he sputtered, trying to figure out the proper way to teach someone to embrace. She snaked her arms under his and after a moment she laid her head on his chest over his heart, still quite stiff. He patted her on the back and cleared his throat uneasily. Finally, he felt her relax against him and she let out a little sigh.

“Nice,” she murmured. “Your heart’s beating fast.”

“It does that,” he said quickly. “It’s why I’m so warm. The blood runs through my body much faster than a regular human.” She hummed in agreement and pushed away far enough to look up at him. He brushed the stray hairs off her shoulder and found his fingers trailing up her neck of their own accord. She shivered and brushed his hand away, shaking her head. “What?”

“Him, he’s… staring at me. We can’t do this here,” she muttered, jerking her head in the direction of the cross. Turning to look behind him, he had to agree. The carved wooden Jesus did look like he was giving them a condescending frown. He suddenly felt uncomfortable and pushed her away, his entire face growing hot. Good Lord in Heaven….

“What name are you taking?” Integra looked up from the document, her jaw hanging open for a moment before she put down the pen, nonplussed.

“I honestly hadn’t thought about it,” she admitted. Maxwell gave a fatigued sigh and rubbed his temples.

“Most women choose the male’s last name, but with such a famous name as yours you could easily just keep your own name. It’s really up to you,” Father Renaldo chimed in helpfully. She looked beside her at Anderson, who gave a noncommittal shrug.

“I dinnae care what you choose. It’s up to you.” She picked the pen back up, tapping it on the table
as she thought before carefully printing the new name and signing beneath it.

“Oh, what the hell. I have enough formal titles; what’s one more name attached to me going to do?” she asked as she combined their last names with a hyphen and a flourish before handing him the pen. Anderson threw his own cramped signature onto the tiny line and handed it to Maxwell, who signed as both the witness and judge. The cleric in charge of the little church signed his place and Renaldo stamped the marriage certificate before placing it carefully into the briefcase.

“Congratulations, you can now say that you’re technically married according to law. Now, if all goes well you’ll be officially married in the eyes of God by the end of the week.” The priest pulled out a blank card and handed it to Anderson. “Here are the funds you requested. The accounting office has told me that they advise you not to ask again for a very long time. It seems they had to pull many strings to get what you have there.” The paladin nodded and tucked the card into his jacket pocket. The two men nodded and stood. “If you’ll excuse us, we are both weary from the trip and would like to rest. Good night, Anderson, Ms. Hellsing…Anderson.”

Renaldo nodded and followed the silver-haired archbishop out of the church. The cleric fluttered around the pulpit, politely waiting for the couple to leave. They quickly bid their goodbyes and left into the dying sunset. The suburban streets outside were quiet, with only a few people hanging about at the bus stop. Anderson and Integra bypassed the stop, choosing instead to walk down the tranquil streets towards the already bustling downtown.

“Well, I’ll have to find an ATM somewhere or a bank so that I can check the amount on the card,” Anderson said conversationally. Integra huffed as she tried to keep up, fighting back the drowsiness already weighing at the edges of her mind.

“Just as long as we get something to eat. I’m starving and I’m starting to really miss my teatime.”

“Attacked!? But how- why – what in blazes were you thinking? The minute you returned, you should have let me know so that I could contact Sir Integra!” Walter’s face was blotched and twisted in rage. Across the room, Alucard simply shrugged.

“I took care of it.” Walter shook his head and rubbed his eyes with one hand, taking deep breaths. “There’s no longer a problem. The police girl is fine.”

“It’s not whether she’s fine or not. I have a duty to tell Sir Integra these things. They may be important. We need to know who’s behind all this.”

“I told you who was behind it, Walter,” Alucard argued. “It was her little blonde Childe that had abducted Seras, I’m sure of it. I wouldn’t forget that look of terror easily,” he added with a smirk. Walter gave him a no-nonsense glare and wiped his monocle on his shirt. “If it makes you feel any better, I’m reporting it to you now.”

“Is Miss Victoria truly alright? I don’t mean her physical wellbeing, either.” Alucard bristled slightly.

“Are you implying that I can’t care for my own fledgling?” he asked, a warning note in his voice. Walter didn’t reply, only giving him a reproachful look and Alucard pulled off his glasses to look the older man firmly in the face. “The police girl is fine,” he repeated. “She is strong, despite her shortcomings.”

“Alright,” the butler conceded, shaking his head as he pulled a blank report out of the desk drawer. “Just promise me that you’re going to look after her.” Alucard grinned and vanished into mist,
leaving Walter alone in his office. He shook his head and began to fill out the report, making a note to talk to the young woman later by herself.

“You’re still on about that?” The ancient vampire collapsed in his chair, automatically reaching for the wine bottle as his outwear vanished. Seras followed closely behind, choosing to sit on the armrest of the chair with her feet crowding his thighs in the seat.

“I really want to do this for Sir Integra. I’m actually pretty good at it. She’ll be beautiful.” Seras sighed happily, despite the shivering fear that still surfaced in her mind occasionally. She had woken up feeling quite rejuvenated, and after trying (and failing) to scold her master for hypnotizing her she’d taken to following him closely around the manor, begging to be taken to the wedding. “Don’t you want to go and see?”

“No, I do not. I abhor weddings. Funerals are more my forte.” Alucard poured the wine and took a deep drink, his eyes burning into the far wall. “I have no desire to praise my own downfall. After all these years, now I have to work for those goddamned Catholics again,” he muttered.

“You do not. Anderson’s not going to become your new master. Sir Integra’s around for that,” Seras countered as she played absently with his hair, the long locks spilling down to his waist in irritation.

“And their eventual progenies?” he hissed bitterly. “Little Vatican angels, I’m sure.” Seras rolled her eyes.

“You’re being melodramatic, Master. I’m not staying here if this is the way you’re going to be all night,” she threatened.

“Fine, leave,” he grumbled under his breath. Seras sniffed haughtily and hopped off the chair, only to be snagged by his shadows and pulled back. “You’re being ridiculous, little girl,” he snapped.

“No, I’m being facetious. There’s a difference.”

“Fine lines,” he shot back as he sipped the wine. Seras crossed her arms and sighed.

“Take me to the wedding.”

“Go by yourself.”

“What, so those bloody monsters can have another shot at me?” she squeaked, paling at the thought. “I’m not going out there alone!”

“Don’t live your life in fear, police girl. You’re a monster too; go and deal with them,” he instructed dismissively. Seras sent him a reproving glare and tucked her knees under her chin, sliding off the chair to sit on the floor.

“I’m not strong enough,” she muttered as she drew patterns with his shadows as they slid around her on the floor. “I’m never strong enough.”

“Who’s the melodramatic one now?” he mocked. When no answer came, he slid his arm down the chair to rest his hand on her head, ruffling the hairs. “True Nosferatu do not wallow in self-pity, Seras. It’s unbecoming.”

“Well, I’m not true Nosferatu then. I’m just a servant vampire,” she pouted. His fingers tangled in her hair, rubbing before trailing lazily down the back of her head. She leaned back thoughtlessly,
letting the digits brush her neck before curling strands of hair around his fingers. “What are you doing?” she asked softly. He didn’t reply right away and she twisted slightly to look up at him.

“Seras, do you care for me?” he asked. Seras blinked in surprise before nodding.

“Of course I do. You’re my master,” she answered simply. He shook his head, his eyes dark.

“No. I mean something else.” She looked at him, the hand on her neck dipping down to her collarbone. She pulled away, standing up.

“Quit that. You’re tickling me,” she complained. He looked at her eyes, level with his even though he sat in the enormous chair.

“What are you afraid of?” he questioned. Seras tilted her head, trying to discern the meaning behind his words. Finally, she sighed and turned away.

“I’m afraid of lots of things. It’s a weakness, I guess.” She began to walk towards the door. “If you need me, I’ll be with Walter.” She left the room, shutting the large door behind her and leaving the man inside alone with his thoughts.

Chapter End Notes

Original Abridged Note:

I’m sorry for all the Bible talk, but it is time to be married and Father Renaldo is in charge of preparing the two… willing parties in their new duties. I promise that I cut it as much as I could to save your eyes from dying as they read 20 pages of Bible verses in what was supposed to only be a fanfiction.
“So you’re deserting.”

“I can’t let her go on her own like this.”

“Do you know why she’s “going like this”?"

“Something about that vampire embarrassing her I think, Sir.”

“So she’s running away?”

“No, well- she said she was leaving, so I thought it best to go with her. She told me about being attacked by some Báthory woman’s bloke and I thought that I shouldn’t let her go alone.” Walter’s pencil lead snapped as he almost slammed his fist on the desk from pressure. He looked up sharply at the mousy-haired man standing before him.

“You said Báthory?” he asked cautiously. Stevenson scratched the light stubble on his chin and nodded.

“I’m positive. She was pretty scared about it, but right now she’s too angry to even care. She’s not even packing much, just her handgun and some blood to-go.” Walter growled and punched the number for Alucard’s line. The vampire never answered his phone, but it didn’t hurt to try anyway. Stevenson edged towards the door before high-tailing it out of the room. Walter let him go, drumming his fingers on the desk impatiently.

“This is the kind of thing he needs to include in his damn reports!”

Seras stomped down the road, growling sporadically at the human following closely behind her with a rifle slung over his back, whistling “Waltzing Matilda” like it was nobody’s business.

“Do you mind?” she hissed finally.

“Not at all. It’s a man’s duty to protect a woman, and it’s my duty to protect my commander.” Seras groaned in frustration, but let him go even though she could have easily lost him. They had been walking for at least three hours and no one had even tried to get them to come back, which worried Harry but only seemed to steel Seras’ resolve to leave. “Where are we going to, exactly?”

“Anywhere away from here. I hate it there, and I hate him. He’s so changeable, and I can’t stand it anymore!” she crossed her arms over her chest and pouted to herself. “Besides, he’s not going to stop me. I told him I don’t need him anymore. I can do this on my own.” Harry decided that running away and sulking was a very childish way to declare your independence, but said nothing and resumed his whistling. After a moment, he heard Seras half-heartedly singing the lyrics. By the time the squatter arrived to reclaim the jumbuck, they’d made it down the street past the city limits and out on their way through the countryside. They passed by the rolling hills, alternately singing duets and talking about where they should go as they watched the sky begin to lighten. After a while, Harry began to yawn.

“Look, we have to find somewhere to stay. The sun’s going to be rising soon, and besides that my
shift is long over and it’s my bedtime,” he whined in a roundabout way. Seras nodded and looked down the road to the forest she’d known was not too far ahead.

“Let’s make it to the center of the forest, and then we’ll curl up for the day. With any luck, we’ll be on a bus to the ocean by tomorrow.” She nodded to herself and began to speed up. Harry followed at a jog, ignoring the burn in his legs as he tried to keep up.

“And after the ocean?” he asked.

“Well, when we get there I’ll think of something. Maybe we should try to go to Scotland. I’ve always heard it was a nice place, even if Anderson came from there.”

“He did? I thought he lived in Italy,” Harry panted.

“Well, the accent- I mean… I dunno. Do you need me to slow down?” she looked back at his red face. He shook his head.

“No, you go on. I’ll catch up.” They’d reached the forest by now, and had entered in quite a ways when Seras stopped dead in her tracks. Harry almost ran into her, and looked around at the empty lane in confusion. “Bugger, Mum. Put your brake lights on.” Seras’ nose twitched and she took in the air like a cat, mouth open slightly as her crimson eyes scanned the multi-colored foliage around them. The autumn leaves hadn’t fallen yet, leaving a dense layer that Harry couldn’t see through, but he heard the slight rustling in the leaves though there was no breeze at all. His hand immediately went to his rifle as he felt Seras bristle beside him in alarm. “What is it?” he whispered almost inaudibly, certain that she could still hear him. He’d been her second-in-command, her partner of sorts for quite some time now and they each knew the other’s body language like their own.

“It’s so sweet its sour… I’m never going to forget that horrid taste,” she whispered, her voice full of suppressed terror. “He’s out there, waiting for me.” As if on cue, a young man walked out of the path only a few yards away. Harry almost laughed at the stranger’s outfit. He looked like a clown reject, with his frilly collar and ruffles. The only weapon he seemed to carry was a sword at his side, although his watered-down, purpley-orange eyes gave away his true nature. After a thought, Harry decided he liked Seras’ clear crimson irises better. At least hers made her look even more beautiful against her pale skin.

The stranger glared at them both, his face twisted in a look of contempt. He rocked from one heel to the other, clearly waiting for Seras to give some sort of reaction. Harry heard Seras sniff once more before she spoke softly to him, her voice dropping almost below a whisper.

“Harry, run. No matter what you hear, run and don’t stop until you get to the mansion. His creatures aren’t here, but I smell them. They may be making their way towards Hellsing this very minute. I need you to run and alert Walter and the soldiers.” Harry nodded, letting go of the rifle and crouching in preparation to burst into a sprint at a moment’s notice.

“No.” He looked up in shock at her resigned face. “I told him that I didn’t need him, and I meant it. I’m fighting this one alone. Now run, Harry. You need to go warn the others.” Her voice betrayed no sign of fear, only acceptance for whatever would happen.

“Mum.” He cleared his throat. “Roger, Captain. Good luck.” He broke off into the fastest run he’d ever managed before, the pain in his limbs forgotten as he sped back towards the mansion. He was more than worried about Seras, but whatever was going on, her vampire would learn of it by his
message to his comrades. If he wanted to help, so be it. But he had to warn the others, then come back to help his commander. A second-in-command would never desert in a time of need.

Seras swallowed, pushing past the lump in her throat. No matter how frightened she felt, she had promised herself not to call her master. She had to prove, once and for all, that she could watch out for herself. And if she couldn’t? Well, she’d tried to be good in her short unlife. Perhaps God would understand and let her slide. Most likely not, but she would see if that’s what it came to. She stared at the boy standing across the lane from her.

“Does your mistress know you’re here?” she asked finally. He shook his head slowly. She began to walk forward, her boots making muffled clumps on the asphalt as she made her way down the painted line. He mimicked her, his leather boots silent on the manmade stone and sword clinking lightly against his belt.

“Non,” he spoke aloud. “I’m supposed to be investigating the Hellsing woman’s gun, and how it came to be in our hands. But I have a grudge to settle first, Cher.” They reached each other and stood face to face, burgundy eyes meeting crimson as they simply stared.

“I see. Is it because you lost to my master?” Seras asked. He nodded, his eyes never leaving hers. “You know, you’re the only other fledgling I’ve ever seen.” He tilted his head.

“And you are the only one I’ve ever seen, either. In another life, we may have become comrades. But not this one.” She nodded.

“Unfortunate. But I’m not dying today. We’ll meet again in Hell. But hopefully, not for a long time.” She gave him a soft smile, her fangs pricking at the corners of her lips. He returned it before he set his jaw.

“Yes, hopefully.” A small breeze picked up, blowing a singly red leaf from a maple above their heads. It floated between them, spiraling until it touched the lane with a scuff so soft that human ears would have never heard it. The two vampire children sprang apart before coming together with a resounding thud that echoed across the countryside, shaking the trees down to their roots and causing a small avalanche of leaves to fall.

The Frenchman cursed and kicked out at her before pulling out his sword, using it to block some of the bullets she was unloading into his body. She ran out before long and stared at the useless, smoking barrel before flipping it in her hand and smashing the hilt against the side of his head, caving it in with a sick crunch. He howled in pain yet slid the sword easily through her left shoulder, separating muscle from bone as she screamed. Her arm fell uselessly at her side and she clutched at it, shouting curses before he tackled her to the ground. She stared up in panic at his head, lopsided and bleeding as he grinned before raising the sword.

She saw the intent in his eyes as he positioned it over her breast, ready to pierce her heart. Her adrenaline kicked in and her eyes flashed a darker crimson before a vicious thrill worked its way through her system. She loved the feeling of the fight; the pain dulling to a throb in her arm as her hand swung up to grab the sword as it fell. It cut through to the bone but she simply laughed, her eyes wild and fangs visible in her grin as she managed to stop the assault and even break the metal blade. It shattered, fragments of light cutting her fist as it swung up to make impact with her opponent’s face.

She felt the nose crumple under her knuckles and his cry of agony was sweet music to her ears. He fell off of her and she jumped up. Her blood was singing, reveling in the pain she had caused and wanting more, more! She began to giggle, the high-pitched tittering evolving into deep chuckles.
before exploding into peals of dark laughter as she stomped on him and heard the bones shatter in his leg.

“Still want to play, little boy?” Her voice sounded malevolent and unfamiliar to her own ears, but she was too far gone to care. She’d gotten a taste of the darker instincts that she possessed, and it was delicious. She watched her enemy pick himself up as best he could with a broken leg, holding his face with one hand as the blood spilled out of his nose; the tainted, sweet-smelling fluid splattered the ground around them and stained the brilliant leaves. He hissed and she smelled the rotten odor of decay as shapeless Girls emerged from the trees, moaning and threatening her with their emaciated limbs. She laughed and let them shuffle forward, ready to maim, to murder and wash in their putrid blood, just to be able to sing in her victory over these demons.

Shots rang out behind her and bullets whizzed by her head, followed by men’s shouts and commands. She was pulled out of her mindlessly violent state and turned to see her favorite sniper—no, favorite human in the world on one knee, surrounded by her fleet of unmarried men as they all pointed various weapons at the creatures. Several of them wore mixed expressions of disgust and horror as they saw the Girls, but the determination burned brightly in their eyes as they prepared to protect their leader. She smiled, joyful tears coming to her eyes as she realized that these men cared about her.

“Stevenson!” she shouted happily, and he nodded and let another bullet fly into the head of a Girl. She let out a choked moan and fell into a heap on the asphalt. The Frenchman’s eyes bugged out of his beaten head and he pushed his blood-soaked hair out of his face with a snarl. He ran towards her blindly, and Seras caught him in a tackle and brought him to the ground. He struggled underneath her, already weakening from the blood loss and stress of the fight.

“Don’t touch my Girls!” he roared at her, trying to get his hands out of her grasp. “Don’t you dare touch my Girls!” Seras looked at the monsters with pity. They were shadows of the humans they once were, and she turned her head to call to her men.

“Kill them all, soldiers. They don’t deserve to live like this. Put them out of their misery.” She looked down at the young man under her. “You’re sick, letting someone do this to innocent women.”

“Sir, yes Sir!” the men yelled as one and began picking off the Girls with well-aimed bullets. The Frenchman saw what they were doing and immediately renewed his struggles, calling out to the Girls by name in an overly distraught state as they fell. His voice reached a painful octave and Seras felt the air shift and a woman’s voice screamed out above the groaning and gunfire.

“What are you doing!?” Seras looked up to see an immensely beautiful, frail woman standing among the corpses. She had one jeweled hand outstretched, a finger pointing at Seras. “What are you doing to my darling Ambrose?” The boy struggled, his eyes trained on the woman. The lady picked up her skirts and moved, her eyes hardening with serious intent. Seras pressed her weight on the boy, her uninjured arm moving to his chest.

“Don’t move! Take another step, and I’m tearing his heart out!” The lady and Ambrose both froze. The men behind her shifted uneasily, and Seras pressed her claws into the multicolored blouse. The lady raised her hands imploringly, smiling sweetly at Seras and showing off tiny fangs.

“Now now, my sweet. Let’s not make such a big fuss over one naughty boy’s mistake. How about you let him up, let him go now? I’m sure that I can pay whatever damages you like.” When Seras didn’t move, her voice took on an unnerved edge. “Be reasonable, darling! I’m not asking for much, just my fledgling back, yes?” She regained her cloying tone. “You can… perhaps, look the other way, as it were.”
Seras’ mind jumped back to long, long before any of this happened. *Just a bit of help… you can look the other way! You bastard!* She pressed her claws in further with a snarl, delighting in the little dots of blood that appeared on his shirt. She thrust her arm into the air, hearing the lady’s cry of fear before the air beside her expanded and she smelled a scent as familiar to her as her own. She looked up to see Alucard standing beside her, his face a mask of fury. But the fury, surprisingly, was directed at the lady and not at her. His hand enveloped hers and he picked her up, setting her on her feet before kicking the boy over to his own creator with the toe of his boot, sending the thin body through the air to land at her clothed toes with a thump. The lady immediately knelt at his side, cooing soothingly, rubbing the hair back from his head and categorizing his wounds.  

Her master’s hands worked over her own injuries almost tenderly, his mind brushing hers and showing his relief and pride at her behavior. She smiled up at him before remembering that she was supposed to hate him, jerking her torn arm away with a muffled grunt. He growled quietly, but didn’t openly chastise her for her blatant disobedience. *He must be happier with me than he’s letting on,* she thought as she watched him look back at the lady in disapproval.  

“Countess Báthory. This is transgression number two, if my count is correct.” Alucard’s voice was both pleased and expectant. The woman’s hands stilled over her ward and she glanced up with a feral expression. “You know what that means,” he added in a singsong voice. Seras looked at him as he pulled a sword from within his jacket and the Countess began to visibly shake.  

“No, please my lord- have mercy, he didn’t know what he was doing.” She knelt over him and trembled, trying to shield the body on the ground from the ancient vampire’s view. “I beg of you, take me instead!” Alucard shook his head almost sadly, summoning shadows from the ground to drag her off the broken body. Ambrose gazed up at him in terror, tears forming and spilling from his eyes silently as he watched his creator become more panicked.  

“One is a warning, two is punishment, and three is death. You know the rules, Elizabeth. I don’t bend them for anyone.” Seras looked back at the human soldiers, who were watching the display with equal parts repulsion and bewilderment.  

“Run,” she commanded and they all took one look at her, then her master before taking off in the other direction. Even in the hardest soldiers, self-preservation prevailed when it came to dealing with creatures of the night. The Countess’ screams rose to a fevered pitch and she turned back in time to see the sword glint over his head before it came down with a crash through Ambrose’s neck, quickly beheading him.  

The woman took one look at the body as it collapsed into ash before fainting dead away, her face drained of all color. Alucard nodded once to the shadows which covered the Countess and in a moment, she was gone. Seras looked at the ash pile as Alucard kicked it into the breeze before turning and coming back to her, placing the sword back wherever it had come from. “Master, what did you do?” she asked quietly, already knowing the answer. He looked at her quietly before his eyes hardened with a deep resolve.  

“Do not question me; these rules were invented long before you were ever dreamed of.”  

“You killed him.” Her voice was weak, even to her own ears. “You killed him, just to punish her.” She shook her head, looking down at her bloodstained hands in awe. Had she almost torn his heart out herself? What was she? The answer echoed in the back of her mind, in the faces of her soldiers. At the time, they’d been whispering about her master but now it seemed they spoke about her.  

Monster. Kills for fun. Evil in those eyes, you can see it. Makes me want to piss myself, the bloody bastard. Cor, I hate to even be around when they eat. It’s blood, mate. Some bloke’s blood. The sight of her hands blurred as hot tears began to pool in her eyes. She wiped them away, keeping her...
still sharpened claws away from her face as she sobbed quietly. She didn’t even know why she was so sad; the boy had tried to kill her, but something deep inside told her that he wasn’t to blame for all of this. If he wasn’t, who was?

“You shouldn’t have done it.” The words seemed to hang in the air, hovering between them before he pushed through and grabbed her shoulders. He shook her like a doll, her head shaking on her neck as he almost gave her whiplash.

“Are you brainless? Even a Ghoul knows it’s enemy! You weak little fool; would you rather have been the one that was turned into ash?” he shouted at her, his voice echoing in the space the trees created.

“You shouldn’t have done it! Let go of me!” it was as if he’d turned a switch on inside her mind and she fought against him. She didn’t want to be like him, where everything was black or white and gray areas didn’t exist. She didn’t want to feel lonely forever, forced to hate everything because the world simply couldn’t and wouldn’t understand. She didn’t want her only joy in life to be crushing someone’s skull beneath her boots; where everyone else in the universe, even God Himself and the Devil were her enemies and there was nowhere that peace could be found.

“Don’t fight against me, Seras!” he held on tighter to her arms, crushing the already pain-ridden limb and bruising the other one instantly. Purple marks blossomed on her pale skin and sent her into a frenzied panic. She pushed against him with her legs, kicking him in the shin and screaming at the top of her lungs. If anyone heard, no one came to her aid.

“Get off! Get off of me! You’re a monster!” The words slipped from her lips before she had time to think. She froze, her eyes slowly traveling up the expanse of his chest before reaching his face. He gave her a long, cold look. “Master, I—”

“So. Now you understand.” He let go of her arms and she landed on her feet in the middle of the scattered pile of leaves. He turned his back on her, walking off to the trees but not vanishing. He seemed to be grappling with something, his hand running repeatedly through his hair and knocking his hat off on the ground. She looked at it as it rolled before landing at the edge of the asphalt. The tears returned to her eyes as she realized that she’d hurt him, and that she’d meant to. She’d known what to say to make him let go of her, and part of her believed it too. And he knew that she did. She’d never hid the fact that she believed him to be in the wrong on a lot of things, but never had she openly voiced it.

She looked down at her feet, noticing the bright scarlet stains on the orange leaves, already soaking into the asphalt and evaporating. Was this really all that was left- the only indication that a young man had ever been here, had ever fought with her and now he was gone forever? It was all so… superficial. The world didn’t care that one monster was gone. There were a thousand more to take its place. Something about that tore her heart to shreds; something that told her that this one boy would only be missed by his former owner, and that only one person would ever mourn him. Who’d mourn her? No one. Not even humans.

She sputtered, feeling the tears flow down her cheeks and no longer cared about making a scene. She burst into anguished cries, crying for herself, her master, this stupid, foolish boy- for every monster who had no one to cry for it. She slumped to the ground, pawing at the wet leaves. Why couldn’t she be like everyone else, with no heart and no conscious, nothing to pity others with?

“I hate you! I hate you for turning me into this… this thing!” she sobbed, letting the tears roll off her nose as she sat on her knees amongst the foliage.

“The choice was yours.” The answer was quiet, and she knew that he was watching her.
“Bullshit!” She opened her eyes to see his nose twitch- the only amount of a flinch that she’d ever get out of him. “You had my life planned out from the minute you saw me in that damned cathedral; admit it!” She stumbled towards him, reaching down to pick up his hat. She meant to throw it, but when she touched the familiar fabric she held it close to her chest with her uninjured hand, her fingers barely stroking the brim. Why couldn’t she be more heartless like him? Then they wouldn’t fight- then they could coexist, even if it was half-assed existence at best.

“Seras.” He reached an arm out to her and she shied away.

“Don’t touch me. If you hate me so much, don’t touch me.” She didn’t have to feel it in his mind; she knew he couldn’t stand her weakness and abhorred her kindness. And she was no better than the rest of the world; judging him and finding him unworthy of her- a monster. A small voice piped up in the back of her mind. *If you find him unworthy, why do you love him so? Surely, this sort of affection isn’t something born of master and servant, usually, it contradicted. She held his hat tighter, the tears slowly stemming.*

“If you hate him, why do you hate him?” He followed behind her, barely guiding her stumbling footsteps with his hand on her shoulder. She allowed it, something telling her that it made him feel better to do it; he didn’t know what to do to help her, but he knew how to order and guide so that’s what he did.

Her heart ached for him- he had no idea how to sympathize or identify with her, and she was the closest thing he had to a true companion, wasn’t she? How lonely it must be for him: at least she had comrades to fall back on when she needed them. She stopped, letting him overtake her before tugging on his sleeve. He eyed her askance before his gaze met hers fully, waiting. She took a deep breath and sighed, wiping the last of the tears away.

“No, I don’t. Master, I’m always going to be here, so don’t worry.” She gave him a shaky smile, trying to sound confident. “I don’t want you to worry about me. I can take care of myself.” He nodded once in concurrence before turning to face the lane again.

“Hurry, Seras. The sun is rising.” She jogged to keep up with his long strides as they made their way back home. Her heart was still heavy, but she would be alright. For the first time, she had realized something- she knew now what her existence was going to be about, what her purpose was. She didn’t need anyone to take care of her, but he did. And when he needed someone to care, she’d be at his side no matter what. *Don’t worry about me, Master. I’ll look after the both of us.*

Integra remembered being a small girl and pretending that her nightgown was a princess’s dress. She’d spin around, letting the soft fabric billow out around her tiny legs and make believe that she was waltzing in her Prince Charming’s arms as the clock struck midnight. Then she’d look in the mirror and swirl her gown around in a pretty curtsey, her long hair falling over her eyes as she smiled at invisible courtesans. She was a good princess.

Now, as she stood in the bathroom and looked at herself in the mirror she remembered those times. Tilting her head, she regarded herself quietly in the mirror bolted down into the back
of the door. She was still pretty enough, even if she was a grown woman and no longer a little girl. Her hair was still flowing and cascaded down her back like Rapunzel, but she was no longer subject to silly fantasies. The only Prince Charming she’d ever have now was Anderson, and he wasn’t exactly the right material. Besides, no princess in any of the tales ever wore glasses and presided over vampires—of that she was sure. But at least in her nightgown she could always hold onto that childlike fantasy.

She allowed herself a tiny twirl in the confines of the bathroom, admiring the way her new nightgown flowed smoothly around her still-scrawny legs. She’d all but forced her new—well, “technically” new husband to detour to the shops in order to buy a new gown, seeing as the old one had been ruined (his fault) and she’d been slowly freezing to death in his shirt every night since. Her gown was immensely modest and barely showed her collarbone, much less her thighs. It went past her knees and ended around her ankles, although it was shapeless enough that it didn’t confine her.

She went closer to the mirror and pushed her glasses up onto her nose, twisting her head from side to side. She didn’t often look at herself; she was busy from sunup to sundown and that was a luxury she could hardly afford besides the quick glances during the day to make sure she didn’t have food in her teeth or her hair was a mess. But she was a woman; when she did get time she enjoyed looking at herself and checking up on how things were looking on her face. And she looked good, if she had to say.

Laughing at her own vanity, she finished combing out her hair and went into the main room of the hotel. Anderson was sitting on one of the beds, which had been turned back in preparation for sleep. He was looking over some papers that had been in an envelope Maxwell had given him at the church, his face scrunched in concentration as he poured over the contents. Integra glanced at the documents as she went by with her dirty clothing; it looked to be some sort of report paper, but in the margins were notes and sums written in Anderson’s writing. Some of them were outlined in red and scrawled out in others, tiny notes written beside the scratches.

She didn’t want to break his concentration to ask, but when she passed by he looked up at her and watched as she folded the dirty clothing and placed them on the empty closet shelf. She turned to see him looking her over, taking in her new sleepwear with a slightly leery look. He said nothing and turned back to his papers. She took it as a sign that he approved.

She hesitated by the closet for a moment. Before, she wouldn’t have thought twice to crawl into bed beside him, for both warmth and just to vex the priest. But now that things were becoming official, a very uncharacteristic vein of shyness began to flow through her; making her wonder if the other bed was looking a bit more inviting tonight.

He was completely focused on his work again; his glasses had slid to the end of his nose and his green eyes were trained on the paper as he worked out some math in the corner, his fingers unconsciously counting out the numbers as he did the calculations. He wasn’t wearing his outer garments or even his boots; only the dark turtleneck and worn-looking pants that contrasted with his light gray socks. The golden crucifix dangled from his neck, swaying slightly as he wrote out his answer at the bottom of the paper before folding it and sticking it back in the envelope with a heavy sigh.

“Something wrong?” she asked, more loudly than she needed to. He looked up at her and shook his head, standing up and stretching before making his way to the drawer for his own nightclothes.

“Nothing at all; ‘Tis just everyday work that I’ve been needing to catch up on. I’m always behind on something, it seems.” He pulled his shirt from her pile and pants from his and frowned when he
caught her expression in the television. “What?” She jerked back to attention, shaking her head.

“You just made me think of the mountain of paperwork that must be waiting for me back at home.” She actually shivered at the thought. “I’ll be chained to my desk for weeks, I just know it.” He smiled at her vehement trepidation and went into the bathroom, closing the door and leaving her alone. She took the chance and nearly jumped into the unmade bed, pulling the covers up to her chest before she could rethink things and lose her courage.

She sat up against the pillows, the blanket only riding down a small bit and closed her eyes. She listened to the muffled sounds of the streets below, the sound of water running in the bathroom, the quiet clicks of electricity running through the old bulbs in the lamps. She allowed herself to relax, and the next thing she knew the bed moved and her eyes shot back open.

“Asleep?” he asked as he settled next to her in the bed. If he didn’t want her there, he didn’t say anything- instead he simply removed his glasses and placed them on the bedside table. She handed him hers as well and he rearranged his legs under the blanket. They brushed her leg and she moved away, realizing for the first time that he’d never before been completely under all of the sheets before. Had it been for her modesty, or was she looking too deeply into it?

She fingered the ridge of the sheet, looking at the pale scars still crisscrossing her hands from the attack on the prison. Most of them had healed up thanks to Anderson’s cleaning job, but the deepest gashes still remained, healing slowly. She flexed her hands and felt his gaze resting on them as well. She allowed her thoughts to roam freely, deciding that she didn’t care what he thought about her anymore (even if it wasn’t true) because they were married now, even if it hadn’t been in a church yet (and even then, she wasn’t sure why they had to go to the church unless it was just for his benefit, because she really wasn’t looking forward to it).

“Have you ever been in love?” she asked suddenly. She felt him stiffen for a moment beside her before he answered.

“No, I haven’t. Why?” he asked, reaching up to turn off the lamp. She lay in the dark a moment before she replied.

“I haven’t either. So we’ll be alright. We won’t know what we’re missing, so we can’t wish for more.” She nodded to herself in the dark and turned to him, barely able to make out his outline in the darkness.

“I dinnae think it works like that,” he said quietly, and she frowned.

“Well, for our sake I hope it does.” She turned over, curling up in the bed and burying her face in the pillow. He didn’t answer her, but his hand reached out to brush hers comfortingly before he turned as well. They lay back to back, each lost in their own thoughts until they fell asleep.

Ring! Ring! Ring! Anderson almost smashed the lamp in as he turned it on, his face livid as he eyed the phone. If there was one thing he never managed to get under control, it was his hatred of being woken in the middle of the night. He heard Integra moan sleepily behind him but he ignored her and grabbed the receiver, not bothering to check the ID.

“What!” he hissed into the phone, hearing the sharp intake of breath on the other side. A throat cleared and he finally recognized the voice as belonging to Integra’s butler.

“Ahem, pardon me for waking you, but this is a matter of utmost urgency. Can you put Sir Hellsing on the phone?” the polite, slightly on edge voice asked. Anderson heard the undercurrent
of panic in the elderly voice and immediately softened. At least it was a good reason; it’d better be a good reason, if the time he saw on the phone’s clock was right. He muttered for the butler to hold on and turned over. Integra was curled into a ball of blankets on her pillow, her face hardly visible underneath the blonde hair.

“‘s for you.” She made a sound and he sighed and threw the receiver on her ear, trying to untangle his arm from the cord. A slender hand appeared and unwrapped the cord briskly before grabbing the receiver.

“Integra Hellsing,” she mumbled groggily. The butlers stifled voice chattered and her eyes popped open, face paling. “What?! Is she alright?” She leaned up, listening to the butler’s answer and rubbed her forehead wearily. “Yes, I know what Hungary? Is he sure? Never mind all that, what about the Sirens?” She listened quietly and her face grew tenser with each minute. “I see,” she said finally, wrapping the cord around her finger and leaning into the receiver to hold it with her head. “I see. Well, do what you have to do. No, Walter; I know but- yes. I know. Is she alright? Alucard hasn’t- what? Oh… I see.” She sounded like a broken record, her eyes growing listless as she sighed deeply. “I’m not sure what I can do to help her. I’m not a therapist.” She listened for a minute more. “Yes, I’ll be careful. Don’t worry about me, Walter. I have my gun and Alexander’s here, so- well, can you blame him? It’s 3:00 in the morning! He’s not used to being woken like I am.” She hummed at something he said and finally bid him goodnight, handing Anderson the phone.

“Trouble at home?” he asked conversationally, cursing himself, the butler, and the vampires: he was sure they had some hand in this. He was wide awake now and he’d have a hard time falling back asleep. Integra gave him a look that told him he didn’t want to know.

“Seems this is just getting deeper and deeper. The Sirens were hired by a vampiress, who’s attacked Seras no less than twice in three days. Something else about Alucard not wanting her to go out, and she running off and then almost being killed and-” She fell back into the pillow with a thump. “I don’t even care about their little rows, I just want to get this over with and go home,” she murmured with a hint of a whine in her tone.

“What, for those cigars?” he asked and she looked at him incredulously for a moment before actually laughing. He blinked in surprised- usually she either just smiled or chuckled, never an outright laugh before. She tapered off and sighed, more softly this time.

“Yes, for the cigars.”

Chapter End Notes

Original Note: Wow! Why did this take so many rewrites! It’s not even that long this time… damn. I’m losing my mind. Is this even real? Is this the real life? Is it a Fanta sea? (Drowns in orange soda)
“After that they took all my blood out, ran the solution through my veins, and then replaced the liquids with my blood again. It was a reverse embalming, really.” Anderson stared at the ceiling, his mind going back through the years to the operating table, where his last memory was being strapped down to cold steel. Integra lay on his arm, her eyes focused on him as she listened. She’d asked him about the procedure for bringing the dead to life, which was basically what the Vatican had been doing since the early 1800s.

“Where you awake when they did that?” Integra’s voice was filled with a morbid fascination as she thought about how such a process would take place.

“No, no- but I was able to see it. It was on file in the video records, which I have clearance to.” Anderson shifted under her slightly, his face wrinkled in slight revulsion. “It was a very messy procedure.” Integra leaned forward to look him in the eyes, her own twinkling with scientific curiosity.

“And when you awoke? Did you feel different? More powerful?"

“The opposite. I had been brain dead for at least three hours, maybe more. I had to relearn how to walk and eat, plus with my changed muscles the simplest tasks became difficult.” He chuckled softly. “I have no idea how many doors had to be replaced. I kept bending the knobs by mistake. Not to mention the first time I tried to shake someone’s hand. But I had the previous Regenerator there to help me through the issues, and in the end-” he held up his hands, “here I am.”

“Why did the last Regenerator not have a child? Like you are?” Integra asked.

“He was too old. They picked a man in his 50s to be the Regenerator before me. He didn’t live quite as long as they hoped. It’s still a very controversial and experimental procedure. That’s why there’s only one at the time,” he explained. “By the time I was chosen, he was already Degenerating.”

“Degenerating?” Integra shivered at the word. Just the sound of it was foreboding.

“It’s the side effect of being one of our kind,” he said quietly. He took her hand and placed it over his heart, which was racing away as fast as ever. “A human’s body isn’t made to run this fast, even a superhuman. After a while, the organs begin to fail and the muscles begin to break apart. Our bodies fall to ruin around us- we degenerate.” His gaze became serious. “That is why I have to hurry and have a child to replace me. My time is almost up.” Integra sat up fully, her features shocked.

“So you’re dying? Right now?” she gasped. He shook his head and laughed.

“It won’t be tomorrow, or even next year. I reckon I have another 25 years or so left in me at least. The last Regenerator was an older man, but he’d been the Vatican’s weapon since 1878. He finally passed in 1953, four years after I came. So if that was how long he lasted, I will be much longer, I’d like to think.” He looked up at her. “And it’s not all at once. Degeneration takes place over a course of years; the body fails slowly. I’ll have more than enough time to put my affairs in order.”

“Damn. For a minute I thought I’d be rid of you early,” she growled lightly as she lay back down.
“Still, it’s a bloody sick thing, knowing exactly how you’re going to go in the end.”

“I’ve made my peace with it. I’ve had a long time to think. Besides, I could just die out in the field. You never know.” She made a face at him. “What, already can’t live without me?” She turned over to lay face down with a mutter of “get over yourself”. He sighed and glanced at the phone’s clock. 4:23 am. Neither of them had been able to go back to sleep after Walter’s untimely call, and after thirty minutes of tossing and turning Integra had started peppering him with questions about his life before being a Regenerator. He had to admit; it had been a welcome distraction from his thoughts but now that she’d seemed to quiet down he was feeling the weariness bearing on his mind once more.

“Maxwell didn’t give you too hard of a time today, did he?” he looked over to see Integra peeking from under her elbow at him. He thought for a moment, unsure how to answer the question.

“I know how to deal with him. I did raise the boy, after all,” he said slowly. “He didn’t give you a hard time either?”

“If by hard time, you mean actually speaking to me then no. He just stared at me; he looked like he’d never seen a woman before.” She leered at him, eyes mischievous. “I made sure to sit next to him on the pew, just to make him as uncomfortable as possible.” Anderson gave her the same frown he reserved for misbehaving children before he could think and she laughed out loud at the look.

“He doesn’t know what to think about all o’ this. He’s hated you for so long, he doesn’t know how to react to me not feeling the same way.” She huffed in reply and sank back down into her arms. He leaned back into the pillows, taking a good look at the woman beside him. He’d never really bothered to care about her physical appearance before, even though he knew she was aesthetically pleasing. He had to admit- he liked it better when he could see her legs. Her new gown wasn’t as risqué as using a man’s shirt as sleepwear, but it definitely showed off more of her and while he should have been happier to see her covered up like she should have been he felt more disappointed than anything.

She hadn’t tried to forcibly throw herself on him tonight, either. He’d expected it, seeing as now she could claim that they were indeed married, and he’d even prepared a nice counterargument for when she did. He’d already decided that his normal Bible verses wouldn’t work on her, seeing as she was usually able to quote something back at him; being a Christian woman in charge of a Christian organization he wasn’t surprised that she had biblical knowledge, but it did make it much harder for him to fight her off. But tonight she acted the way she should have been acting the entire time; like the virgin she was. Yet here he was, actually wanting her to… the very thought should have sickened him. But then again, the more obnoxiously male side of his brain was protesting that she was his wife now. He focused most of his energy towards quashing the voice. It seemed to want to get him into a lot of trouble lately.

“I’ve angered you.”

“No shit, Master.” Her muffled voice sounded through the coffin lid and made him want to punch his fist through it and drag her out headfirst through the wood. But he tried to quell his anger, banishing the frustration from his voice as he sat next to the coffin and tried to coax her out. He looked with growing anger towards the door, where several of the humans and Walter were gathered and watching him closely. He smirked at them and Walter frowned, motioning once more to the unmoving coffin lid. He caught sight of Seras’ doe-eyed little friend standing behind the butler, his mouth a thin line. Alucard brushed the soldier’s thoughts and caught mental images of himself being torn apart for “doing this to poor Mum”. The sneer slid off Alucard’s face as he eyed...
the man, who was clearly afraid but met his gaze steadily. It was his fault that he was sitting here on the cold stones, talking to a hunk of wood and the depressed vampire within. If the boy hadn’t told Walter about the entire ordeal and the shouting match the entire troop had overheard afterwards, then his existence would be that much easier. For the umpteenth time, he cursed the day he was given the order to never attack Hellsing men. Otherwise, Seras’ companion would have met an unfortunate, bloody accident.

The police girl could rot away in her box until Judgment Day for all he cared, and he had told Walter that too. The only reason he was even in the room was because Walter had threatened to call his master and he’d then have the choice to be forced into it, or face whatever punishment Integra could think up on the fly. He’d been weighing his options when he remembered that with the Judas Priest there, she’d probably get some excellent ideas for vampire torture that she’d find perfectly acceptable. And he preferred doing this by his own choice anyway.

So there he was, crouched on his knee by the box and reasoning with the melancholy woman to come out and face the night. He had been absolutely certain that she was just hiding from him again, but when he’d flipped through her thoughts (and without any resistance; that was a first) he had found that she’d simply stopped caring for the moment. The only thing she’d bothered to do was tell him to not lay a single hand on her coffin. While he didn’t normally let her boss him around and could easily just override her command, he didn’t want two women absolutely livid with him in one night, and he had no doubts that his fledgling would run crying to Integra. His hands were tied, and he hated every moment of it.

“Police Girl, come out and we’ll talk,” he tried, only to get no reply. He arched a brow at the crowd outside the door, all of whom simply shrugged. They all had problems with women, be it an angry girlfriend or even a wife (or a mentally unstable ex-wife, in the case of Captain Penn).

Walter sniffed haughtily and turned to leave, taking the soldiers back upstairs with him to give the vampires their privacy. Surely, it was some supernatural thing to have such changeable moods. The poor girl was becoming more and more like her master with the passing seasons. Stevenson gave Alucard once last warning/terrified look before following the others.

“Police Girl.” Alucard’s patience was quickly wearing thin and he really wasn’t in the mood to play games tonight. “Seras!” The only sound from the coffin was a small sniff and a sigh. Dramatic little… he growled under his breath and punched the stone next to the box, sending a small shower of pebbles into the air. “I am quickly becoming angry with you, Fledgling,” he ground out, more surprised that he was warning her than anything. Since when had he become so lenient with her? “I’m about to drag you out of there and teach you what it means to upset me,” he continued in a singsong tone, drumming his fingers on the cracked floor rapidly.

“If you touch this box, I’m going to hurt you!” the tinny voice spoke up from within. “Don’t touch my coffin!” she repeated loudly. The demanding tone grated against his nerves and he almost broke his own teeth with the pressure of his jaw. That was it. He already had to take orders from one bitch; he wasn’t planning on adding another to the list. He smacked the lid loudly and leaned over, ready to pry it open and give her a lesson she wouldn’t soon forget.

The minute his finger grabbed the rim, the lid burst open and he was thrown back with a pounding pain in his skull. It took him a moment to get over the shock of it, but he sat up and tasted his own blood on his tongue, dripping down from his head. The coffin was empty and he realized that she had shot him point-blank in the forehead before running out of the room and down the hall. She was headed towards his room and he hissed before becoming mist, throwing himself through walls and reforming by his chair. He turned around to see her next to his coffin and he barely had time to make a noise before she kicked it sideways with a resounding thud. She pivoted on her heel,
glaring at him with her pistol still in her hand.

“Did you like that!” she shrieked, waving the gun at him. “Other people touching your stuff? You didn’t, did you, bloody prat!”

“You’ve gone completely insane.” He began to stalk in her direction enraged beyond words. “Do you know who you’re talking to, little girl?” Seras paled, but she steeled her jaw and looked ready to attack him.

“Of course I do, my Master,” she simpered. He reached arm’s length and she held up the pistol. “Don’t you dare touch me!”

“Don’t give me orders, Seras. That little toy gun you’re hiding behind won’t do a thing to me.” He reached out for her and her eyes darted between his hand and her pistol before she threw it. His eyes automatically followed the arc of the gun through the air and she slammed into him, reaching around his belt to grab the Jackal before holding it up triumphantly. His vicious smile melted from his face when she turned the barrel to her chest, lining it up with her heart.

“You know, I’ve been thinking. If I’m going to be alone in this place forever, it’s really just not worth it.” She turned the safety off and looked almost fondly at the gun. “I’m sorry, Master. I didn’t want to give you the burden of offing me.” She placed her finger on the trigger and backed away, out of the path of the coffin where no blood would be sprayed on it.

“You’ve given up then?” Now it was his turn to dart back and forth between her chest and her eyes. She looked at him thoughtfully for a moment before shaking her head.

“No, I just wanted to be in control of something for once.” She began kicking a foot out, knocking on the coffin lightly with her heel. He was too agitated to tell her to stop doing it- why did he care? He didn’t know, but he didn’t want her to go to shoot herself. He wanted to grab her and shake her again, yelling that she was supposed to be different- not like the other women who’d chosen their own fate and not his. The knocking grew louder and he closed his eyes to ease his mind, and opened them… to face the lid of his coffin. There was an increasing sound right above his head and he opened it to see a sleepy Seras kneeling by it, her hand poised to knock again on the wood.

“What?” he said more sharply than he meant to, realizing with a jolt that it was only another nightmare. She looked away for a moment before reaching out and brushing his face, her hand coming back stained crimson. He touched his other cheek, his own hand confirming that once again, she’d caught him crying in his slumber.

“Master, you called me again.” Seras looked concerned, obviously remembering the last time they’d been this way. He closed his eyes, exhaling and practically felt her eyes boring into his face as she waited on his floor.

“Sleep with me today, Seras.” He felt her crawl into the coffin, tripping up on her pajamas and sprawling out over his chest before settling down and closing the lid over them. He felt her slight happiness that he’d been the one to ask for them to share a coffin, instead of the other way around. She relaxed next to him, weavng her arm around his and curling her legs up slightly. “Are you still angry?” he asked wood above his nose, not even wanting to look in her direction.

“I’m not angry, just… I’m just in a nark about it, is all. We’ll get this thing sorted.” She clutched his arm tightly and huffed. “I promise we will, even if it kills me.”

“Arguing is not the most elegant way to leave the world.” She stilled her fidgeting beside him.
“Who’s going to care if I die or not?” she asked. “That boy, he died and no one even cares.”

“His mistress does. And you do, apparently.” His voice grew edgy and he swallowed, trying not to fight with her again. If she wanted to waste tears over a dead servant vampire, then let her. “That’s more than “no one”. As long as one person remembers you, does it matter if they even care or not?”

“Yes.” She buried her face in his shoulder. “I think so,” she whispered.

“If it makes you feel any better, I’ll just make sure that you won’t die until you meet enough vampires who’ll be around long after you’re gone. You’re so annoyingly innocent that they’d never forget you, even if they tried. Then you’ll be remembered.” He yawned quietly, feeling his eyelids grow heavy. She was quickly adding what little body heat she gave off to the cramped space, making it nice and warm. And he did sleep much better when she was close by.

“Master, that’s not the solution,” she argued, but he heard the slight smile in her voice.

“Go to sleep, Seras. Night will soon be here, and if I find you slacking in your training because you’ve been chattering in my ear all day, you’ll be punished.”

“Yes sir. Goodnight, Master.” She rolled over on top of his arm, pushing her way into his body like a little child until she was resting her head on his chest.

“Good day, Police Girl.”

“Are you going to eat tonight?” Her husband leaned over, his mustache bristling as he watched her. She didn’t have the will to answer him and after a moment he huffed. “Fine then. Waste away in bed. It won’t be the first time.” He turned, and in a moment the sound of a door closing proclaimed that he’d left the room.

She lay on the bed, cursing him for what he’d never understand. He’d not wanted a fledgling vampire- he didn’t realize how her heart longed for her blonde angel, to see his smile and hear his accent. Her mind kept replaying the last memory she had of him- his eyes met hers with an imploring gaze before the silver light swung down, reflecting the crimson moonbeams as his neck was cleaved in two by the king himself.

It wasn’t fair- the rules weren’t fair! She hadn’t told him to go to England and attack the girl again. She’d not told him to fight her directly. Now, because of his mistake- his youthful mistake, made in the innocence of the unknown- she’d never see him again. He didn’t ever see the executions- he didn’t know what two strikes on a record meant. How idiotic she was, not telling him! Why didn’t she warn him of the dangers, of what would come if he failed this second time?

Her mind kept replaying her memories of him; how gentle he was with her Girls, how he longed to one day have a little fledgling of his own, how he’d smile and sing the songs of his people to her, letting her hear the proper French accent lilting over the syllables. And now, even if she yearned for just a part of him, she’d never have it. Alucard had been very thorough. She’d not been able to even scoop up some ashes to remember him by before they were scattered.

“It’s really not fair,” she spoke aloud. One of the Girls near her bed raised its head, chittering softly. She turned her head, brushing the dry hair back from the peeling skin, out of the way of some fluids draining from her brain. “It’s really not fair, my dear,” she said as she tried to think of the Girl’s name. If only he was here- he kept all the Girls straight for her. “Why am I punished for his misdeeds? The king has gone too far.”
Oh, she knew what she was saying. It was treason, talking against the king. And she hadn’t told the Girls to kill Ruthven, either for that matter! She should have no strikes on her record! Did he not remember who she was? The king did enjoy practicing “eye for an eye” to keep his subjects in line.

“Eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth, childe for a childe.” She sat up in bed, filled with a new sense of purpose. She’d die in the process, but she’d be sure that as she was dragged to Hell, the blonde Victoria girl was dragged with her. No longer did she want such a vile, naughty snippet for her collection. She just wanted to make that man suffer the way he did her. She licked her lips hungrily, ordering the Girls to fetch her bath and a new sister for dinner. She had vengeance to plan.

Chapter End Notes

The only thing more frightening than Mrs. Báthory is Anderson and Integra singing a duet karaoke of “Total Eclipse of the Heart”.

Well, that or “500 Miles”.
“No. Absolutely not.” Alucard leaned back in his chair, looking at the Draculina sprawled over the arm. “I refuse to be caught up any more in this farce then I have to be.”

“I’m not asking you to be there; I’m just saying that it’s proper manners to give a gift and I think it should be from both of us.” She looked down at the tiny wooden box in her hands, sneaking another peek under the lid. “Besides, it’s so pretty. I know she’ll appreciate it.” She smiled at him, shuffling the box between her hands as she waited.

Seras may have been thrown off as a blonde, or perhaps an innocent young lady, but she was more than she seemed to be. For one, she could do the one thing that no one else could: she could read Alucard. He was an open book to her sometimes; maybe not in every circumstance, but she knew what he was thinking a good deal of the time. And besides that, she could do something else very important- she could change his mind. And 99% of the time, it worked. She knew it when he broke: his eyebrows would sag and he’d frown, his shoulders slumping by the tiniest bit and he’d eventually look away, blinking slowly as his left hand twitched on his thigh. Then he’d agree to whatever it was she wanted with a growl of “I really don’t care, Seras.”

She tapped the toe of one boot against the stone floor, looking inside the box at the gift she’d chosen within. It was a treasure she’d found while rummaging through Alucard’s cabinet, pushing aside the golden cutlery and a dragon statue as she looked for a proper gift. She’d found the tiny, unassuming wooden box in the far corner and had opened it only to squeal in delight. Her gift would meet Sir’s standards perfectly. And all she had to do now was convince Alucard to throw his name on it as well. It was his treasure, after all. It was only right that he had a hand in giving it to her. Looking at him once more, she felt her grin pull even more tightly across her face and clutched the box to her chest.

“I really don’t care, Seras.”

Integra couldn’t stop her foot from moving as she stood outside the church in wait. Alucard had called her to sullenly report that he was bringing Seras and she’d had a brief moment of victory as Anderson gazed at her phone, dumbfounded that “the creature really did give in to the lass!” After that, Maxwell had all but beaten him through the door for some sort of preparation, leaving her with a strange woman and Renaldo.

The woman introduced herself as Abigail, the priest’s sister. Biological sister, that was, as her style of clothing showed the world that she was the farthest thing from a nun that there could be, besides a porn star. She claimed that she worked as a makeup artist, but besides that she was always the stand-in witness at “these types of weddings”.

“What types?” Integra had snapped as she crossed her arms. The dark-haired woman didn’t bat a single mascara-coated eyelash.

“The Maxwell types of course,” she drawled-out with a wink. Father Renaldo coughed politely and walked away as Abigail latched onto the blonde’s shoulder with an iron grip. “I don’t care much for such a dry personality, but he always brings his little assassin-well, employees from the England branch here. So I see a lot of him.” She had then begun to wait with Integra as they
searched the streets for the third party.

“I’m guessing that it’s the one with the umbrella, knowing you people?” Abigail asked dryly, pointing out a black parasol bobbing above the crowd and clearly made of material only found in a black hole seeing as the pale figure underneath was completely out of the sunlight.

“That’s her,” Integra said weakly with a nod. Her stomach was really beginning to churn now. She needed a cigar- damn, but she needed one. Or a hammer to knock herself out with; whatever would effectively calm her nerves. Taking one look at her soldier, she almost choked. “Can’t you be a bit more inconspicuous?” she squeaked. Seras was wearing Alucard’s orange sunglasses and a long black business coat over a light blue formal dress, holding a wooden box and large duffel bag in one hand and the parasol in the other. Integra looked up at the huge umbrella, only to see the shadows that made the fabric move and a faint pair of red eyes leered at her for a moment before fading away. She growled under her breath. “That thing’s not coming in the back with us.”

“Sorry, but I had another stop to make in London and Mas- Alucard said that I shouldn’t walk around in the sun for too long. It might hurt my…” she paused and looked over at Abigail, who was listening intently. “Complexion,” she finished lamely. Integra frowned as Abigail reached over and grabbed Seras’ shoulder as well before guiding them both to a room in the back of the church, chattering away like a parrot talking to itself. Seras placed the sunglasses, shadow-parasol and business coat on the table in the foyer before following the humans back. Abigail took one look at the crimson gaze before blinking twice.

“Nice contacts.” Seras gave her a closed-lipped smile and shook her head. “Actually, it’s porphyria. Very advanced.” Abigail nodded absently, her eyes blank as she clearly had no idea what porphyria meant. Integra rolled her eyes and the Seras winked behind Abigail’s back, mouthing “Master said” and shrugging. Clearly, Seras didn’t have any better idea of what porphyria was.

In the room, a chair had been set out in the middle in front of a wall and a table in the middle held an assortment of cosmetics. Integra immediately began to backtrack like a cat facing a baptism, shaking her head and scrambling to escape her two captors.

“Oh, no-no, no, no! I do not wear makeup, not at all.” Abigail grinned wildly and forced the woman down into the chair.

“On your wedding day, you do.” She picked up a suspicious looking brush, only to be pushed away lightly by Seras.

“Wait- I want to do her hair first, before you start the makeup. It’s going to take me thirty minutes at least,” she explained as she sat her bag on the floor and unzipped it to reveal an array of tools that would put any hairdresser to shame. Abigail nodded sagely and went to the door.

“Good, I hadn’t thought of hair. You do that while I get the dress ready. It’s got to be brushed free of the dust and I think a pearl is coming loose.” Her face became thoughtful as she made her way out the door.

“Dress? Hair?! Agent Victoria, I demand you stop this!” Integra protested feebly, trying to evade the vampire’s deft hands as she quickly began to pull a comb through the poor woman’s blonde hair. Integra was beginning to feel more of a prisoner in the chair than she ever did at the actual prison. She finally gave up against Seras’ enhanced speed and sat still with a pout as she was worked on. “Where’d you get all those?” she asked warily as she watched the Draculina heat up a curling iron.
“I have an acquaintance from the orphanage; when I was in the Police Academy, I needed a part-time job to pay my rent and she offered to let me work in her salon. I learned all about how to fix hair, so don’t worry.” She turned around with the steaming iron, looking like an executioner with a torture instrument. “You’re in good hands.”

“Uh huh.” Integra sat still enough to please her attacker as her hair was tugged gently in different directions, sprayed, softened, and pulled up off her neck in some way. Seras finally backed up and smiled victoriously before picking up the wooden box.

“This is all that’s left to complete my masterpiece. It’s your wedding gift, from Master and me.” She opened the box and showed Integra its contents, noting happily as the woman’s eyes lit up in awe. It was a sapphire comb, its individual stones making up the blue petals and the hand worked metal for the teeth making up the roots of what appeared to be a dogwood tree with tiny emeralds for the leaves. “Do you like it?”

“It’s beautiful,” Integra couldn’t help but pick up the fragile looking piece of art and turning it over in her hands. “Are-are these all real stones?” she blurted out. “It has to be worth a fortune!”

“I wouldn’t know how much it costs. I got it from a secret place. But it’s all yours. And it counts as your “something blue”.” Integra pursed her lips and glared as best she could, but the door burst open and the only thing she saw was a billow of white with a mass of dark curls coming out somewhere from the top.

“Don’t breathe too hard in it, love. That pearl’s hanging on with a lick and a prayer, bless it.” Abigail emerged from the mountain of pearls and her eyes widened. “Wow! You’ve done quite a work of art there!” she complimented Seras. Integra’s hand migrated to her hair and she barely felt the edge of the bun before Seras slapped her hand away.

“Don’t mess with it,” she warned as she took the comb back and stuck it somewhere in the pile of hair. “You don’t want it to fall. Now then,” she backed away and took the dress as Abigail surged forward, brushes in both hands.

“Time for the makeup! My goal today,” she announced to the room in general, “is to give every priest in that chapel a hard-on the minute they see you, save my brother because he’s too much of a puss-” she clapped a hand over her mouth and gazed at the tiny picture of Jesus on the wall. “Sorry, Lord. Guess I shouldn’t be saying that in a church.” She grinned sheepishly. “He’s too girly to care about a pretty young woman in front of him.” Integra looked up at her, astounded at the woman’s gall. She was given a steady glare back before her face was angled to the light. “Nevertheless, you’re going to be beautiful.”

Integra sat quietly, meekly obeying the woman’s orders to close her eyes and smudge this, touch that, and the ever popular “don’t blink while I’m doing this!” After what seemed like an eternity, she also stepped back and looked upon her creation admirably. “Gorgeous. Now, let’s get you in that dress so that you can see yourself.” They pushed the tight outfit up her body as she mentally cursed them for not letting her go out there in her suit. She felt exposed, with the dress having no sleeves or even straps and her bare shoulders to the world. However, the two women oohed and aahed at her before opening the tiny closet and bringing her over to the mirror hanging on the inside of the door. “And now, the reveal!” Abigail said dramatically, pushing the barefoot woman in front of the mirror.

For a moment, Integra didn’t recognize herself. The woman staring back at her was a princess come to life, not a burnt-out woman with an organization to run who was about to agree to spend the rest of her life in the arms of a hulking priest with a heavy accent. She only realized who it was when the reflection mirrored her movements, one slender hand coming up to cup her cheek as she
surveyed herself.

The tight dress was rather revealing, coming down to her feet, but showing off her entire upper torso. It pushed up her breasts, making them the center of attention and while the support was nice, she wasn’t used to seeing her cleavage on display like that. The tiny pearls in the bodice splayed down into brilliant floral patterns across her flat stomach, resting in a makeshift belt around her waist. Integra half-wondered how in the hell Abigail had noticed that only one out of a million was slightly loose.

She looked up at her hair, amassed elegantly on her skull with wispy curls made from her bangs framing her face and the comb placed neatly on the edge of the complicated bun, making her look young and… beautiful. Integra realized with a jolt that she’d never really felt attractive before, but now she understood the appeal. It was nice, seeing yourself in a different way. The makeup wasn’t as heavy as she’d thought it would be, enhancing her features instead of creating new ones. The mascara lengthened her lashes and the powder lightened her tone, making her look rather delicate. Seras peered around over her shoulder and gave her a thumbs-up.

“You should wear makeup more often, Sir. It’s nice on you.” She didn’t reply, instead looking around at Abigail, who was blinking back tears for some odd reason.

“You’re gorgeous, darling!” she said in a cracked voice, picking up a small bouquet and handing it to her and placing a pair of white flats for her to step into. Integra looked down at the flowers, feeling strange. She looked at Seras.

“I’m going to be ill,” she said faintly. Seras’ face paled and she grabbed the tiny can in the corner, holding it up.

“It’s alright; just some pre-marital jitters. You’ve already got all the good luck on your side,” she said helpfully. Integra stared at her and she chuckled abashedly. “You know, “something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue and a sixpence in your shoe?” You’ve got all the luck you’ll need then.” Abigail nodded in agreement. “Your comb’s blue, remember?” Seras pointed out again.

“Right, and that dress is mine; you’re borrowing it because I’m not letting you go out there in men’s clothes on your wedding day. And even with all that fertility crap- I’ve got three kids, so you’re good there. And the makeup’s brand new, just opened it this morning.” She looked back at Seras with a grin. “And I invested a good 20£ in those flats, so you can technically say there’s a sixpence in those shoes.

“Your glasses can be considered old…” Seras said hesitantly as she slid the frames onto her boss’s face. “There. Very pretty.” Integra adjusted them on her nose and caught sight of the ring. Anderson had charged himself a plain silver band for a wedding ring to the Vatican Accounting Agency’s account number (he’d claimed that he’d just deal with them later when they inevitably came looking for him) and offered to buy her one, but she’d honestly told him that she’d rather wear his ring.

Somehow, the old silver had grown on her as it sat on her thumb and she’d become rather fond of it. They’d managed to convince the jeweler to size the antique to fit on her ring finger. She decided that if luck was going to be on her side, she might as well count the ring as her “something old”.

“Are you ready?” She looked up to see the priest sticking his head in the door. Abigail nodded for her, shooing the man out and fixing Integra’s train before pointing her in the direction of the chapel with a wave. Seras walked behind her, practically pushing the woman to the door.
“Don’t worry, Sir. I’m going to be right behind you every step of the way, so you can fall back on me if you need to.” Integra felt her heart swell with the vampire’s assuring words. Seras was supposed to be walking ahead of her like a proper maid-of-honor, but she’d proclaimed that she’d rather walk behind, and now she could see why. Integra wasn’t sure she could even move if the woman’s hands weren’t steadfastly shoving her to the double doors. She heard Abigail’s chatter already coming from inside (had the woman sprinted, or did she know of a shortcut to take?) and her heart began to sound in her ears, drumming out her nervousness.

“Sir Integra, look at me.” She was spun around and came nose-to-nose with Seras. “You are Integra Fairbrook Wingates Hellsing, aren’t you?” Seras growled impatiently.

“Y-yes.”

“Well then, why are you acting like a little kid? Get some confidence! Go out there looking like a scared sheep, and you’re going to be laughed at by the Vatican! When you go through those doors, I want you to look like you’ve belonged there. Strut down that aisle like you own it- you do own it, Sir! You’ve got guts!” She did a mini fist pump at her own pep talk and Integra smiled halfheartedly before closing her eyes. She focused on calming her overdrive heart, and after a long moment she opened them with newfound fire.

“Seras, let’s go,” she ordered and the Draculina beamed and threw her cold arms around Integra’s bare shoulders. She shivered at the contact with the cold skin—she’d never noticed how vampires really did feel as if they were dead, but then again most of the time they all had more clothing on—and pushed the girl off of her before clutching her flowers and nodding for Seras to open the door.

She paused for only the briefest moment, her eyes focused on the priest standing at the altar before taking her first steps. She felt Seras behind her and heard the vampire’s voice in the back of her mind, unsure if Seras was doing it on purpose or if she was so excited that she was accidently broadcasting her thoughts. Go Sir Integra! You’ve got this! The vampire’s mental cheering gave her enough confidence to look around the room as she walked.

Maxwell was standing next to Anderson with his mouth agape, jaw about to come unhinged and fall to the carpet-covered stairs. His eyes were wide, looking as though he couldn’t believe his eyes. Father Renaldo was smiling appreciatively from one pew, giving her a slight nod when he caught her gaze. Abigail was almost bouncing in her pew, her expression ecstatic. The priest was looking generally happy about the whole situation, his chubby cheeks dimpled with his soft grin. But Anderson- Anderson was simply staring, nothing more. There was no expression evident on his face, other than the fact that wasn’t blinking and just followed her up to the pulpit with his eyes. She looked up at him, slightly alarmed by the blank countenance until he inhaled and she comprehended that he’d been holding his breath the entire time. She looked forward with a bewildered frown, squeezing the life out of the flower’s stems as the priest began to speak.

She was pretty sure most of the wedding speech was for the audience’s benefit, because she wasn’t paying a lick of attention and she was pretty sure Anderson wasn’t either. She kept trying to sneak a glance at him out of the corner of her eye- she’d never seen the cassock he was wearing before and the sash he had on was decorated with at least a dozen different medals and tassels for various awards in honor of his work in the Church, from what she could tell. He stood ramrod straight next to her, barely touching as they both recited their parts quietly. She could feel Maxwell’s eyes boring into her head as he openly stared at her.

The priest looked happily at them and declared them to be married before God. She let out a small sound of relief, feeling him relax as well as the man congratulated them on their new covenant and blah-blah-blah. He looked towards Maxwell, who cleared his throat and muttered something that
sounded more like condolences than congratulations before following the priest out of the room with Father Renaldo in tow. Seras bounced on top of her again and Abigail plucked at her dress, still going on about the pearl. Anderson stood in the middle of it all like a buoy as everyone meandered around him. Seras kept sneaking glances before she stood in front of him, holding out her hand with minimal trembling.

“W-welcome to the family, I suppose. I hope we’ll work well together,” she managed to squeak out as she stared up at him. Integra felt a strange sort of pity for her; she was so small—already miniaturized around her master, much less the gigantic priest who more resembled Goliath than anything particularly holy.

“Aye, lass.” He shook her hand, wincing at the contact before breaking away. “It’ll take some getting used to.” He looked down at the glove with a grimace, as though her hand had soiled the white material somehow. “I-I’m surprised your little beastie didn’t come to spoil the occasion,” he half-growled. Seras snorted, trying to hold in her laughter.

“He’s been in my head this entire time; he’s been asking if it was over for fifteen minutes already.” When Anderson gave her a suspicious look, she shrugged. “I told him if he wanted me that badly, to come in here and find me.”

“And that I did.” The smooth voice echoed across the chapel, sending shivers down the humans’ spines. Integra whirled around to see Alucard standing in the double doors, dressed in his business suit and having reclaimed his sunglasses and cloak. Seras squeaked in surprise and he gave her a cold sneer. “You left my things out in the open, thoughtless girl. I’d be angry if they came up missing.” Abigail slowly backed away before disappearing through a side door, leaving the four of them alone with their privacy.

“Sorry, sir.” Seras seemed rather unfazed by the icy attitude, instead cocking her head like a puppy and watching as he walked down the aisle towards them. He tilted his head down slightly as he looked over the rims of his glasses at Integra. She met his gaze frostily, her mouth set in a thin line. Finally, he knocked the glasses back up his nose and Seras ran over to stand beside him. He casually draped an arm over her shoulders, letting the heavy business suit fall over her hair and she peered from beneath the shade at the humans with a smug grin that echoed the man standing next to her.

“So, she let you do it?” he asked Seras as he kept his eyes steady on his master. “I’m impressed, Police Girl. You’ve made our bud of a master blossom.” Seras colored at the praise, the pale cheeks darkening only slightly under his arm. Integra growled at him, warning him with her eyes not to cause trouble.

“Quiet, servant. I don’t want to hear your mockery tonight.” Alucard managed to appear offended. “Mockery?!” he gasped dramatically. “I was honest in the praise of my fledgling’s prowess with hair-fixing. She seems to always be amusing me with her talents.” It was clear that he was being truthful, and she saw Anderson’s face take on a shocked expression before he stared intently at the tiny girl underneath her master’s jacket with a newfound curiosity. Integra snarled, but before she could get two words out Anderson nearly knocked her off her feet as he wormed an arm around her shoulders and tugged her over. Clutching her tightly, he glared daggers at the black-clad man before him.

“It’s clear you didn’t come here to do good, ye monster. What did you come for, so you can get it and leave?” His voice was polite and level, but filled with an undercurrent of loathing. Alucard mimicked his position, pulling Seras by her arm until she was almost standing on his boots and tucking her more firmly against his waist.
“I came here for my fledgling, naturally,” he replied with a smirk, but his eyes were silently challenging the paladin to make a move. The two men faced off silently from each side of the aisle, their women caught up in the fiery battle. Integra looked at Seras, who looked between Alucard and Anderson several times before shrugging. Clearly, whatever was going on wasn’t a culture breach or even a religious one; rather it was just a “man thing”. Finally, Seras reached up and cautiously plucked Alucard’s lapel with a finger.

“Master, the salon closes at 6:00 and I have to have those tools back by then,” she said pleadingly. Alucard let her go, turning slightly to watch her run to the back before addressing Integra.

“Well, what will you do now, my master?” he said with a knowing grin. “Return to your hotel room?”

“None of your business.”

When Seras returned, holding the heavy bag as though it were lighter than air, she was caught up again under her master’s arm. Fighting her way back to the open air, she snapped her fingers and gestured to Integra.

“I almost forgot- are you alright? I heard about you losing your gun; I bet you were ambushed by those nasty Sirens, weren’t you?” The bride looked blankly at her soldier before turning to Anderson. He shrugged and she turned back quietly, her face pensive.

“Seras, I didn’t lose my gun. It’s at the hotel, in my bag. I didn’t bring it today because I was going to be in the church,” she said slowly. Seras shook her head.

“No, that boy—the one who attacked me—he said that he had your gun. “The Hellsing woman’s gun turned up at my castle” or some sort of thing. I assumed you lost it in a battle.” Anderson and Integra exchanged another, more concerned glance. Alucard looked down at Seras, and she met his gaze to see that he was grinding his fangs together- a sure sign that something was beginning to worry him.

“Are you certain of this, lass?” Anderson blurted, his eyes narrowing. “I’m sure we haven’t left that room except for once or twice. It must be a mistake.”

“No she’s right, I haven’t checked the gun today—and it’s not your average pistol. It belonged to my father- a custom-made firearm.” Integra shivered suddenly and the vampires watched the goose bumps appear on her shoulders. “I wonder…. Alucard, didn’t you tell me once that a vampire’s scent is more potent than any other creatures—when we were up against that South American cult?”

“That’s right. All vampires have a fragrance that is much stronger than any of the lesser creatures, save the FREAKS, who still smell like humans.” He seemed rather proud of the admission. “Even you humans can sense it.” Integra looked at Seras, remembering when the girl had hugged her loosely in the foyer. She had smelled it on the girl, of course—every vampire she’d ever come across always smelled of blood and wet dirt, and although it wasn’t a particularly bad smell it was powerful enough to overwhelm you if they never bathed. Even Alucard managed to stick his head under some water (or in some cases, have his ass kicked out in the rain) every once in a while to stifle the odor, but Seras had another scent on top of her own vampire musk- shampoo. It was floral and very aromatic.

“Seras, you use that same brand of shampoo all the time- it masks the vampire smell somewhat.” Anderson looked over with a sniff, as if trying to distinguish the smell from where he stood in the
far end of the altar (as far away from the vampires as he could get while still being within an arm’s length of Integra; as if she even needed protection from her own servants). Alucard curled his lip in disdain.

“Yes, she insists on using that chemical gunk. When her hair’s wet I can smell it…across…the—”

His eyes widened and he looked down at Seras before letting out a long string of curses in at least three languages. “What fucking idiots we are.”

“We’ve been leading them right to us—they’ve been using Seras as a way of following our trail. She’d been in our room that one night when you all fought—even if it was days ago, could they still track it?” Integra asked, the horrible realization falling on her as well. They were a bloody pack of fools; why hadn’t she thought of all this before? Those creatures had been in the hotel room, and if they only were a bit smarter she’d have been a sitting duck in there. Not to mention the danger that they’d all unknowingly put the mansion in. No wonder it had taken that boy no time to find Seras! She broadcasted herself across the entire countryside without meaning to!

“Yes, it would have been easy for Sirens- they have a very good sense of smell.” Seras was listening to all this with a growing look of terror on her face and she nearly tackled Alucard.

“Master! I walked here to the church—they may already be coming! We have to get out of here!” she stammered. Alucard threw his coat on top of her head and nodded once before they dissipated into thin air. Integra picked up her dress with both hands, intending on running back to the room and getting changed.

“I’ve got to call Walter; he may be in danger,” she informed Anderson over her shoulder. He helped her down the stairs and nodded before pulling his cellular out of the cassock’s inner pocket.

“We aren’t going back to that hotel,” he declared.

“But-my things!” she stopped and turned back to face him. “What about my clothes?”

“I’m calling Wolfe; she’ll get them and meet us in town.” Integra shrugged and ran out into the foyer, where Abigail looked up from her own phone. The friendly smile fell from her face when she saw the hurried look in the bride’s eyes.

“Something wrong?” she asked in concern. Integra nodded and began to make her way down the hall with the woman in tow.

“I need to get changed right away; something very important has come up.”

Anderson picked around his food, trying his best to keep his gaze from falling on the woman across the table. Integra was alternating between devouring her pastrami and babbling on about what they should do, why they needed to do this, where they were going to stay next, etc. Truth be told, he was only half-listening; more often than not he let the pub’s noise drown her words and sat among his own thoughts.

He hadn’t done a double-take when she walked through the church doors: he hadn’t been able to look away from her until she was next to him at the altar steps. Her entire being had the appearance of confidence, but he’d noticed how her little vampiress had to prod her into motion. She’d stunned the whole company gathered there, save the women. He had almost laughed aloud at Maxwell as the poor archbishop had been amazed into silence by the beauty walking down the aisle. He had to give the lasses credit; they knew how to turn the woman into a virtual goddess. He’d known that those curves had been there, but it was different when he saw them flattered to the best possible
Besides that, in their hurry to vacate the church and save the priest and his loud sister, she’d not taken the makeup off or her hair down. Now, she was sitting across from him with her hair still piled up on her head, her elegant neckline on display through the opening of the suit coat. And those wispy curls kept bringing his eyes back to her glasses where they only enhanced the makeup on her lashes and framed her eyes, which were more cerulean than ice blue with the color on her lids. He’d gone so long without noticing women and what they were wearing, and now that he was allowed to look again he was becoming steadily more aware of how much he missed it.

“Alexander!” the sharp tone brought him back to reality and he blinked at her irritated expression, realizing that he’d missed the last fifteen minutes of whatever she was saying. “You weren’t listening to me,” she accused knowingly.

“I’m a bit distracted this evening,” he muttered before taking another bite of pasta, which was a bit more al dente than he wanted it to be. He crunched down on the noodles musingly, wishing that Heinkel would hurry up and get there. He knew she’d been in London and had to travel a ways, but surely it didn’t take that long to go get one bag packed up and brought to town.

“Well, get over it. I’ll be the first to admit that you’ll be able to count the times I look this dressed up on one hand when I die. I don’t make it a habit to wear makeup, and my hair doesn’t do this naturally at all.”

“Shame,” he replied dismissively. She bit into her sandwich viciously and chewed as she frowned at him.

“Your coworkers are very unpunctual. Is this a habit of theirs?” He nodded and pushed away his plate. He really couldn’t eat crunchy things. It reminded him too much of the trenches, when there wasn’t enough to go around and they were forced to eat insect infested food. Grimacing, he neatly placed his silverware on top and waved for the woman to carry it away. Integra looked at him strangely. “You didn’t have to get offended over it. I was just asking.”

“It’s not that. The pasta was undercooked,” he murmured, and she immediately offered him the second half to her pastrami.

“Here, I won’t eat it all anyway. I was going to wrap it up and take it with us, but eat it if you want.” He hesitated a moment before accepting the half as his stomach protested its hunger. He began to pull apart the sandwich and took out the tomatoes before inhaling the meal. He looked up to see her smiling at him, clearly amused by his hurried attitude. “No one was going to steal it from you.”

“You learn as a soldier to eat quickly; it’s a habit I never lost.” She ate her last bite, licking a bit of sauce from her finger before wiping her mouth and sitting back in the chair, satisfied. They sat in silence after the woman came to take the last plates away, sipping their drinks and listening to the pub’s noisy bar as the team on the television screen scored some sort of goal.

“I’m full and my house is safe,” she proclaimed at last. “As long as it stays that way, I’m fine.” He tilted his head on one hand and looked at her wearily. Not even married a full 24 hours and she was already tiring him out. He wondered where she got such energy. She wasn’t bouncing off the walls, but her subdued demeanor was full of it. “What?” He jerked back to attention again and she growled, crossing he arms over her chest. “Stop staring.”

“Who’s staring? I told you I’m just thinking,” he snapped back irritably. She arched a brow and he felt her leg brush his under the table. He moved away, giving her a warning look and she met his...
expression with her own challenging glare. He sighed, wishing for once that she’d of stayed the quiet, alien woman she’d been last night. All good things must come to an end…

“There you are.” The German accent was both worried and annoyed. “I’ve looked all over this place for you. Why couldn’t you have sat in the open?” Heinkel appeared from seemingly nowhere, giving him the messy bag of clothing, with articles and one corner of a book spilling out of the hastily packed satchel. She made a face at the look he gave her. “Don’t start Anderson. I know: sloppiness doesn’t get the job done. But I didn’t want to be caught in there without a key. I already had enough of a hard time sliding past the front doors.” She waited for him to reply, but he only gave her a pained expression and his eyes flashed briefly to the Hellsing woman, who was smiling rather wickedly and moving slightly in her seat. Heinkel gave her a second look in surprise —she’d never seen the woman so…fancy-looking. At least, she was a lot prettier with her hair out of her face.

“So, um… Herzlichen Glückwunsch, I suppose,” she muttered with a half-nod before slowly backing away into the crowd and disappearing.

“I’m going to hope that meant something nice,” Integra said as she moved her boot further up the priest’s leg, practically resting it on his thigh with a syrupy smile. He looked as if he was going to throw the table on top of her and run, but he only stood and pulled out his card.

“Let me pay, and then we’ll leave. Here’s your bag.” He handed it to her robotically and turned to make his way to the front desk. She watched him leave, her eyes dropping back to her bag as she stuffed the things more neatly and closed the clasp. She swallowed the edging nervousness at what she was trying to accomplish before the night was over before rising to meet him and slinging the bag over her shoulder. She was married now- the time for being coy was far behind her.

“Waaaaallllter!” Seras held her hands out imploringly to the butler as he walked into Alucard’s chambers with the metal bucket of ice and a bottle of wine. “Help meehee!” Her cries became muffled as her cheek was pulled flush with her master’s. The older vampire forcefully rubbed their cheeks together like two cats before pulling her back onto the chair as she fought to escape over the arm.

“I apologize; am I intruding on something?” the butler asked politely as he walked over and sat the meal on the table next to the chair, looking down at the poor blonde in amusement.

“Yes,” Alucard hissed as he patiently pulled the girl back into the seat, looming over her and rubbing her hair with his hands. “Go away.”

“No, please help me! He won’t let me go!” Seras pushed her master’s hands away, only to be pulled up by her shoulders as the man sniffed her hair deeply and growled in frustration. “Stop it!”

“What exactly are you trying to accomplish, Alucard?” Walter peered around the man’s shoulder, taking a cautious sniff of his own. He didn’t smell anything other than the irony fragrance that hung around all Nosferatu.

“This damn hair-soap smell won’t go away. I’m trying to cover her scent,” he explained irritably as he bent his head down again to rub his neck over her forehead. She screeched and fought as her hair started to become frizzy from the motions. Walter covered his mouth with one hand, trying to stop the smile from stretching across his face. He’d often likened Alucard to a beast in man’s guise; his sometimes animalistic nature wasn’t hard to miss, after all—and he couldn’t help but look at the scene in front of him and see a mother cat bathing her kitten, except this unfortunate kitten didn’t want any part of it.
“I hope that it works out for you; I’m sorry Miss Victoria, but I wouldn’t dare interfere.” He held a hand up at the Draculina’s cry of protest. “Sir Integra has already explained the situation to me, and I agree wholeheartedly that the best place you could be right now is with Alucard. And if he insists on this being the best plan of action, who am I to stop him?” Besides, it was hilarious, watching them together. Walter smiled apologetically and turned to leave, tuning out the poor girl’s dismayed yelps and shutting the door firmly behind him.

“Hold still and it won’t take so long.” Alucard bent down further onto the seat and pressed her entire body against his, ignoring her exclamations. “You’re the one who insists on bathing every day.” Seras opened her mouth to retort, only to let out a shuddering groan as he licked up the side of her face.

“Gross! Eww, No one’s tongue should be that bloody long!” she finally managed to break away from his hold on her, jumping over the table and wiping her cheek on her sleeve. “Cor Master; that’s just icky!” She looked down at her rumpled uniform and grumbled to herself as she grabbed the seldom-used comb on his cupboard and got to work righting her hair. She noted in disgust that his scent was all over her now- it made her smell like she’d covered herself in drenched soil and rolled around in a spice rack, mixing with her own familiar smell. She needed another shower now.

“No. No showers.” She looked in the dusty mirror at the back of the chair witheringly and slammed the comb on the cupboard, rattling the items within. Stomping back to the chair, she curled her nose at the sight of him all sprawled out, looking satisfied with himself.

“No. You’re irritating.” She backed away from the throne, crossing her arms and running a hand through her hair. She had half a mind to go stick her head in the sink, just to wash the musk off and make him mad.

“Try it and I’ll hold you under,” he warned gleefully as he read her thoughts. He held out one arm, the light reflecting off his glasses and shining as two bright orange holes in the shadow of his hat. “Come, my little Seras.” She scoffed and looked away, trying to stop the color from spreading into her cheeks. She knew that he knew she loved it when he said her name like that. It wasn’t natural, this attraction she felt to his voice. She couldn’t pretend it was a master/childe thing anymore. It was a Seras/Alucard thing. And he knew it, smug bastard.

“Take off your glasses.” He paused, but did as she asked. Now, it was the crimson irises that blazed out from the shadows; a look she was beginning to know well, even if she wasn’t sure exactly what emotion it was. He didn’t have that many to choose from—it shouldn’t have been so hard to discern his feelings.

“Why?” he asked her as she gave in and walked over to him, letting him tug her into his lap and run a hand over her thigh possessively.

“Because I like to see your eyes. Then I know what you’re thinking.” He laughed: a short, tactless sound that was anything but happy.

“You know nothing of what I’m thinking, little liar.” He raked his claws over the exposed skin between her boots and her skirt and she winced as welts rose on the pale skin.
“What’d you do that for?” she whined as she rubbed her leg. He looked at her hand running across the skin, not saying a word. He placed his hand on top of hers, rubbing with her before traveling on up her arm. She shivered and gave him a stern glance. “Master is being very touchy-feely tonight,” she teased. He paused again.

“You know why,” he replied with a suggestion of hate. She made a face at him and buried down into his vest.

“I don’t want to think about that. It’s nasty.”

“It’s certainly nightmare material, isn’t it?” he sounded mixed, as though he wasn’t sure if he was revolted or amused. She chuckled, the sound stifled by his chest.

“You’re going to be mocking her relentlessly, aren’t you?” He grinned savagely.

“Naturally; I’ll be hard on both of them. We’ll have to gang up on them, Seras.” She giggled and rose up.

“What, we’ll tag-team them into submission? We’re going to be hung up on the outside wall with bayonets and used as shooting targets!”

“Yes- they wouldn’t appreciate our efforts at all, would they?” She shook her head and he laughed again, a real laugh this time. “We might need to have a place to lie low until the newlyweds simmer down.”

“We’ll travel to Siberia. They wouldn’t be able to find us there, and I like snow.”

“Is that it? I’d rather go someplace a bit more populated. I don’t want to go hungry.”

“Norway?” she answered hopefully.

“No. I meant somewhere like, oh say Greece. You’d like the ruins there.”

“Too many Sirens. I don’t want to see any more than I have to. Italy?”

“No. Too many Catholics. I’m already dreading the amount that will be filtering in and out of our doors soon enough.”

“Turkey.”

“Absolutely not.”

“America?” He simply grinned. “Fine, we’ll just go on a seaside holiday and frighten teenagers on the beaches.”

“Ahh, Police Girl- what if you fall in? I’m not fishing you out and you’re not going to die. You’ll just sit on the bottom of the ocean until you starve.”

“I’ll develop an immense love of sushi. Any other issues?” He shook his head and she lay back against his chest, watching the candles flicker in their holders.

“Stay here today, Seras.” His hands tightened on her legs as he held her.

“I will, don’t worry.”

“Seras, do you care for me?”
“We’ve had this conversation before. Yes, I do. You’re my master.”

“Why do you hold onto human stipulations?”

“I don’t know. Why do you pretend you don’t care about anything?” She felt him jerk beneath her slightly and raised her eyes to look at the underside of his jaw, clutching the crimson fabric of his jacket firmly.

“I don’t. Pretend.” She exhaled slowly.

“Master, do you care for me?”

“You’re still here, aren’t you?”

“Very funny.”

It was fire, burning his insides and leaving only a smoldering heap of emotion that made him sick with want. And he didn’t have to feel that way; she’d give herself to him, she’d tried to before, at least twice. Well, once- if you count that the other time she wasn’t in her right mind. She’d tended him, caressed him, kissed him and quivered under his touch, no matter how minimal. But it had been nothing more than lust.

Or had it? He respected her, even liked her to an extent. It wasn’t love, but it wasn’t wholly lust either. It was mixture of a great number of things that just happened to fall together in a slapdash way and apparently worked. It was more along the lines of something that they both shared, that each understood and if they kept feeling mutually, could be built upon. Intimacy: that was a better word for it.

He looked at himself in the bathroom mirror, the reflection showing uncertainty and anticipation in his expression. He sighed and frowned, reminding himself for the umpteenth time that he had a procedure to follow. Whatever he wanted to do to her, he could just go ahead and forget it. The bare minimum— a simple act between a man and a woman.

_Oh, sure lad. You remember it now, alone with your thoughts. But are you going to be holding back she’s under you, gasping and begging for—_ He jolted in surprise as a loud crunch filled the tiny space and a chunk of fake-marble counter came off in his hand. He looked at it for a moment and the door opened, his new wife poking her head around with an alarmed expression. When she saw the counter, she grinned.

“You run up big repair bills, don’t you?” she asked sardonically. He debated on throwing the marble at her head, but he really couldn’t decide whether hitting her would knock her out or not.

“This is why I can’t…” he started as he tossed the marble in his hand once or twice before placing it back on the counter. He wasn’t sure how to finish it in a way that wouldn’t embarrass him. “I can’t just let go,” he finally admitted.

“Hmm?” She tilted her head up at him, and he looked away. She was still dressed in her clothing, although without the suit coat and tie and her shirt was unbuttoned down to her collarbone, most likely to give herself some air. She hadn’t even taken her hair down, although she’d already scrubbed the makeup off the minute they arrived. He stifled a groan and tried to think of a way to explain it.

“If I stop thinking keeping myself in check, I can ultimately… hurt people.” She gave him a bewildered look before picking up the hunk of countertop. “If I forget about how strong I am, I
might… hurt you while we—” Her eyes lit in understanding and he stopped, not even wanting to finish that sentence.

“Oh, oh. I see.” She looked him over, the gears turning in her mind. “I guess it’d be bad for me to be on top, then.” He lurched backwards, unable to stop the heat rising to his face and she coughed, her own face turning red. “Don’t worry. I’m sure you can handle it.” She pushed him out of the bathroom and shut the door, taking the marble with her. He heard her move around and start the shower. He went to lie on the bed, half-watching whatever she had the TV pulled up to. Yes, but I’m not quite as sure.

He was lying on the bed when she finally emerged from the steaming bathroom, her nightgown floating around her legs and her damp hair sticking to her neck. He stared at the ceiling, his mind clearly far away.

She thought about what he’d told her: he was afraid that he’d hurt her if they got too… passionate. And his fears weren’t unfounded; he really was strong enough to pull her limbs off her body if he tried to. He’d obviously been thinking about it when he ripped a piece of faux marble out of the bathroom vanity. She felt a twinge of fear for her furnishings at her home. Apparently, she ought to order a stronger bedroom suit, one that would fit his needs better.

She moved away from the doorway, looking at him in the bed- even as a queen size, it was barely big enough for him. She felt a pang of nervousness bolt through her and cleared her throat. He looked over at her, his eyes following the path of the gown down to her legs and back up to her overheated cheeks. Suddenly she felt too exposed, even covered up as she was and walked quickly to the bed, too quickly.

She sat down, edging her way closer to him before lying down. They weren’t touching, but she was close enough to feel the unnatural warmth from his arm. He was watching her; even if he wasn’t turned towards her, she could feel his eyes on her. She looked over at him, wanting to touch him but unsure of how he’d react.

“I don’t want to push you any farther than you have to go.” Even she was surprised as the words slipped out of her mouth. He looked at her fully then; his eyes reflecting her own.

“Well.” That wasn’t even an answer, was it? He sounded like he just said it to be said. She collapsed against the sheets silently, reaching out to his jaw with her fingers. She happened to like the coarse hairs growing there—she wondered if he did too, or just never bothered with shaving. They stayed the same constantly, though. Maybe he couldn’t get rid of it?

His eyes followed her fingers as they skated underneath his chin, pulling his face closer as she moved her hand back around to his hair. She wasn’t trying to get something out of him, or even trying to spark anything. She was just… feeling. It was close to actual research as she could ever claim to get, a simple hypothesis/experiment/reaction.

She jumped slightly when his hand slid up her hip, feeling her through the gown and tugging her closer as well. She looked down at it, the plain band glinting in the dim lamplight before looking back at him.

“Are we-?”

“Hush.” She blinked up at him, floored by stern tone. “If you really want to do this, you have to stop talking.” She opened her mouth to argue and his hand stopped her. “I have to concentrate. And you have to tell me if I hurt.”
“How can I tell you if I’m not supposed to be talking?” she asked innocently, almost smiling when an exasperated expression flitted across his face. “Don’t worry- I said that I didn’t want to push you and I won’t. Now kiss me.” She saw him give in and he rolled on top of her, one hand firmly holding the bed on each side of her head and only their legs touching.

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“Let me focus,” he ordered and she rolled her eyes, one foot sneaking up to rub his calf. He shut his eyes and growled at her to stop, hissing when she reached up and ran a finger down his collarbone. “I mean it- quit,” he muttered.

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“Make me.” She was gaining more confidence by the minute, almost forgetting why she was so nervous. It was only Anderson, for Pete’s sake. And he wanted her; he’d almost had her before, and now he just needed another small push or two. He leaned down, pressing her into the bed and managing to be intimidating. She laid back, nose-to-nose as he opened his eyes and gave her the severest glare he could manage, which only made him look more impassioned.

“Stop. It.” he snarled, and she grinned up at him and leaned up to push him backwards. She’d only meant to kiss his cheek, but her tongue darted out to lick his jaw lightly and she found herself back among the blankets, his hands pushing her shoulders away as he froze above her. “You’re trying to prove yourself a liar, aren’t you?” he asked, his voice hoarse.

“You said not to talk; what else was I going to do?” she purred beneath him, toes curling on his leg as she trailed her fingers across his thigh. Feeling bold, she traced up his inner thigh to where his leg met his pelvis, watching his face scrunch up in an effort to ignore her. “Maybe I don’t mind being hurt a little.” His eyes shot open and he looked down at her, unable to keep the lust from his gaze. He looked away, running a hand over his face and she took the opportunity to sit up under him, tugging at his shirt. “Alexander,” she sung softly as she pressed her nails against his skin. He was burning alive under her fingertips; she didn’t know how he could stand being so hot. “Alex?” she tried the nickname on her tongue, hearing the longing whine in her voice and he trembled beneath her hands. Sighing, she pushed him off of her and shook her head. Standing up by the side of the bed, she began to pull off her gown.

“How does it feel, to be teased?” She didn’t answer, she couldn’t answer- he was giving her all his heat, boiling her insides and making her shake as he moved south. She bit back a moan as he dipped to her stomach, her breaths becoming short gasps as he seemed to count every rib on the way to her diaphragm.

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“A she-demon, that’s what you are,” he rumbled in her ear and she almost arched against him at the husky tone. “I’m doing this tonight, just let me- let me go on my own time.” She obediently remained still as his hand moved under the sheet, his fingers branching out as he moved towards her hip. The skin left behind its trail became a fiery inferno, burning her up from the inside out. She bit back a moan as he dipped to her stomach, her breaths becoming short gasps as he seemed to count every rib on the way to her diaphragm.

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“How does it feel, to be teased?” She didn’t answer, she couldn’t answer- he was giving her all his heat, boiling her insides and making her shake as he moved south. She shifted her hips against him, wanting him more than she’d wanted anything before in all her life. This wasn’t just silly desire anymore; it was a feeling that she knew was going to be reserved only for him from now on- a need for closeness and affection. She wanted; no- needed him to feel the same way. He held her down
effortlessly with one hand, the other sliding around her side to caress her in lazy circles. He began to nip her shoulder, her neck, her jaw; making her clench handfuls of fabric in her fists as warm breath was followed by a slick tongue. “Not talking so much now, are ye?”

She tried to tell him to shut up, but it just came out a soft mewl as he rolled her onto her back and knelt above her a second time and tore his own shirt off before leaning down and kissing her. He left her breathless, unable to do more than clutch at him as he continued his exploration of her body. Her entire being was thrumming, feeling more alive than she’d ever felt. She could feel him everywhere on her, his heat in her very soul. She lay back, letting him do whatever the hell he wanted to her. Just as long as he didn’t stop.

Chapter End Notes

I’ve finally done it. I’ve finally confused myself with this damn timeline. And I had a typo last chapter, because I didn’t reedit it. This chapter takes place on Saturday. The last Thursday would have been a full week since the story started. I don’t know why Anderson is supposed to be the personification of Frankenstein’s monster. Frankenstein in anime? The only thing close is Dr. Stein. He’s pretty badass, being as he’s got a friggen’ screw coming out of his head. Anderson’s more of a good-guy Frollo. Except without the part about chasing a hunchback down with a sword. At least he’d sing “Hellfire” well.

Also, this Abigail is completely unrelated to the Abigail from my other fics. That Abigail was clearly a historian. Duh. But their personalities are astoundingly parallel, huh? ^o^
It was like someone had set a match on both sides of the link between their minds, and the trails of fire had burned together so close that it was hard to tell where one’s passion ended and the others began. They both drowned in their shared hunger; he couldn’t tell whether her panted exclamations were telling him “No, don’t, stop,” or “No, don’t stop”. Judging by her reaction, he was guessing it was the latter.

“Miss Victoria? Miss Victoria, are you down here!?” Alucard raised his head and tilted it, listening to the sounds down the hall.

“Walter alert,” he rumbled and chuckled as Seras quickly began setting herself to rights. “I’ll take care of it; wait here.” He dissolved into shadows, leaking out of the coffin to rearrange himself in his chair fully clothed. A moment later, the butler stuck his head around the door.

“Alucard, is Miss Seras in here?” The vampire smiled indulgently and nodded.

“She’s in my coffin for the moment,” he replied cryptically and Walter’s gaze became confused. He hoped for the girl’s sake she wasn’t in there for any sort of punishment. He knew that she didn’t like being forced into small spaces. “Is there something you needed?” he nudged the elderly man after a long moment.

“Naturally—it’s the 20th of an odd month, and we all know what that means. Miss Victoria is going to be late; the rookies are already out there waiting.” Alucard’s face actually became shocked, than something akin to guilt washed over his features as Seras burst (thankfully in her pajamas) from the coffin, scrambling to run across the stones.

“No-no-no! I’m never late for exams! What the hell am I doing?!” she squealed in a panic. She backtracked to her master, waving her arms impatiently. He guessed what she wanted and took ahold of her forearm, letting his powers run through her and she emerged from the darkness fully clothed in her police uniform, looking freshly washed and as proper as ever. She took a moment to look down the front of her uniform, which made Walter only the more confused before offering a quick, “I’ve got to go! Thanks Walter!” and making a beeline for the door. Alucard waved his hand and the frenzied Draculina fell into a portal that opened from the ground with a screech. Walter watched in amusement before turning back to his old war partner.

“That was uncharacteristically nice of you,” he admonished teasingly. “You better watch out; she’ll make you soft yet.” The ancient vampire let out a guffaw and reached for his supper.

“I doubt that; besides, you don’t know if I sent her to the training yard or not. I could have plopped her on the east wall.” He poured a glass of wine before grabbing one of the blood packs Walter had brought earlier, mixing the two liquids musingly.

“But you didn’t.” Walter gave Alucard a knowing look before leaving without waiting for a reply. He had things to do before the night was over; Exam Day was always more stressful than any others, and he was behind enough as it was. He didn’t have time to watch a 500-year-old man fall in love against his own will.

Alucard watched him leave before taking a drink of the wine/blood mix, reveling in the flavor. He
loosened his own collar and looked down at the small bites across his collarbone, deciding to keep them there instead of letting them close up. No one would see them, and it’d only make the police girl more embarrassed than she’d been earlier. At least he’d thought to heal hers before she took off. He didn’t want the rookies speculating, after all.

There was a distinct line between new soldiers and old, although they all waited on the same platform. The newer soldiers were shuffling with well-hidden anxiety. They were the best of the best in their own divisions; they had to be, because only top candidates were ever recommended by their peers to the mysterious Hellsing Organization. But compared to the seasoned veterans that waited patiently with them, they looked and felt like green-necked civilians.

“Oi, isn’t this Captain coming? I thought for sure they said to be here by 8:00pm.” A plain-faced man said to the small Asian boy beside him. He thought to himself that the kid was hardly old enough to be a Special Divisions team member, but he kept his silence. Clearly, the young man must have some potential to even get past the auditions to be part of the Entrance Evaluation. The man himself had thought that he’d never make it past the grueling tasks set before him. The Asian nodded in reply.

“Yes, that’s what the email said.” One of the veterans—a ginger-headed man with freckles scattered across his youthful face, long legs, and a nametag that read “K. Roans”—smiled in a friendly manner as he quickly checked his own watch.

“Don’t worry mates; Captain Victoria is never late to the Evaluations. We still have another five minutes to wait.” The rookies gazed in mixed alarm and curiosity; their new captain was that punctual? To the minute, even? Another veteran, this one an older man with a touch of gray in his mousy hair whose name tag simply said “Stevenson”, shook his head slightly and looked back in the direction of the mansion.

“I dunno; it’s not like Mum to be this late. I hope she’d not in trouble with Big Red again.” The other veterans murmured their agreement as the rookies looked on nervously. Big Red? Mum? What kind of place was this? As if answering their unspoken questions, a swirling vortex of shadow and crimson opened in the platform’s surface, regurgitating a buxom blonde woman in a uniform. She lay on the ground for a moment, rubbing her bum before picking herself up. The rookies almost turned tail and ran- not only did this woman apparently travel by Satan; she also had glowing red eyes!

“What the hell?!” the impatient rookie whispered with a subdued shiver. The Asian boy beside him showed no fear, but instead looked quite anxious and a little nauseous. The veterans showed no concern over this, as if women popped out of black holes around here on a daily basis. The woman looked around at the gathered soldiers sheepishly before speaking.

“I’m sorry for making you wait so long. I was… caught up in something.” She giggled to herself before pushing her hair behind her ears. When she opened her eyes again, she was no longer a sweet, slightly creepy girl. The new men instantly recognized a hardened commander and felt more at home. “My name is Captain Seras Victoria. You’ve already met my second, Captain Harry Stevenson. He’s going to be in charge of the Advancement Exams this month. You little neophytes have me to deal with,” she finished with a menacing grin. “I’m sure I don’t have to tell you that maybe a handful of you will pass this test. If you thought the auditions were tough, you might as well go home now.” After a moment of silence, she turned to Stevenson. “I have the Ghouls released from the pens already if you want to go ahead and start them. I know your tests won’t take half as long, so you can join me afterwards or go on home if you want.”

“I’ll probably help you later, then. Come on, men! Let’s get this over with!” he rounded up the
veterans with a single hand motion and the smaller of the two groups tramped off in formation. The impatient, outspoken rookie raised his hand almost-timidly and was called on.

“Captain, did you say… ghouls? Like monsters?” he looked around at the others with a smile. This had to be a joke, right? Monsters didn’t exist, even if black holes apparently did. However, Seras nodded with a serious expression.

“What’s your name, newbie?” she asked first.

“Oh, er- Jonathon Lovell,” he said with a salute. She nodded and he slumped back.

“Well, Lovell: I’m completely serious, no matter how crazy you think I am. And they aren’t monsters; more of a zombie servant if you will. We train our experienced men on moving undead targets for their Advancement Exams. It wouldn’t be fair to do the same for you,” she added irreverently. “The half of you that didn’t shit your pants and died of a heart attack would be killed within five minutes, being as untrained as you are. That’s why you use the stuffed dummies.” The men looked at each other quietly, unsure what to think. Finally, the Asian raised his hand.

“Hiro Yamada, Captain,” he said before she could ask. “You said Ghouls are servants; to whom?”

“Vampires, Yamada.” When the men began to chuckle, she grinned widely and let her fangs glint in the moonlight for a moment. “I assure you, vampires are real. You see, I am one. And another lives on the premises as well, but don’t worry. We don’t bite,” she sneered. The men looked at each other, in uncertainty and fear this time.

“Why-why do you work as vampire hunters then?” Lovell asked.

“We take care of the trash that’s too tough for you. And trust me, there’s a lot of it. Now, enough questions. Let’s get started. I don’t want anyone to learn too much, only to go home and blab about it to the world.” The men followed her silently to the far training field, trying to ignore the unearthly moaning and rapid gunfire that sounded from the other side of raised cement walls the veterans had passed through. They wouldn’t tell. As if anyone would believe them.

Master, you’re making it very hard to concentrate. The one sentence was like a tidal wave crashing down on a lit candle.

“What?!” Integra’s eyes shot open and she felt her face burst into an inferno at the mental chide. Anderson looked at her strangely and she scrambled to push him away, mortified beyond all means. Was he—did he – he wouldn’t dare…. She covered her face, trying to hide the redness in her cheeks from imagined eyes. “Get out of my head!” she screeched finally and Anderson snarled.

“I’ll kill him. I’m going right now to shove a bayonet down his fucking throat.” The man pulled himself up and looked around for his shirt, stopping when a slender hand rested on his forearm.

“He’s spying like a creeping child. Where does he think he can get off scot-free?”

“He can’t help but feel it; besides, he only told me that my state of mind was distracting him. He wasn’t being…himself about it, trust me; he was absolutely serious.” She paused, pulling the sheet up to cover herself. “We made a deal years ago to be completely honest with these things. His emotions drain off into me as well, so I can’t say I blame him for speaking up.”

“Still—a bit of a mood killer, isn’t he?” he said in a somewhat calmer tone, placing his hands on his knees and sighing. “Just when we were getting somewhere,” he added in an undertone. “He’ll not be doing all this when you return home—I will cut off his bloody head and I’m going to hang it
like a wreath on the front door.”

*So now I’m a conversation piece? I’m sure that I’ll get more notice than those table urns of yours.* Integra hissed as he pushed into her mind uninvited and seemed to make himself at home. *If I can’t have my fun, you can’t either.*

*Go away, you pigheaded bloodsucker! I’m not in the mood to deal with you.* Integra crossed her arms, glaring a spot on the wall. Anderson watched her curiously as her expression went slack while she spoke to her vampire.

*No one’s in “the mood” anymore,* Alucard revealed cynically. *Walter dealt with that a few hours ago. I forgot the Police Girl had plans for this evening; otherwise I’d never have gotten her into my coffin.* She gasped at the onslaught of icky mental images of her servants together. Curling her lip slightly, she pushed against him in warning.

*What did I tell you when you brought her to the mansion? My orders haven’t changed, servant.* She felt a wave of bitter compliance and a smaller, more hidden flutter of deep affection for the blonde captain. She pretended for his sake not to notice the latter as he huffed at her assertion of authority.

*I have not forgotten, my master. But that doesn’t stop me from doing what I can.* She heard the open rebelliousness in his tone. *The Police Girl hasn’t rejected my advances yet. In fact, I do believe I’ll begin courting her, if I happen to remember how to go about it correctly.* She briefly imagined her vampire dressed in a bard’s outfit, off to sing songs and entice his lady-love as she sat on her balcony. She hid it from him quickly; he had no need to see what silly things her mind made up concerning him.

*Read a book on it, Alucard. And I’ll try to be a bit quieter. I can’t help it if my husband is proficient with his hands. It must be the bayonets.* She grinned outwardly as his mind recoiled in abhorrence and pushed him out, “locking” the door behind him before returning to her senses. She saw Anderson watching her from his spot on the bed inquiringly.

*“Something funny?”* he asked casually and she shook her head.

*“No, I just take as many opportunities to disgust him as I can. He deserves it.”* He half-chuckled at the idea of the vampire getting a taste of his own medicine. *“I pity Agent Victoria, actually. He wants to court her.”* The priest wrinkled his nose at the thought.

*“He actually plans on wooing the little blonde lass?”* At her amused nod he made an uncertain sound. *“It has to be some sort of mind game.”* Integra shrugged.

*“In all honesty, it wouldn’t surprise me if it were.”* She caught his eye and sent him a fiery gaze. *“Now, back to the important things,”* she suggested as she tugged him over by his arm. He obliged her, moving across the bed and toying with the sheet she still held. *“I believe you no longer have the upper hand.”* A slow grin unfolded across his face and he rested an arm on her shoulder, bringing her down easily with minimum effort.

*“Is that so?”* he teased as he tried to hold her down, only to have her wiggle like a snake and evade his hands before trying to push him on the bed. He gave her a condescending look as she struggled to overturn him one-handed, eyebrows rising as she growled under her breath at the effort. *“It looks like you don’t have much of anything. I can still hold you down, you know.”* She smiled impishly and raked her nails lightly down over his stomach, making him groan softly. The sound echoed all throughout her body. If her servant was water, then he was petrol.

He rolled her on her back quickly, ignoring her sharp protest as he ran his hands over her bare
thighs and pulled her body towards him. She gave a low whine at his display of dominance, shifting in a silent demand for him to let go. He didn’t notice (or more likely just didn’t care what she wanted him to do) and she felt blunt teeth scrape her shoulder, causing her to gasp. She stilled under his touch and her eyes closed of their own accord.

He had to have more than two hands; she didn’t know how he could simultaneously be tangled in her hair, teasing her ribs, stroking her legs and brushing her bangs from her face. However, it was quite possible that her mind was lagging, trying to quickly process the feelings before they overcame her senses. She arched up as he ground his hips against her, his pants chafing her sensitized skin and reminding her that while was still half-dressed, she only had her knickers.

“Sto—wait,” she managed to say. He looked down at her irascibly. “I want to-to do something,” she panted. He tilted his head and opened his mouth to ask a question, but she held up a hand and shook her head. “Just lay back, alright?” His mouth tightened, but he collapsed beside her on the bed. She felt him itching to move, his muscles coiled and filled with restless energy. She waited another minute before rolling over and looking at him before heading to his feet. He rose up to watch her and she pushed him back gently. “Don’t worry. Just relax,” she smiled. He gave her a wary look and returned to the bed, still trying to watch her.

She slowly peeled off one sock, her fingers running lightly over the pads of his feet. His toes contracted and she grinned. “Ticklish?” She looked back at him, almost laughing at the frown he sent her way before kicking off his other sock himself. “And here I thought patience was a virtue.”

“You’ve used up the last of mine, woman. Hurry up,” he snapped hungrily. She slowly crept up the bed to his waist and unzipped his pants at a snail’s pace. He impatiently raised his hips for her and she slid them off unhurriedly before letting them slide off the edge of the bed. Tilting her head, she studied him curiously. She’d heard the few women that ever attended Hellsing’s annual events chattering about their husbands and whether they were a “boxers or briefs” man. She’d never really given it much thought, but as she stared at the plain black boxers she immediately knew that they were right. Anderson wouldn’t have been a briefs sort of person; she felt it, even if she didn’t know what it had to do with anything. “What?” he bristled, tapping his fingers irritably on the mattress. “You wear boxers. I was just thinking about that.” He huffed at her words, beginning to sit up and she held up her hands again. “No; I’m not finished.”

“Well hurry it up then! I can’t be waiting on you forever!” She frowned and leisurely pulled herself up nose-to-nose with him, rising up as he moved to kiss her. “First you spend nearly a week trying to get me this way; now you keep stopping me,” he complained as he flopped back into the pillows. “I should’ve just forgotten about marrying you, seeing as I’m still no better off for it.” She laughed softly and placed a hand on his chest, feeling his heart thundering beneath her fingers. She was surprised that his pulse didn’t move visibly beneath his skin- she could almost feel the individual vibrations of each chamber opening and closing through all the layers of skin and muscle.

She leaned down, planning on placing her head on his chest to hear uneven thumping better. When she came close enough that her breath fanned across his skin she felt the heart lurch beneath her hand, speeding up to near-impossible levels that she’d never have imagined it could handle. Her eyes travelled up to his face, seeing that his eyes were scrunched closed.

“Alexander.” No reply. “Why did you ask me to marry you? Why me?” His eyes opened and he groaned aloud.

“Are we really going to talk, now of all times? What is it with you women?” His gaze was emerald fire on her, insistent and frustrated. She realized that the entire time she’d been under him, he
hadn’t uttered a single sound. She had the urge to make him moan, fighting it back long enough to give him a scathing glare at his questions. Suddenly, inspiration struck. He’d talk, whether he wanted to or not. She had to have an honest answer before she could go any farther. The sudden question—of her own abilities, of what drew them together—it stuck like a barb to her thoughts and just wouldn’t leave her alone.

She ran her hand down his stomach, her palm flat against his abs before gliding beneath the waistband of his underwear. She barely brushed his inner thigh and he inhaled sharply, muscles contracting beneath her body and hands crushing the mattress between his fingers. She retreated and his hand shot out to grab her wrist, squeezing a little too hard and she winced. “Keep going,” he ordered in a ragged whisper.

“Hmm?” she questioned wrapping her fingers around his hand and squeezing before letting go. “If you wanted something, you should have answered me before.” He looked at her disbelievingly before collapsing back into the bed with a grunt.

“I dinnae,” he finally answered. She shook her head, pulling towards the edge of the bed.

“Not good enough.” He hissed under his breath and she knew she had a split second to react before he tackled her. She jumped on top of him, straddling his stomach as she held his shoulders down. He gave her a deadpan look but didn’t bother breaking her frail hold.

“That’s the last thing I’m thinking about right now,” he muttered as he stared at her breasts before sighing. “I didn’t question it then, and I haven’t got around to questioning it now. Some things, God brings us to for a reason that we dinnae about. But I’m sure He’s only brought me here to put me through a trial of patience. There’s yer answer.”

“Now, was that so hard?” she cooed down at him, feeling rather empowered. She rocked back slightly, forgetting about where she was and they connected with a jolt. She gasped and pulled back, feeling him jerk underneath her and his hands found their way to her legs, holding her in place. She looked around at his hands, feeling the slight tug of her skin from where he’d bitten her earlier and grinned devilishly. He narrowed his eyes suspiciously at her as she leaned down, rocking back against him again and licking her way up his neck.

“Sweet Jesus,” he mumbled in her ear, his hands sliding off her to grab the sheets again as he arched his neck for her. She sighed against his skin, nipping his earlobe and listening to the answering growl in satisfaction. She let him set the pace, grinding against him and returning every last gesture he’d given her. Soon enough his growls became moans and he was writhing against her, fists wrapped in the sheets to keep from grabbing onto her and shattering her bones. She whimpered softly as she rubbed against him, lost in the sensations. She was craving so much more, almost crying in relief as he somehow managed to be on top again and his hands were untangled, tugging at the last of their clothing before surging against her.

“Alex,” she pled breathlessly, no longer caring about how weak she sounded. “Please.” He grabbed her upper arms tightly and she grit her teeth as the slight pain shot through her. At her wince, he moved and grabbed the mattress again before sighing against her shoulder.

“Ready?” he whispered and she nodded, trying to relax. Surely, if tensing at the doctor’s made her hurt than here it couldn’t be any better. She wiggled her toes, remembering that someone somewhere had said that doing that meant you weren’t tensing your muscles at all. He slid into her quickly, smoothly and her eyes widened at the feeling.

It was uncomfortable; but not in the agonizingly painful way like slicing her own throat open had been, not like she thought it would be. It was more of the fact that she could feel a part of her body
that she usually never noticed, combined with being stretched out and the need to move her hips to dispel the discomfort.

He was unmoving above her, his breathing harsh in her ear as he kept his eyes closed. She looked over at him, fighting the urge to move. “It’s alright now,” she whispered, unsure why she felt the need to be quiet. He nodded sharply, trying to control his lungs.

“Too long,” he managed to say after a minute. She nodded once, letting him take control even if she wanted to hurry up and quench the fire in her stomach. He was more experienced at this, after all. After tonight, she’d let things go her way. Finally, he began to move slowly, evenly. He stayed balanced perfectly above her, eyes closed in concentration as he moved them both.

It was refined torture, how slow he was. She quivered beneath him, unable to stop the sounds from escaping her throat as she clutched at him. It was bliss, unlike anything she’d ever done to herself—she’d never imagined that it would feel so right, so all-consuming beneath him. A part of her, the ever-shrinking coherent part reasoned that it was clear how this became synonymous with sin. It was delightful and fiery and tearing her mind apart while building it up, all at the same time.

They were sweating; a fine sheen that covered their bodies and undid all the showering beforehand but neither of them even cared at the moment. She begged him to go faster, but she didn’t catch if she actually voiced the plea or only thought it. He didn’t quicken, but he did shift so that they were both working together, holding her steady with one elbow though his touch was light as a feather on her skin.

She was icy-hot; unable to keep her hands still as they fluttered from his hair down his arms and back. It seemed like no time at all before he shifted again and she gasped, biting her lip and digging her nails into his back hard enough to draw blood as the world collapsed around her into the most exquisite sensation; better than listening to a Siren’s song, better than being hypnotized by a vampire—it was unlike anything she’d ever felt before. She heard the tearing sound and came back to reality as he let out a long groan and slowly stilled above her.

“Fuck it all!” he shouted after a moment and she jerked in surprise as he rolled off of her, holding two equal handfuls of sheet and mattress padding in his hands. He threw them across the room, eyeing the two holes that he’d left in the bed before his words degenerated into muttered Latin curses and jumbled parts of Italian, English, and Scots as he moved about the room, throwing things here and there as he searched for something to fix the mess with. After a moment, he turned to stare at her on the bed, where she was trying not to laugh at him. She was still on a high, and besides he looked hilarious stomping about the room, both angry and naked.

“It’s alright, we can figure out how to explain it away tomorrow,” she offered and he snarled at her, although his anger was obviously directed back at himself. He was looking at her arms and she glanced down to see a bruise already starting to blossom on her pale skin in the noticeable shape of fingers. She touched it gingerly, happy to see that they didn’t hurt half as bad as it was looking.

“What, this? I don’t mind,” she said honestly. “It’s not so bad.”

“Not so bad?” he parroted before throwing his hands in the air. “God above, why me?” he questioned the air before gathering up the thrown padding and walking over to try and stuff it back. She scrambled off the bed, tearing the rest of the shredded sheet off before helping him pat the stuffing back in as best they could. He sighed again before searching around on the floor and coming back up with his underwear, slipping it on before lying on the stripped bed wearily. She tsked and gathered the larger comforter, throwing it over him before climbing onto the bed herself and curling up next to him. After a moment, he wrapped his arm around her and buried his face in her hair. “Why me?” he asked again, this time to her.
“Didn’t you say that God gives us things for reasons we don’t know about?” she said quietly, adjusting his arm around her waist and leaning back against his chest.

“I dinnae mean it,” he argued drowsily.

“Well, be happy he gave you a wife that doesn’t mind it when you destroy things; one that has money to buy us things that even you can’t break.” She closed her eyes, feeling his breath on her scalp as he chuckled before relaxing.

Alucard didn’t mind Stevenson. Seras knew this by the way Baskerville acted. Usually, the intangible dog didn’t enjoy being around humans and stuck by Seras alone. But when Stevenson came round, the dog would let the man pet him, thumping his tail on the ground with neither like nor dislike for the hand scratching his ears.

“Would you believe that Roans is the only one to pass? He’s still so young.” Stevenson smiled as Baskerville gave him a complimentary lick and wiped the drool off on his pants. Seras winced as a bomb exploded somewhere in the middle of the Evaluation site and nodded.

“Of course I can. You were pretty young yourself, when you first started moving up the ranks. It seems like only yesterday, instead of a couple years ago.” Stevenson shrugged and made a face. It was hard to imagine that while he was steadily approaching forty, his partner had been here longer than he had and wasn’t a day over 20 at most. He felt a small pain of sadness; surely Seras got tired of watching men come and go, but she still looked forward to Exam Days every other month.

“You’d think that they’d hold off on Evaluations since we’re in the middle of a crisis,” she muttered, rubbing Baskerville with one boot. The dog rolled on the ground, letting his belly be rubbed.

“We always need new soldiers,” Stevenson argued. A shift in the air behind them had the hairs on his neck standing up involuntarily.

“He’s right, Police Girl. In our line of work, fresh meat is few and far between.” Another blast came from the walled simulation, this time accompanied by screams. “Although I doubt anyone is going to pass this month.” The ancient vampire walked over to stand beside his fledgling, looking out over the trainees with a smirk.

“Don’t be surprised. Harry tells me that Roans passed his Advancements. I’m actually sort of proud for him,” Seras mused. Alucard looked at her questioningly and she sighed, rolling her eyes. “The man-whore fodder from last year,” she rumbled in an imitation of his voice. “Remember, with the red hair?”

“Ah yes, the long-legged one. I’m surprised; maybe I should take a second look at him,” Alucard drawled mockingly. Seras frowned and then looked down at the pad on the platform, where the light had turned from scattered reds to a uniform blinking green.

“Oh good. They’re all out and no one died.” She looked down at her notepad, where chicken-scrawl accompanied next to all of the names declared who she thought was fit to move on. “I guess I better go talk to them. They astonished me, actually. I didn’t think that talkative one would make it. Or the little kid either.” She kept muttering to herself as she walked away, already immersed in her own world and leaving the two men behind. Stevenson looked up at Alucard, who returned his gaze inquisitively.

“Were you the reason she was almost late?” the man asked boldly. Alucard smiled enigmatically and moved on to follow his fledgling. Stevenson looked down at the black dog still on the
platform and bent down to scratch his head again.

“I dunno about them Midians. Can you explain them to me?” The dog opened his mouth and let out a sneeze before flopping onto the ground with a huff. The captain also sat, rubbing the dog’s soft, slightly translucent fur. “Yeah, I don’t get it either.”

Chapter End Notes

Original Review had many references to schwanzstuckers. (°____°) Woof.
Alucard could name on one hand the times in his existence that he’d been “content”. It just didn’t happen that often. Shifting his hips on the silken interior of his coffin, he lay with the lid open and gazed at the support beams running across his ceiling. He was utterly content here, and he couldn’t figure out why.

Seras wasn’t there; she still had reports to file, folders to fill, and men to badge and brief and send home to recuperate from their exhausting trials before she could rest her head. He highly doubted she’d join him this day, although she’d have made the effort if he’d asked it. So, it wasn’t her that was contributing to his satisfied state.

Integra was still asleep; he had been forced out of her mind, but the barriers had fallen when she’d slipped into slumber and he felt her relaxed mind comfortably dreaming about what he could only assume was generally pleasant things. At least she wasn’t having nightmares. But even though he’d checked on her before backing out and leaving her to her new mate, she wasn’t responsible for his eased mind either.

He mused serenely as he watched spiders make their homes in the corners of his room. He was full, having eaten before bed. The silk was comfy and he felt the reenergizing power of the soil beneath his body. The air was neither too hot nor too cold, which was rare in the basement. His mind was tired, sleepy with the coming day, but not weary as he’d been for the past few years. All in all, he felt lazy, eager to lie in the bed all night to keep the feeling going. Content. He hadn’t felt this way in God knows how long. 200 years? 400 years? He couldn’t remember, but the feeling wasn’t foreign to him so somewhere along the line he’d experienced it before.

A muffled thump came from down the hall and he felt his way to the source with shadows. It seemed as though Seras had finally turned in for the night; her body had made the noise as it collapsed on the mattress. He sniffed absently and returned to his comfortable position.

He felt a bit sympathetic towards his police girl; having to take care of an army of men wasn’t an easy chore, especially when you had to do a lot of it on your own. At least she had that mousy-haired captain to help her when need be. He wasn’t bad sort of fellow, as far as humans went. At least, he never bothered Alucard and managed to keep out of the way, as well as keeping the blonde occupied for long periods of time.

“Turning in already?” Walter’s mock-surprised voice echoed, which meant he’d just poked his head in from the hallway. Alucard motioned, giving permission with one hand for the elderly man to enter. The butler walked across the room and looked down at him, his eyes twinkling in amusement. “If I didn’t know any better, I’d say a bit of Miss Victoria’s laziness is rubbing off on you.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Walter.” Alucard shifted again and let his arms hang languidly over the rim of his bed. “I’m merely basking in my newfound ease.”

“Oh?” Walter shrugged to himself as he picked up the remains of the vampire’s meal. “And what’s brought about this so-called ease? Hm?” Alucard gave a lazy shrug, rolling his shoulders as best he could in the slightly cramped space.
“No idea. But it’s here and I’m enjoying it.” Walter smiled mysteriously and nodded as he turned to leave with the tray of discarded blood packets. “Walter?”

“Yes, Alucard?” The butler looked back at the arm hanging over the coffin lid. A long moment passed before the vampire spoke again.

“What do women enjoy? As gifts, I mean.” Walter turned fully around and placed the tray back on the end table as he thought.

“This is for Miss Victoria, I presume?” he finally replied knowingly. Alucard pulled himself from the coffin and walked over to sit in his chair silently, a hand on his chin as he stared at the wall mindlessly. “I do believe most women enjoy small trinkets or flowers. But Miss Victoria—she’s not like most women. She’s sweet, but a bit of a tomboy.” He smiled with a mischievous luster in his eyes. “And one hell of a woman. If I were forty years younger….” he muttered to himself. Alucard sneered at the butler, shaking his head.

“You’re too domesticated for her,” he teased. Walter pretended to look miffed and waved his hand. “You have no idea what you’re talking about. You only see me during work hours.” He laughed at his own joke before returning to his previous musing expression. “If she were a human, I’d of advised you to buy her some candies.”

“That won’t work now, I’m afraid.” Alucard leaned back in his seat, crossing his legs and lacing his fingers. “I’m too old for this,” he decided finally.

“You may be right,” Walter agreed. “But she’s not, otherwise you wouldn’t bother.” Alucard nodded silently in answer. “Hm. Well, what sort of things does she like?” Alucard shrugged, prompting Walter to narrow his eyes. “Honestly; do you even talk to her at all?”

“What is it with everyone in this house and talking?” the vampire answered crossly. “I don’t even know what it is you mean. I never talked to anyone in my life. I order people around. That’s all I’ve ever done.”

“Converse, Alucard.” Walter rolled his eyes good-naturedly. “Speak to her. Ask her questions. Have a conversation. It’s what we peasant folk do.”

“Peasants,” Alucard humphed. Walter picked up the tray, walking to the door.

“Yes. Seras didn’t grow up as you did, Alucard. She’s practically the opposite of royalty.” He disappeared down the hall, his boots clicking on the stones as he climbed the stairs to the upper levels. Alucard rubbed his fangs together pensively, turning the butler’s words over in his mind. *Opposite….*

Seras turned the page, biting her lip as she read. She had been working on her latest book for a while now, and she was enjoying every minute of the nail-biting police romance. The main character was in a life-or-death situation, and she just couldn’t put the book down although she knew it was well past dawn. She had to see if Roderick would lose his life; if he did, how would Janice take the loss? She was already a borderline mental case as it was.

“Police Girl.” The quiet voice had her screaming in surprise and jumping out of the bed. Alucard stood at the coffin-bed’s foot, his eyes widening at her reaction. “What’s wrong with you?”

“You—you—God, Master! You scared the living hell out of me!” she panted, holding one hand over her heart as she fanned herself with the book. He frowned and she shook her head at him. “Don’t
bother, alright? I’m tired—I wasn’t paying attention to my surroundings. I know, I know.”

“If you’re tired, why are you up past dawn?” he countered, crossing his arms. She shrugged and turned down the page’s corner before placing the book on her nightstand.

“I’m so tired that I couldn’t sleep, if that makes any sense. My body is restless; I thought reading might help calm me down a bit.” She mimicked his stance, crossing her own arms and shifting from foot to foot.

“Ah.” They stood in silence, her fidgeting under his gaze. Finally she squirmed for the last time and scratched her neck.

“Um, Master? Did you… need something?” she asked hesitantly. He looked around the room before going to sit at her table, motioning for her to take the other seat. She did, tugging at the hem of her pajamas as she became the object of his attention once more. She tapped the table with the palms of her hands, unsure of why he was just sitting there. He never came in her room unless it was to sleep or get her for some reason. “So-er, I thought you already had gone to bed,” she said with an awkward cough.

“I am not yet tired,” he replied, taking off his glasses and twirling them between his fingers. She drummed her fingers on the table before clearing her throat and looking away, across the room. “You finished processing the men.”

“Huh? Oh, yeah. Um—five made it through in the end.” She wound a strand of hair repeatedly around her finger. “Five,” she repeated softly.

“And they show great prowess? As far as humans go?”

“I guess so….” They both looked around the room, catching the other’s eye for a split-second before looking down at the table between them. “I’m sorry, what did you need me for?” she asked again.

“I thought that you wanted to talk.” She looked up at him, surprised. Yeah, but I didn’t expect you to be so weird about it! She cleared her throat again and leaned her elbows on the table.

“Oh. Um, yeah, I guess. W-what did you want to talk about?” she asked curiously, looking at him through her lashes.

“What do you enjoy?” The question caught her by surprise and she blinked at him stupidly for a moment before licking her lips.

“Uh-lots of things, I guess. Why?”

“Something to talk about.” Seras’ eyes shifted to the side for a moment before she shrugged.

“I enjoy working here. What do you enjoy?” He glared at her for a moment, as if she wasn’t supposed to ask questions.

“Killing.”

“Oh, right.” She slumped down in her chair and tapped her bare feet on the floor. “Is that all?”

“Yes.” Some conversation. They sat in silence for a moment more before he stood.

“Good day, Police Girl.” He turned and walked out the door. She watched him leave, sitting at the
table a minute more before walking across the room to shut the door. She caught sight of herself in
the mirror and ran a hand through her hair.

“What the hell was *that* all about?”

*It was chaos—shouts, screams, calls in both French and English as everyone ran around in fear—
and he just stood and watched the world burn. He finally understood the meaning of the word
“Godforsaken”; there was no religion here, no deity who cared two shits about the men dying and
writhing on the ground in pain with their eyes and faces melting as the gas burned them.*

*He turned and walked away from it; there was an enemy to kill, but there was no way he could get
through the no man’s land. He had a plan in the back of his mind—go through the city, circle back,
and kill as many of the bastards as he could before they finally shot him down. He walked through
the unguarded city gates. The men who’d been standing up in the towers that morning were
hanging off the side of the iron gates, their eviscerated bodies already swarming with insects and
birds. He didn’t give it a second glance as he passed through, intent on his solo mission.*

*A man from his own regiment—Irving or something, he didn’t know him personally but he’d seen
the man around from time to time in the barracks—ran out from behind a shell-shocked building,
bleeding from at least five different wounds. The soldier saw him and turned, holding up a hand
piteously. He saw the poor soul’s throat had been torn apart in some awful way—he was a dead
man walking.*

*Another man walked out slowly from behind the soldier, laughing and calling in a foreign
language to the bleeding soul. He watched in awe as the stranger stepped into the moonlight; the
stranger’s mouth was covered in blood, but there were no wounds on his body. His sharpened teeth
glinted in the moonlight, and his eyes burned hellfire. The shadows around his body seemed to
move of their own accord. *Demon-spawn….*

*The soldier called out in fright, but the stranger didn’t notice his audience as he grabbed the
weakened man and *drank* from his wounds. An eternity later, the soldier’s drained lifeless body
was dropped unceremoniously on the ground. The stranger ran a hand across his mouth, smearing
the red liquid across his skin. The stranger noticed him out of the corner of his eye and turned. He
froze, not knowing what to do. The stranger’s eyes lit up in the shadows and he grinned, baring
savage canines that were far too long to be human. He suddenly remembered the stories of
monsters he’d heard as a boy. Banshees, Fachen, Sluagh, Vampires.*

*The stranger—the *creature* lifted an arm and soldiers came from the shadows. They weren’t
human; more dead than alive, they moaned and reached their putrid arms out like zombies, the
bubbling marks of gas still gracing their discolored skin. The creature smiled even wider. It was
clearly showing him the fate that the demon had in store for him.*

*He backed away against a building, watching the horde that must have crawled from the belly of
Hell itself advance. No one was going to save him. The others were dying back on the battlefield.
He was alone. He didn’t want to become part of the evil before his eyes. He knew what had to be
done.*

*He should have called to his mother, begging her forgiveness for being a horrible son. He should
have prayed to God, although a fat lot of good it would have done—as much as he’d sinned in his
short life, God would never accept a tainted soul like him. He should have done a lot of things. But
he didn’t. Pulling out his gun, he fell to his knees and pointed it at the Dark Puppeteer and his
advancing army of the dead.*
“Fuck you.” He swung the gun around, biting the cold steel hard enough to chip a tooth and pulled the trigger.

He shot up in bed, sweating and unable to breathe as the phantom pain and a gunshot echoed in his mind. The darkness was surrounding him; the only light coming from a heavily curtained window. Where am I? he thought frantically before a cool hand grabbed his shoulder firmly.

“Shh….” The whispered sound jerked him out of his panic and he realized that he was gasping audibly in the silence of the room. “It’s alright; it was just a nightmare.” The soft voice calmed him somewhat and he fell back against the bed, still breathing heavily. She settled herself against him, patting him on the arm comfortingly before wrapping herself up in the blankets once more. In a moment she was asleep again. He listened to her quiet, uniform breathing until exhaustion took its toll and he fell into a mercifully dreamless stupor.

She put the finished touches on her latest creation, watching it rise and stumble around with soft trills. She laughed, patting her book back into the bookcase as she watched with wild eyes as he moaned and finally stood still in the middle of the room. She walked over and pressed him against her, running her fingers through his silken hair as she stared out the window at the moon hanging low in the sky.

“I didn’t think I had it in me. My soul is already so used up, and it cost an arm and a leg for the extra power. But now that we’re together again, we can finally have our revenge.”

Chapter End Notes

Juju’s Confessions: I love how in Episode 2 Walter just goes real pissed when Sir Irons belittles Integra. “HOW DARE YOU SIR!” Like- Walter’s really just appalled that he’d be such an ass and just come out and say that it’s her fault. You go, Walter. Don’t let them hate on Sir Integra.
Anderson woke up, disoriented. He sat up, looking around and saw the red digits on the phone blinking 5:30 am. He rubbed one eye, furrowing his brow as he looked around the hotel room. That’s right; a nightmare. He relaxed then as his mind settled into its usual pattern.

“It was a nightmare,” he repeated softly to the muted television. He looked down at his side to see the remote, still held by his dozing wife. He was surprised that she was fully dressed and showered; as light a sleeper as he was, she had to have been very quiet for him to not wake. Or he was very tired; one of the two. He reached out a hand to touch her shoulder, shaking her slightly. He had to practically throw her off the bed before she opened her eyes to look at him.

“Oh, are you awake?” she mumbled as she struggled to sit up.

“Are you?” he retorted as she yawned and stretched, her suit jacket riding up her back with the motion. She shrugged before rolling out of the unmade bed and reaching for her bag, which was all packed up on the table.

“I couldn’t go back to sleep when I woke up earlier; well, I guess I did but I still went around getting everything ready. I thought that as long as you were sleeping soundly, I might as well leave you alone.” She eyed him strangely and he prepared himself for the question he knew was coming. “You had a nightmare last night,” she accused. He scoffed and looked off towards the wall, crossing his arms. He heard her walk over to his side and she placed a hand on his shoulder. “Does that happen a lot?” she asked quietly.

“No. Maybe,” he grumbled as she ran her hand up his neck and through his hair. “Dinnae bother with it.”

“Hmm.” She left him alone and sat back down on the bed with her pack, turning the volume up slightly on the television until it was barely audible. “Get showered and dressed. We’re going home.”

“To Hellsing?” he asked, slightly surprised. She hadn’t mentioned anything about it before, but then again they had been rather… busy. She nodded, her eyes never leaving the screen as the world news flashed the headlines out at them. “What for?”

“I need my resources. If I want to do proper research, I need to have access to more than the normal population. I need my libraries and secret government contacts. I daresay you could probably get in touch with your officials more easily as well.” She sat and listened for a moment as the news reporter talked of a dormant Argentinian volcano before continuing. “Walter already knows that I’m coming home. And he agrees with me; I don’t need to be out investigating. That’s what Alucard and Seras are for.”

“Eh.” Anderson rolled out of bed and headed for the bathroom, grabbing his clothing on the way. He really didn’t want to go to that mansion, swarming with Protestants and his arch nemesis. But he knew that before long he’d of had to go anyway. Integra couldn’t live at the orphanage; she needed to be where she could command her troops. And she wouldn’t have enjoyed all those noisy children.
He sat on the rim of the tub and closed his eyes, intent on taking this short time of peace for his morning prayers. He steeled himself and prayed for self-control and as much patience as the saints could spare for him. He was in for a long day.

“It’s strange. There’s not as many soldiers here as I thought there’d be.” Anderson looked out over the broad lawn, where only a few soldiers stood on patrol. Most of them looked rather nervous, but he only attributed that to himself. Most people gave him the same look when they saw him approaching. He was rather intimidating at first sight. But Integra took one look at one of the men and frowned deeply. The man’s uniform revealed him to be a captain of some sort. His hair was mixed gray and brown with bangs that hung down over blue eyes. His nametag read “Stevenson”, but above that someone had written “Chief” in marker. He saluted as he saw the blondes heading towards him.

“Good to have you back, Sir.” The man smiled, his two front teeth slightly bucktoothed. Integra nodded and looked around the yard before eyeing the quiet mansion. At her unspoken question, the man shuffled slightly. “Mum’s in a bit of a state. Most of the others high-tailed it out of here while they still could,” he explained, his eyes jumping to the fountain and back. He appeared amused rather than fearful, though. Integra seemed to understand the strange explanation and nodded, her forehead creasing.

“And to think I left poor Walter alone with them for a whole year,” she acknowledged guiltily as she walked through the doors. She stopped, looking up at the chandelier in the foyer before taking in a deep breath. “Home.”

“You missed it?” Anderson asked as he shimmied in behind her as best he could, standing off to the side and looking around curiously. He’d never even seen a picture of the mansion on the inside before; it looked empty, but nicely decorated all the same. An elderly man with a ponytail stuck his head from an opening in the ground, where stairs could be seen disappearing into the gloom. His eyes lit up when he saw the pair standing in the foyer.

"Miss Integra," he gushed warmly as he practically jogged to where she was standing. He held her at arm’s length, his eyes twinkling as he took in her appearance. “I’m so glad to see you well, Miss-er, well, Sir Integra. You have no idea how concerned I’ve been these past few weeks.” Integra smiled, more warmly than Anderson had ever seen her smile towards anyone, even himself. She even wrapped the old man in a brisk hug before backing away.

“I’m always going to be that little girl to you, aren’t I Walter?” she teased him. Anderson realized with a start that this was Hellsing’s infamous butler, the Angel of Death. Really? He thought to himself as he eyed the man with a newfound wariness. Walter caught the scrutiny and looked the priest over quickly before offering a bow.

“I beg your pardon; allow me to introduce myself. I am Walter Dornez, head retainer to Hellsing. I’m pleased to be of service to you, Paladin Anderson,” he chirped politely as he looked up at the man, his indigo eyes shining eloquently. Anderson nodded and after a moment held out a hand for the old man to shake.

“I suppose I’m not needing to be introducing myself then,” he replied awkwardly. Walter grabbed the hand in a firm shake before backing away.

Pleasantries can wait, Walter,” Integra butted in. “I’m more concerned about Captain Stevenson’s explanation.” Walter frowned and his mouth settled into a thin line.
"I told Miss Victoria not to write that on his nametag. No one wants to hear about why he’s called Chief by everyone in East London." He colored as Integra’s eyes bugged and she shook her head. "Yes, well—apparently you can be too drunk."

"Walter—my men are missing because of ‘Miss Victoria’, according to him. Why are all my men defecting at the sight of one vampire?" Walter cleared his throat, clearly trying to beat around the bush as long as possible. "Walter," she repeated in a more warning tone, one slender eyebrow rising into her hairline.

"Yes—hmm." Walter looked out at the fountain. "It seems that Seras and Alucard reached another one of their little impasses last night." His own eyebrows rose and Integra groaned, rubbing her temples.

"I don’t want to know. What was it?" she growled impatiently. Anderson looked between the two with interest.

"You’re telling me that the little devoted follower actually fights with the demon?" he crowed after a moment. Integra looked up at him crossly before sighing and turning back to Walter. The butler coughed once more and placed his hands behind his back, clearly trying not to smile as he conveyed the story.

"Well, it came to my attention a day or so ago that Alucard had an issue with Seras’ ‘hair-soap’, as he so articulately put it. This culminated in his refusal to allow Miss Victoria to bathe at all.” Integra wrinkled her nose. "Oh, it gets worse; you see, he also insisted that her scent be disguised."

"How so?" Integra asked weakly, her face twisting in disgust. Anderson’s expression mimicked hers and they shared a look before listening to Walter with growing distaste.

"Well, it looked like a pair of oversized cats. Except that one was most definitely not purring." Anderson shivered in revulsion and Integra shook her head, lamenting poor Seras’ fate. "Yes, very much so. And after a while of this, Seras apparently told him that if he didn’t stop—and I quote —‘rubbing his sweat all over her’, she was going to go to drastic measures. Alucard both seemed to take offense to being called sweaty and refused to comply with her orders."

"And?" Integra asked, both inquisitive and repulsed. Walter looked out to the fountain, unable to hide the grin that spread across his face at the remembrance of it.

"And so she went and dunked herself in the fountain outside and let the spray fall over her head. Then they stood there and shouted at each other for all of five minutes before Miss Victoria burst into tears and went to hide in her coffin. Alucard’s been alternating between making the house shake and skulking around the basement in a dead pout. They’ve put each other in a mood again, to make a long story short.” The man shrugged carelessly as Integra huffed. Anderson rolled his eyes; they were talking about these creatures like they were spoiled children and not undead adults. And from the sound of it, that’s about the same way they acted.

"In other words, everything’s completely normal," Integra muttered after a moment. Walter chuckled and took the pack from her hands.

"As always. Now, I suppose you’ll be wanting to show our newest arrival around the mansion, so I’ll take this from you and make sure everything goes where it’s supposed to. I have a bit more work to do before I head out with the cook, so dinner may be a bit late. To make up for that, I think we’ll have roast beef for tonight? Hm?" he smiled at her and Integra nodded.

"Sounds delicious." She turned to Anderson. "Come, let’s go.” She made her way up the stairs and
he followed, nodding in farewell to the butler.

“So you’ll just leave them two at it down below?” he asked as they strolled down the winding hallways.

“Might as well. Alucard will sulk for a few days and then he’ll be back to normal. Seras is a bit harder, but she’ll come around eventually. They do this every few months.” She made a face. “At least it proves that there are lengths even she won’t go to.” They walked in silence until Anderson cleared his throat.

“Do vampires sweat?” he asked her. She was the vampire expert; she ought to know. She stopped in the hallway, thinking for a moment before she let out a short laugh.

“I honestly never thought to check.”

_Stupid Master. Stupid shampoo. Stupid clothes._ Seras curled up within familiar silk and earth interior, sniffling intermittently and letting herself air dry. The warm, stale air was actually a comfort and she rubbed her eyes before stilling as someone knocked on her coffin lid.

“Mum?” It was Roans. She barely opened the lid, peering out. It could easily have been Alucard playing a trick on her. No, there was the round face with the smattering of freckles; the hazel eyes blinking at her with concern in their depths. “Captain told me to come check on you before I left for the day.” When she didn’t respond, his voice became more pleading. “Come on; I got you a towel, so at least dry your hair off.” True to his word, a fluffy bathroom towel appeared next to the crack. She let the coffin lid rise up enough to grab the towel and bring it back into her warmth. Roans sat on the floor, his head at level with her mattress. “Everyone’s on your side in this one. You’re right; you gotta take a shower sometimes. Otherwise you’ll be gross and greasy-haired.” Yep, that was Roans all right. So blunt, and not even realizing it.

“Thank you.” She didn’t know if she was thanking him for the towel, or the encouragement, or for him just being there and checking on her. But whatever she meant, he must have caught it because he smiled and blushed as he stood up.

“I’m going now. I’ve got a plate of food waiting on me at home. See you tomorrow, Mum.” She listened to his boots as they echoed down the hall and up the stairs before pressing the button on her remote and sinking into the ground. She lay her head on the pillow, her arms wrapped around the towel as she closed her eyes. She was exhausted; she knew that she must have looked insane during her outburst, standing underneath a torrent of cold water as she shouted her lungs out at her livid Master.

_I’m going to throw you over the fence and let those Sirens have you, ungrateful thing!_

_At least they wouldn’t rub their nasty skin all over my face! Even if you’ve never stuck your head under a faucet, you can still wash off every night!_

_There’s no need! I have shadows for that!_

_Shadows, shmadows! Go bathe in a fucking river and then we can talk!_

She humphed and buried her face in the towel; it smelled sweet from the dried herbs Walter kept in the linen closets. She smelled the fabric softener and chemically-pungent bleach that made it so startlingly white. She could have sworn she even smelled the hands of the humans who folded it, although more than likely that was just residue from Roans holding it.
She fell asleep on her bed, her cheek still rubbing the material as she dreamed of fields of lavender and clover.

Leather boots tapped out a rapid staccato on the stone floor. Their owner was sitting in his chair, fingers laced in front of him as he stared at the wall. The only thing betraying his calm exterior was the shadows in the room, which flickered across the floor and up the walls restlessly. It was as if they were itching to devour something in their depths, the red eyes bobbing into being and out again without any real pattern within the inky darkness.

The man didn’t touch his drink, nor did he bother to look at the coffin in the corner. He was too irate to sleep, to flustered to sup. His boots continued to rap against the floor as he thought. He stared at the wall without really seeing it, his mind flipping and flopping in an attempt to find a solution to his problem.

He felt his master’s presence upstairs and realized that she had returned to her stronghold, but didn’t bother to go up and irk her and the Catholic. They were beyond his attentions at the moment, and he’d have plenty more opportunities to make their lives a living hell if he so wished. Even so, Integra’s psyche was buzzing with aggravation and he knew that Walter had informed her about his fight with his stubborn ingrate of a fledgling.

Her mind was already asleep, soothed by a towel of all things. He felt like going up to her room, punching through the coffin lid and dragging her out for an explanation of why. He couldn’t understand her reasoning—well, truly he could but he’d rather not. She didn’t want to be unwashed—it was a product of her time, he was sure. He had no qualm with going without a bath. The whole process was meaningless anyway; he could just use his powers to rid himself of dirt and other unpleasant things that may find their way onto his person. Yet she wasn’t convinced.

He could still see her in his mind’s eye, standing under the water in the fountain and letting herself be soaked to the bone. She washed away all his hard work in an instant, his transferred scent leaving and he had sniffed the air, smelling nothing but her again. Why did she have to be so damn potent? She wasn’t a flower. She didn’t have to let her odor waft across the whole countryside. He was half-surprised that all the vampires weren’t knocking down their doors in an effort to get to her. And that disgusting hair-soap didn’t mask it a bit. With a natural fragrance like that, she might as well have been a Siren herself.

How could he stop her from smelling like that and still keep her from being so bloody emotional? No matter what solution he thought of, he couldn’t work out all the kinks in the matter. Perhaps if she washed with a different hair-soap. No, he’d be hard pressed to find one that he could stand and she wouldn’t smell nice in all at the same time. He growled and thought harder, willing an answer to come into his mind. He couldn’t rest until he figured out a way that would keep her shrill screams out of his ears while still “winning” the battle.

He fell asleep in his chair, his boot still tapping a slower rhythm on the floor until he slumped sideways with a quiet snore.

“What’d you think was going to happen? You’d been clean for a full year.” Anderson cringed as she heaved the last of her breakfast into the toilet before slumping down on the floor with a groan. She leaned her neck back onto the rim of the tub, letting the porcelain cool her. Her face was green and miserable as she looked up at him and shrugged slightly. He looked pointedly at her as she reached up to flush the mess, her fingers resting on her forehead before reaching up to him. He scowled and handed her the still-lit cigar and she took a careful, more measured inhale before coughing only a bit less violently. “You should have just given them up for good.”
“The day I do that is the day you worship the Devil with an open heart,” she vowed as she tried her best to finish the cigar. Finally, she got it halfway down before stumbling to her feet and putting it out in the ashtray. He sighed and turned to leave the room as she reached for her toothbrush. He walked back into the bedroom, looking around in more depth as she brushed the taste from her mouth.

It was practical and yet a bit extravagant; he found that he expected nothing less of her furnishings. The room was the most crowded of all he’d seen so far, and still looked empty. He wondered if she did it on purpose, or just because she didn’t want more than what she needed in the house. He laid on the bed, drawing his legs out experimentally to see if they’d fall off the edge. They didn’t, but they came damned close. He could feel the edges with his heels, even through the boots.

He got back up at the sight of the pictures on the dresser, walking over for a closer look. They were lined up in a row; he supposed from oldest to youngest in terms of time. The first on the left end was a tanned woman in a sari, holding a blonde-haired baby close to her heart. He decided that it must have been Integra’s mother and looked over to see the next one; a blonde toddler sitting on an older man’s lap. This man, who shared her eyes and cheekbones—her father. Next was an older girl, perhaps ten or so, with her father again and Walter. They stood in front of a ship at a pier, the sun shining on the girl’s hair and making it light up. Next, a picture of her and Walter. Her father was missing, but Alucard was there—he looked rather put-out. The pictures stopped about midway through the dresser, the rest blank. Empty spaces waiting to be filled.

“I didn’t have enough to stretch across.” Her voice startled him and he jumped back to look at her standing in the doorway of the bathroom. She crossed her arms and walked across the room to his side. She smiled wistfully at the photos and looked up at him. “Do you have any pictures of your parents?”

“Taking pictures back then was a big occasion. Little farm folk didn’t get the chance.” He frowned down at the pictures before turning away. “My parents never had their picture taken. I didn’t either, until I was a soldier.” He felt her staring at his back and refused to look around at her. After a quiet moment she tugged on his sleeve.

“Come on; I need to show you the rest of the house.”

Three floors of endless hallways and crazy rooms. There was even a torture chamber, although it clearly hadn’t been used in a long time. And libraries upon libraries, kitchens upon kitchens, ballrooms and music halls and guest bedrooms and meeting rooms and so much more. Anderson’s head was spinning from it all. Who needed this much stuff?

Now, they stood in the basement hallway, looking down the dark corridors at the steel-plated doors lining the stone walls. Integra walked to another set of stairs in the floor, standing at their summit and pointing down the hallway.

“Alucard’s room is the only thing down that way. I don’t know why he likes it this far back, but I guess it suits him well enough.” Anderson bristled at the thought of the evil King, lying asleep in his chambers. It would be so easy to just slide him through—pin him to his coffin and figure out a way to destroy him before he managed to become too powerful. His hand twitched at the thought. However, Integra must have caught his mood and she pointed a finger at him warningly.

“I don’t want you two fighting all the time. If you can’t manage to have the ghost of civility around each other, than stay out of the other’s way. I get enough headaches around here as it is.” He shrugged and she gave him a death-glare before walking back the way they came. She stopped by another door, unassuming as all the others. “This is Seras’ room. She usually doesn’t stay in there
much, but if you ever need her you can always start here. She pops in and out throughout the night.”

“I doubt I’ll ever need her,” Anderson corrected as they walked through the cold hallways and back to the stairs leading to the upper levels.

“Anyway, there it is.” Integra looked around the foyer, side-stepping soldiers as they scurried about on their personal missions and patrols. “This is how it should look—of course, it’s still not as crowded at night, although there are quite a few soldiers.”

“I see.” Anderson felt completely out of his element. Surrounded by the enemy, vampires resting under his feet, protected from his bayonets by the words from a blonde woman who just happened to be married to him... he never felt so outnumbered before, not even in the Great War. He couldn’t relax, even jumping when Integra grabbed his sleeve once more.

“Come with me,” she said softly and led him through the hallways. After a moment, they arrived at her office and she pushed him in, shutting the door behind her. “You can always come here for some quiet,” she explained, understanding that he was getting overloaded. “No one bothers me in here except Walter, and half the time you can’t tell if he’s here or not.”

“Hm.” Anderson looked at the pictures lining the walls, across the empty space of diamond tiles to the picture windows behind the desk. Integra was looking at the crowded desk, holding a stack of paperwork in each hand. With every passing moment she became more and more distressed until she reached into the desk drawer and pulled out a tin cigar case. She lit one and didn’t choke this time as she inhaled and let the smoke waft towards the ceiling.

“A year’s worth of paperwork. I’ll never catch up,” she informed him seriously. “I’m going to be here until I’m older than dust.” He chuckled and went to pull up a chair in the corner, sitting close to the bookcase as he perused the shelves. He sat and pulled his bible from his sleeve, flipping the pages open and reading silently. Integra looked at him before smiling and sitting at her desk, pulling the first stack of endless papers towards her.

They sat like that, each lost in their own world of quiet thoughts and rustling pages, until Walter rang them for supper.

They called out at her; they were so very, very angry for what she’d done, who she’d brought back. She heard them; the voices whispering in the shadows and under the beds. Demons were all around—if you knew where to look for them. Adults had a harder time of it, naturally. Their minds thusly occupied with adult matters, they had no time to worry about what could easily drag them into the shadows. And drag they did. Demons would always take advantage of an opportunity. And their whispers! It was enough to drive anyone insane.

Small children, who cry to their parents about monsters in the beds and under the closets and are not believed, although they are comforted by their guardians—to what words can children describe the horror that is a demon’s appearance, other than “monster”? How can they tell of the horrid things that those creatures let them see? Demons can’t touch children; those who are loved most dearly by Him. But they can frighten them.

She heard them, fussing to themselves about what to do with her and yet unable to touch her, seeing as she’d thrown herself through the only loophole in her contract. She’d done things the proper way; she’d not violated the covenant she’d created with the creatures of Hell. But still they searched for a way out of that loophole; anything to get her soul a few thousand years early.
She dreamed about it sometimes; what was going to happen to her when she eventually crossed the veil. They surrounded her in her mind’s eye, ripping open her stomach. She felt their claws scrape the inside of her body, felt their sharp teeth nibbling on her innards. She cried out to be saved, but who could save her? Even the King, in all his dark power, refused to join her and create the most powerful army in the world.

He’d seen her Girls, when she first discovered the recipe for making them. He’d watched her black ritual and his nose had wrinkled in disgust.

“You are a babe, Erzsébet Báthory. You play with things that you have only the barest knowledge of. Innocence, no—\textbf{ignorance} will not save your soul in the end.”

She had scoffed at him, sent him on his merry way with a wave of her kerchief. How was he to know what she was? She was in control. At the time, that’s what she thought.

But now, as she lay in bed and the monsters around her whispered their anger from the shadows, she wasn’t so sure.

Seras wasn’t tired. She’d woken hours ago, when the sun set and the air cooled and the sounds of soldiers upstairs drove away into individual voices instead of the clamor of the daytime armada. But she didn’t want to get up and face her master, or Sir Integra or even Walter, who’d been by earlier sometime before she woke to drop off her supper. She didn’t feel like crawling out of bed, so she didn’t. Instead, she lay in her pajamas with her hands demurely on her stomach, picking out the humans that belonged to the voices she heard clearly, as if there wasn’t twenty-something feet of foundation and steel and stone separating them. Roans, Stevenson, Walter, Penn, Sir Integra….

She felt sweaty and icky all over, even after dunking herself in the fountain. She needed soap; something to wash away the crud and Alucard’s stench off her body. Not that he smelled particularly bad—she just had an issue with his fragrance all over her. She had long decided that it must have been a “vampire thing”, as she liked to call it; this strange, unexplainable anger that arose every time she moved and caught a whiff of \textit{him} on her skin, as if he owned her body or something! She chalked it up there with anxiety over her coffin and the need to go outside during the full moon and just stare up at it for a while.

\textit{Ugh. Master doesn’t understand. I know he’s never showered in his life.} Suddenly, the image of Alucard in a shower stall had her temporarily distracted. She had the immense privilege of being one of only a handful that ever saw him in something other than his normal crimson outfit. Her mind flitted to his lean form when he took off his coat, the tucked in shirt and vest tapering off into thin hips and long, lean legs. Even the skintight leather that he wore when he released his powers—God, it left hardly anything to the imagination! She could see him standing under the spray, rivulets running down his slender form and accenting the pale, gorgeous skin. Her eyes followed the wayward drop as it traveled from his chest down his abs, sliding achingly slow until it reached the apex of his thighs before it touched his-

She jerked out of her daydream from the pain, realizing that she’d bitten her finger hard enough to draw blood. She gave it a tiny lick, letting it heal as a shiver worked its way through her body. \textit{I shouldn’t feel this way. I really, honestly shouldn’t feel this way, or think this way for that matter.} He was her master, her mentor and she his scion. He was only supposed to be her guide—her handsome, dark, tantalizing… No! She banished the wanton thoughts from her mind, shaking her head. She was just hungry, was all. She had those sorts of… fantasies and dreams when she hadn’t eaten enough and was craving sustenance.

She bit the wrapper and let the blood pour into the bowl, waiting impatiently for it to fill so that she
could start eating. She may be a vampire, but she’d be damned if she drank straight from the package like other vampires that didn’t need to be named. She took a single spoonful and stopped before it reached her mouth.

That was it. That was how she could convince him to let her bathe again. When Sir Integra needed something, she used her feminine charm on them. She probably used it on poor Father Anderson, too. If Seras could take a page from her book, and be brave enough to work her wily ways on Alucard, then who’s to say she couldn’t have whatever she wanted? And she’d wait to do it when he was at his weakest. She frowned; she had to be careful, though. One push too far and she might end up biting off more than she could chew. Still, he’d have what was coming to him.

Seras smiled to her reflection in the mirror and raised the spoon in a silent toast. Oh, this night was absolutely, truly, most certainly a beautiful night.

“Peace offering!” Alucard looked up to see a nervous Seras peeking around his doorframe. She held up her hands, showing him the two blood packs she’d brought with him. When he glared at her, she tilted her head slightly in a pout. “You’re not still angry at me, are you? I’m really sorry about what I did yesterday,” she whimpered as she walked across the floor to his side. “I’m sorry about what I said, too. Even if I don’t like it, I guess not bathing will help keep you from exerting yourself too much,” she conceded as she took her normal spot on the arm of his chair, letting him take one of the packs from her hand. She blinked her eyes at him woefully and he scoffed.

He knew why she’d come to him so early. It wasn’t as if she couldn’t hear the horrid sounds coming from upstairs somewhere. And he wasn’t even trying to spy! He’d been sitting there, trying to block out the goddamn emotions and sounds and using all his self-control to keep from eating the Jackal and blowing his own head off. He was in a state and she knew it, the little minx.

“I came to see if you wanted to talk, Master. I’m sure you need a distraction from…” she looked up at the ceiling with a grin that clearly portrayed her disgusted amusement. “Even so.” He grunted and turned the pack over in his hands, looking at the writing on the front and watching the red liquid slosh about sluggishly within, the chilled mass gaining no heat from his palm. She watched him for a moment before crossing her legs, her skirt riding up her thigh as she delicately bit the pack and let it drip for a moment before licking the blood off the plastic.

“What are you doing?” he snapped at her, his eyes moving from her exposed skin to her tongue at a rate that alarmed even him. She stopped and turned to him, her eyes dark against her white skin with pupils dilated.

“What does it look like?” she crooned softly, shifting on the arm of the chair. “I’m eating a snack.” She closed her eyes and licked the plastic against as the trail of blood came dangerously near her fingers, moaning in delight at the taste. She heard a pop and looked down to see the remains of the second blood packet crushed in her master’s fist, crimson staining his white gloves.

“Don’t toy with me, child,” he growled, a note in his voice that spoke of things worse than punishment. At the same time, her own instincts told her they were much better than any punishment, too. She leaned forward, disregarding his warning hiss as she ran a finger up the soiled glove and through the bloody plastic.

“Oh dear—you made a mess, Master. Better not let good food go to waste.” She looked him in the eyes as she licked the blood off her finger, watching him fall for her act. Ha! Master or not, you’re still a man under all that dark power. “Wanna taste?” He smacked her hand away, backing up out of the chair and throwing the ruined pack to the ground.
“You have no idea what you’re dealing with,” he warned her again, his eyes chary and sinister as he took her in. She leaned forward like she’d seen Sir Integra do to the government officials when she’d been a little too tipsy, letting her legs spread out on the seat he’d vacated.

“It’s a shame that you’ve forbidden me to shower,” she cooed. “If you were nice enough, I might have let you watch me.” It took all she had to not blush at the words, but if she colored even the littlest bit, the show was over. He’d take control and win again. And the vampiress inside her railed against that happening. However, she knew—who didn’t know? Vampires were masters of the seductive arts; she was no exception. She had this one in the bag. He wasn’t going anywhere.

“Liar,” he called her bluff, looking down as his shadows drank the blood off his glove and left it as pristine as before. She knew he was looking away from her body and stretched, focusing his attention back on her.

“You’ll never know. In the showers at the precinct? Where I worked my human job? The men got more than an eyeful, I’ll tell you that much.” Okay, that wasn’t a full lie. Eddie had walked in on her showering once; he’d practically killed himself by apologizing until he was out of breath. The poor guy thought she was going to pull a sexual harassment suit on him for an accident. Her white lie worked; Alucard’s eyes shot back to her own and narrowed menacingly, prodding her mind with his own evidence of falsehood. She grinned and ran a hand down her leg.

“Too bad, such a shame that you’ll miss out. Soap running down every curve, hands all over my body, touching…” She softened her voice and closed her eyes, knowing that if she looked at him, she’d realize what she was saying and end up blushing and come to her senses, running out of there before it was too late. The entire room was a danger zone as it was, and here she was stoking a fire to cook herself with. “Hair sticking to my neck, water droplets running along my pulse as I rinse off —”

His breathing hitched and her eyes opened of their own accord to see him staring at her hungrily. She knew he was imagining her body under the water, like she’d been doing with him before in her room. Time to seal the deal. “But I might as well stop talking about it. It’s not going to happen anymore.” The look of absent wonder left his face and was replaced by a snarl. She hopped off the arm of the chair, adjusting her skirt and fluffing her frizzy hair before smiling at him and waving as she walked out the door. “Well, I’m off to work on my formations. Have a pleasant evening, Master.”

Lorenzo looked at the brochure he’d gathered from the airport. It was a hobby of his; collecting brochures from every airport, rest stop, or civil building that he and his brother visited during their travels for work. He didn’t have one for England yet, but now that it was in his hands he was excited to return to the Vatican City and put it in the scrapbook with the others.

“Leonardo—Look here at this picture of Buckingham Palace. Could you imagine what it looks like from up close?” He turned the page and eyed the illustration of Big Ben. “Maybe we should visit some sights before we leave this country.” His twin brother huffed, mustache quivering with the heavy breath.

“Lorenzo, we aren’t here for leisure. I wouldn’t spend a day more in this Protestant hovel than needed to anyway. I can’t imagine how Anderson lives with it.” The younger twin looked up from his brochure and adjusted his round sunglasses.

“Father Anderson is a good role model. He is filled with love and righteousness in his heart,” he chirped. Leonardo wrinkled his nose at the cheery words.
“You just stole that from Yumiko,” he accused as he sized up the double-decker bus before getting on. He turned around and jerked his brother onboard before he was left behind. Lorenzo wouldn’t have even noticed if he’d been abandoned or not. Leonardo sighed. His twin had always been like that; an air-headed bookworm. He was the level-headed one; but he had to admit that Lorenzo’s polite ways were much more effective at causing guilt than his straight-talking demeanor. The ultimate good cop/bad cop: They were the finest of the Vatican’s Iscariot Division: Accounting Services. And they were headed straight for Hellsing.

Chapter End Notes

The Twins are actually—well, sorta from Hellsing Ultimate. I got the idea from episode VI of the OVA, when Integra’s bullying the Iscariots with her cigar (which is my number #3 favorite Hellsing moment; random fact there). There are two of them in the background that look almost the same with minor differences to the blonde hair. The only major thing is that one has a mustache/beard thing going on and the other doesn’t. So I got the idea of twins (the joke is that no one can tell them apart, even though Leonardo clearly had a mustache and Lorenzo doesn’t. It’s just that no one really cares because they’re from the Accounting Division and no one likes a loan shark anyway.) Then again, all the Iscariots look the same with those weird mini-Lennon glasses.
Incident Un porumbel lui

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“London Bridge is falling down
They’ve burned all that they have found
Not a human left in town
‘cept my fair lady”

“That’s absolutely morbid, Erzsébet.” Her husband looked up from his paperwork, wincing at his insane wife and pretending to care. “Quit singing. You’re a dead woman walking, you know.” She turned to him, still humming under her breath.

“Never you mind. If I’m dying, I’m taking that trollop and all those soldiers down with me.” She pivoted on her heel and looked back at her darling childe, who had walked into a doorframe and was still moving even though he wasn’t getting much of anywhere. “But how to get there? I want to make a nice entrance, you know. Can’t be all sneaky-sneaky when I have a point to make.” She moved over and pulled what was left of Ambrose away from the frame, caging him in her arms and petting the listless hair. A clump of it came out in her hand and she stared in disgust before throwing it out the open window with a shrug.

“Yes, don’t you worry my pet. We’ll get that bad little girl and all her little boyfriends.” She made a face and turned to look over her shoulder at her husband. “Are those creatures still stalking England or have they all returned by now?” The man looked up, stroking his mustache thoughtfully.

“There’s a right many downstairs now, but I never kept up with that. He did,” he motioned with a wince to the empty vessel in his wife’s arms. “But you should be able to find out one way or another. Why?”

“Well, let’s just say that I have an idea. An awful, genius idea. I end up surprising myself every time with how well-thought-out I am, you know.” Her husband hummed to himself before finishing up the letter and walking to the window with a piercing whistle. A bird flew down from the rafters and he tied his small letter to the tiny creature’s leg before sending it out the window. “Who’s that going to?”

“Someone I haven’t seen in a long time,” he answered cryptically. She let go of the creature and moved beside him to look out the window. He put an arm around her, realizing how easy it’d be to tip her over and let her brains bash out on the rocks below. Even so, he held her just a bit tighter, as if she’d fall on her own. She let out a soft coo and nestled into the crook of his arm, watching the bird fly out of sight.

“An acquaintance?” she practically whispered, clearly enjoying the rare moment of affection her husband was doling out on her.

“You could say that.” He looked down at her, wondering if he’d just sealed her fate with that letter. “You could say that.”

Anderson couldn’t help the hairs on his neck standing as the Draculina drew nearer to him. Granted, they were just walking down opposite sides of the hallway, but he was used to
unsheathing his blades and driving them into creatures that gave him this sort of feeling, and doing nothing went against everything he’d ever trained for.

She didn’t even seem to notice him, her eyes distant as she walked down the hallway towards the kitchens he’d just vacated. She looked at him blankly, the gears clearly turning in her mind before she snapped her fingers and moved with more determination to the kitchens, turning at the last second to make her way off to where the freezers were.

Anderson watched her go, knowing only her direction from his own halted after-supper explorations of his new supposed home. He’d already learned that if you got lost, you only had to head to a set of stairs and when you went down enough of them, you’d eventually end up in the foyer. It was like the center point of a thoughtless maze. After she disappeared from view, his hair finally lay flat and he turned to continue his way through the mansion, stopping often to take in a new sight or admire a painting in the endless hallways.

There were seemingly millions of rooms to go through, and he briefly eyed them all. every once in a while, he’d stop to go inside and thoroughly inspect the room’s contents, adding the new place of interest to his ever-growing internal map of the house. He’d already had a tiny skeletal blueprint, from earlier when he’d been whirlwind-ed through the tour by Integra. But he had taken his leave of her to let her finish her paperwork as he went on an in-depth examination of the home and its occupants.

Most of the soldiers politely tipped their hats to him as he walked by, or nodded as they moved to let his wide-shoulders pass by unhindered. Some even offered a friendly “How’d ya do?” as he made his way past their posts. Others just stared at him before shuffling on out of the way and continuing their tasks. He came out on a balcony of sorts on the second floor and saw Seras hurrying back to the basement, loaded down with a pail of blood and two more bags in her hand that were clearly for some different purpose. He turned back and took a different branch, ending up at a door that, when opened, led to a completely new, uninhabited wing. Thinking back, he remembered that the private bedrooms and bathroom were on this end. Integra had mentioned that no one came down this way except one maid, herself, and now him as well. Not even Walter or Alucard disturbed the chambers except in dire emergency. He nodded, about to close the door when a voice right behind his ear made him jump in surprise.

“Father Anderson.” He whirled around to see the butler standing there, barely hiding a smile. “Oh dear, I didn’t mean to frighten you,” he said honestly. “Are you having a well enough time finding your way around the place?”

“Aye.” He looked around the hallway before shutting the door fully and turning to face Walter properly. “There seems to be some sort of method to this place after all.”

“Naturally. The Hellsing family isn’t one to slapdash their own home, or anything else for that matter.” He hummed for a moment before clearing his throat. “Now, there’s the matter of your belongings.”

“My belongings?” Anderson repeated. What did he mean?

“Yes, are you bringing any from the Vatican? Integra’s already expressed that you’re free to place your things in her—well, I suppose your room.” He made a face, as if it were hard to think about that fact that Integra was now sharing a bedroom with someone. “But you haven’t said anything about things being brought.” Truth be told, he hadn’t thought much about it.

“Oh, yes—well, I have a few things and I’ll take care of them myself.” Anderson scratched his head. “A bookcase or two, and my clothing.” Walter nodded knowingly.
“Priests aren’t supposed to own much anyway, are they?” he quipped hesitantly. Anderson nodded and he relaxed. “Of course. I’ll file the paperwork immediately.” There was paperwork for belongings brought into the house? For insurance purposes, maybe, he thought after a moment’s contemplation. He opened his mouth to ask Walter for confirmation, but the butler was already gone—silent as a thief.

He stood at the window in Integra’s office, looking out at the full moon with a serious expression. He heard her scribbling away at her paperwork, the scratching of the pen pausing only when she met the end of a page and reached for a new one. The grounds outside the window were almost deserted, with only one or two guards walking out under the starry sky. He felt a sudden longing for the orphanage, where he knew they’d be tucking the children into bed by now. He frowned and tried to quell the feeling; he needed to focus on getting situated here, not longing for the past.

He heard her sigh behind him and the papers rustled once more before her chair scraped back and she groaned. He looked over his shoulder to see her stretching before tapping the papers into a neater stack and placing them in the tiny plastic bin marked “outgoing”.

“Well, I’m through for tonight, I think,” she said. They both ignored the 3 massive stacks of paperwork waiting in the corner by the bookcase—a year’s worth of unread reports and unapproved funding data. There had been 4—Integra had done the most recent stack first, in order to get a few things moving along the line for Walter to take care of in terms of budget costs and new weaponry.

“It’s late,” he remarked casually. She looked over at the clock ticking away on the wall and nodded, massaging her temples. “We should go to bed.”

“Alright,” she agreed, trudging along after him down the hall. She let him lead the way, feeling a little cheerful that he remembered how to get there. But then again, he’d told her that he’d been walking around through the house while she was busy with paperwork. He’d probably memorized the entire layout by now.

She followed without protest through the doorway to the private wing, down the hall and to her room. If she’d been alone, she wouldn’t have thought twice about flopping on the bed in her clothing and just falling asleep then and there. But she had someone sharing her space now, and while that someone had all but ran for the bathroom she still wasn’t going to be so undignified. So despite her aching back, sore from where she’d been bent over the papers, she went to the closet and stripped her jacket off to hang in its rightful place.

She turned to the chest-of-drawers and looked at herself in the mirror, suddenly unsure of proper protocol. Was she supposed to get dressed for bed and then wait for her turn in the bathroom? Or was it the other way around? Was she even supposed to get dressed at all? She eyed her heavily decked-out bedding and decided that it was both thicker and warmer than flimsy hotel sheets. She’d sweat to death with him under there and a starchy long-sleeved nightgown, even if it was the tail-end of fall.

She walked over and pulled out the pajama drawer, gazing at her array of summer nightgowns thoughtfully. Pulling out the nearest one, she let it unfold and took in the sight with a wary eye. It wouldn’t pass the paladin’s inspection—that was for sure. It didn’t have sleeves at all and even though it ended at the knee like a proper gown, it was somehow just as revealing as wearing one of his shirts; well, in her eyes at least. Still, it’d be a lot cooler and she’d probably sleep better than having to be soaked all night. She looked in the mirror and held the fabric up to her chest, letting it fall naturally and eyeing the way it was a little tight on the hips.
Well, with any luck we won’t be wearing it for long. She colored at her inner self’s raunchy thoughts before hurrying back across the room and shutting the door, changing into the gown at a breakneck speed before looking back expectantly at the mirror. Yes—way too tight at the hips. I need more acceptable sleepwear. Thinking for a moment she turned back the closet, rifling through the hangers and—there it was! She pulled out the long robe triumphantly, slinging the silky material over her arms and letting it hang untied. Now she was properly covered; she admired her ingenuity and rocked from side to side in the mirror until she nodded satisfactorily.

Something outside the window caught her ear and she turned, walking over to peer out at the grounds below. There didn’t seem to be anything outside her window, still she turned her head and saw something swoop out of the corner of her eye. To her surprise, it was an owl. She looked down at the creature with a sense of wonder, watching as it flew from its perch on the tree close to her window down to the grassy knoll of the training ground, grabbing some small creature expertly. She blinked again as another shadow crossed the ground and she looked up to see… was that a pigeon? She craned her head, pressing her face against the glass in an effort to look. Birds don’t fly at night. That had to have been my imagination.

“What is it?” Anderson’s voice sounded from close by and she turned slightly to motion to him, forgetting her appearance in her confusion as she looked out the window again and pointed. He walked from the threshold of the bathroom to her side, looking out at the sky. “I don’t see anything.”

“I could have sworn I saw a carrier pigeon, of all things.” Integra tapped the glass with a fingernail before turning away and beginning to draw the curtains. “But it had to have been a trick of the light. Pigeons don’t fly at night.”

“Must have been,” he conceded, taking the curtain from her and pulling the heavy fabric across the window in one fell swoop. He ignored the envious look she sent his way at his effortlessness, turning away from her completely to walk over to the closet and shut it with a soft push.

Damn it all—no damn him and his less-than-pure thoughts. Even when she was clearly dressing to be modest, it still looked too stunning to ignore. He’d been glad that her mind was on a wayward creature outside and not him; otherwise she’d of noticed how he’d been frozen in the doorway, eyeing her outfit as she pressed her body against the windowpane. Or how he’d moved close enough for the silky, sheer robe to brush his skin as he looked outside to see what the matter was.

Even now as he turned back to look across the room at her, his eyes wouldn’t stop lingering on her body, mapping curves that he knew were there underneath her silken wrap. It didn’t help that her eyes were on him too; he felt her burning holes into his chest with her intent stare. He tried to swallow, his breath getting stuck somewhere in his throat. Their eyes happened to meet and suddenly he was breathing a bit too fast at the desire written across her face. Her cheeks turned the faintest pink and she averted her gaze, scurrying to the bathroom. The slamming door jerked him out of his state and he felt his shoulders sag in mixed relief and disappointment. He growled under his breath, kneeling at the foot of the bed and clasping his hands. Clearly, he wasn’t praying hard enough. That was the only excuse for the demons waging war on his brain.

Seras heard a cooing sound and looked up from her spot on the front stoop. She was running her plan through in her mind, a certain series of steps that involved seducing her master into letting her take a shower. She knew what steps one and two were, step one being implemented later that night. But step three was a little trickier, and involved the stoop and one of the guards. Most likely it would be her poor little scapegoat Roans, who was too nice to really stand up and tell her no. But
Roans was a tiny man and she was better able to move him out of the way in the event that Alucard became angry than someone bulkier like Stevenson or even eccentric Captain Penn.

The noise came again and she peered up at the roof to see a pigeon of all things standing there, cocking its head at her with rapid, jerky movements. She trilled back at it, trying to coax it down and figure out why it was flying this late at night. She had always been under the impression that birds couldn’t see well at night and so only nocturnal fowl such as owls rode the skies under the moon. Perhaps pigeons had suddenly evolved to be nocturnal.

The pigeon glared almost haughtily at her coaxing and she had the sudden urge to use it for target practice. Ungrateful little beastie. She scowled up at it and tried to go back to her plotting but a nice thick puddle of white birdshit landed right next to her hand, splattering from the pavement onto her cheek. She swore loudly and wiped her face, making disgusted sounds as she stalked indoors to borrow someone’s gun for a minute. That bird was dead meat.

“Walter!” she cried when she couldn’t find anyone offhand to borrow a weapon from. The butler appeared from seemingly thin air as was his usual way and she pointed to the ajar door. “This stupid pigeon outside pooped on me!” she whined, trying to convey the indignity of the situation. Walter’s eyebrows rose and he made a surprised sound before peering out the door into the night.

“Aha, a pigeon you say?” he asked absently. “At this time of night?” Seras pointed to the evidence left on the stoop and the retainer made a sickened face before stepping over the mess to stand on the walk and look up at the roof. “I don’t see it now, although I do not doubt that there was one. Perhaps it was spooked and flew here from its nest in fright.” Seras crossed her arms, angry that her target practice had fled the scene of the crime.

“No fair. Now I can’t even finish up my plan,” she pouted and kicked at the drying bird poo on the stoop. Walter eyed her askance before clearing his throat.

“What plan are you speaking of? It won’t take five minutes to hose off the stoop, Miss Victoria,” he assured her. She shook her head irritably.

“No, I’ve been thrown off my groove. Now I have to rethink steps three through six again. And I have a plan to—” she stopped, eyes narrowing as she looked around at her surroundings, especially the shadows in particular. She motioned for Walter to step forward and before he could utter a sound she grabbed his slightly loose old-person arm skin and gave a harsh yank. He started in surprise and slapped her hand away, rubbing his arm.

“What did you go and do that for?” he snapped crossly. She shrugged and gave him a pity pat on the shoulder.

“Sorry—I wanted to make sure you weren’t Master in disguise. Now,” she said as she leaned in and made him do the same. “I’m going to get my shower, whether Master likes it or not. But he’s going to like it, because in the end he’ll be begging me to take a shower.”

“Miss Victoria, please tell me that you’re not planning on overloading his senses by rolling in sewage or any of that.” He looked behind her. “In hindsight, that bird’s mess will be a good starting point, if you’re going that route,” he added in repulsion. She shook her head, laughing quietly before motioning him near again.

“No, I’m going to seduce him, Walter. He thinks that I’m too shy to do much of anything, but he doesn’t know Seras Victoria. I’m staying clean, even if that means risking my virginity for it!” she vowed jokingly. Walter gave her a serious glare.
“Miss Victoria, I’d advise you to be careful or you’ll be doing exactly that. Alucard isn’t much of a gentleman, you know.” His expression turned worried and he bit his bottom lip. “This may not be the best idea.”

“Don’t worry about me, Walter. Master won’t bother me. He knows that I have my limits.” She smiled and she mused for a moment before looking at him, her gears turning at full speed. “Say, do you have any books on wolves?” she asked as innocently as she could muster.

“Check the Eastern library—the Nature section is in there.” Walter watched her as she nodded and squeezed his hand in a friendly way before jogging off to the library in question. He gnawed on his lip, concern enveloping his mind. “Oh dear, I hope she knows what she’s getting herself into.”

Anderson lay in bed, his mind suddenly recalling an episode of his life with startling clarity. He had to have been only five or six, because he was still too small to see over the large table that stood as the center point of his family’s rather substantial two-room cottage. He’d been under the table on the worn wooden floor, his bare feet balanced perfectly as he kneeled and watched with interest as a beetle made his way in and out of the grooves of the wooden slats.

His mother had been scurrying around the table in a sort of frenzy, worry evident on her face as she kept throwing her glance to the antique clock sitting on a tiny shelf above the compost bin. He knew partly what was going on, but being as young as he was he couldn’t find it in himself to worry about it. The clock’s hands were almost at the 9 and 12 marks, meaning that he would be going to bed soon. But his father should have been home when the smaller hand was pointing to the 6.

Suddenly, the door burst open and a wave of frigid air bounced off his bare toes and made him go crawling for the other side of the table, away from the wintery air. His father walked in, but something about the man was off. He wasn’t striding in from work like he usually did, booming about something with unions and trouble. He stumbled in, his eyes bright and unusually shiny in the light of the fire as fought his own feet on the way to the table. Alexander heard his mother let out a gasp and her voice cut through the slowly-warming air like a knife.

“Look at the state you’re in! Who’d ye think you are, slumping in here at this time o’ night?!” she cried sharply. His father mumbled something under his breath before instantly repeating it in a too-loud voice.

“I been down looking at the news! What’s wrong with seeing the news with the lads?” he replied, his voice slightly slurred. His mother scoffed and sat down the last of her dishes in the sink. He watched her patched shoes moving across the floor to stand beside his father’s boots at the front of the table. He peered out around the wood to see her using the same expression on his father that she used for chastising him whenever he tried to bring frogs into the house. “What’s wrong with that? Nothing, that’s what,” his father repeated, banging his hand down on the table. “Where’s dinner?”

“It’s gone-left four hours ago, you might of had some if you’d been on time,” his mother retorted coldly. “The fact is that you’d been down drinking at the alehouse, and now you have the nerve to walk in here and demand things of me.” There was a slight pause. “Where’s the money?” His father muttered something else unintelligible. “Wha’?”

“I said it’s gone,” he enunciated forcefully. “I lost it in a wager with Duff.” Alexander sat under the table, thinking hard on what his father said. His mother, he knew, didn’t like Duff. Though he’d never personally met the man, who apparently lived out on the other side of the town, his mother insisted that he was a drunkard with a violent streak who needed to be thrown in jail until he could
pull his life together. She often reminded his father that he shouldn’t be seen around with the man, who “hasn’t enough sense to keep some money set aside for those three little babes running about, poor things”.

“A wager? Graham Anderson, you mean to tell me you not only went out and got stone drunk, but you lost all our money by gambling with Duff?!” His mother’s voice reached a level of anger he’d never heard before. He slunk back under the table, seeing his father recoil as well as the waves of anger poured out from the large woman standing with a rolling pin in her hand, clearly ready to knock her husband into the next world. Her emerald eyes were infuriated and the inebriated man cowered at the table.

“Now Jinny,” he simpered as he fell back in the chair. “It’s not as bad as all that, pet….” He winced as the rolling pin was slammed on the table.

“Don’t you “pet” me!” Another slight pause and her voice fell to a lower level. “He’ll be startin’ school in the fall, and what’s he going to be going with if he has no shoes?”

“Where is the boy?” his father asked suddenly. “He’s not in bed yet.”

“Here I am, Da.” He managed to scoot his way out from under the table and stood at his father’s side, smiling up at him despite the sour odor filling his nostrils that seemed to be the old man’s breath.

“What a sight you look,” his mother murmured disapprovingly, shaking her head. He looked down at himself and his smile vanished. He’d been playing outside all day after the chores were done, and his clothes looked worse than if he’d been rolling in the pig slop. It was a time like this that he was curious as to what he looked like all over, and wished that his mother had a mirror like Jacob’s mother did in her townhouse. The most he could get was looking at his reflection in a puddle, or in a spoon as he ate his soup.

His father gave him a long, cross-eyed stare before he placed a hand on the boy’s head, a look of mingled guilt and regret crossing his face as he eyed the dirty bare feet.

“Don’t make the same mistakes as your father, son.” He sighed after a long silence.

“Get up to bed, Alex. I’ll be on shortly,” his mother ushered him out of the room as his father’s face looked as though he were about to cry. He paused on the ladder that led to the hay-filled loft that served as his bedroom and listened as his mother took up her dishes again.

“Well Graham, I suppose your hangover can keep you company as you go off to the Church tomorrow. And God help you for it; because I know that I won’t.”

He stared at the ceiling, the last of the memory playing out in his mind. He hadn’t taken his father’s advice—well, in hindsight he supposed that he had to an extent, if you could count doing the right thing as a mistake. That was the only time he’d ever remembered his father being drunk, besides the day his mother died and the elderly man had gotten halfway through a bottle before falling over in a dead sleep. He’d forgiven him for that one, though.

Looking back, he realized that his mother had a right to be angry. Her husband gambling away their hard-earned money that was supposed to go for shoes; he’d have not been very happy either. But it hadn’t been the end of the world, obviously. His mother and father had been together to the very end. Now, he had someone to be with. The sudden thought of the same memory, with different characters; blue eyes shooting cold glares as she shouted at him for wasting the money. He
laughed to himself as he tried to avoid sinking further into the multitude of pillows and drowning. They’d never need money, and he wasn’t ever going to touch whiskey again. He’d learned his lesson; the withdrawals were bad enough, not to mention the temptation afterwards.

He rolled over and closed his eyes; another, more happy memory coming to mind—the day he brought his mother a silver engraved mirror from his tour in France.

“Why did no one tell me that me hair was so messy?!”

It wasn’t until she settled down next to him that he realized he’d fallen asleep. Having been alert rather than overly-tired, he was more surprised than anything. He opened his eyes and looked over to where she was making quick work of disappearing among the multitude of pillows, only her blonde hair and freshly-washed face sticking out from under the heavy blanket.

“You can’t possibly be cold,” he accused and she jumped.

“I thought you were asleep!” she squeaked before snapping her mouth shut and reclaiming some of her dignity. “I’m always a little chilly. And it’s comfortable under here.” She leaned against the nearest pillow with a sigh. “I missed my bed,” she said softly. Looking at him, something crossed her mind and she rose up to look down the length of the bed. “Where are your feet?” He raised one foot up slightly to show her where they lay underneath the mass of sheets and she scoffed. “Well, at least they don’t hang off the bed.”

“It’s a close fit,” he agreed and flipped over on his back. She pushed at his arm and he moved it up to allow her to curl up under it without thinking. She made soft scuffling noises as she wiggled around, getting comfortable before reaching up and hitting a switch above the headboard. The lights blinked out and the moonlight shone in softly from behind the curtains. He stared at the ceiling drowsily and yawned. She moved again and he was about to tell her to find a spot and stay there when she pressed a tiny kiss to his cheek.

“Sleep well,” she whispered before curling back into her previous position and letting out a soft exhale. He frowned at the damp feeling on his cheek and closed his eyes.

“Pleasant dreams,” he finally conceded.

Gunshots in the night and shouts woke Integra from a dead sleep. She winced at the muffled noise and the sudden ricochet of pain in her head from being woken in the middle of a dream. She moved and found that she was stuck under Anderson’s arm, where he’d almost rolled on top of her. He was awake a moment later, though and jumped clear out of the bed with a shout. She fumbled for the light switch and hit it, both of them blinking and swearing at the flood of bright light accosting their eyes.

“What in the hell is wrong with this place?” he shouted angrily, stomping to the bathroom and emerging with his cassock and two blades. “I’m going to murder them all,” he swore under his breath. Integra grabbed for her nightgown, for once just as mad at he was.

“I’m sure it’s something completely unnecessary,” she growled and together they ran down the hall and out onto the balcony above the foyer. They didn’t see anything for a moment other than a very ruffled Walter, who was staring at the ceiling with an air of “why-does-this-always-happen-on-my-watch”. “Walter, what the hell is so damn important that you let the soldiers go shooting indoors?!” she shrieked down at him with as much restraint as she could handle.
“It’s not the soldiers, it’s Miss Victoria,” he replied, shrugging helplessly. Integra stood still for a moment before groaning.

“What’d he do now?” she asked exasperatedly. Walter shook his head.

“It’s not Alucard, ma’am. It’s, well, him.” She turned, thinking that he was pointing at Anderson. However, he was most likely pointing at the carrier pigeon that had just mistook the paladin’s messy hair for his nest. He was nestled among the blonde locks, twitching his wings and looking as if he’d rather do anything than be in this house another moment, if a bird could think such things. Anderson’s eyes rolled up to stare at the bird, but to her relief he didn’t move a muscle, looking like a breathing statue.

She slowly raised her hands and cupped the bird, letting it flap its wings as she untied the tiny scroll of paper from its leg. The job done, it flew up and rested on the chandelier in the foyer, tucking its head under one wing and hiding among the false candles. Integra watched it for a moment before unrolling the scroll and giving it a look over. She glanced up as Walter joined them on the balcony, panting and leaning on the railing.

“It’s in Hungarian. Why was Seras shooting at it, in the house no less?” she asked commandingly. Walter paled even more and waved his hand.

“It’s a very long story that involves some sort of hair-brained scheme on her part and the front stoop. I really don’t know the whole story.” He frowned at the paper. “Hungarian, you say? Why would a carrier pigeon give you a Hungarian letter? You don’t know the language well, I presume.” He turned to look disapprovingly at the sleepy priest. “Is it for you?”

“It’s for me.” Before Anderson could open his mouth, an irate Alucard pushed his way past Walter and grabbed the letter.

Chapter End Notes

Wrong me! Wrong my brains out! (Laughs along with Ketti)
Integra blinked in confusion as she let the vampire’s letter-snatching go unchastised. She watched his crimson eyes scan the letter before his mouth twisted in a snarl and he crumpled it in his hand. She turned to glance at Anderson, who eyes were also trained on the vampire’s clenched fist. Alucard took a deep breath before his angry expression melted back into a neutral frown and he shot a glance over his shoulder before speaking.

“‘The Police Girl is a target,’” he admitted. “‘But you already knew that much,’” he added after a terse moment.

“Yes, we did,” Integra said patiently. If she understood anything about her servant, it was that when he started repeating information it meant he was clearly focusing all his brainpower into the problem. At times like this, it was best to let the redundant things slide and let him work out the solutions on his own. “Who was the letter from?” she asked.

“The Count Nádasdy; he is an old acquaintance of mine. In life he was married to Erzsébet Báthory, but in his current unlife they remain partners in name only.” Alucard twisted the end of the letter in his hand, his gaze distant. Finally he stuffed the wrinkled parchment into his vest pocket and his eyes flitted up to meet hers. “Seras cannot know what you are about to hear. She is unsettled enough as it is. I don’t need her being paranoid as well.”

“Naturally,” Integra said as she nodded. After a moment she elbowed Anderson and he gave a sharp nod as well. Walter bowed his head low, indigo eyes filled with unease. “Continue.”

“The Count informs me that since the punishment I dealt to her, the Countess has been in a constant state of unrest. Her already frail nature, combined with this new state of being—she’s finally cracked for good, he says.” Alucard’s eyes filled with malice and he sneered cruelly. “She’s done the unthinkable… I can’t even imagine how she managed to do it, but she has.”

“What?” Integra asked. “Is it something to do with the Sirens?” Alucard shook his head.

“No. The Sirens are at most a diversion, a first line of defense. Easily expendable and not bright enough for more than grunt work. Our real issue here is—was—her Girls.” Integra nodded slowly, her mind flipping through mental images of reports and soldier’s descriptions written in file after file.

“Those “Girls”… they’re monsters of some sort? I remember reading the combat reports on them but I can’t say for sure if I understood. The descriptions were vague at most. They were apparently too far away to really get a close glimpse?” she said hesitantly, her hand moving up to stroke through her hair. She tugged on it lightly as she ran her fingers through the blonde locks, her own non-verbal cue that she was hard at work.

“They’re worse than monsters. I wouldn’t set foot near them if I could help it.” Disgust was written across the vampire’s face. “The Countess, many decades ago, found that she was very much like you, my master.”

“Like me?” Integra looked up in surprise, her hand stilling in her hair. Anderson perked up at this too, green eyes focusing on the vampire as he listened intently. Alucard nodded once, the
corners of his mouth pulling down even further.

“Yes. Like the Hellsing family, the Báthory line had an interesting—skill, if you will. They could comprehend the occult, as well as holy and unholy powers.” Anderson’s brow furrowed.

“Wha’ exactly does that mean?” he growled. Alucard looked to the priest with undisguised hate but answered the question anyway.

“*It means* that Erzsébet Báthory had the same sense of the supernatural that your little wife does, Judas Priest.” Anderson scowled, but said nothing. “My master could pull a bayonet out of your cassock, with enough effort and practice.”

“Impossible,” Anderson countered. “No one has my abilities.” Alucard grinned and shrugged.

“She *could*. She can also see your holy barriers. Besides that, she can sense demonic auras and even perform incantations and rites. It’s in her bloodline.” He grinned even wider, his sharp teeth glinting in the light. “Some far-distant ancestor of yours sold his soul for those powers — and while he’s surely in torment, isn’t it nice to get something for free?” he asked Integra sardonically. She hissed angrily at him; her eyes narrowing and hand twitching at her side, ready to slap him off the balcony. Anderson looked at her strangely.

“You can see the barrier?” he asked quietly. She nodded silently and he shook his head, muttering under his breath. “I’ll be damned.”

“What do my family’s sins have to do with your Countess?” Integra finally cut in, her foot beginning to tap impatiently on the ground. Alucard’s smile vanished and he continued in a clipped tone.

“Just like you are able to work incantations, so can she. And she used hers for all the wrong purposes. She had eternal youth and power beyond human imagination at that point, but she was greedy. She sold her soul to demons for an unspeakable power. She was able to turn living humans into shades of their former self. Whatever those Girls are, they aren’t human—they’re the offspring of demon magic and human flesh. Rotting, dissolute—beyond help. Death is a mercy for them.” Alucard commented on this the same way one would comment on the weather, with an air of offhand boredom. Integra frowned and crossed her arms, unconsciously leaning closer to Anderson. The priest crossed himself.

“Still, even if she’s been making these Girls of hers… you said it’s escalated to the unthinkable,” Walter piped in, his voice shaking. “How—what you’ve told us already is bad enough. How in God’s name could this get any worse?”

“The Countess’ sick nature—she chose young girls to be her slaves; she ripped their souls in half and sewed up the leftover parts with demon magic and let them rot. They are the Unconsecrated.” Alucard frowned, his eyes burning crimson fire. “But now she’s brought back what was already dead. She’s brought the undead—a Midian—to life. I can’t see how she gave them enough of her soul to gain this power, while still being able to live on her own. She’s more demon than Nosferatu, now.” He shook his head. “I warned her, back when she was first dabbling with this. I told her to stop before she went too far.”

“So she’s resurrected a vampire as an…what did you call it? Unconsecrated?” Integra couldn’t help but shake in her slippers. The whole thought of it was just wrong. Zombie vampires with demon magic in their veins—it was an occultist’s worst nightmare. Alucard shook his head.
“Doctor Faustus, William Blake, even Plato himself knew that there were some things in
the universe that you shouldn’t be putting your hand in,” he said to Integra. “Simon Magus was
proof enough of that.” Anderson’s brows arched, but he said nothing. Alucard saw the expression
and laughed cynically. “What? You say yourself that the Bible is true; you don’t think I don’t
know of these things?” he accused. He frowned when Integra gave him a stern glare. “Simon
Magus thought he was a god. He was a demon-corrupted fool. Anyone, Christian or not, could see
that.”

“Well, what are we—” Integra trailed off as a mess of blonde hair came through the
doorway. The foursome stared at Seras, who returned their gaze in confusion before walking past
them quickly and turning the corner to get to the weapon’s room. Her uncertainty hung in the air
after her like a cloud, as well as a strange sort of cloying scent. Integra blinked, sniffing the air
with a wary look. Seras returned through the doorway and she held out a hand to stop the Draculina
from fleeing. “Seras, is this a new perfume? It smells… strange.” And it did—a hint of spicy
sweetness hung in the air, almost mouthwatering but not quite enough to get more than the barest
hint of taste.

“No Sir.” Seras looked rather confused at the whole thing, although Anderson sniffed
and nodded as well.

“Aye, something in the air be different about you, lass.” He wrinkled his nose, not sure if
he liked the fragrance or not. It was something like incense smoke mixed with a familiar floral
scents and steam, if steam had an odor to it.

“Oh, really?” Seras grabbed the collar of her shirt and sniffed it lightly, rubbing the
fabric together as if looking for a strange aroma. She shook her head after a moment, her expression
befuddled. “No, I don’t smell anything different,” she stated tentatively, looking between the
humans. Walter nodded with a fond smile.

“Yes, I sense it too. It actually reminds me of gunpowder and— strangely enough, lilies.
Funny, I never was one for lilies but here it’s actually nice.” He sniffed the air again appreciatively
before tilting his head knowingly. “This wouldn’t have anything to do with the library, would it?”
he asked vaguely. Seras shrugged with the hint of a smile on her face.

“No, I don’t think I picked up anything from there. It just smelled like dust and old
books,” she answered, the ghost of waggishness in her tone. She smiled at everyone in the hall
before waving slightly and passing through the crowd. “It’s getting to be a bit early; I think I’ll turn
in.” She turned and looked back at them over her shoulder. “Oh, and if you see that bird, I’m not
done with him yet,” she growled. She flipped herself over the balcony, landing on her feet and
striding purposefully towards the basement.

“What was that about?” Integra asked softly, her eyes unfocused for the smallest moment
before turning to Anderson. He shook his head and shrugged, looking at the butler who just smiled
and waved his hand dismissively. “Alucard, your fledgling is rather peculiar.” She turned to her
servant to see him staring at the basement, gripping the banister on the balcony hard enough to
leave the imprint of his fingers on the metal. “Alucard!” she admonished, shocked. He jerked back,
staring at the banister before bristling and turning to her with an expression that bordered on livid.

“My master, tomorrow evening I’ll explain the rest. Right now, I also will turn in. I
have… unfinished business,” he practically spat as he stalked down the hallway and through the
wall as if it weren’t there. Integra stared after him before yawning and turning to head back in the
direction of her chambers.

“I’m returning to bed. This night is far too long.” Anderson turned and let her lead the
way, stifling a yawn himself. Walter bowed before looking towards the basement. He chuckled, shaking his head and moving in the direction of his own small chambers off the first floor.

“You’ve got your work cut out for you, old boy.”

“So what do you think of it? Is it true, that you can sell your soul for demonic power?” Integra whispered softly to the darkness, knowing that Anderson was still awake beside her. He didn’t answer for a long moment.

“I suppose it’s true enough. If a man be willing to sell his soul, than the Devil will be waiting on him at the door.” He paused again. “Why, are you planning on it?” She chuckled softly, shaking her head even though he couldn’t see.

“I don’t think so. I’d be no good with demons, anyway. I wouldn’t fall for their traps; I’m too level-headed.”

“Maybe so.” She shut her eyes, trying to stop the thoughts from bouncing around her skull like billiard balls. “Your shampoo—what is that supposed to smell like?” he asked half-cursively. She blinked, actually having to think about it. It wasn’t every day someone asked her a strange question like that.

“Um—I think that the name of it is “Spring Meadow” actually. Something about wildflowers.” She buried her body down under the thick covers, relishing the warmth. “I never really pay much attention. Why?”

“No reason. I just couldn’t place it.” His voice had a strange undertone, but he flopped on his side and dismissed her without saying a word. She frowned and closed her eyes again, focusing on the black behind her lids in an effort to fall asleep.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” A foreign body slammed against her and Seras hit the wall hard, bouncing off the stones slightly before being caged in by her absolutely enraged master. “Still weak about sensing what’s around you, little fledgling,” he cooed furiously, holding her chin in a firm grasp and pushing her head against the stones. A twinge of fear crossed her face before being replaced by a blatant challenge. She grinned in a rather good impression of him, turning her head in line with his grip and eyeing him boldly.

“I don’t know what you’re talking abo—umph—” she grunted as he forced her deeper into the stone, her cheekbone straining under the pressure. She chuckled darkly. “If you want me, just say it. It’s your problem, anyway Master. This’d all be over if you just—”

“Shut up.” He pulled in close, his nose pressed against her as he let her new fragrance intertwine in his senses. Delicious, he thought despite the desperate battle against his own body. She honestly had no idea what she’d done; the poor innocent thing thought that she was getting the one-up on him, but instead she’d just placed a lamb in a cage with a wolf. A hungry wolf at that. Starving….

For humans, a vampire’s true scent—one that comes with knowledge (where had she learned of it?)— was pleasant at most. It drowned out the iron-rust smell of blood and instead their mediocre senses were filled with scents from their own memories. Happy scents, which represented things they enjoyed. But for other vampires, it was a clear beacon that could easily spread across an entire countryside in a fortnight. In Midians, it evoked something much more hormonal than simple happy memories. It sent chills down his spine and made him want to throw
caution to the wind and defile her in a public hallway, even if it was just the basement.

But perhaps she did know what she was doing. She tangled her fingers in his hair, growling playfully as he slowly let her feet touch the ground and let go of her chin. The bruises he left were already starting to fade and she grinned at him before her eyes shifted to the stairs and he vanished into the wall as the little curly-haired boy that belonged to Seras’ troop made his way down, blinking in the darkness to try and compensate his weak eyes.

“C-captain?” he asked hesitantly. Seras nodded and waved.

“Just heading to bed, Roans. Aren’t you going to be headed home soon?” she asked, scratching her chin nonchalantly to hide the bruises and give them time to vanish completely. The boyish captain nodded and lifted a plastic sack.

“As soon as I ferry these down to Lab 3.” He sniffed the air and his nose wrinkled. “Are you wearing perfume? I thought it hurt your nose.” Seras laughed and shook her head.

“No, I’m not wearing any perfume. Everyone’s been asking that tonight.” Roans shrugged and continued on his way with a salute. Seras watched him leave, only to be pulled into the stones by shadow arms.

“Don’t think that you’ve gained the upper hand, Police Girl. I will not be swayed.” The ghostly voice vanished with a slick swipe of a tongue that had Seras shuddering in the hallway, wiping the sticky residue off her neck.

“Cor, but I hate that tongue of his!”

Seras brushed her hair out in the mirror, irritated at the dog lying beneath her feet. She’d come out of the bathroom with a fresh face and clean teeth only to see the ebony animal sitting beside her coffin, tail beating the ground and a note in his mouth. She recognized her master’s neat, even handwriting from across the room.

Scowling, she had stomped over and jerked the note from the dog’s teeth, ignoring as it wound its bushy shadow-tail around her legs and began sniffing at the bottom of her pajama pants while she read.

Police Girl—

The dog stays with you until further notice. Don’t bother arguing about it, either—I’m not in the mood for your constant whining anymore tonight.
A.

“Oh, he makes me so angry sometimes!” she howled, ripping the note into shreds and throwing it in the wastebasket. “Why can’t he believe that I can look after myself?” she asked Baskerville angrily.

“Woof,” the dog had answered before rolling on his back and scratching his body along the stones. She had sighed before moving along to brush her hair. Now she turned and watched him continue to scratch his back, wondering if hellhounds could get fleas.

“I don’t want you in here, but I guess I have no choice, do I?” she asked the wriggling creature before crawling into her coffin. He jumped up on his feet and made a move to follow her, only to have his snout shoved back before it was caught in the lowering lid of the coffin. “No, dogs
sleep on the carpet, not in bed.” The dog looked thoughtfully for a moment before vanishing into thin air. A few seconds later the lid rose and it was shoved off the mattress, two angry eyes glaring at it from within the gloom. “I said no!” The lid lowered once more; it whined but got no answer. Finally it rolled onto the carpet with a huff and pulled its tail over its nose, eyes closing.

Seras lay in the dark, listening to a leaky pipe dripping somewhere in the wall near her head. I know why he won’t believe me. Every time I try to prove that I can take care of myself, I end up almost dying. Even that last time—I would have won against that woman, but I’m sure she’d have set those Girls on me in a heartbeat. Even with my men I might not have made it. She rolled over, burying her face in the pillow and trying to ignore the greasy feeling of her unwashed hair. He must look at me like I’m a little kid. No wonder he gets mad when I try to pull off these sorts of stunts. She heard Baskerville huff softly and smiled, gaining a weird sense of protection from the dog guarding her coffin. I wonder why Master chose a dog as a familiar. Maybe I’ll ask him sometime…. Integra scowled at the sunlight, rolling over and trying to hide her face in the pillows from the light leaking in around the heavy curtains. Her head pounded from lack of sleep; between going to bed late and getting up in the middle of the night, she was tired and it was early. Her mind went to the stacks of paperwork still sitting in her office and she groaned softly. She really didn’t want to face the day.

Very seldom did she act on such lazy feelings, but there were days that she just sent a message down saying that she felt ill. She knew that Walter understood that she wasn’t really sick, but just needed a day to catch up on lost sleep. If she had truly been sick, she’d have tried to tough it out before being banished by her old guardian up to her chambers while he called the doctor.

Now, she knew she couldn’t do that so easily. Anderson, being the insightful man that he was, would immediately call her bluff before quoting something about laziness. She emerged from her pillow sanctuary for a breath and eyed his sleeping form. Something about the fact that she was awake and he wasn’t annoyed her and she jabbed him sharply in the stomach. His eyes immediately flew open and he stared at the ceiling for a moment before yawning widely and stretching with a grunt. His arm almost knocked her in the head and she ducked back down.

“Watch it,” she growled and he looked over at her.

“Not a morning person today, I see?” he responded mockingly and stretched again, this time keeping himself more contained. His back cracked and he winced before laying back and sighing. “It’s early, isn’t it?”

“When you’re being woken in the middle of the night, anything before noon is “early”. I just want to go down there and shoot them both for causing such a racket.” She rubbed her temples and groaned.

“Hmm.” She looked over at him, noticing him staring around the room. “Your butler… Walter?”

“Yes, what about him?” she sat up slightly, her eyes following his around the room, lingering on all the furniture.

“He was speaking yesterday about my belongings. If I had any and who was going to bring them.” He paused for a moment. “I had them in my bedroom at the orphanage. I want them in this bedroom, here.”
“Of course,” she replied without thinking. “I was the one who asked Walter if you had said anything about it. I mean, they are your things and since you’re living here now I just assumed... of course, if you wanted to leave them there that’s fine too I suppose,” she finished quickly, feeling her strange vein of shyness bubble up again under her skin. Wasn’t there some sort of book to read about how to deal with being married and moving into people’s homes and that sort of thing? Who had time to figure these things out on their own? It was awkward and she didn’t want his things cluttering her space, but at the same time something inside her felt warm and happy at the thought of his things in her space, where they belonged.

“It’s fine. I’ll make arrangements to have them brought here from the orphanage. There’s not a whole lot to bring; only the bookshelves and a few personal belongings.”

“Bookshelves?” she leaned forward intently. “What sort of books do you own?” she asked curiously. He shrugged, continuing to look about the room and sort mental images in his mind of where his things might fit in.

“Nothing really fancy; mostly work related titles. Theology, Ecclesiology, Anthropobiology, Demonology, and of course Mythology although that is more for personal entertainment.” He nodded and looked at her, eyes falling on her chest absently. She looked down to see her gown slipping and pulled it back up with a scowl.

“Pervert.” He laughed and shook his head.

“After all you torment me with, you decide to call me the pervert? You hypocrite.” She colored and turned away with a huff, her nose turning in the air slightly. He had never seen her act so… ingenuous before he started being with her all the time.

I’m probably the only one she acts this way with. I wonder if that’s a good thing.

“Come here.” She ignored him, her hip now parallel with the edge. “It’s the best time for such things—your little beasties are asleep by now.” She was fully red now, but still swatted at his hand with a fierce stubbornness. He leaned over slightly and his fingers brushed her thigh before she jerked back and tumbled off the bed. He burst into chuckles as she cursed him with phrases he’d never even heard of before as she stumbled back to her feet. He saw the discomfiture in her eyes and shrugged.

“You should have come over when I asked you to. Now come here.” Her hands fisted and she planted her feet, eyes glimmering with defiant determination. He sighed and sat up, recognizing the start of a fight. “Don’t make me force you.” She remained silent, her mouth tightening into a thin line as she crossed her arms. He groaned inwardly and threw off the blanket, preparing to chase her down. She realized what he was about to do and backed away, looking more startled than anything else. She probably didn’t think I was serious. It took a full two seconds to grab her and drag her back to the bed. It probably wouldn’t have taken that long if she hadn’t been fighting from the minute he grabbed her around the waist.

“No! This—stop! Rape!” she shouted as he held her down, looking at her futile efforts to
escape with a sense of blasé amusement. After a moment, she stopped trying and resulted to just
glowering at his hands holding her wrists to the bed. “I’ll call Alucard up here and make him shoot
your head off. Don’t think I won’t, rapist,” she vowed. He laughed at her threats, effortlessly
moving her hands above her head just to make her more irate. She was so fierce, so interesting
when she was angry.

“Aye, call him if that’s what you want. After I shove a knife or two through his heart
we’ll be back to square one here.” He bent down, nose brushing hers before whispering in her ear.
“Go on, fight all you want. But you’ll be screaming another tune in a minute, I promise.”

“Is that so?” she sneered, but she couldn’t fool him. Already she was relaxing, her neck
angling the slightest bit. He leaned up and studied her expression, staying still as stone while he
mapped her features. He hadn’t really looked closely at her before, not even on their first night
together as a married couple. He had to admit that she was quite pretty, despite her male-oriented
dress code. The lack of makeup left her face smooth, and as far as he was concerned she was
symmetrical.

She watched him as he stared at her, her face beginning to flush again under the scrutiny.
She wrinkled her nose and frowned at him. “Well?” He let go of her, rising slightly to allow her to
move away if she wanted.

“Well, what? You didn’t want me to do anything, and I’m not a rapist. I won’t force a
woman.” He shrugged and she sat up, sputtering slightly.

“You can’t just—you didn’t even—who do you—” he frowned and she trailed off into a
stonier silence.

“What?” he leaned in close, mimicking her not a week before. “You have to tell me what
you want,” he murmured. “I’m no mind reader. I cannae tell what it is you’re expecting.”

“What do I want?” she sat up, rising onto her knees and pushing back her hair. “What do
I want?” she repeated, hands tangling in his hair as he pulled her closer.

“Show me,” he replied almost inaudibly, running his hands under her gown. She let out a
breathy laugh and he grinned.

Beep-beep-beep-beep-beep— Integra’s shoulders sagged and they stared at each other in
utter disbelief before Anderson snarled, throwing a look over her shoulder.

“We’re not keeping that in here.”

“I’m not getting rid of the phone. What if there’s an emergency?” she replied, untangling
herself from him. She sighed, shaking her head as she climbed out of the bed and reached for the
phone.

“I’ll save you in an emergency. We’re not keeping it,” he answered firmly. She shot a
look at him over her shoulder as she picked up the receiver.

“Yes, Walter.” She paused a moment. “No, I wasn’t asleep, but I’m sort of in the—who?
For who? Yes. Well, can’t it wait until later? No, I’m not being—no, I really don’t…” She sighed.
“I understand. Yes, alright. Well, make them wait in the parlor and we’ll be down shortly.” She
hung up and picked a pillow off the bed, throwing it at him as hard as she could.

“It’s your fault, you oversized troublemaker,” she proclaimed as he caught the pillow and
lowered it, tossing it across the bed.
“Wha’ do you mean it’s my fault?” She flipped her hair over her shoulder, moving to the closet and browsing through her array of suits.

“Two men from the Vatican are here to see you. Some twins or something.”

“Twins?” he asked and she nodded, looking over her shoulder and pulling a light blue suit off the rack.

“Yes. Um… Leo and Loranzo, I think.” She shrugged. “Walter said they were businessmen of some sort.” Anderson groaned aloud and stood, his face falling. “What? Is it bad? What are they, lawyers?”

“It’s Leonardo and Lorenzo, and they’re much worse. They’re accountants.”

Chapter End Notes

Afterword: (ORIGINAL):
for those of you too lazy to Google:
Theology: Study of religious doctrine (or religion in general)
Ecclesiology: Study of church affairs
Anthropobiology: Study of human biology
Demonology: Study of demons
Mythology: Study of myths, fables, and/or tales
I knew Anderson would have lots of occupation-related material in his reading list, but my brother was actually the one to suggest having biology books in there too. His point being that since Anderson was regenerative that he may have had to study up on his body to make sure he understood where not to get hit so that when he regenerates he won’t be paralyzed accidently or something. Although I thought that you probably couldn’t be paralyzed from regenerating, I added the study of human biology into the mix just to… well, mix things up!
Walter peered around the doorframe to the guest parlor and bit his lip as he stared at the men inside. They looked exactly the same, down to the cowlicks on their forehead. The only major difference was the addition of a thin mustache on one of their faces. The mustachioed one stood in the middle of the room, a cross frown twisting his features and bushy brows hanging above his darkened glasses. The other one, looking almost five years younger without the facial hair, was moving about the room and taking in the antiques on the bookshelves with an appreciative air.

He was counting the minutes since he’d called Sir Integra. The two men had showed up on the step first thing, flashing their Vatican I.D.s and asking for Paladin Alexander Anderson. The butler had kindly explained that the priest and the lady of the house hadn’t yet emerged for the day but the men had practically shoved their way through the closing door. It was clear that they’d done this many times before.

“We’ll wait as long as it takes. Please let them know that we’re in the home,” one of them had said, his mustache barely quivering with every breath. Walter had blinked in surprise at the utter gall of the two young men. He cleared his throat and pulled a tiny legal pad from his apron pocket.

“Oh, why does he have to be like that?” Lorenzo drew close enough to lean against his brother’s shoulder and talk into his ear. His gloved hand reached around and the twins linked pinkies, something they’d done since before either of them could remember. It was a comforting gesture, subtle enough to hide well and effective enough to calm them down when they became overstressed.

“You have to remember that the father comes from a time when people didn’t have much money between them. Saving money is just another aspect of his life.” He moved his hand up to squeeze his twin’s wrist before moving away and adjusting his glasses where they’d fallen down his nose. Lorenzo sighed and moved to stare out the window at the soldiers moving around below in the yard. He watched curiously as they moved into formation and began marching drills. He turned
around again only when the door to the parlor opened.

Father Anderson appeared as they’d always known him; nothing in his clothing was changed and as far as his countenance was concerned they all could have been in the Vatican instead of England. The only change was the stern-looking woman peering around his right arm before moving to stand beside him. Her light-colored looking woman peering around his right arm before moving to stand beside him. Her light-colored hair stood out against the immaculate blue suit she wore. Her long bangs were pushed out of the way by large, wire-rimmed glasses that made her face seem much smaller than it really was. Icy blue eyes scrutinized her new guests as the corners of her mouth turned downwards.

“I assume you’re the accountants?” she inquired briskly, tilting her head as if she couldn’t figure out what to do with the men standing before her. After a moment, Leonardo nodded and stepped forward while raising a hand.

“Yes, my name is Leonardo Mancinni, and—”

“My name is Lorenzo Mancinni. We’ve come to discuss business,” Lorenzo finished as he smiled politely at the pair. He was used to people standing on the defensive in front of him; he was an accountant, after all. Most people he went to see owed debts of some sort, and his brother and he weren’t the most popular people as a result. But that was alright; as long as he was able to stay with his twin, he didn’t mind it if no one liked him.

“Oh yes. Leonardo and… Lorenzo.” The woman shook the proffered hand and wiped her glove discreetly on her jacket. “I’ve heard a lot about you. I am—”

“Yes, we know you. Integra Fairbrook Wingates Hellsing.” Leonardo rattled off the name with an air of derision and the woman frowned.

“Hellsing-Anderson,” she corrected frostily as she motioned to the table. “Will you sit?” Anderson followed her with a barely-hidden grin and the four sat at opposite sides of the table. She looked between the pair and sniffed haughtily. “My husband tells me that he’s racked up quite a debt with you.” Lorenzo nodded vigorously as he grabbed his brother’s briefcase, popping it open.

“Oh yes. Property repairs, cover-ups, hospital bills, collateral damage; you name it, it’s on his record somewhere.” The man cheerfully pulled out paperwork upon paperwork, stacking on the table in front of Integra. She picked them up, shuffling through them and humming at things that caught her eye. After a moment she looked up at Anderson with a slight sneer.

“Sexual Harassment suit?” she asked with a hint of laughter. He colored and snatched the paper from her.

“It was a misunderstanding. That one was settled, was it not?” He picked up a discarded paper and eyed the figure on the bottom of the page. “And this one, for the damage to the Church depository—didn’t we make out a payment plan?” The twins exchanged a “here-we-go” look and simultaneously squared their shoulders, clasping their hands on the table in front of them.

“We did make the payment plan. That’s the figure for it,” Leonardo started with a firm tone. Anderson balked and pointed to the paper.

“Every month?!”

“Yes, every month. Roofs are expensive. Rewiring electricity is expensive. Everything that lands on our desk with your name on it is expensive.” The clean-shaven twin laid a hand on the flustered one’s shoulder. The man took a deep breath, pushing his glasses up his nose. Integra took the paper.
from Anderson and shook her head at the sum.

“For this amount, there better be a bloody rendition by Michelangelo himself on the roof of that thing.” She wrinkled her nose and continued looking through the papers, ignoring Anderson’s rambling on how he couldn’t possibly cost that much. “Look, Lorenzo—”

“I’m Lorenzo,” the other twin stated, barely raising his hand. She looked at him and turned her body to face him.

“Yes, Lorenzo. What is this one here, for “Matters concerning his Holiness’s chair”? What, did he shove a bayonet through it or something?” Anderson growled and looked over her shoulder at the bill. Lorenzo coughed and scratched his chin before answering.

“Well, he managed to knock part of the golden plating off during an incident involving the Bishop Maxwell and a wrinkle in the carpeting.” The man’s brown eyes shifted over to the flushing priest before he hid them behind his sunglasses once more. Integra snorted and eyed the invoice. “It was embarrassing for everyone, I assure you.”

“And it costs this much each month to fix it?” she asked incredulously. The twin pulled the paper over to look at it before shaking his head.

“No, that’s just the interest amount. The real monetary value was repaid with a loan. And of course the Bishop is paying half of the dues as well.” Integra shook her head and tsked before waving the remaining papers away.

“All in all, how much money are we talking about here; to pay off all of the debt.” The twins exchanged another look. Finally one cleared his throat.

“All in all? Well, if you count the outstanding debts that were in place before we came into office….” He tapped a finger against his chin thoughtfully. “We’re looking at a rough sum in the hundreds of thousands. We might even break the million mark.” Integra winced and looked reproachfully at the man by her side before sighing and motioning to the twin that was talking.

“Look, Leonardo…”

“I’m Leonardo,” the other protested, mustache bristling.

“Yes, yes—whoever you are—give me a fixed amount. Do the math now if you have to, I don’t care. I just want to know how much all this will cost us.” The twins bent their heads together and began muttering to each other.

“Us? It won’t cost Hellsing much of anything.” Anderson frowned. “I’m the one whose paycheck just dropped into the negatives.” Integra jabbed him in the side and rolled her eyes.

“We’re married. Your debts are my debts now. And I hate having debts.” She raised her eyebrows, letting the thought set in. “And the best part is, you don’t even have to pay me back.” Her voice dropped below a whisper. “In money, anyway.”

“Shh!” Anderson hissed, casting a look to see if the twins had overheard. Luckily, they were still in the midst of their calculations. That’s why the boys were part of Iscariot’s accounting services. They were the best of the best; geniuses with a number of ways, but when they became absorbed in their work they were oblivious to the world—not a good thing for a lot of occupations. That’s why they were thrown into the office work. The twins were notorious for not only keeping all the monetary flow up to date and almost to the hour, but for always collecting what was due, one way or the other. Not that they were loan sharks, mind you; they just always had a way of making you
feel horribly guilty when you knew that you hadn’t paid back what you owed.

“We’ve reached a sum,” one twin announced, clearing his throat politely to quieten the arguing couple. The other scribbled an amount on a scrap of paper and slid it across the table, as if it were black-market dealings instead of debt reconciliation. Integra arched a brow and took the scrap, unfolding it and eyeing the numbers on the page. She promptly choked on her own breath, coughing harshly before looking at the accountants.

“This can’t be right! You’ve got to have added one too many zeroes,” she sputtered in disbelief. Anderson peered around her hair at the number. His eyes widened and he pale a bit, but didn’t dispute the amount the two had come up with. Integra turned to him, eyes imploring him to tell her something comforting. “This can’t be right,” she repeated, waving the scrap of paper in the air. The corners of his mouth turned down and he mumbled something under his breath. Her eyes narrowed and she shook her head, practically slamming the paper back onto the table facedown.

“This is too great an amount to settle here,” she said with a forcefully subdued tone. “I’ll have my accountants keep in touch with you.” Her mouth formed a steely smile and she held out her hand for them to shake once more. The twins stood, bowing and shaking her hand one by one.

“That’s fine. We’ll—”

“Yes, we’ll keep in touch.” Leonardo pulled a square card from inside his overcoat.

“Here’s our business card,” they spouted in unison as they moved around the table and to the door. “We’ll see—”

“Ourelves out,” Lorenzo finished with a smile. Halfway through the door, he turned back and looked at Integra inquiringly. “If you had time to view only one site in London, what site do you think would be best to see?”

“Harrods,” she answered after a moment. He nodded, murmuring the name to himself as he moved to jog down the hall after his brother. She watched him leave before pivoting around to face Anderson. “You and I need to have a private chat,” she ground out, grabbing the slip of paper still on the table.

“Well, say what you need to say,” he replied, crossing his arms defensively. She shook her head, shooting a glance to the open doorway.

“No. Private private. Bedroom. Now.” She seemed to be angry beyond basic speech as she pushed him ahead of her and marched him down the hall in the direction of the private chambers.

“How does this taste?” Cook asked as she popped a spoon into Walter’s mouth. He blinked in surprise before tasting the soup and swallowed with a satisfied sound.

“Delicious, as always.” He winked at the talented chef, who blushed and waved him away with her ladle as she stirred her mixture again. The heavyset woman was about his age, having come into the family kitchen when they both were in their twenties. Back then, she was a healthily-plump thing with a bright smile and passion for cooking. The only thing that changed between then and now was the size of her girth. Although they’d never really let anything very serious spark between them, she and the butler had been flirting for the past thirty years. He still looked at her and saw the playful girl of her youth, despite the fact that he couldn’t get his arms around her anymore.

“That’s good. I don’t know what this new man of the Lady’s likes; otherwise I’d fix him
something nice.” She shrugged and placed the lid on the soup pot. “But he ate enough for three men last night, so I think that I’ll just have to play it by gut instinct.” She tapped her belly with a hand and moved to knead the bread dough. “Soup and bread with cake for dessert. Something delicious and filling; this will stick to his bones, I daresay.”

“I think that he’s open to almost anything. I agree though; you need to catch him in the halls one day and ask him. He’s a good sort of fellow, for an old enemy. He’s quiet, but he’s polite enough when he needs to be and I don’t think he’ll go picking fights with our little bats in the basement.” Walter smiled and sat down to polish the silverware as Cook beat the dough on the other side of the table.

“I do need to speak to him; I do.” She flipped the dough and dusted more flour over the top. “Where is he? I might be able to catch him before supper and get an idea on tomorrow’s meal.” Walter colored slightly and shook his head, separating the knives and forks into different sections.

“I believe that he and Sir Integra retired once more to their rooms. They claimed they needed a private room to speak to each other in. I’m not sure if they were in earnest or not, though.” The elderly woman cackled and nodded knowingly, her strong arms pushing the dough into a circle on her board.

“I’m sure that they don’t, knowing a newlywed couple. But they’re young. You and I had times like that, in our own far-away youth,” she mentioned. Walter turned an even deeper shade of red and grinned, his hands deftly shining the cutlery.

“It wasn’t quite so long ago, when you really think about it.” He laughed and leaned back in the chair, eyes distant. “Do you remember when you and I snuck into the private chambers to spy on Master Arthur and his wife?” Cook laughed and pushed her hair out of her eyes, tucking it back behind the kerchief on her head.

“Of course I do! He caught us before anything really interesting happened and shot at us when we were running down the hallway; not to mention all those weekends afterwards where we had to shovel manure out of the Calvary’s stables.” She smiled, more wistfully this time. “Oh, we were just silly children back then. We wouldn’t do such a thing now, or I wouldn’t at least.” She picked up the dough and put it in a bowl, covering it with a cloth to let it rise some more. “Let the young’uns to their privacy. We all know that it’s got to happen anyway.” She pulled a bobby pin from her hair and re-pinned some stray hairs at the nape of her neck. “I’m sure that their babies will be beautiful. All blonde hair and light-colored eyes.”

“They’re sure to be wonderful little things. Smart and athletic, not to mention tactical.” Walter nodded to himself as he flipped his rag over to clean insides of the spoons. “Yes, I must say I think that this will work out, despite my earlier misgivings.” He paused and looked up at the woman as she moved around preparing vegetables. “Gabby, why did we never get married? You and I—back then, we could have had something.” Cook looked up from her cutting board and turned to him, her eyes distant for a moment before she smiled.

“Well, I suppose that neither of us had much time for things like marriage and children. We were both always so busy, first with Master Arthur and then with the young Lady.” She nodded, but there was something a bit regretful to her tone. “And then again, we were just silly children back then.” She turned back to her board and the sound of cutting once again filled the air. Walter looked at her back and sighed to himself before resuming his chores.

“Yes, I suppose we were.”
“How the hell did you gain that much debt! What are you, a walking liability!?” Integra tore off her more expensive coat and put it back on its hanger, trying to be quiet despite the locked door and deserted hallway outside.

“Aye! Or, I was,” Anderson agreed, watching her hang up the garment and slam the closet door shut. “I told you how unstable I was, those first few months. It took me weeks to get back on my feet!”

“What does that have to do with anything?” Integra countered, hands on her hips as she squared off against him. “That number—that’s not a bunch of squashed doorknobs!” His cheeks turned red and he crossed his arms again, matching her stance.

“No, it’s a broken arm for one of the nurses when she tried to help me on my feet the first time after the surgery. It’s a statesman’s hip, an old man who was on the wrong side of the door when I fell through it trying to relearn how to walk. It’s the sink for the bathroom, which I punched a hole through trying to fix a leaky faucet,” he growled, stalking forward. She didn’t back up, but her arms fell to her sides as she listened to his explanation.

“It’s a busted bedframe and a ripped-apart wall, from when I realized wha’ my eventual fate would be as I watched my mentor fall apart. It’s a gilded banister in the great hall of the orphanage, which I bent accidentally when I got the news that my mother had gone to be with the Lord.” He stopped in front of her, boots touching the edges of her polished shoes as he stared down. “Aye, I’m a walking liability. But I couldnae help it, back then.” His gaze rested on her arms, the purple bruises darkened against the tight fabric of her shirt. “I still cannae, sometimes. It’s not something you ever get fully used to.” He turned away, not bothering to meet her eyes as he slowly let his arms come apart.

“I’m sorry.” The words surprised him more than anything and he twisted his head to look at her over his shoulder. Her eyes were both pitying and guilty. “I—I never thought about it quite like that. I shouldn’t have made assumptions,” she acknowledged quietly.

“Wha’s this? The mighty Sir Integra, apologizing?” he asked only half-jokingly, turning back around fully to stare at her. She scoffed and waved her hand dismissively.

“I am willing to apologize, when I know I’m in the wrong.” She smirked. “And only to certain people at that.”

“I’m flattered,” he deadpanned. She glared at him, wishing that she had something to throw. Instead she walked over and opened her drawer, pulling out a silver cigar case and lighter. “Oh, no. Not when I’m in the room. I can’t stand it.”

“Second-hand smoke is overrated, don’t you know?” she pulled a cigar out and placed it between her lips, but didn’t light it. “You won’t die from it, I assure you.”

“It’s not that.” He eyed her warily. “Seeing you with one brings up the temptation. And it’s worse when I taste it on you.” She stopped halfway from bringing the light to the tip, letting the tiny flame click out. He frowned at the offending stick and shook his head.

“What, did you swear to God that you’d never have another?” she asked, trying to sound serious. It was hard when inside she was laughing at the mere thought. He shook his head again, more sternly this time.

“No, to my mentor. On his deathbed,” he enunciated. “He didn’t like the thought of me smoking around the children. That wouldn’t be a good role model, you see.”
“I do see,” she sighed, placing the cigar back into its case and into the drawer, closing it with an air of disappointment. She really did need the stress relief that only tobacco could give her. “I’ll try to make sure that you’re not around when I light up,” she conceded, hoping that he understood the sacrifice that she was making for his sake.

“I appreciate that.” He gave her a strange little half-grin. “I really do.” She shrugged indifferently and looked down at the paper scrap sitting on the nightstand, looking forlorn. She placed a hand on her cheek, biting down on her pinkie slightly as she contemplated the best way to explain it to the rest of the Round Table. The cool glove soothed her somewhat and she sighed as she felt him walk up behind her and stare over her shoulder. She barely leaned into him, her eyes focused on the scrawled numbers.

“My colleagues will not like what they see. No matter how much I try to sugarcoat it.” He made a sound of agreement and he reached around her to turn the numbers facedown. “Hiding it won’t help,” she teased.

“I’m more concerned about hiding you.” She turned slightly in his arms, staring up in astonishment. He was staring at the wall pensively, his face serious. He caught her look and frowned. “You’re a loose felon, so far as your English government is concerned. I broke you out of prison, remember?”

“You didn’t break me out of prison. The prison broke around me,” she countered. His brow furrowed and she laughed softly. “Don’t worry; I won’t leave the mansion if I can help it. No one has to know that I’m here, save for everyone who already knows.” She tilted her head and the smile slipped away. “You’re a loose felon, so far as your English government is concerned. I broke you out of prison, remember?”

“The higher-ups may or may not have known that particular piece of information,” he mumbled after a moment. She blinked, shocked beyond words. After a long while the information sunk in and she began to chuckle.

“You mean you lied to the Pope, all for me?” she exclaimed. “Honestly, I’m a little flattered.” She caught the expression on his face and stopped laughing. “But, why though?” she inquired.

“It was the easiest way to go. You’d already all but accepted, and the more I thought about it the more I realized that being married to someone like you would make my life that much easier, considering how knowledgeable you already were about my… occupations.” His eyes flitted around the room, unable to rest on any one thing. “I didn’t lie, not really. I just told Maxwell not to tell them everything in the formal request.” He coughed and tapped his boot on the ground. “Besides, you and I both know that you never committed any crime. Everyone knows that, but you had to serve time so that no one could cry preferentialism.”

“Well, no matter what the reason, I’m surprised at you,” she declared. He shrugged.

“If it weren’t for Maxwell, I couldn’t have pulled it off. But I suppose in the end, what does it matter who did the work?” he replied unabashedly. She almost spat out something about liars and Catholics, but she knew she’d just hear the “I wasn’t always a Catholic” line and kept her mouth shut. She shrugged and he gave her a weird look before pulling his vibrating phone out of his front pocket. “How did that get there?”

“I put it there in your coat, this morning. Otherwise you’d have lost it again,” she accused. He frowned, but flipped open the phone.
“Anderson.” He listened for a moment before his frown deepened. “Is that so? Alright, I’ll be there for the papers in a minute.” He hung up and placed the phone back into his pocket. “I’ve got a mission in Austria today, it seems.” He straightened his coat and pulled out his bible. “It’s a big one… I won’t be back until late, most likely.”

“Alright then.” She shuffled her feet and backed away as he flipped the bible open and prepared to leave. “Er— be safe,” she added. He nodded and was gone in a flurry of pages. She caught one of them as it fluttered almost out of existence. The intangible page became real and she read the Latin on it without really reading it. Something compelled her to stick it in her pocket and she folded it up carefully before doing so. She turned and walked over to the closet, choosing a more work-friendly suit coat before heading out the door and to her office. There was work to finish.

“I just don’t like it. I mean, it reminds me of my grandma’s house when I was a kid. Sugar cookies and old lady scent.” Stevenson frowned up at his captain, who was standing up in the middle of the battlefield like the bullets didn’t even exist. Granted the bullets were paintballs and it was a training ground, not a battlefield, but even so! Seras ducked as a yellow ball whizzed near her head and turned with a sigh to mimic Stevenson’s pose, sitting with her back against the piece of plywood they were using as a makeshift stronghold.

“I can’t help it. To humans, it just smells like the things that they enjoy. Apparently, you enjoyed your grandma’s house.” Stevenson sniffed, but didn’t deny the claim. He heard a shout of pain and Roans flipped over the plywood, his face stained bright yellow and thick mats of paint in his curls.

“Can we call foul, Mum? They’re deliberately aiming for the face,” Roans moaned. Seras patted him sympathetically on the arm, clucking like an overbearing mother.

“Better the face than the crotch, Roans.” The captain blinked up at her sadly and she propped him up against the plywood before peeking over the edge again. “Ugh. I’m going out there; we’re being slaughtered.” She whistled sharply and shadows formed into a dog at her feet. “Cover me, Harry,” she commanded before jumping over the plywood and jogging for the front lines. The captain sputtered angrily, but nevertheless slung his gun on top of the plywood and shot at the opposing team.

Inside his master’s office, Alucard watched the “carnage” play out. He could faintly hear his fledgling’s shouts to her men as she dodged the chemical-packed balls of goo and mowed down enemies. He knew she had too much fun doing it, even if it was a training exercise for her men.

“I’m surprised you aren’t out there distracting her,” Integra mused softly as she worked. Alucard turned and looked at her, a wicked grin forming on his features.

“Under normal circumstances I’d love to. But having my fledgling smelling of inhalants won’t help my cause any.”

“Ah, yes. If she can’t wash off, then she’ll be stinking up the whole basement with paint-smell, won’t she?” Integra stamped a seal of approval on a paper and placed it with the others before leaning back in the chair wearily. “Another full stack down. I’m moving along well, I think,” she muttered to herself.

“Without your new plaything to distract you, you do manage to get a good bit done,” Alucard agreed. She turned around and glowered at him, only to have him ignore the look.

“He’s not anyone’s play-whatever. And he most certainly doesn’t distract me. He’s just my
husband, and even if you don’t like him he’s not going anywhere.” Alucard didn’t answer for a moment, and she turned back and grabbed another stack of documents to sort through.

“It’s strange, how you set yourself up to be hurt in life.” Integra paused in the middle of her writing. She finished the sentence and put down the pen before pushing her chair away from the desk and swiveling around to take his bait.

“Oh, I’ll bite. What do you mean?” He turned and looked at her, crimson eyes glowing in the dim light of the room.

“Well, I’d have thought you’d have at least chosen a man who would live as long as you would,” he started. “After watching your father falter and die, I’m surprised that you would willingly choose the same thing with your husband.” His eyes roved her face and he shrugged before continuing. “But; since you’d never really love someone like him, you’ll be able to watch as his own body betrays him without much of a problem, won’t you my master?”

She couldn’t answer; her mind jumping back to her childhood. Her father had learned that he’d contracted HIV during his mission work in India. She’d heard the story from Walter—after her mother had died in childbirth, the autopsy had shown that she’d contracted the disease. After being tested, her father had also received his death sentence. He’d raised her as long as he could; hurrying to endow her with the knowledge he knew he’d have to pass, racing against the clock, he’d robbed her of a real childhood without meaning to. Before long, AIDs had weakened his body to a shell of what it once was. And he died a broken body, unable to care for himself and hating every minute of it. His mind was still raging for life, but he couldn’t handle the burden his body had placed upon it.

She didn’t know how Alucard knew but she had an idea that he’d probably asked Walter, and the kindly butler wouldn’t have withheld such information from the vampire. The harsh feelings of pain that had wracked her small body as she watched her father die came back with a vengeance, tearing at her heart hard enough to make her breathe heavy. And now, without even thinking, she’d condemned herself to the same fate.

Anderson had warned her about what was going to happen to him. And goddammit, but she couldn’t just feel nothing as she thought about it. And worse, her heart lurched again—not for him, but for the unknown baby that would someday have to take his place. Her child—not yet born, but already destined, no: convicted to the same fate. She gripped the arms of the chair until her knuckles were white, feeling a panic rise in her at the thought. How could she ever agree to something like this? Why did she think it was going to be alright?!

“Ah, so you do care for him already. Pity.” Alucard tilted his head, his glasses reflecting the moon in their lenses. “Tell me, Master. Do you love him already? Can you not bear the weight of his eventual demise on your person? Do you regret your decision?”

“Enough!” she shouted, slamming her fist down on the table. Alucard’s brows arched above his glasses and the smile faltered somewhat. “How dare you speak to me in such a manner, servant!” She stood, all the fear and pain channeling into anger. “How dare you tell me off for repeating mistakes, when you’ve clearly done the same thing yourself!” she accused, pointing a finger at him. “Five times, in fact! Do you honestly think that Seras will be any different than those other women?”

She didn’t need to see his eyes to know that she had hit her mark. She’d hurt him, and she had meant every word. Of course she knew that Seras Victoria would end up dying before she abandoned Alucard, although personally Integra couldn’t see the reason behind her devotions. But all it took was a small seed of doubt, and she’d clearly come across one. Even though she knew she
should stop, she couldn’t help but rub the proverbial salt in deeper. “Especially since you treat her just as badly as you did them.”

“You have no clue what I’ve done!” he snarled, coming nose to nose with her. She could see the fury in his eyes behind the lenses; was close enough to feel his hot breath on her face. Realizing what he’d done, he backed away a few paces.

“Get out,” she ordered and he sunk through the floor without another word, although the house itself groaned on its foundations. She stared at the spot where he vanished, still shaking in anger. Finally she collapsed in her chair and rolled back up to the desk. She pulled out a cigar and lit it, hitting a button on the phone with her free hand. “Walter, I need my tea now, please.” After a moment, the aged voice answered amidst the slightly crackling static.

“Of course, Sir Integra.”

“Guess who won the war today?!” Seras sang as she sauntered through the doorway into her master’s chambers, twirling the paintball gun like a majorette baton. “My team!” she declared. “For the first time in six months, too! I didn’t give them an inch today; oh, you should’ve seen it Ma—Master?” she stopped in her tracks, looking at the chair and its occupant. “I-is something wrong, sir?” she asked hesitantly.

Alucard was sitting in his chair, fingers laced before him. He looked more depressed than she’d seen him in a long time. She backed away a pace, fidgeting. Perhaps this hadn’t been the best time to barge into his quarters singing her victory song. He was probably still angry at her. She quickly sniffed her now multicolored shirt. The paintball smell masked her scent somewhat, but it was still there underneath the chemical odor.

“Seras, go and bathe. I’m sick and tired of hearing your whining.” The command startled her enough to almost drop the gun. She stared at him in disbelief. He was… he was recanting his earlier orders? He was going to let her wash off? She paused, sorting his words through her mind, trying to find some loophole or trickery on his part.

“Of course, Master; but are you sure that—”

“Get out of here!” she jumped almost a foot off the ground and backed away, feeling a little hurt. He was clearly angry; had she said some offhand statement that irritated him? Or was it really still from early this morning? She wilted slightly and turned to leave.

“Fine.” She put a hand on the doorframe and looked at him. He hadn’t moved a single finger. “Thank you,” she said a little too forcefully before disappearing down the hall, her hurt disappearing under the excitement of a well-needed shower.

Chapter End Notes

[ORIGINAL]

Author’s Note: Leonardo and Lorenzo come back in this one! I based poor little Lorenzo’s personality on Italy from Hetalia. Does that make Leonardo Germany?
“Huh? Where… where am I?” Seras looked around, but her sight couldn’t penetrate the heavy darkness that seemed to hang over her. It was strange; usually, she could see in the dark as well as she could the daylight. But this gloom—it was murky as her master’s shadows and thick like fog. She couldn’t move well in it.

Suddenly, bright lights flashed on and she winced, hands slapping over her eyes to block out the bright assault on her vision. She blinked rapidly, trying to discern the sounds coming from where there was only silence before. It was applause of some sort; she tried in vain to vanquish the stars from her eyes and view her surroundings. “What the hell’s going on?”

She finally was able to see and peered around her to see that she was on some sort of stage, raised high above a table on a cement floor. Behind the table was a partition that gave way to seats, where an entire audience sat clapping and cheering for her. She saw all the soldiers from Hellsing crowded into the seats, and behind them sat the group of old men that formed the Round Table Conference. They were clapping politely, but didn’t engage in the whooping and hollering that the soldiers seemed to be fond of.

Above those seats were two balconies. In one balcony, her parents sat beside Commander Fargason. All three of them were calling her name and waving. She blinked in surprise and saw both Captains Henderson and Pickman sitting behind them, applauding her with large smiles. All of them wore halos and tiny white wings.

The other balcony had people in it as well, but not ones that she’d want to see. The two men who’d invaded Hellsing manor and killed almost all the soldiers—the Valentines? — were sitting in the front. The loud-mouthed one turned to the blonde at his side and whispered in his ear, his hands gesturing in such a way that she knew he was talking about her boobs. The spectacled man pursed his lips and shook his head while his brother guffawed. Sitting behind them was the crazy woman that had posed as Sir Integra’s sister. She was clapping like the others, but her expression suggested her boredom. Beside her sat Báthory’s fledgling who was staring at her with a sense of curiosity, blonde bangs hanging in his eyes.

“Are ye going to perform, or just stand there gaping like a fish?” Seras jerked in surprise at the loud voice and looked down, where three people now sat at the long table. Sir Integra sat on one end, a surly Alucard on the other, and an impatient Paladin Anderson in the middle. She fidgeted under their combined gaze, noting that the cheering had stopped and now everyone was staring at her expectantly. What was she supposed to do?

“Um—er, perform what?” she asked hesitantly. Out of habit, she looked to Alucard for some sign of her objective. He glared at her from under his hat, lips pressed together tightly. She had the distinct impression that he was very angry with her, but she couldn’t remember why. Maybe he was just mad because he was sitting next to his archenemy. Sir Integra smiled, her nails drumming impatiently on the table and wrinkling the tablecloth.

“Your talent, Agent Victoria. They don’t call it a talent show for nothing, you know.”

“We haven’t got all day,” Anderson added crossly. “Some of us have more pressing things to do.” Integra looked at him with a sly smile, scooting closer. He leaned away and almost
hit Alucard’s shoulder. The vampire growled low in his throat and he turned in the other direction. The look on his face proclaimed that he only just realized the situation he was in. He slumped in defeat, looking more like she was molesting him rather than just putting her hand on top of his.

“Oh. Um—sorry.” It was a dream—it had to be a dream. There was no way this would ever happen in real life. The dead didn’t come watch her stand onstage; Sir Integra wouldn’t commit PDA, no matter how drunk she was; so there was no other logical alternative. She might as well just play along, and see where her subconscious took her. Seras wracked her brain, trying to decide what they wanted from her. She didn’t really have any major talents; she was a good shot, but that was more skill than true-born aptitude. She could sing fairly well. Perhaps that’s what they wanted?

“I’ll be singing a song for you, I think,” she said finally. Before she could request a track a familiar melody echoed above her head, sending the soldiers into a wild frenzy. Alucard wrinkled his nose in disgust at the “music”; Seras knew that anything that didn’t involve 12 or more hour-long movements didn’t register as true music in her master’s ears. “Van Halen? Alright then,” she muttered under her breath before standing up straight as the lyrics started.

“I get up, and nothing gets me down,” she crooned, trying to put some heart into it. “You got it tough; I’ve seen the toughest around.” She never felt more mortified in all her life. Perhaps singing the song on karaoke night wasn’t so bad, especially since she had a drunken Stevenson as her air-guitarist; but on her own, in front of everyone she knew? That was crazy! “Can’t you see me standing here; I’ve got my back against the record machine.”

The soldiers started clapping the rhythm and shouting the chorus with her before the demo ended and she was left standing on the stage, her face positively vermillion with embarrassment. Sir Integra scribbled something on a piece of paper and held it up for everyone to see: 8.4.

“You sounded a little shaky on the chorus. You can do better,” she admonished cheerfully. “Still, it’s not so bad.” Anderson looked at her number and held up a 9.2 when she lowered her paper.

“I gave you two points for effort. You had yer heart in it,” he explained sheepishly. Alucard scowled and didn’t bother holding up a sign. His shadows swirled above his head into a neat 0.0 before dissolving into the air. Seras turned a darker crimson, this time from anger. She surely deserved better than nothing!

“Why do you have to be so cruel?” she snapped before she could stop herself and think, one foot stomping the stage angrily. Sir Integra’s brows rose beyond her hairline and she elbowed the priest beside her not-too-subtly.

“Cruel? How am I cruel, pray tell?” Alucard straightened, all four of his chair legs hitting the ground as he leaned forward offensively. Seras glowered at him, ignoring the fact that the audience and the other two judges were watching their faceoff with the utmost interest. Integra leaned forward; soaking up the drama eagerly like it was a soap opera.

“You-you force me to do things I’d rather not, you forbid from doing anything that I enjoy; on another matter, I can’t have any sort of relationship with anyone else without you being insanely jealous!”

“Furthermore,” she hissed, drawing herself up to full height, “you take a sadistic enjoyment of breaking my bones, you love to make me confused; if you want something from me, don’t pretend to care for me one day and then throw me off the roof the next without the slightest hint of mercy. I don’t like it!” She vented all of her sore feelings that she would never say to the real Alucard.

This dream-Master would be gone with the rising of the moon and she’d feel so much better getting
“You’re just as cruel as I am, little girl,” he growled, standing up with enough force to knock the chair down behind him. He stalked up to the stage in two large steps, his form growing seemingly larger than life as he shortened the distance between them. He stopped before her, dressed all in black leather with his hair hanging in lanky tendrils between them, the toes of his boots touching hers. She backed away and he followed, filling her vision with nothing but his livid features. “You stand there and accuse me of being cruel and merciless, and yet you’ve been the largest hypocrite. I give you a new life, sacrifice my time and patience to rear you properly, bend over backwards in order to protect you, and this is my reward?”

Seras stood with her mouth open, at a loss for words. Her argument died on her tongue, the words falling flat. For some reason, he didn’t seem to be a dream-Alucard anymore. The melancholy barely hidden in his eyes seemed more real than anything she’d seen before. She swallowed and stared up at him, her mind reeling.

“But—but you didn’t mean any of it,” she protested weakly, somehow feeling as though she’d made a big mistake. He backed away from her, vanishing along with the stage and all the people into the impermeable darkness once more.

“My my, Miss Victoria. You’re certainly glum today.” Walter eyed her askance, his expression pensive. “Did your little seduction not go as planned?” he teased. Seras looked up from her bowl of blood vacantly at him before sighing.

“No. I gave up. It’s just not worth it; I don’t even know what I was thinking,” she answered dolefully as she took another spoonful. Walter continued his rudimentary straightening of her space, watching her more closely. She was still in her pajamas even though it was well after midnight. Her hair was unkempt, face unwashed, feet bare, and eyes dull. She was eating mechanically, as if she didn’t even taste her meal. She looked horrid, really. Walter frowned slightly. She looked as if she just didn’t care; as if she were utterly depressed and didn’t feel like bothering with life at the moment.

“Miss Victoria, is everything alright,” he said suddenly, before he had time to think about it and how blunt of a question it was. “You know you can talk to me about anything,” he added. “Anything you say will be in confidence, if you wish.” Seras looked at him, sighing and nodding.

“I know, Walter. Thanks.” She turned back to her meal and robotically sipped from the spoon. Taking it as a silent dismissal, Walter patted her shoulder comfortingly before leaving. He walked down the two steps that led to the deeper basement and down the hall, the ever present chill seeming to be even colder this day. He reached Alucard’s chambers and knocked, waiting for permission to enter as he did every night. The door swung open silently and he proceeded forward,
stopping when he realized what Alucard was doing.

He had all of his belongings piled in the chair and was currently in the process of rearranging the furniture. His coffin stood neatly out of the way along the far end of the wall next to the door of the never-used bathroom, which was always half-covered by a hanging tapestry that came from somewhere upstairs. Alucard pushed his heavy chair like it was nothing with his foot, moving it to the side of the room before turning and moving it back again, apparently changing his mind.

“It looks like you need a break,” Walter started, feeling awkward. In the years he’d known Alucard, the vampire never changed his room around. Yes, he pretended to rearrange it, but that was only when he was thinking very hard on something and needed to be kept occupied. Clearly pacing didn’t do much for him, so he stuck to moving his furniture all around the room before putting it back in the same spot he’d always had it.

“I suppose,” Alucard answered coolly as he paused his work and walked over to take the chilled bucket from the butler’s hands. “I’ve been busy since nightfall, and have neglected my hunger,” he added, taking a packet from the bucket and eyeing it ravenously.

“Work will make you famished,” Walter conceded with a nod. He walked around to look at the stacks of books near the doorway, picking up the top one and flipping through the pages of what looked like ancient rites. “I just came from Miss Victoria’s room,” he began, trying to maintain a nonchalant, conversational tone. “She seems to be a bit under the weather today.”

“Oh?” Alucard sounded about as disinterested as the butler did, but Walter knew better. He may be a semi-forgetful elderly man, but he wasn’t stupid. He knew that the ancient vampire had something to do with Seras’ gloomy mood; she wasn’t like that normally.

“Yes, she was clearly despondent, but she refused to tell me what the problem was. I wonder if she’ll even venture from her room tonight,” Walter mused. “Perhaps I should let Sir Integra know that she may be taking a day off.” This caught the vampire’s full attention.

“So she’s moping around in her bedroom, is she? Well, we can’t have a vampire doing that.” He grinned savagely and Walter didn’t have the heart to tell him that he was technically doing the same thing, banging around in his room with the furniture. “Don’t tell my master anything. I’ll make sure that the Police Girl emerges for the night, one way or another.” Walter couldn’t miss the waves of malicious energy rolling off the words.

“Do you really believe that to be best? Especially since you’ve been fighting on and off the past few days?” he asked. Alucard tilted his head down, glasses sliding down his nose to reveal dark eyes. Oh, so it’s about vengeance. I should have known, Walter thought in despair. He felt horrible for accidentally setting the poor girl up for punishment, but he knew better than to interfere between the vampires. He didn’t want to die at Alucard’s hands. He backed away, leaving the pail with the vampire.

“Don’t worry about us, Walter. I can handle anything that little girl dishes out,” Alucard promised. “And I can return it tenfold; if that’s the way she wants to play.” Walter bowed and made his way out of the room and to the upper levels, peering at Seras’ closed door. That’s the problem, Alucard. I think she’s through “playing” now.

“Well now Police Girl, what’s the matter?” He stood at the foot of her bed, watching her stare at the ceiling. He knew that she knew he was there, but was just ignoring him. He didn’t like the thought of that, of her purposefully disregarding his presence. Besides, it was just as Walter said; she wasn’t dressed or even washed, although by her scent it was clear she’d showered last night.
“Have you forgotten that it’s nighttime?” he half-teased, wanting to see her sit up and yell at him. She had in her dreams that day, her eyes shimmering with unhidden anger at his supposed “cruel treatment” of her. He’d woken after feeling her anger through their mental bond and had slipped into his dream-self, only to hear the accusations with a sense of growing fury. He’d shouted back at her, livid at how she blatantly ignored all that he had given her and focused only on his short temper and punishments. Then, her one sentence had undone all his rage, leaving him feeling strangely empty inside.

“But—but you didn’t mean any of it.” She’d been honest; he had searched her eyes for any trace of deceit. She had truly thought that all of his offers, everything she’d flippantly turned down, were nothing more than him teasing her. He hadn’t really known what to think of that. It was true, she was often the brunt of his mockery and most of the time she set herself up for it, but surely she could tell the difference between jests and seriousness. Couldn’t she?

It made him think. He had sat in his chair, tapping his boots impatiently on the ground as he thought back over the whole year. Every time they’d been together, all the things he’d told her, all of her replies. He couldn’t find a solid answer, and it made him uneasy. He began to roam around his room, not even thinking about what he was doing. It was only when Walter knocked on the door did he surface from his contemplations to see that he’d turned his room upside down.

Now he stood and watched her lay on her coffin, staring at the ceiling as if there were nothing better to do.

“Go away,” she said finally. “Leave me alone.” She sounded emotionless, drained.

“I’m afraid that’s not an option. Now you can get up and get dressed, or I will dress you. I assure you, what’s fun for me will not be the same for you,” he warned her with a cruel grin. She sat up and looked at him, her eyes listless.

“Just go and fuck yourself, okay?” she muttered before grabbing the remote that controlled her bed off the table, hitting the button and lowering herself into the ground. He let her go all the way into the ground before giving a low whistle.

“Fetch.” A moment later, Seras was dragged out by a horde of shadow beasts, her eyes finally showing a spark of anger as she glared at him from her spot on the carpet. She pulled herself up and walked over to him, her eyes boring into his. He smiled at her, only to have it literally slapped off his face as she hit him hard enough to jerk his head sideways.

“I said to leave me alone!” she snarled. He grabbed her hand, turning it palm-up and pulling backwards until she was forced on her tiptoes by the pain. He bent down nose-to-nose with her.

“I am exercising the utmost patience with you, girl. Don’t you forget that. Don’t do that again, unless you want to lose an arm.” She didn’t reply, but the look in her eyes said enough. He twisted her arm around behind her back, marching her over to her clothes-cupboard. “I think you enjoy forgetting exactly who I am. And I’m getting weary of reminding you.” He stopped before the cupboard, his other arm going up to capture her chin and forcing her to stare into the mirror on its surface. “Who am I?”

“You’re Alucard,” she answered after a stubbornly tense moment. He shook her head with his hand, leaning down to growl into her ear as his fingers tightened painfully on her jaws.

“How. Am. I.” She fought for a moment, trying to get away and only succeeding in twisting her own arm further. Finally she hissed in frustration and locked eyes with him in the mirror.
“You’re my master,” she ground out in exasperation. He sneered at her, nodding.

“And who are you?” he continued.

“I’m your fledgling,” she answered in defeat.

“Good girl,” he purred in her ear. His hand left her chin, but he didn’t dare let her go. She was like a mouse; he’d caught her, but if he relaxed his grip she’d escape and scurry away. She’d not make the same mistake this time of hiding in her bed—she’d go straight to Sir Integra and have him forbidden to mess with her. He reached up and ran his fingers gently through her hair. “Was that so hard?” When she didn’t answer, he yanked. “I said: Was that so hard?”

“No!” she yelped, her eyes scrunching from the pain. He immediately let go and continued the softer caresses.

“Answer me when I speak to you. You’re getting too out of line; it’s time you remembered that your place is in my shadow.” Seras mumbled under her breath and he yanked again, hearing enough to understand her meaning. “What did you just say to me?” She arched her back over her arm, gritting her teeth against the pain.

“I said that this is a fine way to treat someone that you’re supposed to care about!” she shouted before giving a screech. “You’re going to pull my hair out; stop it!” He let go long enough to spin her around, nose-to-nose once more.

“How dare you.” Every word dripped venom, but she didn’t even flinch. She tossed back her bangs as best she could in his grip, her own free hand coming up to try and push his face away.

“I’m just saying what needs to be said. You have no idea how to be kind or caring; all you know is how to be vicious and inhuman!”

“I’m not human! You’re not human!” he shouted back, his arm gripping hers hard enough for the bones to crack. “I’m just being what I am!”

“No, you’re being what you want to be. What you are and what you want other people to see you as are two different things, Master.” She looked up at him, more sadly now. “I just wish you could pay more attention to that.”

“I don’t know what fantasy that you live in, where you think that I’m some sort of good-natured sod.” She sighed and went limp in his arms, her eyes becoming resolved.

“Fine. I’ll play your pretty little servant, if that’s what you want.” He let her go and she immediately walked to her cupboard and pulled out a clean uniform.

“That’s more like it,” he said as he turned to leave, unable to shake the feeling that he just started something that wouldn’t end the way either of them wanted it to.

“You’re back.” Anderson almost jumped out of his boots. He turned to see Integra sitting up in bed, looking with a frown at his stained gloves. “Don’t stand and drip, go get cleaned up.” He obediently walked to the bathroom, bloody boots in hand. He sat them in the tub before methodically cleaning the blood off his weapons, clothes, and then finally himself with a nice hot shower. He sat his things up to dry and walked out to find her still sitting in the bed, but at least she’d turned the light on now.

“I thought you were asleep,” he accused. “It’s early in the morning.” She shrugged and leaned back
against the pillows, watching him put his wet boots by the door and come over to the bed.

“I woke up when you walked in. Everything went alright?” He gave her a strange look as he pulled the sheets over himself and lay against the pillows with a weary grunt.

“I wouldn’t be here if it didn’t.” She winced, hoping he meant that he’d still be out fighting, instead of that he’d be dead. “There were more of them than we thought there’d be,” he said, explaining why he was so late. She nodded and flipped the light off before lying down beside him.

“Well, as long as you got it taken care of,” she finally said. “It was a very quiet day here. I have to say; I enjoyed it. I’m not used to all this fighting and fretting.” She curled around his arm and closed her eyes. Truth be told, she sort of missed the heavy warmth.

Chapter End Notes

[ORIGINAL]

Afterword: Poor Integra. Sometimes she doesn’t know what goes on right below her feet, does she? And what of the Countess? I wonder how her plan doth go? And what of the issue of money? Who will take care of all that?
Captain K. Roans never understood why he was recommended to Hellsing Organization. He wasn’t the strongest or handsomest or even the most outspoken. In fact, he was really just a bandy-legged, red-haired farmer’s son with sporadic acne from Asiago, Missouri—a town that had one stoplight and a frighteningly large amount of drunken bartenders. Not wanting to be either a farmer or a bartender, he joined the U.S. Army only to learn that he was “practically average in every way”. Practically.

You see, what he lacked in skill he made up for with his natural talent; a talent that had no real purpose anywhere except the military. He was observant. Observant beyond the call of duty, in fact. He could watch something be done once, and be able to copy it with only one or two errors. He could recall the tiniest details in a painting, and he was a walking book of useless knowledge he’d learned from documentaries.

While that was neat and could land him some money on Jeopardy, it wasn’t enough to get him into one of the most mysterious of world military organizations… or so he had thought. No one had ever fully explained how he’d been accepted to even take part in the Entrance Exams. From what he gathered, it was part observational skills, part semi-eidetic memory, and maybe a little bit of schmoozing from the U.S.A. that he would prove himself to be more than worthy.

And he was; which surprised him more than anyone else. Here at Hellsing, he felt at home. He had good coworkers that were also his friends, even if they did laugh at his accent and the way he slurred British terms without meaning to. He enjoyed his job, even if he couldn’t really write home about how grotesque it was; after all, the things he fought weren’t supposed to exist. And his mother would never allow him to get into such dangerous situations if she knew what was happening.

But one fact always remained—he was too observant for his own good. Even now, he couldn’t help but observe as he stood watch at the front doors, his gun slung over his shoulder and feet together in a ramrod position. He saw first a large red blob that moved out of the misty dusk to become Alucard, the elder of the mansion’s resident vampires. Personally, Roans didn’t mind that vampires existed—most of them didn’t bother anyone, and the ones that did ended up on the wrong side of Hellsing’s weapons 9 times out of 10. But there was something about Alucard that gave him the heebie-jeebies.

Like most of the other soldiers, he couldn’t quite put his finger on what it was that made his nerves go jumping all over the place the minute Alucard came within a ten-foot radius of his body. It could have been the strange smile that seemed permanently etched on his face most of the time. It could have been the way the shadows quivered and gained a life of their own whenever he entered a room. It even could have been the way that it felt as if those crimson eyes were boring into your innermost thoughts, even though you couldn’t see them through the sunglasses and the wide frames prevented your catching a glimpse of them as he passed by you. More likely than not, it was a bit more simple: even if you never saw him in battle, even if you ignored the rumors whispered in the locker rooms at shower time, even if you had never heard a word slide from between his thin lips, you knew; you knew deep in your soul that Alucard was an evil son of a bitch who didn’t give two fucks what humans thought about him. In fact, he really didn’t seem to care about what anyone thought about him, human or not. With one strange, unexplainable exception.
That one exception was following on his heels, her expression nothing but boredom. Captain Seras Victoria, the vampire. The Draculina; Alucard’s own blood heir, the humanistic vampiress. Seras Victoria was completely unlike her creator in almost every form. He was tall, she was tiny. He was thin, she was curvy. He was bad, she was good.

But of course it went much deeper than that. While Alucard’s presence enticed fear, Seras’ usually made men a bit calmer. She went out of her way to help the men in her troop, and they loved her to her very core. Yes, she was a vampire; yes, she drank blood and sometimes it stained her teeth a light pink and made the lesser men cringe when they saw it. But she had a heart of gold; and everyone knew it.

It only made it that much harder to understand why sweet little Seras willingly divided her time between her men and her “Master”, as she called him. How could such a pure soul stand something so… tainted? No one understood it, save maybe Walter and Sir Integra; but then again, they were a bit off in their own way, so perhaps crazy was catching in that big house.

No matter why she followed him, follow she did, and tonight was no exception. But Roans observed, even if he’d seen it time and time before. This time was different. Seras didn’t have her usual happy grin, and she wasn’t walking ahead of Alucard or even abreast of him, as was her usual want. She was steadfastly planting her feet in his shadow, and her face was schooled into something neutral. As for Alucard, he was harder to read, but Roans had been there long enough to observe the five or six emotions that roamed freely across the ancient vampire’s face. It wasn’t sadistic glee, or mockery, or anger, or moodiness.

It was switching back and forth between irritation and a begrudging sense of approval, as if she was doing what he wanted and at the same time the exact opposite of what he wanted. Roans didn’t have enough time to wonder at this before Alucard passed by him. As always, the hairs on the back of his neck stood straight before he forced himself to relax. Alucard would not harm him. He didn’t harm any of the soldiers, because he thought it beneath him. Or perhaps he was forbidden? More likely he just thought it beneath him; oftentimes he was forbidden in theory, and was very adept at finding loopholes in Lady Hellsing’s orders when he saw fit.

“Police Girl,” the vampire said suddenly, turning to look at the guard. Roans looked up despite himself and met Alucard’s eyes. The amber sunglasses tinted the crimson irises a brownish shade. Alucard looked him over a minute before turning with a grin to the woman behind him. Sadistic glee, Roans thought with a suppressed shudder. “Throw this man as hard as you can.” Roans jerked in surprise before staring at Seras in shock and confusion. Seras returned his helpless look with a cool, unperturbed stare before she reached out and grabbed the soldier’s forearm.

“As my Master commands,” she stated dully before picking the soldier up and flinging him as hard as she could in the direction of the gates. He barely had time to register what was happening before he was flying through the air, above the trees at a height and speed that would surely kill him should he hit the ground. He heard the shouts of the other soldiers, but his astonishment was so great that he couldn’t cry out.

He realized he’d begun his downward descent and closed his eyes, praying that it’d be over quickly and relatively painless. Suddenly, he hit the ground, but not nearly as hard as he should have. He felt something wiggle under him and suddenly Alucard’s massive hound appeared above his head, sniffing his pulse point and his temples. He lay back in disbelief, letting the dog’s breath waft over him as he felt the ache in his muscles and bones. He may not be dead, but he still hit the ground pretty damn hard. There’d be bruises tomorrow for sure.

“Hey!” “Roans?!” “Are you okay, mate?” He was suddenly aware of the dog’s vanishing, and then
soldiers flocked from all sides to stare down at him. Some of them looked surprised that he was alive, others worried as their gazes roved over him for any noticeable injury.

“Move aside, move aside!” He heard Stevenson’s panic before he could see the man. Suddenly he was there, leaning over Roan’s head. “Roans; what happened? Are you dizzy? Where does it hurt?” Roans closed his eyes and groaned softly, trying to decide which to answer first.

“Of course I’m dizzy, I just went a good twenty feet up in the air and came back down on my back,” he finally admitted. “Mum threw me, because Alucard told her too.” The other men gasped and began to buzz with chatter.

“Mum? Seras?!” “No way, no bloody way!” “Why would she do a thing like that? Has she gone mentally insane?” Even with all his observing, he couldn’t really answer. All he could do was let them accompany him to the infirmary, where he promptly lay on a cot and passed out before a nurse could even ask his name.

He hadn’t expected her to actually obey him. It was dumbfounding! He’d told her to freely harm one of her own men, and she’d done it without a blink of the eyes! Even when he’d come to collect her from her chambers earlier that evening, he hadn’t expected her to be absolutely serious about her vow to be a perfect servant.

But she’d stood there; awake and fully dressed, even as early in the evening as it was. Her breakfast had been eaten (all of it, it was truly astonishing) and she’d made her way over to him when he appeared in her doorway. She hadn’t greeted him other than a slight bow of the head, and had immediately stood behind him, not beside him and not frolicking her way to the front.

It had thrown him off a bit, but he hadn’t let her know as he began his rounds under the moon. She walked when he walked, she stopped when he stopped, and she never left the confines of his shadow as he made his way around the grounds. After a while, he decided to speak to her.

“Police Girl?” Her head immediately snapped up from where she’d been watching a caterpillar on a leaf of ivy growing up the side of a portion of fencing. She gave him her full attention, and yet something in her gaze was lacking. It was as if she’d flipped a switch, turning off her personality. Her attentive smile was emotionless, and her eyes—while not listless as they’d been the night before, they were disinterested and filled with a passive sort of ennui.

“Yes, my Master?” she asked practically robotically.

“Are you planning on being this way all night?” he inquired. She blinked at him vacantly for a moment (true, honest-to-goodness confusion; where was her mind?) before replying.

“What “way” are you talking about, Master?” she answered, tilting her head slightly. “I’m only being myself.”

“And you consider that being yourself?” he sneered, poking a long finger into her cheek as he watched for signs of life from her. Anything—a flush of vexation across her cheeks, a spark of righteous anger in her eyes; even sarcasm or cynicism. But she calmly gazed up at him, not even moving a muscle as he poked her cheek.

“I am your servant; your bidding is my only priority. You’ve got me at your beck and call.” No other words, nothing in her manner to make him suspect her of being in jest. It was as if during the day, something had taken her soul and left behind an impassive shell.

“Fine. I’ll play your pretty little servant, if that’s what you want.” Was she really intent on taking it
as far as he would allow it to go? He had frowned, but continued on his way silently. He had been trying to think of a test when he’d seen the gangly fellow from her troop standing guard at the front doors.

But he hadn’t expected her to throw him. He had to rush and keep the man from dying, less he be punished for breaking one of the most well-kept rules at Hellsing. Don’t kill the soldiers. Don’t hypnotize others to kill the soldiers. Don’t order anyone to kill the soldiers. It was all very clear.

He half-wondered if Seras would have really let him die. He’d even probed into her mind, but he had found nothing but a strange, cool buzz. It reminded him of the annoying sound made by a room full of fluorescent light bulbs—a humming noise that was part energy output, part hellish torment.

Somehow, he found himself almost, almost missing the other sort of buzzing; the never-ending flow of gratuitous chatter and rapid multitasking that occupied every female mind for as long as he could remember, even back to the time right after he’d given up his humanity.

He dropped her off in her room and she waited for him, knowing that when he reached his room his mind would come sneaking back to see if she’d given up the façade yet. Sure enough, she managed to keep her mind-numbing state until he withdrew his mental tendrils and let out an inaudible sigh. It gave her a migraine, but she’d finally managed to combine her mental shields with her ability to distance herself from life—something she didn’t do often, only in times of stress. Between that and focusing her thoughts to the bare minimum, she had made herself into the most boring person in all of England. She had to give herself a pat on the back for her efforts—it wasn’t easy!

But he’d asked for it, and now he got it. Seras wasn’t giving up in this; she was as stubborn as he when it came down to it. If he wanted a model fledgling, he’d get one. And he’d better be happy with it, because it was going to take something big on his part to change her back.

She felt immensely guilty for throwing poor Roans. If she hadn’t felt her master’s powers surge to go and break the captain’s fall, she might have had to give up the act and jump in herself. Thankfully, Alucard managed to catch him before he became a broken fixture on the walkway. She’d probably hear about it later from more than one person, but the important people could be told what was going on. She knew that Sir Integra and Stevenson would understand. Roans himself would be a little off-put, and Walter would think that she was crazy to try and go through with it. But she felt that this was what she had to do.

She didn’t know what she was going to do now; she couldn’t go gallivanting around the grounds without giving up her pretense. But staying in her room was boring! She finally shrugged and grabbed a book, deciding to content herself with the realm of fiction rather than lie and stare at the ceiling for the rest of the night.

“There, that ought to be the last of it all.” Anderson stood, placing the taped box on top of the others and dusting off his hands. He looked around the tiny room with a hint of sadness. His last forty years were packed away in a dozen boxes, ready to be flown to England along with his two handmade bookshelves, the only real “furniture” to his name. The only things left in the room were the ancient television, the bed with the creaky springs, and the large table that served as a desk.

“I believe you’re right, Father,” Armand said. He and a few of the oldest boys in the orphanage had been commandeered from their classes to help pack away the priest’s belongings. The teens could miss one day of class; as old as they were, they had stopped book learning and the
ones that hadn’t opted for Vatican jobs went to learn trades.

“The room looks a lot bigger when you don’t have all those books piled everywhere,” Anderson remarked thoughtfully, tapping a finger to his chin before turning and grabbing three of the heavy boxes. “Anyway, let’s go get this last bit loaded onto the truck. If we hurry, you boys can make it back, wash up, and be on time for the evening meal.”

“Yes, Father,” the boys chorused as they grabbed one or two boxes apiece and struggled to get them downstairs and into the waiting moving truck. Anderson quickly outdid them; he ended up carrying six boxes in the time it took them to carry two. It took less than five minutes before they were finished. After saying their farewells, the boys ran off as the bell for supper began to ring. Anderson waved after them for a moment before getting into the truck and instructing the driver to take him to the Iscariot’s office building on his way to the landing strip. He looked in the mirror at the building where his room had been for the last time before they pulled out onto the street and it was hidden by the stone fence.

Chapter End Notes

[ORIGINAL]
Author’s Note: I don’t think that Asiago, Missouri is a real place. (I’m just a fan of Asiago Cheese.) If it is, please don’t sue me. I’m sorry, Missouri. It’s just that I can never understand if you’re considered Southern, Northern, or Midwest.
Integra wasn’t a “touchy-feely” sort of person. In all her childhood, her father hadn’t ever shown much affection. Yes, there was a pat on the back for a job well done, and she distinctly remember him kissing her forehead once when she was small and he’d left for months on a business trip; however, mollycoddling was something that mothers did and since she didn’t have one, she simply went without.

Then there was Walter. Most of the time, the extent of his affection went to a soft touch on the shoulder when she was having a stressful day in her office, or perhaps he’d take her hand and squeeze it lightly before handing her a teacup. She let him do it, since she knew that he cared for her in a fatherly way and he thought it was for her benefit, but if he didn’t do it at all than she would still have been fine.

Other than that no one ever wanted to touch her, save a few rare moments. She’d broken up a drunken “victory reverie” in the men’s barracks and a soldier had sloppily kissed her cheek, but the next day he came into her office and practically fell on his knees apologizing. That night had been embarrassing for all, so they’d both let it slide.

Once, Seras had received a letter from an orphanage stating that one of the teachers was dying and had asked to see her one more time. Integra had given permission for her to go on a week-long holiday to meet with this woman and in her relief Seras had thrown herself on her boss, arms around her neck and shouting thanks in her ear. Integra had immediately stiffened, her nose filled with the scent of flowers and blood and Seras had pulled back in embarrassment. She had briefly chastised the sheepish captain about self-control before sending her on her way.

Then, of course, she’d been threatened by Alucard once he learned that she’d approved the holiday and he’d grabbed her hand before she managed to slap him. But she never enjoyed it when Alucard touched her; in fact, it sent shivers down her spine and she often tried to forget that it had ever happened. He’d gotten a sound week-long punishment for his disobedience and the incident was never spoken of again.

Yes, Integra was a more private woman, and just wasn’t used to physical contact with others. However, it changed a bit once she was married. Of course, when she’d been gallivanting around the countryside on a wild Siren chase with Anderson she’d only threw herself on him because it mortified and irritated him, which naturally made him flustered, and for some odd reason she’d enjoyed seeing him in that sort of state.

She pondered all this as she sat alone in her office, absently twirling her fountain pen between her fingers. She was supposed to be working, and although she’d already gotten another full stack of paperwork done she couldn’t bring herself to look at another field report. It didn’t help that she couldn’t send some of the work to the rest of the Round Table: they thought, surprisingly enough, that she was still in prison.

It was baffling, how they didn’t know that she wasn’t there. She wasn’t sure if they had simply never bothered to check in on her during her time at prison or if someone had kept her escape under wraps for purposes of their own. On one hand, most of the elderly men of Conference had their own things to worry about and she wasn’t one of them; on the other hand, keeping secrets meant that there was an insider at the prison. The latter was more plausible—after all, the Sirens had to
get past security somehow, and she was certain that at least one guard had to have been married.

Still, an intruder in the prison meant that this was a more large-scale job that had taken a while to prepare. She couldn’t think of anyone who was that willing to waste such large effort on Hellsing. Even if it wasn’t for Hellsing and just for London or England, *surely* there were easier ways to go about it. But then again, no one had noticed Incognito’s little heist going on under their noses. Perhaps they’d become slipshod with national security lately.

Sighing, she threw the pen down onto the desktop and watched it roll to the edge and teeter. It was clear she wasn’t getting any more work done tonight. She frowned as her head started to pound slightly and she rubbed her temple with one hand, wondering what could be the matter. She winced as a particularly hard jab coursed through her skull. It was something with Alucard; then again, it was always something with Alucard, wasn’t it? If he was upset, it ended up affecting her as well—if not physically, then by the costs that came with damage control.

As if on cue, a soldier came bursting through the door. At the vexed look on the blonde’s face, his cheeks darkened and he backed up to give three sharp raps on the wood. Integra pursed her lips and crossed her arms, waiting to hear what had happened *this* time. The soldier tapped the edge of his sneaker on the ground as he fidgeted under the harsh gaze. He gave a half-hearted salute, his face clearly saying how much he did NOT want to be there.

“Ma’am, I’ve been told to inform you that your vampire… your vampire, urm…. Well, Captain Roans is unconscious, and so he’s gonna be needing an impromptu leave of absence.” He wilted under the furious look sent his way and practically tripped over his own feet on his way out the door. “He’s in the infirmary! Sorry!” he shouted as he retreated down the hall and presumably out of harm’s way. Integra growled under her breath and forced herself to calm down, lest she stomp down to the infirmary like an angry child.

The nurse ran a hand through her hair, muttering under her breath. It was really taxing sometimes, working with the doctor. Sometimes, she knew in her heart that her hands just weren’t up to standard. She’d never progress with such a horrible set fate had given her.

“Two sixes,” she finally said as she laid two cards down on the table. She tried to meet the doctor’s eyes, and finally settled for what she could only hope was a neutral stare. The doctor gazed quietly at her, blue eyes piercing behind square frames. After a moment, the doctor grinned and tsked, waving a finger.

“Bullshit.” The nurse let out a muttered string of curses and grabbed up the tiny deck that had begun piling between them. The doctor let out a giggle, shaking her head. “Really, you have the worst poker face.”

“And just what do you think you’re doing?” a cold voice sounded from the hallway. The two women looked up from their cards at their boss standing in the doorway. The doctor held up her hand.

“Playing cards, naturally. Want to join in a few hands? The night’s still young.” She calmly set her cards down on the table and stood to usher Integra in. The nurse leaned back, using the chair to pop her back. She almost stood as well but immediately sat back down, rubbing her ankle and cursing a few soldiers that had made her run earlier in the night.

“No, I do not want to “play a few hands”. Not when one of my men is lying unconscious on the other side of the room, and my two best medical staff is sitting in the corner playing cards at the same time!” The doctor didn’t seem fazed by the shouting, instead only sticking a finger in her ear
before pointing to the occupied bed.

“Whadda ya want me to do?” she drawled. “There ain’t nothing I can do now except monitor his signs until he wakes up. From what I heard, your little blonde vampire threw him twenty feet in the air. It’s a miracle that his spine’s not broken.” The nurse snorted from her spot at the table.

“Yeah, the ladypire must have had an issue with something he said. I dunno, though; this one’s kinda cute.” She looked over at the patient with a smile, twirling the end of one blue-streaked pigtail. The doctor waited until Integra turned to look at Roans before nodding her agreement. The two shared a brief air-high-five before their boss turned back around.

“Seras did this? But—they said vampire and—why would Se-Miss Victoria do such a thing? I don’t understand.” Integra frowned and laid a hand on the unconscious soldier’s heart monitor, feeling the hum beneath her fingers as it beeped proof that the motionless patient was still alive. She turned and looked at the women. The doctor and nurse glanced at each other before shrugging. It wasn’t their job to understand why. They just healed boo-boos and ouchies and the occasional hangover-induced headache.

Integra shook her head before waving herself out with a “Carry on”, eyebrows knitted as she began to bite her nails through the gloves. The nurse’s eyes followed her out the door, but the doctor stayed standing in order to check the man’s vital signs again for the seventh time that hour.

“You’re right, you know. There’s nothing you can do until he wakes. Quit messing with him,” the nurse said seriously. “I’m going to peek at your cards if you don’t come sit down.” The doctor rolled her eyes in the nurse’s direction before looking back at the soldier. She reached down and barely patted the curly head before heaving a great sigh.

“You need to come on and wake up now. I don’t need a comatose patient on my hands,” she whispered almost silently to the unmoving patient before returning to her card game.

Seras stepped into the large office, feeling the tense atmosphere with a sense of certain doom. And so it begins, she thought as her heart clenched in her chest. She knew that Integra knew what she’d done, and she wouldn’t get off scot-free. She knew that once she told the whole story, Alucard would end up getting a good 50% of the blame for Roans’ condition. Even so, what was coming wasn’t going to be pretty by any means.

She stopped before the wooden desk, warily watching the woman that sat there. Integra’s eyes were trained on the tabletop, her chin resting on hands and fingers laced. She looked up when Seras stopped walking, her eyes meeting Seras’. Seras fought back a shiver; the clear fury inside of those icy eyes rivaled that of her master’s. It suddenly became all too clear how she managed to keep an entire army of rowdy men in line—Seras knew that if it came down to it, she could easily overpower Integra, but the woman was too damn frightening for her to even raise a finger!

“Miss Victoria,” Integra said coolly, raising off her hands and pointing to a chair on the other side of the desk. “Have a seat. We have much to talk about.” Seras obediently sat, her mind turning over whether she should pretend with Integra too, or go ahead and let the heiress know what was happening between her and her master. She stretched her powers around the room in search of Alucard, but came up empty. Either he wasn’t there, or he was hiding well. She knew that he had heard the soldier call her up to Integra’s office.

Integra lit a cigar, taking in a slow breath and exhaling a cloud of smoke. Seras tried hard not to breathe in the vapor; she always ended up choking and unable to breathe. She couldn’t help it; the taste combination of every chemical in that smoke always left her breathless, and even as a human
she was barely able to handle a cigarette.

“Agent Victoria, are you happy here?” Integra asked suddenly. Seras perked up, actually having to think. Was she happy? She enjoyed her job and she was content with her duties; she had friends and her master was good company at times. She got to do things with Walter and train new recruits; but never before had she ever looked around at herself and thought “I am happy”. She bit her lip, thinking hard before giving a small nod.

“I’m not unhappy,” she replied vaguely. And it was true. Integra nodded as if this was a perfectly acceptable answer.

“And yet you go against the one steadfast rule that I’ve implemented for you and your kind.” Seras felt a slight bristle at the words. It was a subtle slap to the face, but she really couldn’t find any grounds to call Integra out on it. She sat silently, feeling her hand clench into a fist despite her self-control. Integra took another puff of the cigar, her free hand absently running through her bangs.

“You know, Agent Victoria? I don’t think you understand the extent of the privileges that I’ve given you. You aren’t restricted like your master; I let you leave the grounds under your own terms and you are given a salary, as if you were one of the regular soldiers. I allow you leave to go to any room in the house save my own; your powers aren’t carefully controlled and regulated like Alucard’s, and how am I repaid? Honestly, I’m afraid I’ve been too lenient with you.”

Seras didn’t reply, instead she stared steadfastly at the ground. Integra watched her for a moment before slamming her cigar into the ashtray. The entire desk rattled and Seras jerked her head up in surprise. “Well?!”

“I promise that I was going to save him if Master didn’t do anything,” she half-whimpered, any feelings of defiance or anger withering away under the almost-tangible fury of the older woman. “Honestly, I would never let him die! I care too much about my men. But I couldn’t break character, even for a second! I was banking on Master obeying your command.”

“Yes, because any other time he’s just a stickler for the rules, isn’t he?” Integra snapped harshly. “You have no idea how lucky you are, Victoria. If Roans had been killed, I’d have had you destroyed in an instant. I won’t tolerate my men living in fear of a couple of vampires, do you understand?!”

“Yes, Sir Integra,” she agreed softly. “I really am sorry.” She didn’t dare look back up, although there was a sudden silence that stretched on for a length of time.

“I know you are, and that makes it all the harder on me,” came the eventual sigh. “What the hell are you talking about characters for? If acting is your new hobby, I wish you wouldn’t work on my men.” She was still clearly angry, but also more level-headed. Seras coughed and ran a hand through her hair.

“Well, it’s not that, not really. You see….”

Integra stared at her once she was finished. Seras couldn’t help but wince at the sheer lack of understanding on the older blonde’s face. She fidgeted in the seat and finally crossed her legs, holding onto her ankle just to have something to do.

“I don’t think I follow the train of logic here,” Integra confessed finally. Seras sighed, her shoulders sagging as she shrugged half-heartedly.

“It’s a crazy plot, but then again Master is a crazy man,” she admitted. Integra looked at her and
shook her head slowly.

“And you’re going crazy right along with him,” she accused. “Seras Victoria, you have got to get whatever it is between you two under control.” Seras chewed the inside of her cheek and looked ashamedly at the ground.

“I know,” she whispered. “But I don’t have any say in it.”

“Get out of my office. Go straight to your room and report to Walter tomorrow night to begin your punishment,” Integra commanded with a dismissing wave. “You vampires give me a headache sometimes, and I still have to have enough in me to yell at Alucard before it becomes a full-on migraine.” Seras stood and left, her entire aura radiating frustration and depression. It was a nauseating mix, and Integra was happy when the door to her office shut and the room became quiet once more.

She smoked another full cigar before sighing and mentally calling Alucard. He appeared not five minutes later, his irritating smile written across his features. He pulled off his hat and bowed with a flourish, knowing how much it irritated her.

“My master,” he purred. “It’s not often that you call me so early in the morning.” She blinked, slightly surprised by his statement. It wasn’t… oh. Looking at her watch, she realized that the papers took up more time than she thought they did. It was well after 2:00 am. She felt a small jerk of concern—Anderson wasn’t home from his trip to the Vatican. Where the hell was he? He’d told her that he might be a bit late, but 2:00 am was more than a bit. She shook off the mental tendrils of worry and turned back to her problem at hand, which was still bent at the waist and sneering at her.

“Alucard, if this battle between you and Seras doesn’t stop, I’m going to send her to the States and you to Siberia. I won’t allow this strife to mess up my peaceful home,” she threatened. She felt a small stab of victory as his smile faltered and he straightened, clearly imposing his self-control to keep from appearing angry before her. “It was irksome before, but humans are getting hurt and I will not just sit here and let it happen. If you know what’s good for you, you’ll give up.”

“And why should I give up, when she’s as much to blame?” he forced between clenched teeth, his eyes dark with anger. Integra looked up at him and stood, squaring off across the desk.

“Because you are hundreds of years older and know better than to behave like a spoiled child, servant. And don’t take my threats lightly, Alucard. If you so much as entreat her to harm another soldier, she’ll be sent off and you’ll be chained to the basement wall!” she ended on a scream, pounding her fist on the desk for emphasis. “Do I make myself clear!?”

“Yes,” he hissed. “You certainly do.” He didn’t bow again, a sure sign that she’d hit home somewhere in his jumbled, sadistic mind. She frowned, feeling her headache erupt into a miserable throbbing behind her right eye.

“You really are stupid sometimes, vampire. Did you not consider that if the man had died, she’d have been destroyed on the spot? I’m not too fond of her to stay my hand. She’s a monster, just like you; only she handles herself in a more genteel manner. I haven’t forgotten that,” she snarled. Alucard stared at her, his face emotionless.

“Get out,” she growled finally. “Get out, and don’t you dare show your face aboveground again for a week.” She slumped down in her chair, palm pressing against her temple to try and relieve the ache. Oh, but vampires gave her such migraines! She heard a soft chuckle from the corner of the room and her eyes shot open. She stood up, hand still against her head to try and balance herself as
she searched for the intruder. She scowled after a minute, wishing that she felt better so that she could give him a scolding too.

“Just where have you been? Do you realize what time it is?” she snapped. Anderson tilted his head and arched a brow.

“Do you? It’s early to be doing paperwork; you should be in bed. But I see that you’ve been having some sort of predicament, hmm?” She honestly tried to feel the angry concern that she’d felt earlier, but she only felt drained. She fell back down in her chair, covering her face with her hands.

“So much for peace and quiet,” she mumbled. “I’d give up half my inheritance if I could just have one week where Alucard didn’t ruin my nights.” She heard him walk over to the side of the desk. He grunted and she peeked through her fingers to see him bend down. He placed her fountain pen back on the desk top, from where it must have fallen when she hit it in anger.

“I did like the idea of you chaining him to the basement wall. That might work,” he said with a laugh. “I would have made myself known earlier, but I was enjoying my viewpoint too much. You might have gone easier on him if you knew I was standing there.”

“He probably would have gone a lot rougher on me if you hadn’t,” she argued, knowing that the priest’s appearance wouldn’t have been missed by his so-called nemesis. “And even as little as he did say, I still got a headache for it,” she complained. Cool, insistent fingers began kneading her shoulders and she didn’t even have enough energy to shrug him away. She closed her eyes, letting him work the tension out of her muscles, sore from where she’d been hunched over work all night.

“Where were you?” she asked again, more softly this time.

“The Pope called a meeting of all the Special Organizations. As second-in-command of Iscariot I had to stay until it was all over,” he explained, moving her hair out of the way to reach her shoulders better. He peered at the work she had on her desk, frowning at the technical jargon. “His Holiness worries about the seas surrounding Italy. It was imperative for Iscariot to be there; we are supposed to watch the coasts for attacks.”

“Well why didn’t you call?” she asked, groaning as he hit a particularly stubborn knot. He lightened up and she relaxed. It really felt nice—maybe she should do like the wives talk about at the galas and go for massages and spa days. Her headache was slowly throbbing itself out of existence along with the discomfort in her shoulders.

“I didn’t think of it,” he admitted apologetically. “I’m still trying to get used to having someone to call. I never had to do it before, at the orphanage.” She grabbed his hand to stop him, brushing him off and standing up. She still wasn’t going to get any work done, and she was tired. No reason to stay in the office and just stare at papers that obviously wouldn’t be completed by tomorrow evening.

“Did you eat?” she asked as she waited for him to go around the desk and walk beside her. He nodded.

“They fed us some sort of pasta with mushrooms and peppers. It was delicious.” He looked thoughtful for a moment. “Still, I’d liked to have had some more of that stew from the other night. It was one of the best things I’ve ever tasted. Then again, after years of healthy government fare at the orphanage, anything hearty tasted just fine.” Integra laughed softly and closed up her office, waving to Walter as he passed by on the balcony across from theirs. He looked surprised to see them both up so late, but waved to her and nodded once to Anderson. He was most likely locking up the house before turning in himself.
“If you like it so much, I’ll be sure to let Cook know. I’m sure she enjoys having a healthy appetite like yours around the house now. She’s always complaining about how skinny I am.” She turned the corner and began to climb the stairs, heading for the bedroom. Even with the invigorating massage, she was tired and she knew that she’d have to get up tomorrow morning and delegate punishments for her vampire wards.

Seras practically threw herself into her coffin, mentally fuming. It wasn’t her fault that Alucard was a big jerk! Why should she have to take punishment? Wasn’t a sound scolding enough? She grabbed her pillow and curled around it, burying her face in the soft surface. It just wasn’t fair.

Integra had managed to drive a vein of fear into her subconscious; now it kept floating to the front of her brain and it made her shiver. She had been one wrong move away from sure death. She hadn’t been thinking about it at the time; she had only been trying to get back at Alucard, and had fallen too far into the charade to give up without making a fool of herself. In order to save face, she’d thoughtlessly chucked a man through the air!

For some reason, it always slipped her mind that humans were such frail things. Even in her mind; she knew that she was much, much stronger than her men, but her involuntary thought was always that men were big, strong creatures and as a woman she was… not. Not that she had been weak before; no, her human form had been athletically built and she was no wimp. But the social norm was that men were physically tougher than women, and she still harbored that particular stereotype.

Yet, she had thrown poor Roans through the air, banking on the fact that Alucard would call her bluff and save him. Looking back, Integra’s words rang true. Yes, because any other time he’s just a stickler for the rules, isn’t he? She’d had no solid proof that he wouldn’t have let Roans die.

And she’d have been destroyed. It was true; Integra and Walter both had warned her that if she were to go crazy with bloodlust, or defiant to orders, or if she maimed or killed soldiers intentionally, she would be exterminated. No second chances, no reprieves. And she understood: the only way the soldiers would truly feel safe within Hellsing’s borders is if they trusted the fact that rules for their protection were in place, with a stringent no-tolerance policy as the foundation.

She truly almost let herself be killed, all for what? She couldn’t change Alucard; she was only trying to prove a point. He was just as stubborn as she was. Was that worth dying for? No, no it wasn’t. Seras buried her face further into the pillow, not bothering to breathe. This back and forth tug-of-war she was neck-deep in with Alucard was threatening to take her sanity. Integra was right; he was literally driving her crazy. And the worst part was; while she was fighting tooth and nail, he was simply toying around.

Chapter End Notes

[ORIGINAL]

Author’s Note: If I was an Ambrosial Orange Tree, I’d be thriving right now.

[UPDATE 2016]

The aforementioned is still true.
Integra brushed out her hair, feeling slightly satisfied with herself. She could feel her vampire servant’s anger bristling through the air as if he were in the room with her instead of several floors below. She looked at the mirror, absently watching the path of the brush as it glided through her hair as she thought about his punishment. She had an idea of what she could do in mind, and it correlated perfectly with Seras’ punishment. But she knew that once she told him, he’d go on the warpath and she wasn’t sure what would happen then.

No: that wasn’t true. She was almost certain of what would happen. She just didn’t know how she would be able to diffuse the situation. Alucard would be angry and make a scene, although in reality it was more like a kid with a tantrum since Integra was never in any real danger. But it looked like she’d be in real danger, and she knew that Anderson wouldn’t stand for that. Then the two men would get into a fight and destroy her house and cause casualties all around and probably break at least a dozen peace treaty rules. The Round Table would speak up about that and then she’d be in deep shit, because the Vatican would show up. All over something as silly as a week-long penance.

She lay the brush down but didn’t get up from the chair, instead looking at her reflection. The young woman in the mirror stared back at her thoughtfully, head tilted slightly to the side. *Are you really going to go through with this?*, the pensive eyes seemed to ask her. *Will the backlash be worth it? He won’t learn a lesson; life taught you to give that hope up early on.* She closed her eyes, gathering her inner courage; the thing that made her heart hard and hand sure. When she opened them again, it seemed that an entirely new woman took the place of the unsure one in the mirror. Confident, piercing blue eyes and a challenging smile; the heiress of Hellsing. *Yes. Yes, I’m going through with it for his sake, and for Miss Victoria’s.*


“What is?” She twisted around to see Anderson standing in the bathroom doorway, staring curiously at her. She grinned widely and pulled her hair behind her ears.

“I amaze myself with my ideas sometimes; I’m utterly… pleased.” She kicked back from the vanity, scooting the chair across the carpet enough to stand up. She sauntered over to him, ignoring the amused look in his eyes as she mentally praised herself on her illusionary victory over the Red Menace. She had a silly thought that this is what stupid people felt like: accomplishing nothing, but still carrying a euphoric sort of happiness inside them with the thought that it might work even if all the evidence points to the opposite.

“You look positively evil,” he complimented her sarcastically as she paraded by him. “I’m starting to be relieved that I’m married to you; I’d hate to be on the enemy’s side.” He stretched and yawned, rubbing the side of his head wearily as he went to the bed and collapsed on it with a grunt. He watched as she walked around to pick up the day’s clothes and stuff them down the laundry chute in the closet. “Who exactly are ye plotting against?”

“Who said I’m plotting against anyone?” she purred, peering around the edge of the closet to eye him. He laughed sharply and shook his head.

“Don’t lie; I know that look. Yer scheming; I can see the cogs turning in yer pretty little head.” She colored slightly at the word “pretty”, but otherwise didn’t call him out on it.

“How do you know “that look”? she asked jauntily. “We haven’t even been married a
“Because,” he answered, pushing his index finger against her nose, “you had the exact same look in all those hotels, when you were trying to have yer way of things and get me into trouble. Besides that; I’ve been looking at you every Friday for a year now. I ought to know at least a little about ye.”

“Yes, because our Friday dates were always so full of chatter,” she shot back, rolling her eyes. “I’m sure you were mentally begging for me to shut up.” He scoffed lightly and lay back. She gazed at the ceiling, thinking for a moment before rolling on top of him to secure his attention. He craned his head forward to look at her, a question in his eyes. She tapped a finger on his chest, gathering her thoughts before speaking.

“You know, from the time I was thirteen years old Alucard was a thorn in my side. He was the kind that you couldn’t really remove; all you can do is get to a point where you’re comfortable, and then you accidentally move the wrong way and it digs in again. And I thought that I’d never get the best of him. Of course, I still tried. My teenage years were one big game of tug-of-war for power over the other.” He shifted slightly under her, but didn’t speak and she took it as a cue to continue.

“But—” she added, one finger in the air as though she were giving a lecture. “But, that all changed one day. He threw in a wild card, something that we both controlled, but at the same time was under no one’s control.” Anderson’s brows raised in silent query. “We’d had a usual fight that day about something or another, but then we all went together on a routine mission. Nothing out of the ordinary, nothing unusual or troubling, other than the loss of human life, of course.”

“But,” Anderson said, knowing what was coming. Integra crossed her arms and lay her chin on them, staring down at him with an air of remembrance.

“He comes back from the mission with this… this thing in his arms, carrying it like it was something important. At first, I thought it was a child, it was so tiny and fragile-looking. And I wondered, because usually he’d have called for the cleanup crew to take care of any survivors. And then she turned towards me, looking at me as if she’d never seen anything like me. And she was weak, and trembling, and everything that Alucard wasn’t. But he held her like she was a part of him that went missing, and he’d just then found it.”

“The vampire lass,” Anderson concluded. Integra nodded as well as she could lying on her forearms.

“Yes, “the vampire lass”,” she agreed softly. “She looked at me, and even though her hair was all bloody and tanglely and in her eyes, I could still see the crimson irises shining in the headlights of the trucks. And I looked at Alucard, and he was looking at me, and I knew he was waiting for me to step in and say something.”

“And you were angry with him.” Integra paused, biting her lip and staring into his eyes. After a moment she shook her head slowly.

“I was afraid,” she confessed in a whisper, and then he knew that she had never admitted it to anyone else. “What was I supposed to do? I’d never been in that situation before. Alucard had never—in all the years I knew him, and even before with my father and my father’s father… he’d never, ever openly showed any sort of—whatever-that-was—to any person before, human or not. And he’d never hesitated to destroy a vampire. He certainly never created one.” She buried her head slightly into her arms, her voice becoming muffled.
“Who was she? Why in the world would he choose her? What sort of evil being was she, that he would gladly take her with him instead of saving her as a human? Was I supposed to let her come home with me? She was a stranger, a new vampire; was I going to allow her around my human soldiers? What if one day she went after Walter? Or me?” She shook her head, and he laid a hand on her head comfortingly, running his fingers through her hair.

“I said something,” she broke off with a laugh. “I said something bloody stupid about calling rescue for her, like I was blatantly ignoring the fact that she was a vampire. And he said that she was going to be transferred to Hellsing.” She tilted her head into his touch, laughing again. “I told him “You don’t make the decisions.”

“And?”

“And he said “She made the decision herself.” Or something along those lines. In the end, he brought her along. He carried her all the way from Cheddar to the mansion. He didn’t let her go once. Of course, it may have been that she couldn’t walk herself. She was so, so feeble-looking. Her body was miniscule in his arms.”

“And you let her stay without a fuss?” Anderson seemed impressed, although whether it was Alucard’s stubbornness or her ability to handle the situation that impressed him she didn’t know.

“Well, we fought a bit after he’d put Seras to rest in his coffin, and he told me that if she was going to leave, it would cause a fountain of problems. He eventually convinced me to let her stay. I mean, at least contained she wouldn’t be out killing all the innocents of London in a bloodlust. We could keep a closer watch on her.

“I was more surprised by Alucard’s insistence than anything else. He told me flatly, “I’m going to have to teach her about being a vampire. Some of it doesn’t come innate. She’s my responsibility now, and I won’t have you pawning her off to die by your hands in two months’ time.” He was hell-bent on keeping her.”

“Vampires don’t separate well from their fledglings. That’s one of the first things we teach Iscariot assassins. If you kill the fledgling first, then the vampire is no problem anymore.” A rare look of disgusted pity crossed his face. “We tried to keep some, in the beginning when we first realized it. But they go crazy with the separation. They eventually stop drinking and become vegetables; it’s like they lost the will to exist. Only two out of fifty we kept for research didn’t go insane and had to be exterminated. But they weren’t… normal anymore, either. They were just there. They had no emotion, no tie to anything that would will them to survive.”

“That’s horrible.” Integra frowned, slightly worried by the fact that she didn’t care enough about former humans going insane. But then again, she didn’t really worry about it. Her family’s ingrained prejudice threatened to wield its scaly head and she shoved it back down mentally. Anderson nodded.

“I suppose so,” he said indifferently. “But they were still monsters, so they had it coming.”

“I suppose so,” Integra parroted. She smiled teasingly. “Say: what if our children were to say “Dad, I want to be a vampire.”? What will you do?”

“No.” He frowned and pushed her off, growling slightly as she rolled off him and laughed. “Don’t even joke about that. No child of mine is going to willingly give up his soul.”
“And no child of mine is going to be so weak that they can’t deal with their own existence. But there’s always a slim possibility, in those rebellious teenage years, that they might—”

“Don’t even start; I’m warning you,” he scowled at her devious grin. “I swear woman, I’ll make sure we don’t even have children if you even think about planting those sorts of ideas in their heads.”

“Alucard will, if I don’t.”

“Alucard will be chained upside down to a brick wall inside of a vault from the time they’re born until they’re grown and gone. He’s not coming near them, and that’s final.”

“And what about my wild card?” Integra asked, trying to keep a straight face. Of course she wasn’t going to let Alucard within fifty feet of any children of hers. That would be just asking for trouble. Those kids would be corrupted beyond belief by the time they could talk.

“We’ll have to see. She might be able come out of her vault on the weekends. If she behaves and doesn’t set a foot in their direction.”

“I’m not worried about it. Think about it; I can hear Alucard now—“Those little brats aren’t worth my notice. Come along, Police Girl.” She snorted at the sound of her own impression, trying to channel Alucard being smooth and disgusted at the same time. “And Seras will adore them because she adores everything cute, but running after her creator is her full time job. If we give them a mission and lock them in a dungeon together afterwards, that’ll just save time. Besides, vaults cost money to build and I have dungeons in the basement.”

“You might be right.” A wandering hand snaked across her thigh and she gasped softly.

“You do realize we’ll have to get up early in the morning?” She bit her lip as he began to pull her gown up over her stomach. “In—in a few hours? Four hours, to be exact?”

“Hmm.” Warm hands spread across her stomach, tickling her ribcage as they continued their journey up her body. She wiggled, enjoying the sensation for a moment before halfheartedly pushing against his wrists.

“I have a meeting tomorrow. I need some sleep and I—ohh—I’m going to make a fool out of myself…” she sputtered, trying to sound firm. “Sleep! Do you understand?”

“Mhmm…”

“Ah-lex!”

“Hm?”

“Alexander Anderson!”

“Does anyone tell you that you talk far too much?”

He lay with his arms crossed, glaring at the ceiling and cursing everything he could think of without being blasphemous.

“I’m not angry. Well, the maid will be furious.” He snarled at her and she bit her hand. She was trying her hardest to not laugh at the sight of him and for some reason it irked him more
than if she was rolling on the floor. He growled low in his throat and she snorted before biting her fist harder. “I think it’s actually sort of… flattering. I must be doing something right.”

“Oh for the love of—I thought you had a meeting or something to go to!” he snapped. It only served to make her even more humored and she had to take a deep breath before answering.

“I do, and thanks to you I’m going to be falling asleep in the middle of it.” She shook her head at the sight of him and leaned over to pick up a slender goose feather from where it lay on his arm. “You owe me a new pillow. I’ll just add it to your personal debt.”

“I swear”

“Oh, don’t be angry.” She stood and finished buttoning her jacket, smoothing the suit coat out and brushing a stray feather from her hair. “To be honest, it was fun. I’d do it again in a heartbeat, if I wasn’t otherwise occupied.” She actually stared at the phone for a moment. “You know, maybe I could leave them waiting until this afternoon…” She was cut off by a half-empty pillow flung at her head. Another cloud of feathers drifted in the air, catching on her hair and shoulders.

“Go to your meeting. I have things to do too.” He rolled out of the bed, stretching his arms and pretending not to notice her appreciative stare as the broad muscles flexed. “And I’m not staying to explain what happened. She can come to you for that.” He strode to the bathroom, scattering feathers like some sort of shedding angel. She watched him until she heard the shower turn on and reluctantly went out the door to face her busy day. She didn’t even bother with being concerned at the strange sort of deep affection that grabbed at her chest. Instead she tried to focus on the teleconference ahead, and not be distracted by lingering thoughts of feathers and fallen angels.

“Walter, no!” Seras cried, staring down her punishment. “It’s not fair! Let me go be moving target practice! Let me go scrub the hallways with a toothbrush! Let me hang upside down in the sunlight for an hour! Just please, anything but this!” she squealed overdramatically.

“Miss Victoria, please!” Walter said firmly, pushing her body further into the room. “If you enjoyed it, it wouldn’t be a good punishment! Sir Integra told me that you couldn’t be anywhere near people; you’d gain too much pleasure talking to them.” Seras whimpered and her shoulders slumped as she allowed Walter to shove her into the small room.

“Now, we need you to take one filing cabinet, go through each drawer, and pull out the files. Then take the files and open them up and look in the top right corner. If the serial number is on the list I gave you, stamp it. If not, put it aside. Then, when all three filing cabinets are finished, fill one with the stamped ones in numerical order, and then the others the same way with the unstamped one.” She pouted at the closest cabinet, then at the small desk with ink pad, stamp, and list of seven-digit numbers.

“This is a big help to me, you know. And think about it; if you work diligently, a week will go by like that,” he added with a snap. “These files have needed a good sorting for the past ten years. God knows why I haven’t been down here to do it.” And with that, he shut the door and left her alone.

Seras blinked back tears. Over ten years’ worth of unfiled reports, backed up and waiting for her to sort through them. She sighed heavily and pulled the first filing cabinet over to the desk, happy for her super-strength to pull the heavy metal object like it was nothing. She pulled out the top drawer and hopped onto the desk, smoothing her skirt out and sitting the drawer to her right. She pulled out
the first thick file and found its serial number on the sheet after a few minutes of searching. Picking up the stamp she stamped the folder, leaving a bright red “Closed” on the manila surface.

One down, ten-million-gazillion to go. She might just make it through this with her sanity intact.

“No. I will not.” Integra crossed her arms and glared sternly at crimson-clad vampire who dared tell her “no”.

“You will, on your own, or I will chain you in the farthest dungeon and you won’t eat, you won’t move, and you certainly won’t be able to use a smidgen of powers.” She frowned at him, tipping her head to the side and studying the stubborn features on her servant’s face. “You had it coming; you pick fights with her all the time. You two need a time-out from each other.”

“I will not,” he repeated. “You will not get in between me and what's mine.” His knuckles were whiter than snow against his already-pale skin, and he bent the arms of his chair in his grip. He was clearly showing a lot of restraint against her. She gave him a syrupy smile and waved his refusal aside.

“Fine then. If you won’t do it voluntarily, I shall order you. Heed my orders, servant,” she began. He snarled openly at her, the sound ripped from his chest and sending a bolt of pure terror down her spine. She didn’t dare stop now. “You will not leave these chambers except under my orders. You will not speak to Seras Victoria, either mentally or physically. You will not look at her. You will not touch her, come near her, breathe in her general direction, go into her room, or communicate with her in any way, shape, form, or fashion for an entire week’s time. I will tell you when the week is up, and until then you shall have no contact with your fledgling whatsoever. That’s my order, and you can stick it where you will.”

“Walter will be by later with your meal. You can be sure that he’ll let Miss Victoria know what’s going on, so she won’t come looking for you. And if you even think about disobeying and going against orders, I swear under God’s shining Heaven that I will chain you to the fullest of my ability and I’ll send her to India to live with the swamis.” She walked out of the room, closing the door behind her. She was halfway down the hall before the entire basement shook with a rage-filled roar and something shattered against the rune-incrusted wood. She hurried her pace, knowing that Anderson would be waiting at the top of the stairs for an explanation, bayonets at the ready.
It was the first time in his existence that he could remember feeling something akin to panic. He
was up and halfway out the door before his hands burned and he came to his senses with a jolt. He
stared down at the glowing red runes, his eyes narrowing before he stalked back through the
doorway. Flinging himself down in his chair, he rubbed a hand over his face and closed his eyes.
The emptiness in his mind; the nearly unbearable silence that he’d never noticed before now,
weighed down on him. He tried for the umpteenth time to fall asleep.

It was the second day of full separation, and his solitude was beginning to takes its toll, no matter how desperately he fought for his pride and sanity.

“Miss Victoria!” Walter shouted, his voice booming in the tiny filing room. Seras jerked
and stared up at him, looking lost for a moment before rubbing a hand over her face.

“Sorry Walter. I didn’t hear you. What’d you say?” she asked, reaching down to take a
sip of the glass of blood at her side on the desk. Walter looked at the girl and tried his best to calm
down. However, his instincts were screaming that something wasn’t right about her. She looked
awful, but not the way she’d been a day or so ago. No, she was showered and dressed and drinking,
but heavy bags lay under her eyes and her movements were sluggish, even with the blood. It was
the third time that night that he’d caught her staring off into space instead of working; for Seras,
not focusing on her job was a red flag to everyone else that something was off.

“Miss Victoria, are you alright? You seem distracted this evening.” Seras looked up at
him and nodded, but her eyes weren’t fully focused on his face.

“Yes, I’m perfectly fine,” she said distantly. “I was just thinking about….” She pause and
before he could blink she was on her feet, standing in front of him. “My Master’s in the basement,
right? He’s not… he’s in the basement, isn’t he, Walter?” Walter blinked for a moment,
flabbergasted at the Draculina’s mood. She was almost frenzied, wringing her hands as she waited
for an answer. When he didn’t respond right away, her eyes widened. “Walter?” she squeaked, her
voice cracking. Walter jumped to attention and laid a hand on her arm, guiding her back onto the
desk in an effort to calm her down.

“Of course he is. Sir Integra ordered him not to leave his chambers, remember? I
 guarantee he’s down there right now.” At the sound of her boss’s name, Seras’ eyes flashed in
anger, but she blinked and smoothed her hair behind her ears, laughing. Walter winced at the edge
of hysteria in the high-pitched titter.

“Of course,” she repeated. “Of course he is. I’m worried over nothing.” She took another
sip of her drink, the hand that held the glass trembling slightly. “But Walter, he is in the basement,
right? You wouldn’t lie to me, would you Walter?” she inquired sweetly, a nervous smile creeping
onto her face. Walter cleared his throat and patted her shoulder.

“I would never lie to you, Miss Victoria. He’s down in the basement, and you can see
him in 5 days. Try to focus on getting the files ready, alright?” Seras nodded and reached for a file
and the list, reading it before stamping the folder. Walter backed away softly, watching her slowly
stop before grabbing the next folder. Her head came up and she stared at the wall, in the exact
same position she’d been in when he’d came to check on her, stamp dangling from her fingers.
Walter closed the door without a word and immediately took off at the fastest walk he dared take. He didn’t want to alarm her, but Sir Integra was going to have to know about what was going on. He was almost certain that the poor little blonde wouldn’t last a full week.

“I assure you Alucard, I checked on her moments before coming down here. She’s in the filing room on the first floor.” Walter backed away from the vampire looming over him. He’d practically been tackled from the moment he walked in to bring Alucard his supper.

“And you saw her. You didn’t assume.” Walter sighed and nodded, trying hard to keep his composure. It was hard, even for a seasoned man like him. Walter smelled the odor of burning flesh and had to stop himself from staring at Alucard’s hands. It was clear the vampire had left the room, but apparently only for a moment or two. He was afraid Alucard may have been sleepwalking and hurt himself without thinking about it.

“Alucard, sit down and drink. Try to relax.” He sat the metal bucket on the end table and even poured the vampire’s wine for him. “You’ll be able to see her in 5 days. A business week. I’m sure if you keep your mind occupied, it will pass quickly,” he added with a false sense of cheer. Alucard took off his sunglasses and Walter paled. The bags were under his eyes as well. Neither vampire was getting adequate rest. He added mental underlines to his mental note to tell Sir Integra.

“Hm.” Alucard didn’t even bother with a sarcastic comment. He took a gulp of the blood and sat in his chair, his eyes trained on the door to his chambers. Walter prepared to leave and was halfway out the door when the vampire called his name. “Walter, if I found out you lied to me….” The vampire didn’t finish, instead leaving it to the butler’s imagination.

“I would never lie to you,” Walter replied as he made his way upstairs.

“You’re supposed to be unpacking.” Anderson looked up at his wife, who was sitting hunched over on the bed.

“Okay, be right there,” Integra murmured as she flipped the page. She lapsed back into silence, her eyes trained on the book. Anderson shook his head and continued to pull more books from the boxes, taking them to the shelf and putting them in order. He finished the job silently and then went to stand by Integra.

“You can keep it out; the bookshelf is sorted by category, when you’re done,” he explained. Integra jerked and sat up.

“Okay, what do you need——” she looked around, then up at him. “Did you finish?” she asked incredulously. Anderson arched and brow and she quickly marked her place and stuck the book on the bedside table, her cheeks glowing. “It’s really interesting…” she mumbled. He picked up the edge of the book, gazing at the title written on the spine.

“Exorcism: Dealing with Demons and the Magicked in Ancient Times,” he read. “Not too many people would be interested in this,” he admitted, shaking the book before placing it back on the table. She stared up at him before shrugging, her eyes not meeting his face.

“Well, you should know by now that I’m not normal,” she replied, crossing her arms.
“And you’re the one that owns the book, not me, so you can’t say anything about it.”

“Who said I was saying anything?” he asked. She didn’t reply and he laughed again, shaking his head. “Yer too fun to tease. Lighten up a little,” he said. Immediately he stopped and backtracked. He told her to lighten up? Since when did that happen?

“Oh, just shut up.” She looked over to the bookshelf before backing away from it and the now-empty boxes. “If I go look I’ll find twenty more I’ll want to read. I need to get my work done.” She paused. “Which reminds me; Alex, one of the Round Table is coming by today and I need you to… well…” she stopped, and after a moment one hand strayed up and she began to bite her thumbnail.

“Stop that,” he muttered and smacked her arm. She jerked mid-bite and winced, looking at the hangnail reproachfully before walking over the vanity and searching in one of the drawers. She came up with a small pair of clippers and began to shape her nail into proper shape again.

“Now, what was it?”

“Well, you see, Sir Penwood is coming by later this afternoon and he’s the only one I trust not to tell anyone about me being out of prison, and I was planning on getting a loan on some money but I don’t know what he’s going to think about… you,” she finished on a whisper.

“Yer embarrassed of me.” She looked up, shock in her eyes.

“No! Of course not!” she replied indignantly. “I’d never be embarrassed of you. Unless you acted like a bloody fool or got dead drunk or something. I just wanted you to not come up right on him because you’re intimidating is all.” He crossed his arms, one eyebrow rising above his glasses.

“Intimidating.” She rolled her eyes and came over to where he stood. She stood and looked up at him, sighing before lifting her arms. They went back to her side and then she practically flapped them before making up her mind and wrapping them around his waist.

“You’re big,” she clarified. “You might scare him off. I’m surprised you haven’t done that to my soldiers already.”

“I doubt I can scare any soldiers of yours off. If they can stay with your shadow looming over their heads, they aren’t afraid of me.” He patted her shoulder before bending down and wrapping her in a hug, squeezing and hearing her “oomph” as he barely avoided knocking the wind out of her. “Oh, sorry.”

“Mm, I don’t mind,” she muttered into his chest as she wiggled up out of his arms in order to stare eye to eye. “Please, be nice to him. Sir Penwood was a good friend of my father’s, and he’s been good to me.”

“I’ll make myself scarce, unless you want me in there. I’ve actually been meaning to go outside and see what sort of training areas you have.” He let her go and she slid back down to the floor. He watched her regain her footing and his smile faltered somewhat. “I am big,” he conceded. “But then again, it wasn’t like I dinnae know already.”

“I like it,” Integra offered. “You’ll be much more efficient than Alucard at scaring people away.” He scowled as she put her gloves back on, brushing the book dust off her hands. “And it comes in handy in other ways, too,” she purred. He scoffed and walked past her out the door, leaving her and her improper thoughts behind before they could act on them.
“What do you mean, sleepwalking?” Integra clicked her nails on the desk, the gloves muffling the noise as she watched Walter wring his hands before her. The butler had come in her office in a panicked frenzy, his eyes filled with concern. He’d explained the best he could about what was going on with the two basement-dwellers.

“It’s hurting them both, being away from each other. They’re beginning to stop functioning. Alucard didn’t even bother with trying to get a rise out of me, and Miss Victoria couldn’t hold her focus on something for more than a few seconds! They only wanted to know about each other.” He frowned and looked at her sadly. “They both thought I was lying and that the other had been sent away.”

“I’m sure they’re fine; a little separation anxiety just proves that I was right. They’re getting too focused on each other.” Integra bit an unlit cigar and began to sort through the papers to find the ones she was going to need for Penwood later. Walter shuffled his feet but didn’t move.

“To be frank, I think this is a bad idea.” Integra looked back up at him and sighed, but made a gesture for him to continue. “Seras and Alucard share something that we humans don’t have. They’ve made that much clear dozens of times by now. I’m afraid that we may be harming them on a deep, emotional level.” Integra laughed.

“A deep emotional level? Walter, this is Alucard we’re talking about here. He’s not deep at all.” Walter nodded his agreement to that, but the frown remained.

“And what of Miss Victoria? I’m extremely concerned—I mean, she’s very close to my—if I can be open, I care very dearly for the her and I hate to see her in so much pain.”

“I know you love her, Walter,” Integra said, her expression softening. “I can tell that you do. But you have to let me handle this. I know what’s best for right now. Thank you for your opinion, but I believe that a simple, week-long punishment will have no lasting harm.” Walter bowed, his mouth tightening.

“Yes, Sir Integra. What you think is best.” She nodded his pseudo-agreement and he left without another word.

However, neither of them could have known how much they’d underestimated. They were in for a very rough five days.
“Cancelled?!” Integra stared at the email. “What do they mean, too busy?” Walter wrung his hands on the other side of the desk, acting as though it were his fault the elder Knight had refused to come to Hellsing manor at first notice.

“Well, perhaps it came as too much of a shock at the moment. It is a large amount,” he admitted weakly, rubbing his monocle with a cloth repeatedly although it was already spotless. Integra knew it was just to keep his hands busy. “He did say that he’d consider a meeting later in the week, yes?” Integra rubbed her temples and scowled at the screen before repeating the short, overly polite email message.

“Sir Hellsing; while we understand that your dilemma requires Sir Penwood’s prompt reply we are unable to relay it to him at this moment. He is currently working on a matter of National Security that requires his full focus. We’re sure you understand that the matter you present us with also requires both parties’ full attention, especially when such large expenses are involved. Thank you in advance for your patience; from the desk of Penwood, etc.”

She all but snarled at the syrupy formality. “Thank you in advance,” she mocked. “I bet you anything he’s still flipping somersaults over the explosion at the prison.” Walter gave her a forced smile and shrugged. “This is a load of—the idiots!” she shouted, slamming the laptop’s lid down and pushing it to the side of the desk. “I’m walking,” she informed Walter snippily. Walter bowed and she left the room.

She headed for the sanctity of her bedroom, where she could take a nice hot bath. How could they be so rude? They didn’t even show it to him! She growled and crossed her arms, trying not to stomp. He really must have been busy; usually he didn’t default emails through his office unless something major was taking up a good portion of his time.

Sir Penwood wasn’t the most organized of men. Especially as he grew older, he became more and more dysfunctional when it came to interoffice relations. He would forget the emails were ever sent unless he was in a position to answer them within a day. She had his personal mobile number, but she wondered if this warranted such a call. She had always tried to save calling him for absolute emergencies; he was busy and so was she, and they both didn’t have time to chitchat.

But she needed a loan in order to pay the Vatican what Anderson owed. She had over half the expenses, but the budget would be shot for months afterward if she tried to use even a fraction more than she had. And she was months behind anyway; sometimes the economic advisors didn’t have the best options in mind when they gave her budget reports.

She looked up and realized that apparently her feet had different ideas. She was about to step through a doorway; however, instead of her bedroom, she was headed outside. She frowned, but continued on her way out the door and down the walk, turning onto the gravel pathway that had been trodden down by thousands of soldiers’ feet. She passed by the barracks and strayed off the path, knowing that it continued to the gun range and training fields beyond before dead-ending at the gardeners small shed. She headed instead for the southern wall, where the forest lay just outside.

She breathed deeply, getting a taste of air that wasn’t stale and recycled like the kind inside. She
hadn’t gone walking outside in months, even before being incarcerated. She’d forgotten how brilliant and serene the landscape looked, awash in the light of dusk. She headed through small copses that dotted the grounds, meandering around with no particular path in mind. It was more relaxing than she remembered.

The short, well-groomed trees moved softly in the wind, their leaves flickering in the breeze like thousands of tiny orange-tinged jewels. The scrubby bushes still bloomed with different colors of flowers, and the few flower gardens still hanging on despite accidental trampling by wayward boots were vibrant against the dull brown of their mulch. It was a pleasantly cool evening; it was as if nature refused to accept that winter was just around the corner.

She walked until the grass became tall and unkempt, swaying high against her calves yet still sparse enough to keep from hindering her progress. It was weedy grass, where the neat sod had stopped and nature was allowed to take over again. The gardeners apparently didn’t come out this far.

She saw why a moment later; they’d commandeered the southern wall for their own sort of rubbish heap. It made sense; no one ventured out here. Broken pottery sat in untidy heaps here and there, sometimes broken in many places where they’d landed after being thrown. Old soil spilled out of their edges and seeds had taken root, growing over the heaps and along the ground. It looked like a sort of modern garden, like those sculptures one saw at museums. She didn’t mind it. It looked rather strange and archaic; it suited her tastes.

She stopped at the fence and looked out at the whispering leaves in the forest beyond the wrought-iron. Something caught her eye and she looked slightly to her left to see a strange pair of bars. It looked as if someone had gripped them hard enough to bend them. She walked over and gasped in surprise.

The wrought-iron ended at about waist level, and under that was well-laid stone brickwork that had been there since the time of van Helsing himself. Right under the bent bars, the stone was horribly cracked. She stared for a moment and then turned to face the forest. She put her hands on the bars and squeezed—they were hard as iron should be, but her hands were only slightly larger than the imprints on the bars. The grooves marking the otherwise smooth iron were clearly fingers.

“What happened,” she murmured as she stared out at the darkened forest. She couldn’t remember if the bars had always looked this way, or if it was a recent damage. Had something been trying to come in… or was someone trying to get out? There were only two people in Hellsing strong enough for such a thing: Seras and Alucard. She decided that she’d bring it up when the chance presented itself.

Turning away from the strange bars, she started a slow, careful path along the wall. The broken flower urns were partially buried against the wall, and she stumbled more than once on sharp edges that were almost invisible in the waning light. She dodged a particularly large vase with a shell motif on the side and almost toppled over something sticking further out of the ground than the average flowerpot. She grabbed hold of the iron bars and steadied herself, rubbing her thigh as a bolt of pain shot through it when she hit the stone. Parting the grass with one hand, she bent to see a bayonet, lodged deeply into the earth. She grabbed it and pulled, using both hands and almost toppling onto her rear as it came out of the ground all at once.

“What in the—” she murmured, holding it up to the light. It was one of Anderson’s, no doubt the work of a throw gone awry. She hadn’t seen anything else that suggested that he’d been here, so it was plausible he’d just overshot a target. The blade was heavy and she swung it back and forth experimentally to get used to the feel. She smiled and swung it over her head, bringing it down
with a crash on an ancient-looking piece of planter. The planter shattered and she grit her teeth as the force worked its way up both her arms.

“Ouch,” she muttered, rubbing her shoulder and almost dropping the bayonet on her foot as a result. She stepped over the remains of what was once the planter and sauntered off across the grounds, heading back to the house as the sun dipped behind the horizon. It was going to be dark soon, and there were no lights on this side of the manor to illuminate the grounds.

She wasn’t even halfway back to the manor before the sun completely vanished. She stood in complete darkness, with not even the moon above her to light the path. The trees in the copses, once beautiful, now served only to block what little light there was with their gnarled branches. She could see the manor in the distance, with its floodlights on the roof and pinpricks of light gleaming from the windows, but between there and where she was stood a ten-minute walk and a long stretch of uneven ground hidden in the black of night.

She stood still, her hands clenching the blade and her eyes wide, trying to see; it was in vain, and the darkness didn’t lift any further from her eyes. She swallowed, her mind turning over what to do. After a moment, she laughed at her own silliness. It was stupid of her to stand in the dark like she was actually scared. There was no one here to get her—she lived what was probably the second-safest place in the entire country, the palace being the first. She had a fenced in manor and guards of the highest caliber—no one was getting in. Besides, the worst that would happen was that she’d trip over a flowerbed railing and get dirty and scratched, and she could live with that.

Still, she held the blade even tighter as she walked, using it as a cane of sorts. She knew that if she could find the gravel path, it was a straight shot back to the manor’s front door. Even so, she had to stop for bushes and other things that she found where very annoying when viewed at night rather than midday.

She was so focused on her mission to find the path that she didn’t realize she was being followed until two strong hands grabbed her shoulders. She was so shocked that she dropped her only weapon, her hands coming up to her mouth to muffle the startled yelp that escaped her lips. Immediately she cursed herself internally. If her assaulter was Alucard (highly doubtful, but still plausible) he’d never let her live down being caught off guard. By the time the night was over, he’d be saying that she screamed in terror for a full minute, the bastard. But it wasn’t the crafty vampire at all; it was even worse.

“What? The Hellsing heiress, afraid of the dark?” Anderson laughed and let her go. She swung around, but was unable to see him in the darkness. Scowling, she crossed her arms and wondered if she ought to try and find the blade so that she could return it to him—maybe by running it through his stomach.

“What? The Hellsing heiress, afraid of the dark?” Anderson laughed and let her go. She swung around, but was unable to see him in the darkness. Scowling, she crossed her arms and wondered if she ought to try and find the blade so that she could return it to him—maybe by running it through his stomach.

“Do you think you’re funny?” she asked angrily, glad that it was dark enough he’d miss her face burning in embarrassment. “Because you’re lucky I didn’t go with my first instinct and slice your head off.” He only laughed harder and she turned on her heel, stalking away from him. A moment later, he yanked her to the left and she almost cried out again, more surprised than hurt. “Stop that!” she shouted at him.

“Fine,” he sniffed. “Trip over the bushes.” She heard the grass rustle as he walked away and she turned towards the sound, debating on whether to call him back and force him to lead her to her house. She had only taken two steps when he spoke again, and she realized he must have only moved far enough away to keep her from running into his back on accident. “Why in God’s name are you out stumbling about in the dark?”

“I took a walk and went too far,” she snapped as she tripped over a root and almost went
sprawling. She kicked out at it, her foot meeting nothing but air. “As if it’s any of your business.” He humphed and she felt a tiny stab of guilt for sounding so mean. But her heart was still thudding in her chest and she couldn’t bring herself to strive for politeness with someone who’d just shortened her lifespan by a few years. She stumbled again and he caught her by the back of her suit coat, dragging her back upright and clucking pityingly.

“You really ought to pay more attention to where you are, even in the dark. You’re just too headstrong,” he observed. “Do yourself a favor and feel the ground with your feet before you walk.” She grumbled, glaring over to where she thought he might be standing. It was hard to tell.

“How about you just do me a favor, and keep your advice to yourself! Unless you plan on carrying me back home, I don’t need your help!” she snapped. A second later she gasped as she was scooped off her feet and the breeze picked up as she was ferried across the dark ground. “Put me down!” she hissed once she realized what was going on.

“No,” he replied sternly. “I had to come all the way out here to find you, and I’m not waiting for you to try and make your way back. I dinnae have the patience or the time for that.” His voice rumbled in her ear and she winced slightly, still wiggling around to try and make him drop her.

“What did you need me for?” she sighed irritably as she realized the futility of it. He had her in an iron grasp and it wasn’t fair. Deciding that she ought to just go to bed and give up on the night getting any better, she crossed her arms and watched the lights of the manor grow brighter.

“I need an office,” he declared. “I cannae get anything done around here. A desk at least.” She snorted and made one last freedom-wiggle, only to have him tighten his hold and almost crush her spine until she stopped.

“If you needed an office,” she panted, her lungs protesting being treated like stress toys, “you should’ve said something. I’ll get Walter to clear out a room for you. Just tell him what you need and he’ll make sure it’s in there for you.” She realized that the dark had lightened enough for her to make out the shapes of his fingers on her legs. “I can walk from here,” she noted. “Walter’s going to think I turned my ankle and become flustered if you carry me into the house. He doesn’t need that with his heart and all.”

Anderson considered it and she slid a moment later to land shakily on her feet. She shook her head as he strode ahead of her and finally they both burst from the copse onto the brightly lit lawn of the manor’s front, the floodlights making it seem like daylight. She winced as spots appeared in front of her eyes as she went up to the front door, three steps behind him.

“I thought you’d be in that meeting for the rest of the night,” he said conversationally as they walked through the front door. She sighed, her earlier disappointment and frustration rearing its ugly head again.

“He’s not even able to look at my email yet. Apparently, I’m not important enough to be dealt with at the moment.” Integra felt like she was being childish, but at the same time she was filled with a justifiable anger; she was significant enough to at least get a response from Penwood himself, even if it said the same thing! Don’t let your office write it!

“Ah, I see,” Anderson said softly. “How long would it take?” She shook her head.

“I don’t know; they didn’t give me a date. Just that they’d get to it eventually.” She rubbed one temple. “Don’t worry about it; the business end of this stuff always gets pushed back. I’ll get that money one way or the other.”
“You’re tired.” It wasn’t a question. She looked up at him and nodded, allowing her shoulders to slump for a brief second before regaining her posture as a group of night guards passed by on their way out the door.

“Yes,” she admitted. “It’s been a very stressful day for me.” She looked towards the basement. “At least having him on lockdown leaves me free from one torment.”

“Go to bed,” he ordered. She bristled slightly, but forced herself to keep quiet. “It’s for your own good,” he added quietly, so the guards wouldn’t overhear him. “I’ll be up later. I’ve got things to put in place.” She didn’t even have time to ask him before he’d swept off. She watched him go, wondering if he’d had enough time to make a map in his mind or if he still got lost. She didn’t bother musing about it for too long; his order, as much as she disliked the fact that he said it, sounded good and she really was exhausted.

Seras paused at the door to her chambers, breathing heavily. She knew that if she were caught and Sir Integra found out that she was about to break the rules, she would be punished. Not that she couldn’t take anything the heiress dealt; but she really wanted to be free again. Still, the benefit far outweighed the risk and she was being careful.

She listened to the bustling upstairs, not used to the loud multitude of voices that stemmed from the upper floors. She knew the dayshift was double the nightshift in terms of men, but still—it was amazing that she was able to sleep through such a ruckus! She felt a bit better; doing this in the middle of the day was supposed to be better because no one would bother looking for her, but now she rested a bit easier knowing that the people upstairs would drown out her footfalls.

Looking out, she noted the empty hallway and quickly made her way down it, her ears pricked for even the slightest noise. Every mouse in the stonework became a lab technician; every groan of the pipes was a gasp of surprise that she was out and about. She made it through the easier part without a hitch.

Walking by the labs would be a bit harder, though. The humans that worked down there left the doors open and were often walking between rooms, looking at other experiments. She’d only have a second or two to hide before she was noticed. She was banking on the humans and their love for blaming things on “trick of the light”, although there was no such thing.

She peered around the corner, looking at the final obstacle that kept her from her mission. The doors were open as expected, propped open with door props and in one instance a stack of heavy looking books. She jumped back a bit as two male scientists and a female technician came out of a doorway and crossed the hall, carefully carrying something hidden with a cloth. She counted to three and then ran out, speeding past the rooms as fast as she dared go. If she ran as fast as she could, the metal doors would swing back in the wind and people would look out, wondering.

She was almost home free when an orderly came with a giant stack of paper in her arms. Seras balked and then did the only thing she could think of—she jumped straight over the woman, her boot barely catching the edge of the girl’s ponytail. The papers went flying and the girl shrieked in surprise. Seras turned the corner and slammed against the wall, not making a sound—not even breathing, even though as a human she would have been panting heavily.

“What’s going on?” The head scientist, a burly man with a thick mustache and a bald head, poked his head out of the door. “What happened?” he shouted as he took sight of the rattled orderly standing with her arms still held out, papers floating everywhere and pooling at her feet.
“I-I don’t know,” the orderly confessed. “I was just walking when this big gust of wind came and almost knocked me over!” She looked around at the papers on the ground, tears in her eyes. “Oh, no! It’ll take forever to get these back into order!” The head scientist sighed and shook his head, rubbing the space between his eyes.

“Get Jackson to help you pick them up and put them back in order. And for the love of it all, keep one hand on top of the papers next time!” He stepped into the hall, kicking a stray paper towards her and looking up and down the ceiling. “Maybe it’s time we checked those ducts again,” he muttered to himself.

Seras let out an almost-silent sigh of relief. They didn’t suspect anything but faulty ducts. And for all she knew, there may be faulty ducts, as many people apparently climb up and down the insides all the time. She put the incident behind her and hurried down to the darkest, deepest part of the basement; past the empty dungeons, past the retired torture chamber, all the way to the end of the line where only one door stood.

She stopped in front of it, her mind turning. She knew that Sir Integra would be up at this hour, and if she were to just waltz in the heiress would be sure to notice. Even so, her whole purpose of braving the laboratories was to cheat their punishment and see her master. She wasn’t satisfied with looking at the closed door. She wouldn’t be able to rest easily until she knew for a fact that he was alright behind there.

She had almost gone cuckoo with the punishment. It was only her resolve, which had come from somewhere deep within her, that made her sober up and realize that if she wanted to see him she could always just sneak behind her boss’s back. She wouldn’t go mental over something as silly as a week-long absence!

She knelt at the door, unsure of what to do. What if he was asleep, unlike her and her insomnia that had been rampant for the past three days? Should she dare wake him? She sat with her back against the door in the darkness, her head pressed against the wood.

“Master?”

Chapter End Notes

I'm slowly getting caught up!
Yes, that would be all she had to do. Walk down the hall, past the labs, and knock on his door. Yep, easy as pie. Mhmm....

“Miss Victoria!” Seras jumped and turned around, hands clasped behind her back as she pressed herself against the wall. Oh, who am I kidding! I didn’t make it ten steps past my bedroom and they caught me! She’d been running the scenario over and over in her head since Day…2? 3? Wait, what day was it now? Her mind couldn’t work right; she was overwhelmed with the emptiness in her psyche where her master usually was.

“Walter! Um—hello.” The retainer stared angrily at her, his eyes narrowed. “How are you tonight?” Her eyes jumped from him to the hallway where the labs resided, wondering if she could make it if she ran. Probably not; those wires of his could be killer and he’d have her tripped in a moment’s time.

“What are you doing out of your bedroom?” he asked sternly. “You know if Sir Integra found out, you’d only get a longer punishment.” At the word longer, Seras practically threw herself at his feet.

“No!” she shrieked, and then curled in on herself, mortified and bewildered and scared. “Please, don’t tell Sir Integra,” she moaned, her hands running through her hair. She’d never felt this way before; was this what it felt like to go insane? “Please, I’ll go back to my room! I’ll be good!”

“Miss Victoria!” She didn’t look up at his face, but his voice sounded alarmed. Was he scared for her, or just shocked that she’d ask him to go against procedure? “Mi—Seras, look at me, what’s wrong?” He gently grabbed her chin in his hand and she allowed him to pull her head up. Her eyes met his and she felt even more horrible to see worry swimming in the depths of his gaze.

“I’ll be good,” she promised, trying to crawl away. “Please let me go. Please don’t tell.” She paused, looking up and down the hallway. Her mind felt jumbled; she wished her master was there to sort things out for her. “Walter, it’s so quiet,” she whimpered. “I can hear everything.” She felt hot tears spill out from under her eyes and she looked at her knees, dirty from the stone floor. “Walter, what day is it?” she sobbed. “How many more?”

“Not many more,” he assured her, one hand on her shoulder. “Try to calm down, Seras. You’re alright.” She shook her head.

“Where’s he at?” she whispered to herself, before a strange sort of anger bubbled in her stomach. She looked up at Walter, feeling hatred towards him, and Sir Integra, and every human that patrolled the halls and got in her way. “You’re starving him, aren’t you? You just want to get rid of him!” She stood, snarling furiously and pointing in his face. “You want to kill us both, don’t you? Because we’re vampires!”

“Miss Victoria, that is not true.” Walter stood his ground, and she saw the wires he carried around reflected in her peripheral. He was on the defensive. “You need to calm down.” He looked at her for a moment, his mind turning over a thought. “If I bring you a message from him, will you promise to behave?”

“Message?” she said suddenly, her ears perking at the word. Her eyes widened and she shook with excitement. “You’ll carry a message for me?” Walter nodded. “But isn’t that—won’t
you be in trouble?"

“I’m afraid Sir Integra is treating this punishment like a big science experiment—a what-might-happen sort of thing. I don’t condone that sort of thing, because I feel it’s hurting you both.”

“But you’ll carry a message for me?” Walter nodded again, his eyes pained. “Wait,” she ordered, scrambling off to her room. She threw things everywhere, finally finding a pen in her bedside table. She picked up one of her books and carefully ripped out the blank front page, sitting it on the table.

_Dear Master: how are you? I am fine. What day is it? Do you know? I can’t wait to be out of my room. They won’t let me sort files anymore._ She looked at it, wondering if she should scratch the last part out. Finally she shrugged and folded it up neatly creasing the corners. She leaned out the door, waving at Walter. He walked back down the hall and she gave him the note with a slightly-hysterical smile.

“Don’t read it!” she chirped. “Bring his answer back straight away!” Walter nodded and motioned to close the door. She obediently stepped inside of her room and heard the lock slide in place outside. She sniffed and sat at the table, running her hands through her hair.

Even if he didn’t bring back an answer, it wouldn’t matter. Walter must have forgotten he’d locked the door to begin with. She fingered the bobby pin in her hair with a secretive smile, her eyes wild and half-crazed. She’d just go out and… well; she’d make her way down the empty hall, keeping her ears pricked for the slightest noise.

Going by the labs would be a bit harder, though. The humans that worked down there left the doors open and….

Integra stared down at her desk, watching the dark surface as if she expected something to pop out of the wood. She was trying her best to ignore the man pacing in front of her; he was ranting and raving and sweating profusely as he walked lines and waved his arms about. However, a few sentences couldn’t be filtered and she clearly heard “off your rocker”, “a felon. Felon!”, and “how much?!”, repeated at least a dozen times. Finally Sir Penwood stuffed himself back into the chair across from hers, mopping his brow with an already-soaked handkerchief.

“Sir Integra,” he moaned in desperation. “Tell me again… the prison break?” His shoulders sagged. “And the bill…. You’re joking; please say you’re joking!”

“I told you already,” she repeated for the umpteenth time, her no-nonsense manner beginning to sound robotic to her own ears, “I only left the prison because I was being blown up! And the debt came with…” She paused, trying not to sound too overwhelmed, even though just saying it still made her heart do weird flip-flop motions. “With my marriage.” Sir Penwood’s eyes bugged and she swore that he stopped breathing for a full minute.

“M-m-marriage?!?” he finally squawked. Integra sighed and pulled off her glove, holding up her hand. The ring on her finger caught the noon sunshine and the silver surface sparkled. Sir Penwood gaped, drawing up in his chair as if the sight caused him physical pain.

“Don’t tell me you met the man in prison!” he wheezed, cheeks alternating between flushed and pale at an alarming rate. “Oh dear, oh dear; but how could you? Locked in a solitary cell…. Sir Irons will never….” The pudgy man shuddered and steel came into his eyes as he abruptly stood. “Sir Integra!” he bellowed, sweat dotting his forehead and rolling into his eyes, “This behavior is unacceptable! You broke your word, escaped your prison sentence, and what
Integra interrupted, standing as well. “I wouldn’t be so stupid as to marry a convict!” Technically she had...met him in prison, but she’d known of him before so it didn’t count, right? Right? “He’s a good sort of man, and I—well, that doesn’t matter because it’s frankly none of your business.” She felt her face grow flushed; it sounded more as if she were fighting her father off a boyfriend rather than a colleague off her husband!

“It’s my business when it’s my money bailing you out!” Sir Penwood replied heatedly. “What sort of man comes with debts like that?! Does he gamble? Is it the horse races?” Integra bit back a sarcastic reply, instead focusing on reining in her emotions.

“Collateral, mostly,” she finally admitted. “And he may have broken a few limbs here and there that weren’t his own. I don’t really know—I didn’t ask for every single detail because I trust him!” She was surprised at how easily the words flowed from her. She hadn’t thought much about it, but she did trust him. She remembered why she shouldn’t trust him, but somewhere along the line the reasons blurred and became nonexistent, or at least insubstantial.

“I trust that he’s a walking liability!” Sir Penwood retorted. “Who is he?!” Integra opened her mouth, but what had flowed easily crammed inside her throat. While she could defend him until Judgment Day, something in her hesitated and she found that she couldn’t tell her fellow Knight exactly who she’d married. She gaped like a fish for a moment, trying to squeeze the resisting syllables through her lips.

Integra swallowed, her mouth drier than a desert by this point, and tried again. “A-a—” she managed, her hands fisting at her sides. *Come on, out with it!* her inner fighter coached. *You’re not embarrassed of it, and you can’t hide forever.* Her mind protested, declaring herself to be the world’s biggest fool, and a hypocrite at that.

“A? A-African? Afghan?” Sir Penwood tried, his face slowly turning a ghastly shade of green. “That’s why you won’t say, isn’t it? He’s a sand dog—a terrorist! An extremist!” He shook his head in horror. “No. He’s a—he’s a Nazi sympathizer!”

“You’re being ridiculous, Sir Penwood. I wouldn’t marry an extremist.” But Sir Penwood was already wrapped in his own imagined terrors.

“You’ve led yourself unto a life of disgrace; you’ve soiled your good name somehow with this, I know it! And with you we’ll fall as well.” He paused, his expression stony. “What would your father say?” he spat in a disgusted tone. Sir Integra bristled, her eyes narrowing. He was dragging her father’s name into this?

“How dare you, Sir,” she hissed icily, her hands fisting at her sides. Sir Penwood looked frightened for a split second before his previous anger took hold once more. But she wasn’t to be cowed by the furious expression; she was tired of standing down and being polite!

“How dare you stand here, in my house, and then have the gall to ask me what my father would say. *My father* would praise me for saving the family line, as well as risking my neck to save this damned country!” she declared, one fist slamming on her desk and rattling the papers. “Even if it did mean breaking out of prison, do you think he’d have done anything less for Her Majesty?”

Sir Penwood sat there, mouth agape, with the only sound being the ticking of the clock on the bookshelf. He finally blinked and fumbled with his handkerchief, mopping the fresh layer of sweat on his brow. Sir Integra didn’t relax, but she had a feeling that she’d made a bit of progress. *I should have just shouted like that from the beginning, consequences and Irons be damned.*
“I-I see,” he said at length. “Well, erm—I apologize for my rudeness, Sir Integra, but—but I will not retract my statement until you prove otherwise. I wish to meet this financial black hole you married and access him myself.”

They stared at each other across the desk and finally Integra nodded.

“Alright,” she said calmly. “Stay for dinner. You’ll meet him then.”
“Did he write back!?” Seras practically tackled Walter as he unlocked the door. He looked at her strangely before biting his lip and looking behind him. He opened the door wider and a shaggy black dog walked in, looking expectantly at her. She gasped in delight and threw her arms around its shadowy, furry neck. It woofed and snuffled her hair before walking to lie under the table.

“He said you are entirely too predictable, Police Girl,” Walter quoted. “You send a letter and of all things, you ask him to respond to simple pleasantries. So he sent the dog, saying that “She never said it couldn’t interact with her”, he explained, his fingers coming up in air quotes.

“Thank you, Walter.” Seras crawled under the table and curled up around the dog, resting her head on its stomach. “Thank you.” He looked pityingly at the poor girl before shaking his head and sitting a metal bucket close to the dog’s head.

“Just don’t tell Sir Integra I went out of my way to help you like this,” he warned. “She’ll make it hard on you. And for heaven’s sake, drink some extra tonight. It might keep you from completely losing it.” He said it light-heartedly, but his mirth didn’t reach his face, which was drawn and solemn as he watched her movements. “Just call if you need anything, Miss Victoria. I’ll be down in the dining room, keeping an eye on Sir Integra and her guests.”

“Mhmm,” Seras answered, burying her nose in Baskerville’s fur without another word. The butler waited for a moment before retreating, locking the door behind him. After she was sure he’d gone down the hall, she lifted her head just enough for the dog to lick her nose. “Does he miss me?” she asked gently.

The dog barked, but as she still couldn’t speak fluent Dogese, she was forced to imagine that he was saying “Yes, he does. Naturally, because he can’t talk to you like he’s used to.”

“Well, that’s not my fault. He wanted me to be stupid and have no mind of my own and be a servant. But I won’t say that to him, because when we meet again I’ll be so happy I won’t care what all the fuss was. We’re not meant to be separated, I think.”

The dog tilted its head musingly and she imagined its voice, rough and gravely with a doggy growl in between the words. “Then Sir Integra was right, wasn’t she? You just needed a break from each other.”

“She went about it in an awful way, truly.” Seras argued, sitting up to properly face Baskerville. “She didn’t have to be so rude about it, although I think that if I don’t go insane from being cooped up like this, I’ll understand her viewpoint once everything’s normal.”

“Well, you did almost kill one of her soldiers. I’m sure she was just worried that our master is rubbing off on you more than he should.” Seras nodded sagely.

“He is! Well, I think he is. I never used to be this hot-headed before I came here. But he’s got a bad temper at times. After all, he has thrown me down stairs and off of ledges whenever he gets mad. It’s silly, because if I were a policewoman still, I’d be mad at myself for staying in an abusive relationship. But I’m not angry at all.” She drew her knees up to her chest.

“Well, your relationship isn’t normal, is it? Humans don’t have the same depth of feeling
that you feel, because they can’t bond. Well, they can to an extent. Otherwise the concept of soul mates wouldn’t exist.” Baskerville scratched his head with his back paw, panting. Seras considered the thought.

“I suppose. I wonder if Master knows more about that.”

“I’m sure he does. He knows about lots of things.” Baskerville flopped onto his back and started scratching the stones. Seras watched him with a smile.

“I think you’re right. He does know about a lot of things. And one day, I’ll know a lot about everything too. In fact, one day, I’ll make sure that I’m as strong as he is, and I’ll never be kicked around by him again.” She nodded to herself triumphantly. Baskerville stopped wriggling, resting with his belly up in the air.

“The problem is that he doesn’t have to work for your attention.” Seras stared at it, her eyes lighting up with comprehension.

“You’re exactly right. All this time, I’ve been throwing myself at him, but it hasn’t done any good.” She drew her face up in a stern grimace. “It’s time to play hardball. No more nice Police Girl. I’m going to… hit on guys! Other guys!” She slumped down. “No, he’d just kill them. Or scare them away. I’m going to have to think harder about this.”

“I see he’s the sort to be fashionably late,” Sir Penwood snipped quietly as he waited with Integra in the dining room. She said nothing, her entire being focused on keeping calm. Her stomach was bubbling for reasons other than hunger, and she prayed with everything she had that he hadn’t done something stupid, like forgetting that he was supposed to be here for supper. She’d made sure to leave a message on his office phone (thank goodness she’d remembered to get the number for it beforehand), but what if he never got it?

“He’ll be here,” she finally retorted quietly, resisting the urge to cross her fingers behind her back. Every passing minute made her more anxious, and if she kept it bottled up any more she was sure she’d begin to sweat, or some other god-awful, mortifying thing. He didn’t turn, but his eyes shifted towards her before looking back at the clock with a soft huff. She knew that Penwood, even with his many faults, was a stickler for punctuality. This was already a strike against Anderson, and he was only five minutes late! Eventually Sir Penwood humphed and laced his fingers behind his back.

“He’s not making a very good first impression,” he said, “even though my confidence in him was shaky to begin with. After all, when you meet a man in prison I’m sure that—”

“Give him some time!” she finally snapped. “For Christ’s sake, he’s got to commute from Italy; it’s going to take him a bit if he gets caught up in something!” Sir Penwood turned fully to look at her, his expression shocked.

“Italy?!” he repeated in astonishment. Integra took a deep breath, realizing that she’d said too much too soon. “Good Lord!” he gasped and she steeled herself, waiting for the final blow. Now, given her connections, there was no way he couldn’t guess that she had married a Vatican worker. Sir Penwood paled and his hand twitched towards the pocket his handkerchief was in. “You didn’t… erm…” he paused, apparently too embarrassed to even voice his thought. “You didn’t go and marry into the Family, did you?” he asked weakly.

She relaxed and shook her head, wondering if he’d meant for that to be his idea of a joke to ease the tension between them. Somehow, she thought that he had been partly serious. She knew
that the idea of her being married at all was a bit overwhelming to him. She even understood his concerns for her family’s wellbeing. She knew he meant well, and was only trying to keep her name out of the proverbial mud. But even so, she couldn’t help but feel angry; after all, in the end it was her life, wasn’t it?

But she also knew the minute that he realized who she’d married, Penwood would be utterly flabbergasted… and furious. After all, it was his job to keep the country’s secrets—well, a secret. And here she’d gone and invited a member of the Vatican, Hellsing and the Protestant Church’s on and off enemy, into her home. Not only that, but a member of Iscariot! Penwood would do the most obvious thing, and begin to worry about the thousands of secrets at Hellsing being leaked into Vatican hands.

"He’s not coming is he?" Penwood asked agitatedly, then stood and began to pace around the table. "You're married to an irresponsible, unpunctual mobster aren't you?! That would explain the debt from the collateral damage!" The plump man - unfortunately not the jolly fat kind - was throwing his hands about in the air and mopping his sweating face as he ranted.

“He’ll be here,” she answered with a confidence she didn’t feel. Her prayers were answered a moment later when a piece of paper fell out of the sky between them, catching slightly on her glasses during its downward spiral. She caught it in her hand and smiled, relaxing. Of course he wouldn’t forget. After all, he knew how important this meeting was to both their financial futures. “See? Here he is.”

“What?” Sir Penwood looked blankly at the paper, and then looked up as another fell, followed by more and more that seemed caught up in their own wind. He grabbed it and flipped it over, reading before giving her a look of pure bewilderment. “Psalms?” he sputtered. “Is this some sort of… joke? Where are all these Bible pages coming from?”

“They’re… side effects, if you will,” she answered amusedly. He scowled at her apparent lightheartedness. “I’m being utterly serious, Sir Penwood,” she added when she caught sight of the expression. She looked up over his shoulder and nodded to something behind him. “Welcome back,” she said politely. “Sir Penwood and I were just waiting on you to begin supper.”

Having felt someone standing directly behind him, Sir Penwood turned to find himself nose to cross. He backed away and looked up to see a very tall, very broad priest standing there, looking down at him curiously. It didn’t help that from his elbows to the tips of his fingers, his arms were covered in drying blood. They gazed at each other for a long moment, Sir Penwood’s mouth hanging open slightly, and then Anderson backed away with a cordial nod.

“I’ll just go and get washed up, then.” he said, sounding only a little awkward. He turned and strode away, leaving a few splattered drops of blood on the tiled floor. Integra didn’t seem to notice, instead gaging her fellow Knight’s reaction.

“A-ah-And…..” Sir Penwood mumbled, and she felt her face color.

“Precisely,” she replied matter-of-factly. “Surely he’s better than—oh, what did you call them?—sand dogs, or a member of the Family. After all, he’s a proper Christian man with battle experience and a good knowledge about who I am and what I do. So I didn’t have to explain much.” Sir Penwood’s mouth slowly closed and she watched him physically deflate, his shoulders slumping as he stared blankly at her.

“You are too much like your father sometimes, I’m afraid,” he answered finally, his voice flat. “How am I ever going to explain this to Sir Irons? Even better, to the other Knights?! You’ve just—” He paused, looking around the room for an escape of some sort and finding none. “Do you
have any idea what you’ve done… the weight of your actions on rest of us is nearly unfathomable!”

“You won’t have to explain it to Sir Irons. I’ll do that myself.” It was worse than she’d hoped. Sir Penwood wasn’t shouting at her. That meant he was so angry, he couldn’t even bring himself to scream. The elder Knight shook his head and grabbed his handkerchief, wiping his forehead discreetly before sticking it back into his pocket.

“No, you won’t. I wouldn’t let my own wife stand up to that man, and I’m more afraid of her than I am of him.” He sighed and looked towards the table, moving to sit in the closest chair. “You’ve married one of the most untrustworthy men in all of Europe, and now you stand there and expect me to be completely alright with it?” She sat in the chair next to him, at the head of the table. She looked at him and sighed, trying to put what she knew into words.

“He hasn’t asked about work. He hasn’t even looked at much of my things. In fact, most of the time he’s at the Vatican working on his own problems. There are days we hardly see each other. And he did take very good care of me, after I left the prison. Even though he didn’t want me there, he still looked out for me.” He stared at her, looking defeated.

“But he’s one of them. He could take you hostage and hurt you; he could deceive you and then steal everything of ours from the inside. I thought he was a liability before, but now it’s clear that he’s much more than that! He’s a danger!” His tone was insistent, pleading her to see his side of things.

“He’d never hurt me,” she said confidently, and he gave her a “come-now” glare. “I’m sure of that. He may be big and can rip doors off their hinges, but he’d never hurt me… on purpose,” she added as an afterthought.

“Ripping doors off hinges,” he repeated softly as the man in question walked back in, thankfully blood-free. He looked at them crowded at the table before walking around to sit on Integra’s other side, across from Sir Penwood. The elder Knight watched him fold himself into a chair and looked away quickly, trying not to stare.

“Erm, Alexander….” Integra started, looking between the two men, her cheeks still the barest pink. “This is Sir Shelby Penwood, one of my coworkers. He helped to take care of me after my father died; he provides some of my… more excessive military needs.” Sir Penwood looked at her, wincing at her forced smile. “Sir Penwood, this is Alexander Anderson. He works for the Vatican in Italy.”

“I know who he is,” Sir Penwood snapped. “He is a high level member of Iscariot, the Vatican’s personal army bent on ruining England in order to “return it to its Catholic roots”. For all you know, he’s been stealing Hellsing secrets and reporting them to his boss!”

There was a clang and both Knights looked up from their plates to see the priest glaring stonily at Sir Penwood. The knife he’d been holding had been bent in two, and the upper half had broken free and fallen to the plate.

“You see?!” Penwood sputtered, staring at the broken cutlery. “He’s a violent brute with no respect for other’s property! It’s no wonder he’s a financial black hole for collateral damage! What in the world were you thinking, agreeing to such a thing, Integra?” He gaped like a fish before deciding to finish with a resounding “I expected better of you!”

“Wha’ did you call me?!” Anderson roared at the same time Integra cut in as calmly as she could, “Sir Penwood, is this really the time for such discussion?” The portly man slammed his silverware
down on the table, looking more ferocious than Integra had ever seen him. Walter stood in one
corner of the dining room, his eyes on Integra, waiting for the signal to step in should things get a
little too heated. He stepped forward questioningly and she shook her head, clearly determined to
diffuse the situation herself.

“Of course it’s the bloody time, Sir Integra!” Penwood swore, red blotches high on his cheeks.
“Your father trusted me to take care of you! How could he possibly approve of his little girl
marring such a monster?! I won’t stand for it! I—”

“—have no say in the matter,” Integra cut in coldly. “It’s already done and over with. And
furthermore,” she said, placing her own fork down calmly lest she stab the table and cause a scene
all her own, “I am no longer a "little girl", as you put it, and I’d appreciate you respecting that. I
can make my own decisions, and—”

“You’re only 23,” Sir Penwood shouted exasperatedly. “You’re barely an adult! And Lord knows
how old the Vatican’s monster is!” he added. “Oh, yes,” he snarled when he caught sight of the
look being thrown his way from across the table. “I know all about you Regenerators, believe me.”

Shelby glared at the blonde behemoth, his rage adding to his bravado so that he did not flinch back
when meeting the green gaze full of cold anger. “You’re hardly out of the cradle, Integra. You still
need a guiding hand to help you not make choices like… like this!”

“That’s enough!” Integra shouted, slamming her hand down on the table, rattling the dishes. “I
have been running this Organization for over ten years, ever since I was thirteen years old; by
myself at that! My father, as you continue to bring him into it, my father prepared me from the
time I was born for this role, and—”

“Your father robbed you of a childhood!” Penwood finally screamed. “And I’ll never forgive him
for it!” Integra stopped mid-sentence, her words dying on her lips. Penwood breathed heavily, his
eyes frigid. “I tried to put a stop to it. “Let me have her, Arthur. I’ll raise her and Geoffrey like
brother and sister, and when the time comes I’ll train her to be a Hellsing.” But he was as proud
and vain as his father before him declaring that only he would train the new heir, and look what
became of you as a result! He raised you to be a wild, sporadic woman with no regard to honor,
family, or duty!”

Integra stared at him, expression torn between hurt and enraged, and like a wounded animal she
fell back into old habits; anger.

“How dare you….” Her words were whispered, shoulders tense as her eyes were shielded by the
light reflecting from her glasses. “My whole life has been about family, honor, and duty. How dare
you, Sir.” Her head jerked up and her cold gaze burned him to the core. “Do you think you could
have done half the job my father did preparing me to take the mantle of Hellsing? You know
nothing of what I do for this country!”

“I do know, and I’ve been doing it twice as long as you have.” His gaze was just as cold, not
showing any of the weakness he’d allowed to seep through when they were alone. He was equally
as determined to have the last say as she was, both of them ignoring the priest watching the battle
between them with growing interest.

“I may have been one of the first born into their position, but don’t you dare sit there and insinuate
that I don’t work with the same issues that you have to work with every day and night. And I might
have not done as well with preparing you for your job, but I’d have done a hell of a better job with
raising a child.”

Integra grit her teeth to bite back the flood of insults that came to the forefront of her mind the
moment he questioned her “uncouth upbringing”. After all, she blamed the entirety of it on Alucard being around during her “impressionable teenage years”, as Walter had put it once. She met Sir Penwood’s gaze evenly, voice filled with a forced calm.

“Be that as it may, the past is in the past, Sir Penwood. My decision is made, and whether you like it or not, Alexander Anderson is my husband and I am his wife.”

“And how does the hellspawn in the basement feel about that?” Sir Penwood spat maliciously, still high on his anger-fueled horse. That was the straw that broke the camel’s back, and the hot-headed young blonde slammed her fists so hard on the table that one of the cups tipped to its side and rolled, shattering on the tiled floor.

“That is none of your business!”

“The hell it isn’t!”

“It’s my life!” she screamed back. “I didn’t get to choose the path my life took, but I think I can be expected to at least choose my own husband!”

“Tha’s enough.” Both turned to look at Anderson, who was glaring firmly at them from his seat at the table. He wiped his mouth and placed his napkin neatly on his plate, the only empty one at the table. “Yer squabbling like children.” He stood, turning to address Penwood. “I mean no disrespect, but I’m not divorcing her, no matter what you say.” He then pushed his chair in tidily, stepped over the remains of his cup, and left the dining hall, leaving silence in his wake.

Integra stared after him, slack-jawed, for the barest moment before turning back to the man that would have been a second father to her had she allowed it.

“He’s right you know.” Sighing heavily and pushing her glasses up her nose, the blonde graced the portly Knight with a forced smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes. “It’s been lovely having you for dinner, Sir Penwood. Now if our business is concluded…?” Sir Penwood took an audible breath through his nose as he pasted a false mask of calm over his anger-flushed face, an expression that had clearly been practiced time and time again.

“For now, Sir Integra, for now. Expect a call from my office in the next week.” With that thinly veiled threat, he nodded good evening to her and turned to see himself out of the manner, Walter following on his heels with a single concerned glance over his shoulder. Integra sighed, shoulders falling as she let the emotion finally roll across her face, staring unhappily at the still-full plate of food. After a moment she groaned and pushed it away, throwing her chair back and quickly leaving it behind as she stomped out of the room.

“Seras, have you finished your….” Walter stopped mid-question, his jaw dropping.

“Don’t come in!” Seras shouted, holding up her hands. Walter stared around her room, looking in utter bafflement at the scene before his eyes. All of Seras’ things; table and chair, boxes, little knick-knacks, had been pushed against the far wall. The dusty floor had been covered in drawings, scribbles, and in one spot, a graph.

“Miss Victoria, what—what is this?!?” he gasped, unable to do more than stare at the maze of dusty drawings. Seras reared up on her knees and gave him an irritated look before waving an impatient hand at her work.

“Walter, I’m doing the math,” she said, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. “I need to find out how to make Master leave me alone, without making him leave me alone. Baskerville told
me—he’s very smart, actually.”

“Baskerville… told.” He looked at the dog, who was currently involved in biting his flanks to get rid of an itch. It looked up at the sound of its name, licking its chops before returning to its task. He looked back at the scribbles, now seeing them to be math equations that could only be seen in an asylum. He was certain she even had “glasses + hat ≤ x” written in a corner. The floor in front of was filled with a strange, backwards binomial theorem.

“Yes, Baskerville told,” she repeated impatiently. “I’m sorry, Walter, but I’m very busy. Please take your bucket and leave me.” She pointed to the dog, which dissipated and reappeared at the door with the pail handle in its mouth. Walter wordlessly took the bucket and shut the door, listening to her nonsensical mutterings follow him down the hall.

Her hands shook as she lit the cigar, breathing in deeply and sighing, watching the smoke spiral up into the night. She hadn’t come out onto the roof since she was a young girl. Her heart still clenched uncomfortably as she looked over at the clear patch of concrete where her father would set up the telescope, showing her planets and constellations in the clear night sky. She then remembered how in those last months, how she’d have to help him up the stairs, supporting his thin frame. After that, he’d became bedridden and deteriorated faster than she would have ever thought possible.

She didn’t even want to entertain the idea about being raised as a Penwood. How much would have been different. Would she have grown up loving the idea of fancy tea parties with petit fours like his wife did? Would she and that lumpy sod Geoffrey have studied science together, and would she have cried when he went off to study in Australia? She would have had a mother, and two fathers, and…

But the memories came flooding back; her father humming along to Handel as he worked, lifting her up on his shoulders to reach a high shelf in the library, teaching her chess, with Walter’s help. She had laughed, in those memories. And they’d been happy; just her and him and Walter, the way it was— the way it should have stayed.

“He would never have done as good a job. He never could have equaled my father,” she whispered to the air. She wouldn’t have been the same person, if things had played out differently. In fact, she wouldn’t have been strong enough to fight against her uncle; of that she was sure.

“Here you are.” She didn’t even look up as Anderson managed to crawl his way up onto the ledge. “I searched the house over for you,” he declared. “Finally, the butler said you might be up on the roof.” When she didn’t answer, he crisscrossed his legs and managed to twist himself into a smaller shape, fitting easily on the ledge next to her. She finished her cigar and put it out on the roof, twisting it until it was nothing but squashed ash and leftover tobacco.

“Tonight was a disaster,” she mumbled.

“Of course it was. Tha’s what happens, when people lose their tempers.” She frowned, looking down at the soldiers changing shifts below her dangling feet.

“He was wrong,” she declared vehemently. “He was wrong about so many things.” Anderson patted her shoulder, taking care not to be too rough and knock her off the ledge.

“I’m sure your father did the best he could, considering the circumstances—”

“No, I don’t mean my father,” she snapped. “Penwood’s right; he was a wild man with hardly any
morals; Walter taught me those. I meant he was wrong about you.”

“Oh really?” She turned to him, her frown becoming more pronounced as she searched his face for signs of teasing. To her surprise, he seemed as serious as she was.

“Yes!” she finally answered. “You’re not violent…” she started, before faltering when a single brow arched over his glasses. “Well, not unless you’re working,” she amended. “And “black hole” is a very strong term to describe someone. You’re not bad,” she growled. “I just don’t see why I’m the only one that believes it.”

“Sometimes people only see what they want,” he replied. “I do it, and you do it too. And my superiors and your superiors, and everyone in the entire universe. It’s the way we humans are.”

“You’d think that we’d be more open-minded about things,” she said after thinking on his words. “You really would.”

“At least wait until after Christmas.” The mustached man flipped the pages of his book, not even bothering to read more than half the words. He’d read it thousands of times before in his past years, and could quote it by heart. Not that he’d ever needed to; he was sure that he’d have a first-class seat in Hell, and no amount of Bible reading would ever change that.

He was sitting in the drawing room, if only for a change from the dreary office he’d remained in for the past hundred years or so. When you had servants to bring you everything you could possibly need, there wasn’t much reason to go out and about. He usually only left the office when he wanted to make sure that someone in the castle was left alive; no matter what his wife said, nothing could ever give him cause to say that those creatures she made were in any way “alive” anymore.

“And why should I?” she asked. Unlike him, she made it a habit to sit in the drawing room after her dinner. Sometimes she studied spells, other times she did more human things like needlework or playing on the instruments. He looked up at her, taking in her appearance. She was greatly changed these past few weeks, and it didn’t do her good at all. She was gaunt, pale with dark circles under her eyes, and her plump cheeks lacked the rosy sheen. They looked splotchy and pasty instead.

This new obsession of hers has driven her completely mad, he thought to himself as he stared into her eyes. They shone with a gleaming intensity that frightened him. For some reason, his mind jumped back through the centuries to her human eyes, so glittering and light-colored. She was beautiful back then, when he’d loved her. His eyes darted to the shape by her feet, stirring ever so slightly with a wet moan. Or perhaps she sold more than she had, in order to bring him back.

“You don’t want the Girls to be affected by the cold, do you? They would probably freeze in the snow. And Sirens can’t stand the chill anyway; they’d refuse to work.” He looked out the window at the mountain peaks, snow already dusting the points.

“I never thought of that…” she muttered, one hand reaching down to pet her reanimated fledgling. A chunk of scalp came off in her hand and she stared at it before tossing it aside with a displeased frown. “Please Ambrose, do your mistress a favor and stop decomposing where there are rugs. It leaves a nasty stain when you get up.”

“Darling, I don’t think that he can control where he rots and where he doesn’t,” he argued, putting the Bible aside. “Come here.” She looked at him strangely, but stood and gathered her skirts. The lump of flesh that was once a handsome boy slumped over onto the ground without her
leg holding him up. The gaping holes where its eyes had once been stared blankly at him and he turned away, watching his wife instead.

“What’s the matter? You’re acting out of sorts today, my love.” She knelt by his chair, one dainty hand on the arm, her nails barely touching his sleeve. He tugged her up and kissed her forehead, desperate to feel the depth of emotion that he used to, to remember what it was like to be passionately in love with someone. But no matter how hard his lips were pressed against her cool, fresh skin, he felt nothing. With a sigh he pulled back and she looked at him with the same adoration that she always did. He realized bleakly that even though she was off her rocker, she still loved him as much as she had when she was alive.

When they were both alive. She was unstable then, but she had tempered it with using all of her energy to chase after their children. And then they’d met the King, who had showed them the path to becoming Nosferatu. They’d made the journey together, and had, for the longest time, lived in happiness with each other. But as the years passed, his boredom led him to studying everything there was to know about warfare. But her tastes ran darker, and she became immersed in Necromancy and some of the evilest of arts. She’d begun making deals with dark forces in exchange for powers, and now he didn’t even recognize her. She was no longer the woman he’d been betrothed to.

“Wait until first thaw. Then you can go wherever you wish in the world and I will not stop you.” He petted her head, trying to muster a smile. She tittered and tilted her head with a sappy grin before rising and returning to her own seat, picking her fledgling off the floor. He heard an arm bone snap and she tsked before snapping it again and letting it hang loosely, if not straight. It reminded him of an old vampire he’d seen once, who had turned his own sister. She’d been physically challenged her whole life, although her mind was good, and he’d carried her on his back wherever they went.

He shook his head and stood to leave the room, walking up the stairs and back to his cold tower. He felt his shirt pocket, the King’s reply tucked neatly into it. “Stall her until spring.” He’d done his job, and even though he didn’t care an inkling for her anymore, it still felt as though his heart had been stabbed with the dullest knife, cutting slowly and sending him into a dark depression.

Chapter End Notes

Here, I had a little note that you can follow me on social media: Twitter is @Bethany_JJ, Tumblr is heyheyitsjuju.tumblr.com.
Shelby M. Penwood was a coward. Yes, there were times when he could stand up for himself, but he never forgot that fact. He was a coward from the tips of his graying hair down to the edges of his toenails. When things became a hurdle, he was one to ignore the problem completely and go about his business, dealing with it only when it became a true burden.

But tonight, he couldn’t put his new hurdle out of his mind. He tried working on paperwork, only to find himself staring off into space with his pen dangling from his fingertips. He got up and made his way to the mission control center, but everything was quiet and the men were bored. He eventually just gave up and made it home a good three hours before he usually did, although he didn’t know it. His head was in the clouds.

So when he opened the door to his bedroom, he was accosted with a bright light. Rubbing his eyes with one hand, he wondered what in the world could possibly be so bright. Was a helicopter hovering outside his window or something!? As it turned out, it was just the lamp on the dresser. He was used to coming in so late that his wife was already asleep and the room was always darkened.

Standing in the doorway awkwardly, he looked around the room and caught sight of the time on the nightstand’s digital clock, answering most of his mental inquires. He heard his wife in the adjoining bathroom, most likely dressing in her nightclothes and getting ready for bed. He moved forward and shut the door, hearing the noise in the bathroom cease.

“It’s me, Kitty,” he called, knowing she would be on her guard at the sound of someone in her bedroom so early. The sink turned back on and his wife finished as he pulled off his gloves and began to undress, his weariness rousing the arthritis in his shoulder. He winced as he tugged his coat off and hung it in the closet, rubbing the aching bone and sighing heavily. Getting old was beginning to be a bother.

She finally made an appearance, her long curls plaited neatly behind her back and her long nightgown dragging the floor. Her hazel eyes turned sharply to him and she looked him over before turning off the dresser lamp, throwing the room into sudden darkness. She fumbled and a click later the nightstand lamp turned on; a softer, easier light that made the bedroom seem cozy.

“You’re home early, aren’t you?” she asked conversationally, picking up a book from her bedside table. He continued to undress, his fingers working to undo the knot his tie seemed to be in. He finally made it down to his pants and undershirt and then answered as he made his way to the chest-of-drawers for his own pajamas.

“It’s a quiet night,” he replied vaguely and pulled out a clean pair of pajama pants and a shirt that matched. He went into the bathroom to brush his teeth and heard Kitty call out from the other room.

“I thought you were at the Hellsings for dinner. Did you give her my love?” Penwood choked on his toothbrush, imagining how the young heiress would have reacted if he’d turned around after their shouting match and told her that his wife sent her love. He finished and wiped the toothpaste from his mustache, giving himself a good look in the mirror. His eyes were even baggier than normal, and his color was awful. He was surprised the woman in the other room hadn’t said anything about it yet. She was always nagging him about his health.

No, he corrected himself as he put his dirty suit in the clothes bin for the servants. That’s...
not really true. She worries about me; she doesn’t mean to nag. He sighed and looked at the open door, where the edge of the bed was the only part he could view. He half-wondered if he was too nice to her in his mind.

Katherine Leesworth Penwood—Lord knows why he chose her as a wife—was well-known for being shrill and shrewish when the occasion arose. She’d even gone up against Irons quite a few times in her youth, blatantly calling him rude and obnoxious. But then again, she was a good balance against his cowardice and inner calm, with her daring personality and quick wit. Plus, he’d always loved her chestnut-colored curls; in fact, they were the first thing he’d ever noticed about her.

“I did not; we had a dreadful row and I saw myself out.” He walked back and got into “his” side of the bed, lying down and staring at the ceiling. She looked over and pursed her lips, her eyes blazing with curiosity.

“Whatever for? Surely she didn’t insult you in any way.” Penwood angled his face and looked up at her, his nose inches away from her fleshy arm. He noted mentally that he wasn’t the only one who had gained weight in the past fifty years; she was nearly twice her original size as well.

He thought about not telling her, but the idea sent a wave of fatigue through him as if reminding him that he only had enough energy for one fight that night. He blew his breath out and it fluttered his mustache, tickling his nose. He would have to swear her to secrecy, he supposed. At least she was good on her word.

“Katherine.” He used her full name to imply the seriousness of the situation, but the name sounded foreign to his lips. After all, the past fifty-odd years he’d been calling her by his little pet name for her. She arched a brow and closed her book, using her fingers to hold her place. “You mustn’t tell anyone. Not Marie Walsh, not Gregory, and certainly not Marjorie Irons. That woman couldn’t keep a secret if her life depended on it.”

“Yes, now—”

“Give me your word,” he prompted. She sighed and placed the book on the nightstand, turning fully to face him and raising her right hand.

“I give you my word,” she recited dully. “After all, I couldn’t say anything anyway. You made me promise not to tell that little Integra was out of prison already.” She shook her head. “Arthur raised that girl to be the wildest Englishwoman there ever was. The poor thing doesn’t even know any better.” She narrowed her eyes suddenly, glaring at him. “You are going to give her that money, aren’t you? Don’t you tell me you’re cutting her off, Shelby Penwood!” The edge to her voice rose slightly in warning.

“Of course I’m giving her the money!” he sputtered crossly. “I made a solemn vow to Arthur I’d take care of her, and help her out of any situation she managed to get herself into, to the best of my ability. He was too good of a friend for me to even dare think about going back on my word.” He rolled an arm over his eyes. “If only she wouldn’t make such horrible decisions,” he mumbled.

“What’s happened?” Kitty’s voice was now gentle and soothing; he recognized the tone as one she used often to get information out of him. He groaned and moved his arm slightly to look at her leaning over him.

“She’s married,” he said bluntly. She blinked at him for a moment until the words set in and she reeled back, visibly shocked.
“And she didn’t even invite us to the ceremony,” she whispered, awed at the gall of it. Penwood huffed; of course she’d only think about *womanly* things like ceremonies.

“For all I know, she might not have had a ceremony at all,” he grumbled, finally getting it all off his chest. That’s one of the best things about his Kitty; he would bet his entire fortune that Marjorie Irons wasn’t as good a listener. His wife had heard such hard, trying things about his work; sometimes, just talking about them eased his suffering slightly.

“I walk in and she’s already married herself to one of the most dangerous men in all of Europe—an Iscariot, one who could steal our secrets and take her hostage, or worse—kill her in her bed and no one would know the wiser, because the brute can *rip bloody doors off their hinges*!” He sat up in the bed, his arms beginning to flail in his frustration.

“And when I try to make her see it, clear as the nose on her face, she fights back! “Oh, he’s *good*,” he mimicked, his voice slightly higher pitched. “He wouldn’t hurt me, I know what’s best, I’m not going to listen to the man who’s been through two world wars and knows what he’s bloody well talking about!”

“Darling.” Her reprimand was gentle, but effective. “Your blood pressure.” He took a deep breath, focusing on his heart pounding away angrily in his chest.

“She’s barely an adult, but she’s been making decisions for herself for so long that she can’t see when she makes irresponsible ones!” He hissed through his teeth, wishing he’d had the courage to stand up to her father over twenty years ago. “Damn Arthur Hellsing’s pride. We should have insisted that she come live with us. This would never have happened.”

“He wanted to raise his daughter. He was showing everyone that he could settle down enough to care for another being—someone innocent, who he could help. And she needed to be with him, while she could be. He knew…” She trailed off, her voice breaking slightly. “That day, when we were all in the parlor and he told us. He knew then that he’d never see her get married, or have children. He wanted to have as much time with her as possible. I can’t blame him for that little bit of selfishness, Shelby.”

Penwood sighed, fighting the guilty anger eating at his heart. Everything she’d said was right, but at the same time, he had to think about what it meant for the country. They sat in silence, the lamp buzzing quietly as the old bulb slowly fizzled its way out of existence. Finally he felt a soft hand touch his arm, stroking softly.

“Do you remember that summer… 1943? I’d invite you over to our house,” she murmured, laying her head on his shoulder.

“To see your victory gardens. I remember. You had three, all in a row below your father’s study.” He placed his hand on hers and she took it, squeezing gently with a chuckle.

“Yes, to show you my gardens. And we’d sneak off behind the house, just you and me, all alone.” His cheeks flared with a rosy heat, his mind falling through the years to those summer days, hot and heavy in his tailored sleeves, her hand in his as they laughed and ran into the glen behind the gardener’s shed.

“Oh, I remember,” he growled quietly, looking down at her as nostalgia flooded his brain. He wasn’t sure how— because when he was overly positive that he’d once considered overweight and elderly as the opposite of what beauty was—yet she was still the most beautiful thing he had ever clapped eyes on. Her eyes sparkled with a mischievous glint.
“We were pretty irresponsible ourselves,” she stated. He considered the thought; compared to what he knew now, if his son were caught with a girl the way her father had caught them out together back then… yes, they were very irresponsible. “But then again, we were in love,” she sighed, speaking the words at the same time he thought them. “We had no idea what that meant,” she added as an afterthought.

“We still don’t, sometimes,” he countered, making her laugh again. “I don’t know if they’re in love or not. I’d think not.” She tugged him down, curling her arms around him as best she could considering their combined flab, and lay her head on his chest.

“You don’t know,” she argued. “Besides, they’re already married, aren’t they?”

“Yes, they are.”

“Then let them deal with it. Integra may be young, but she’s no fool. She wouldn’t marry someone who would threaten her and the country. She’s got too much pride for that.” Penwood scoffed and reached over to turn out the lamp on the nightstand.

“She’s got too much pride to admit that she’s wrong, too.”

“I know the problem,” Seras said to the dog. She was pushing off the edge of her coffin, the top of her skull resting against the floor and her legs balanced above her. One of the best things about being a vampire was that there wasn’t enough blood flow to her head that she got a headache, no matter how long she hung upside down.

“And that is?” the dog raised its head from the floor at the sound of her voice, cocking it slightly with its ears up and alert. Seras chewed the finger of her glove, putting her thoughts in order before answering.

“Master is old. I mean, really old.” The dog thumped its tail on the floor and she took it as a nod. “So new things confuse him. Like that time he tried to figure out the remote for the telly. Or when he wants to do something on his mobile and I have to show him how.” She flipped off the coffin, rolling on the floor to rest beside the dog on her stomach. A few of her dusty calculations were messed up as the dust picked up on her clothes, but she didn’t seem to notice.

“In other words, he wouldn’t know much about newfangled things and such, because although they’re not new, they’d be new to him, so he wouldn’t know.” She stopped, scratching her head with one nail. “Did I lose you?”

“Yes, but go on anyway,” the dog replied in its silent way, red eyes studying her without judging.

“So if I want to make a point, I have to make a point like old people would. I mean, really old people. Like, fifteenth century old.” Seras nodded, her mind made up. Of course she was half-sure it didn’t make a whole lot of sense, but who cared? She was certain she’d done fallen into the “looney” category by now.

“And how are you going to do that?” the dog laid back down, exhaling with a soft whoosh. “You didn’t live in the fifteenth century.” It closed its eyes condescendingly. “And women had rights back then as well. It wouldn’t matter if you pulled from then or from today.”

“Yes, it would,” Seras argued. “Because women have many more rights now than they did back in. The most I could get out of it back during those days would be divorcing Master, and since we’re not even married that’s sort of out of the question.”
“True,” the dog agreed, his tail still hitting the stone as she scratched behind its ears, thinking to herself. Baskerville had a point. If she tried to pretend to see things from his point of view—a fifteenth century point of view—she’d be no better off than she was now. She was out of ideas again… what could she do?!

“Ugh….” She buried her head in her arms. “Maybe I should just run away.”

“He’d bring you back.”

“I’ll declare myself independent.”

“He’ll laugh in your face.” Seras glared at the animal from under her arms.

“Do you have an answer for everything?”

“Yes.” The dog then proceeded to lick her face and she recoiled in disgust, wiping at the doggy drool.

“Get off!” she shrieked, pushing its shaggy head away from her cheeks. It wiggled around her arms, trying to get another swipe or two before she stood up, wiping the wet residue from her face. “I swear, you and your master and licking. It’s not fun for me, I hope you know!”

“But it’s fun for me,” the dog replied, its tail going at supersonic speed. Seras kicked at the creature before wandering into her bathroom to clean up. She stopped and stared at the thick crust of sludge and dust that had collected in the sink. She frowned and shrugged, looking around for a washcloth.

She found a bunch of filthy, matted ones in the floor, covered in dried blood.

“What?” she lifted one up, trying to remember how they’d all gotten so dirty. As she stared down at the washcloth, a memory surfaced in the back of her mind, wavering like she was watching on an old, snowy television. She had the washcloth in her bare hands, everything covered in blood and her little moans filling the bathroom as she mopped her face. “Oh, yes. I was crying.”

As she said the words aloud, her mind jolted with enough of a push to make her physically stumble. She yelped and grabbed hold of the shower curtain, bringing it down halfway before she stopped herself with her knees on the edge of the tub.

She hadn’t been crying about her master, she remembered with vivid clarity. She’d been crying because she’d hurt someone; someone who had been dear to her. But who could it be? She slammed her hand, fisted around the filthy washcloth, on the lip of the tub and breathed heavily, forcing her mind back to that snowy memory. It was hard, her present state of not-caring and half-insanity calling her back.

Then, the images came like a punch to the face. Throwing a man with all the strength she had. The youthful, shocked face that had disappeared as the body tumbled through the air. Her fright, horror, and guilt that had come just after doing it; the terror that arose in her chest at the thought of being executed like a criminal; it all flooded back into her mind.

She gasped, clutching her chest above her heart as it lurched painfully at the realization that she’d been so absorbed in her own woes that she’d completely forgotten about her man… her men, who hadn’t seen her in a week, who were probably deathly frightened of her now, who would never again look at her with trust or affection.

“Oh God,” she whimpered, sanity visible in her eyes for the first time in a week. “Oh… God.” She swayed, her body uncooperative for a moment before she ran pell-mell to the door. She banged both fists on it, as loud, rattling the metal hinges and cracking a few pieces of stone around the
“Walter! Walter!” she screamed at the top of her lungs while pounding at the door. She heard screams from down the hall, and knew that she’d startled the scientists at work. She was glad of it; she hoped that Alucard could hear it all the way in the lower basement. She hoped that they’d hear it on the first floor, that Sir Integra would hear it in her office, because she needed people to hear it. She needed Walter to hear it.

If she’d been in her right mind, she would have remembered that her room, like all the rooms at the manor, was equipped with an intra-home phone network that would have made it very simple to find and summon Walter. But as much as she was herself again now, her insanity was making a desperate fight to regain control of her mind. It was tearing her in half inside, making her head pound as the images clashed and warred for supremacy of her soul.

The dog cowered under the chair, watching with fearful eyes as the girl that had been chipper and complacent a moment now seemed to go batshit crazy. She stopped pounding and her hands went up to her temples, fisting handfuls of hair as she screamed in pain and confusion. She began to use her body to slam into the door, still calling out the butler’s name, making a terrible racket.

She heard the soldiers upstairs exclaiming, and hurried footsteps making their way down the upper basement stairs. She heard them stop in front of her door and keys jangled in a frantic way. “Miss Victoria!” Walter called from the other side of the door. “Stop! I’m coming, just hold on a minute—damn,” a clunk and muffled clinking sound accompanied the curse, and Seras realized that in his hurry to find the one to her room he’d dropped the keys. She backed away, still holding her pounding head as he burst into the room.

“Whatever is the matter, Miss Seras!” he said in a panicked voice, looking around at the room. “Wh—” he caught sight of the bloodied washcloth still held in her hand and breathed in through his teeth. “Have you been harmed? Where, let me see and—what’s happened,” he finally blurted, nearly as overwhelmed and frightened as she was.

“I…” she stopped, looking at the washcloth as if seeing it for the first time. “I’ve ran out of clean cloths,” she muttered before shaking her head again, groaning at the onslaught of agony at the gesture. “Walter, what about Roans? Is he—am I going to be exterminated?” she gasped through the pain. “Please, please tell me he’s alive!”

“Yes,” Walter said, taking her gently by the arm and leading her to the chair, which was overturned in the madness. He picked it up and sat her down carefully, tugging the washcloth from her loosened grip and carefully twisting apart her matted hair. “He’s alive. He’s at his parent’s home in the United States, recuperating from the damage.”

“Damage?” she whispered softly. Walter nodded and began thoroughly checking her for any sign of damage, not completely trusting her half-crazed mind to tell him the truth. Even in the blood was dried, while she was calm like this it was the perfect time to access her.

“Yes—we had to send him to a larger hospital, because he wouldn’t wake up from the coma and our doctor became very worried. They got him woken and bandaged and sent him to the USA to a hospital there for recovery. Last word I had was yesterday at noon, where he called me himself to say that he was at his parent’s house, and hoped to be back in England by the new year.”

“He must hate me.” A tear slipped down her cheek and she lay in the chair like a doll, letting Walter move her this way and that. Walter gazed at her for a long moment before replying.
“He asked if we’d gotten rid of you, and he seemed quite relieved over the phone when I told him you were well and still at Hellsing. So I don’t think he hates you.” Seras’ face crumpled and she turned and grabbed Walter’s shirt, burying her face in it. She began to sob, rocking him with her as she cried undecipherable sentences into his chest. He caught the words “selfish”, “insane”, and “headache” at least a dozen times, and decided in the end to just let her cry it out, wrapping his arms around her shoulders and patting gently.

“There, there,” he murmured. “It’s not as bad as all that.” They stayed that way for a long time, until the wrenching sobs gave way to quieter shakes and hyperventilating, which in turn became sniffles and hiccups. The phone started ringing, and he ignored it until it was clear that whoever was on the other line wasn’t going to give up. He let go of the Draculina and walked over to the bedside table for the phone, noting with happiness that although the door stood wide open, Seras was making no sudden moves to escape.

“Sub-basement, Agent Victoria’s room,” he answered as dignified as ever, showing no sign in his voice that he’d been shaken up. “Oh, yes, Sir Integra. She’s fine; no, no, I daresay she’s making a turnaround of sorts. She’s been asking up about her men, and—what? Oh, of course. If you wish. Alright then.” He hung up and turned back to Seras, putting on a cheerful mask.

“You gave Sir Integra quite the fright,” he admonished lightly. Seras looked down ruefully at the tabletop and he came back to put a hand on her shoulder. “She insists that you try to keep your outbursts to a minimum and reminds you that the phone is free of charge, if you ever need to get in touch with me.”

“I forgot about the phone,” she confessed, wiping her eyes and leaning into his touch. “I’m sorry for frightening you,” she apologized weakly. “I just… I’m afraid that I can’t hang onto my mind for much longer, but I know that my men need me. That’s the only thing keeping me rational at the moment.”

“That might be all that you need,” Walter replied. “There’s only one more day, and then you can leave your chambers come nightfall,” he reminded. She looked up at him pleadingly, her hand clasping his on top of her shoulder.

“Don’t leave me alone,” she whispered. “I don’t think I could handle it.” Walter frowned, his lips disappearing in a thin line as his brow knitted.

“Miss Victoria, I have duties that must be finished by tomorrow,” he faltered. “But perhaps Sir Integra can be worked upon for you to have a guard in your room for the next day.” He looked at her knowingly. “Provided that having one would mean a lack of screaming and banging on the doors,” he added pointedly. Seras stared back without answering, and his gaze searched her face before turning to the door.

“In any case, we’ll see what can be done.”

“A guard?” Walter gazed steadfastly at the heiress, who had finally managed to clear most of the pending paperwork off of her desk. Anderson was sitting in one of the chairs on the other side of the desk, his arms crossed as he lounged against the expensive leather. Both of them were staring at him as though he’d grown a second head, although he couldn’t possibly imagine why. It might have been that he’d shown up after such a commotion bearing a bloodstained shirt and gloves; surely he must look horrible. “And who do you propose for such a purpose?”

“Oh, anyone would do,” he replied with a small smile. “For overtime, I’m sure many of the men would be eager to perform the task.” Integra bit her lip, clearly considering the request heavily. Her
husband’s eyes flitted to her before returning to rest on Walter again.

“That blood hers?” he asked coolly, with a sort of distanced curiosity.

“Oh, yes,” Walter answered, looking down at his shirt. It was completely ruined, but if he worked hard enough he might be able to get enough of the blood out to use it as a “work” shirt, for painting and digging up the garden, as well as other dirty tasks he wouldn’t trust to wear his good clothing around. “She was sobbing profusely at one point, and managed to stain my shirt and my gloves.” Poor thing, he added silently to himself. He wasn’t one for pitying others, but he couldn’t help but feel sympathy for the poor young woman in the basement.

“If,” Integra began, tapping her fingers on her desk. “If I could ensure their safety, I’m sure it wouldn’t be an issue at all. And there’s the issue of her safety, as well. We’re both aware that a vampire in the daylight is vulnerable when asleep; I don’t want some weak-minded soldier trying to enact revenge on Agent Victoria.” She looked to the ceiling, lost in her own thoughts. “No, Alucard wouldn’t stand for that,” she muttered, scratching her cheek.

“I agree, ma’am.” Walter nodded. “As patient as he’s being this whole week, I’m sure he’s just waiting for someone to slip up and do something. Then he could get away scot-free, to a point. Or so he’d think,” he added with another smile. Anderson growled under his breath, wishing that the vampire would try to wreak havoc. Then he’d have an excuse to pin the worthless demon spawn to a wall and leave him there for the sun and starvation to eventually mummify him.

“What do you think, Walter? Should we ask the men?” she asked, rolling a pen between her fingers. “I don’t know them as well as you do,” she acknowledged. Walter thought for a moment.

“I think a few would be trustworthy enough to sit with her. If it pleases you, I’ll ask them, and if I have no takes I’ll try to think of something else.” Integra nodded and he bowed, turning to leave. He took three steps and turned back, something else coming to mind. “Also, Sir Integra, Cook would like to know what sort of cake you’d like on your birthday next week. I’m sure it’s just the formality of asking, since we both know what kind you’ll have.”

“Same as always, Walter,” she replied dismissively, and he bowed again before leaving for the night.

“I didn’t know your birthday was next week.” She looked up to see Anderson staring at her and shrugged, counting the days mentally.

“October 27th. That’s… Wednesday, I believe?” She checked the calendar. “No, Tuesday.” She frowned. “I’m not in the habit of doing anything special, but it makes Cook happy to bake me a cake, so I never complain.” She turned in her chair and pulled up another stack of papers. “Besides, it’s not every day I get all my favorite foods at one meal.”

“I see.”
“Miss Victoria, are you sure you’re going to be alright?” Walter stared at the pair of people at his feet. Of all the men in the manor, only the veterans from Seras’ own team wanted to be the ones to watch over her. They wheedled and argued to be the one to go to the basement to keep a close eye on their captain, but when it came down to fists Walter chose second-in-command Stevenson to accompany him.

Stevenson currently resembled a very overgrown purple caterpillar, as he was curled up inside a government-issued sleeping bag Walter had found for him in the soldiers’ supply closet. His face was the only thing poking out of the bag, which was zipped up to protect the human inside from prolonged basement chill. Seras was also camped out on the stone floor, but she was in her bare feet and her lilac-colored pajamas.

“I’ll be fine, Walter,” she replied in a soft tone, pulling a comb through her hair for the first time in days. The elderly retainer’s heart felt lighter as he watched Seras slowly pull herself back together. He was afraid the prolonged solitude would have an impact on the poor girl, but if she continued to improve, she might just get back to normal.

“Alright then... Captain, call me if you need assistance,” he said to Stevenson, who did his best to salute without having to unzip his cocoon. He backed out of the room and locked them in, listening at the door for a moment before walking up the stairs to his bedroom to get a few hours’ rest before another weary day.

He hoped the captain had things under control. Otherwise, there’d be trouble. He was sure of it.

Integra liked to think that in the grand scheme of things, she was a patient woman. After all, it took an incredible deal of mental fortitude to deal with Alucard on a daily basis; not to mention the pressures of running an Organization as well as having a hand in the affairs of an entire country. She might not have been able to keep her temper in check every time something went out of order, but she considered it a personal fault that she would have to be vigilant about.

So the day after her botched dinner with Sir Penwood, she was secretly overjoyed when her office phone rang and it was the knight’s line. She was glad that she didn’t have to wait a week for the money after all; it was a godsend, as she wasn’t sure her patience would have held out so long under pressure from the Vatican for their due funds.

In hindsight, she should have been more suspicious. It was Penwood’s home line, not his business line or even the military number. And the portly man wasn’t in a position that he forgave and forgot easily; he usually overlooked Integra’s temper, but after last night she’d been expecting him to avoid talking to her for a few weeks at the least. And even if he’d okayed the funding, it wouldn’t have went through the banking system overnight.

Nevertheless, she picked up the phone and said hello, ready to rattle off the necessary words of overly-polite gratitude and nearly sarcastic sentiments that she’d rehearsed before she’d went to bed the night before. But the voice on the line had not been the brisk, angry words of Penwood or even the polite, bored tones of one of his staff.
“Integra! Darling, I haven’t spoken to you in forever, it seems! How have you been? Now, don’t hang up; we have things that must be discussed without delay!” Integra froze, the practiced words catching in her throat. Her hand gripped the receiver tightly enough that she heard the plastic protest.

“L-Lady Katherine,” she managed to say in a tone that sounded pleasantly surprised, her voice not giving away the fact that an unnerving chill was working its way down her spine. In her years of acquaintance with the Penwood family, a call from Sir Penwood’s wife was nothing to be pleased about. For years in her youth, Lady Penwood’s notions that she had to have a hand in “molding her into a proper lady” had made phone conversations with the woman both gut-wrenching and nerve-wracking for the heiress.

“Love, we have to talk,” the gentlewoman repeated, and Integra saw her in her mind’s eye, sitting at the vanity in her boudoir and filing her nails as she held the telephone in the crook of her neck. “Now, it’s come to my attention that last night, you and my husband had a long, drawn-out row of sorts and—oh, honestly Integra; is that any way a lady should act? Hitting the table hard enough that you break your own fine china?”

Integra sagged slightly, waving Walter away as he opened the door with a stack of papers in his arms. She could tell that this was going to be a very long “conversation”, although it would be mostly one-sided and aimed at giving the young woman a thorough scolding as if she were a wayward child. She would have to give the woman her full attention; somehow, Lady Katherine had always had a sixth sense when it came to her. If she wasn’t listening, she’d be harassed twice as bad as what she already had coming.

It wasn’t that she hated the woman; no, she really had admired her as a teenager. Katherine Penwood didn’t take flak from anyone; she’d have stood up to the Queen herself had a situation called for it. Integra, as the young, impressionable girl that she was, had found herself with a deep level of respect for the tough gentlewoman. She’d also found it quite amusing that most of the Knights, including her own husband, were afraid of her.

But when the rough chiding and long-winded lecturing was aimed at her, suddenly it wasn’t charming anymore. She could take the snide comments from Sir Irons’ high-strung wife, or even the sideways glances of disapproval from the other upper-class women. But when she was being told off by Lady Penwood, the woman had a way of injecting a certain sense of disappointment in her words to the point that Integra almost felt guilty for behaving in such a way. Almost.

“He was out of line, Lady Katherine. He insulted—”

“She was out of line!” the woman cut her off. Integra balled her free hand into a fist, squeezing the life out of her own fingers to keep from throwing the nearest thing in reach. She couldn’t risk the woman on the other end of the line hearing a crash. She felt her ring pinch the skin of her finger and she scowled.

*I ought to slap the glasses off his face when he gets home*, she thought venomously. *It’s all his fault, coming into my house with all this bloody debt. I’d never have married him if I knew it would be this way.*

*Trouble in paradise, my master?* Alucard had been quiet in her mind for so long that Integra nearly yelped in surprise at his voice. She’d figured he’d been sulking at her orders for his punishment, but he sounded so quiet that an uncharacteristic vein of concern for the monster flowed through her. But then his cynical laughter filled her ears and she threw him back out of her mind furiously.
A week in solitude hadn’t changed him a bit. She should have known. She was so caught up in her frustration that she almost missed the next part of “her ladyship’s” words.

“Now, Integra—I know you thought that you were right,”

“I am right,” Integra corrected her briskly.

“But thinking you’re right doesn’t mean you are,” Lady Katherine continued in an icier tone; the nonverbal cue that she wasn’t taking any of Integra’s backtalk, not that she ever had before. “That is no way to speak to your elders,” she rebuked, although Integra wasn’t sure if she meant now, or at the dinner last night.

“He went too far,” she argued, trying not to sound shrill. “He not only insulted my husband, but he went so far as to insult my father as well as my own upbringing!”

“Anything said about your father was entirely true, I am sure.” The woman’s words cut like a knife. “Shelby was Arthur’s best friend—make no mistake about that, young lady—but just because they were closer than brothers doesn’t mean that Shelby was blind to his faults. Your father was an irresponsible rogue that caused far too much damage in his lifetime, especially concerning that blooming war.”

“That’s…” Integra paused, taking a breath to keep her temper under control. She’d about let off without thinking—that’s grand, coming from you—but she didn’t want to face the full force of the woman’s wrath. With their two inner flames going against each other, a quarrel like that would cause an irreparable rift between the two families. “That’s neither here nor there,” she finally chose, trying her best to sound calm and collected. “My father’s actions do not equate to mine, just because I am his daughter.”

“No one’s saying that,” the lady replied shortly. “But we all knew that when he said he’d raise you that you’d turn out to be a reckless, short-tempered filly. And you haven’t let us down, to be honest. I’ve tried everything I could think of to make you more… mild-mannered, but it didn’t work; it was too late.”

Integra sucked in a breath through her teeth, pushing the old pain down; ever since her father had died she'd been told that same thing by gentlemen and women alike. Well, she didn't need their friendship, only their cooperation.

"Mild mannered," she repeated in a deadpan tone. "A proper Lady who enjoys tea parties, you mean?" She couldn't hide the note of scorn in her voice. "I am the leader of an army, Lady Katharine. My interests must naturally lean more towards masculine—"

“Oh, not this again,” Lady Katherine groaned. “You gave me this exact same speech when you showed up to Gregory’s knighting in that suit, for God’s sake! People began to think that you shopped around the corner, Integra!”

“I’m married!” she snapped in exasperation. “It doesn’t matter anymore!” Lady Penwood sniffed.

"That’s another thing we need to discuss. Honestly—your own godparents weren’t invited to your wedding.” She sounded hurt. “Now darling—I understand that if you didn’t want Gregory to attend… not that he’d take time off from Australia, of course. He can’t even do that for me, and I spent 20 hours in labor with the ungrateful, narrow-minded—humph!” Integra rolled her eyes, happy that telephone conversations couldn’t pick up on body language.

“But if you asked Shelby, he was only upholding the familial duties. More like blundering around
the plains and shirking every duty he was ever taught.” Personally, Integra thought that a blubbering duff like Gregory Penwood couldn’t think enough for himself to purposefully skip out of work, but she didn’t dare voice her opinion to the man’s own mother.

“But this isn’t about him,” she cut in suddenly. “This is about you. Teggie, darling—”

“It’s In-te-gra,” she hissed, bristling at the hated nickname given to her by her fawning, self-imposed “mentor”.

“Oh, Integra then; we had a hand in raising you! The least you can do is let us come and watch you get married. I could have used it as an excuse to see the cathedral again, because I’m sure that you could have roped getting married in the—”

“We were married in Liverpool,” Integra said quickly, trying to find a way to change the subject.

“Liverpool! Oh, even better! I could have had a proper holiday; they have a wonderful set of spas there.” There was a pause, and then the woman’s voice became firm again. “Even so, what I want to know is… well, why didn’t you tell me?” She really did sound hurt this time, and Integra felt that familiar feeling of almost-guilty plucking at her brain.

“It was….” she faltered, struggling for the right words. “Very rushed,” she sighed at length, rubbing her forehead. Lady Penwood tsked, causing static on the line.

“Youth.” She sighed wistfully. “The only ones able to run off, get married, and actually get away with it.” She sounded almost jealous, or perhaps it was a longing for her own younger years. She cleared her throat. “You will, of course, have a bigger ceremony later?” It wasn’t really a question, more of a command, and they both knew it.

“I’m not planning on it,” Integra began, wondering how to get out of this situation. She knew, of course, that all the ladies who’d missed her whirlwind wedding would want to coerce her into having another, grander affair with all sorts of flowers and hors d’oeuvres. That was the last thing she wanted to be roped into.

“Oh, but you must!” Lady Katherine insisted. “I’ll handle it; you’ll have a beautiful gown, and of course we’ll cater, and I know the florist who must work it, nothing else about it….” the woman was already wrapped up in ideas of wedding bells.

"I'm a busy woman." Integra tried to keep her tone level. Snapping at her would only get her more excited.

"Nonsense!" Lady Katharine scoffed. "No woman is too busy for her own wedding!" Integra fought not to grind her teeth or to hiss audibly.

"I'm already marri-"

"You will, of course, leave your vampires behind." Lady Katharine continued as if she hadn't said a word. "This will be a glorious daytime affair. Oh! We must arrange for a spa day so that we can do something with your hair, Teggie dear."

“It’s Integra,” she corrected again, feeling her patience dwindle away under the continued plans of the older woman. “And I assure you, even if I did say yes, there’s no guarantee that my husband would show up. He’s not the type for “formal” affairs.” Of course, she wasn’t 100% sure about that, but it was better to have a small white lie rather than give the eager woman any ideas.

There was a moment of tense silence, and Integra was sure the other woman was wracking her
brain for a way to force Alexander into attending his own second-wedding. "Yes, well, men do
like to be that way," she said hesitantly. Then, before she could stop her, Integra heard the
calculating, sly shift in the gentlewoman’s voice. “On that note… there are a few things I want to
know. This man still hasn’t won my approval yet, darling.”

“I don’t need your—”

“Shh, shh! I just want to ask a few questions, love. Let’s not repeat last night—oh, yes, Shelby told
me all about it. Now, is it true about his strength, or was he just exaggerating?”

“His… strength?” Integra asked, unsure if the woman was speaking literally or not.

“You know!” she cried in answer, before her voice dropped to a whisper. “Doors and all that.”

“Oh!” Integra relaxed. Knowing Lady Katherine’s mind, she wasn’t exactly sure what she meant,
much less how she was supposed to answer. “He’s pretty strong. He could hold a candle to
Alucard, in terms of brute force.”

“So… lots of muscles, then?” Integra rolled her eyes again, somehow knowing where this had been
heading. For a woman married to a man with more rolls of fat than cash, Lady Katherine was
surprisingly good at picking out “strapping young men” to flirt with.

“I suppose?” she answered uncomfortably.

"Oh come now, Integra, don't hold secrets from your own godmother! Give us the details, love." Integra
pulled the phone back to stare at it for a long moment.

"Details?" she asked hesitantly, a feeling of foreboding growing in the back of her mind.

"Oh, it's not like you haven't seen the man with his shirt off, dear! Does he lift weights? I imagine
he must be a terror at the gyms." Lady Katharine tittered like a school girl. “Tell me, can you
bounce change off his—”

“Lady Katherine!” The woman giggled even harder.

“Come now! Of all things, I know Arthur didn’t raise you to be a prude. You can tell me—it’s just
between women.” Integra coughed, more than a little uncomfortable, and glanced at the door as if
wishing something would happen so that she could get away from this awkward conversation.

"Well... I ... you can meet him yourself, you know." She considered calling Walter to create a
distraction, but she hadn’t tried to call him while already on the phone, and she didn’t want Lady
Katherine to hear the mechanical beeping and get suspicious.

“Oh?” the woman sounded intrigued. “Is this an invitation? What a rarity,” she purred wryly.

"I suppose it is, yes." Integra conceded. "I can't guarantee when we'll both be available at the same
time, however," she continued, hoping to hold the engagement off as long as possible. The woman
hummed thoughtfully, and then Integra heard the audible snapping of fingers.

“Christmas gala!” she sang triumphantly. “Naturally, we’ll be there at Christmas, my Shelby and I.
I don’t know why I didn’t think of it before. It’s perfect.” She was quiet a moment. “But I’m not
giving up on that wedding, you know. Don’t think you can take my mind off it.”

“Surely you don’t want to sit still and listen to some priest droll on for hours,” Integra grumbled.
She knew she didn’t, no matter what Lady Katherine might want.
“Of course not; no one goes to weddings to hear the priest,” the woman protested. “I wanted to see you all dressed up and beautiful. You don’t wear those skirts anymore, and I can’t remember the last time I saw you in a proper dress, much less with makeup or anything on your face. And your hair; I know you keep it conditioned well, but darling—wearing it down like you do? It doesn’t become you.”

“If,” Integra said quietly, already beating herself up for even suggesting it. “If you say I don’t have to get married again for your benefit, I promise to dress up for the Christmas gala.” She heard a sharp gasp of disbelief from the woman on the other end of the line.

“You mean… a dress? Not one of those so-called “fancy” suits you use for special occasions?” she nearly squealed in her delight. Integra sighed.

“Yes,” she muttered.

“And you’ll do your hair? A nice and proper up-do?”

“Yes, Lady Katherine.”

“Kitty. And you’ll put something on those pale cheeks of yours?” Integra bit back a smart retort, her jaw working.

“N-urgh… we’ll see.”

Stevenson was still asleep when Walter came to collect Seras. At the thought of her punishment ending in mere hours, the antsy Draculina had woken early with a newfound sense of ease. No—ease wasn’t the word for it, because she was not at ease. She was frightened, but there was also calmness in her mind.

It was silly, really, because her vampiric instincts wanted nothing more than to reclaim the bond with her master and spend the rest of the evening with him underneath the moon and stars, reveling in nature and freedom. But her other instincts—the ones that were more ancient than her or even her master, the ones that weren’t mortal or immortal, but nothing but female intuition and principled knowledge—her other instincts were screaming that if she had any sense whatsoever, she’d stay away from the creature that had sired her.

She’d peeled off her disgusting, sweaty pajamas and showered properly for the first time in nearly a week. She made her hair nice and neat, dressed in a crisp uniform, and had spent the last hours sitting demurely in a chair, her hands in her lap and her mind miles away.

She knew, now that she was able to think more rationally, that this week-long isolation had changed her. She didn’t know exactly, although she already felt the benefits. She didn’t feel like running away anymore, although her mind was telling her to. She thought, and for once she could see the bigger picture at play behind her master’s behavior as well as her own. She felt… smarter, somehow.

But now, the moment of reckoning was upon her. She stood, standing by the table as Walter unlocked the door and flung it open, walking inside. She saw the apprehension on his face and knew that he’d been anxious coming down the basement stairs. She didn’t blame him in the slightest; after the way she’d been behaving all week, the poor butler hadn’t known what he was coming in to. For all he knew, she could have been painting the walls with Stevenson’s blood.

He looked approvingly at her before he saw the snoring captain and his smile faded as quickly as it had come. Seras laughed softly, not wanting to scare him. After all, she knew that
she’d have to work hard to convince him and Sir Integra that her mind had been enhanced by the isolation, not degraded into half-insanity.

“Let him sleep, Walter,” she said in a quiet, but cheerful tone. “After all, he’s used to sleeping during the day, and he stayed up to watch over me as long as he could.” Walter shook his head.

“We can’t mess up his sleeping patterns more than we already have. If we let him sleep through the night, it will take at least a week to get him back on track.” He nudged the captain with his boot, rolling him onto his side. Stevenson slept on, dead to the world. Walter sighed and Seras sidestepped him to make her way to the door.

“Wake him up, if that’s the best thing to do,” she agreed. “I’m going to see about Master.” Walter looked up sharply and she tried to look confident. “Don’t worry. I can take care of myself.” He straightened up, his eyes calculating as he looked her over once more.

“Miss Victoria,” he said quietly, giving her a very solemn expression. “Please don’t forget: you’re dealing with a monster. He’s never been anything but, and he’ll never be anything but.” Seras felt the smile slip off her face.

“He’s a monster,” she conceded, looking down at her boots before giving him a more self-assured grin. “But then again, so am I.” With that, she slipped out the door and he heard her boots clomp away down the hall towards the lower basement.

“You aren’t,” he protested to the open air, wondering what she meant. She’d never killed or hated like Alucard had. Did she mean the fact that they were both vampires? Or, he thought, looking back at the oblivious captain, did she mean that because she’d willingly hurt one of her own men, she’d put herself on the same level as him in terms of what lengths she’d go to?

Pulling his leg back, he firmly, yet carefully lodged the corner of his boot tight in between Stevenson’s ribs; enough to rouse him, but not to break a rib or hurt him in any way. The captain awoke with a yelp, rolling out of the way and into a fighting stance, still clad in the cushioned sleeping bag.

“Sleeping on the job, Captain?” he said tersely, his eyes narrowed at the drowsy man. Stevenson looked around the room before realizing what had happened and his cheeks took on a dark red hue.

“I suppose so, Sir.”

The minute they sat down to dinner and saw each other for the first time that day, they both had something to talk about and immediately began to overlap each other’s words. “Himalayas…” he groaned, while at the same time she shouted out “In a dress!” They looked at each other in confusion, and then at the steaming bowls of stew they’d been served.

“You first.”

“Nay, I’ll wait. You go ahead.” Integra shrugged and took a sip of her water before beginning.

“Well, today I was in my office and out of the blue I get a telephone call from Lady Katherine, of all people!” He blinked at her and she nearly rolled her eyes, forgetting that he knew next to nothing about English gentry and their inner-Table conflicts. “That’s Penwood’s wife.”
“Ah,” he nodded, and then listened to her while polishing off the stew and getting his bowl filled twice more by an over-delighted Cook, who patted him on the arm and murmured under her breath about healthy appetites as she ladled as much as the bowl could hold before lumbering off to her kitchens where Walter waited with silverware to shine.

“… and so now, in order to keep from being forced into a high-class travesty that she calls a wedding, I have to dress up for the Christmas gala and subject myself to questions and gossip from those low-brow cods that dare to speak up about what I wear; as if it were any of their business!” She forced her spoon into the stew with unnecessary strength, taking her first bite and following it with half her water.

Anderson tapped his spoon against the side of the bowl, thinking for a long moment before answering.

“Rather it’s just for one night and a gala, than a full day with a wedding, I suppose.” His nose wrinkled slightly. “I’m supposed to be there?” Integra looked taken aback, her spoon pausing before she could reach her mouth.

“You can’t not be there!” she cried. “You’re my husband! Everyone’ll be expecting you.” Anderson shook his head.

“You can’t _not_ be there!” she cried. “You’re my husband! Everyone’ll be expecting you.” Anderson shook his head.

“Not everyone knows that I’m here,” he argued, nodding to Cook as she offered a fourth bowlful. Integra stopped, glaring at him until he looked up questioningly.

“Lady Katherine knows you’re here,” she countered briskly. “That’s enough for me. If you don’t show up, she’s going to be on my case all night. She’ll walk to Italy and bring you up here if she has to. You can’t be married and one of you not show up; it’s not proper,” she said, making air quotes and she purred the last word the same way the elder Knight’s wife did.

“When is it?” he asked with a barely suppressed sigh, frowning at his stew as though it were personally offensive. Integra crossed her arms, pushing her half-empty bowl away and ignoring the disapproving look Cook sent her way.

“December 20th,” she answered. “Why? Do you have plans?” He nodded and shrugged at the same time, pushing his completely empty bowl away and finally drinking the water in one long gulp. He wiped his face with his napkin and crumpled it in his hands, staring at it.

“There’s a priory in the Himalayas,” he said slowly, “tha’s lost all contact with us. We sent a team there last month, and we’ve lost contact with them too.” He adjusted his glasses, pushing them up his nose. “They’re sending me now, with a few other veteran soldiers in a small team of four. It’s a long mission; I expect to be gone for a month, at least.”

“A month?!” she said incredulously. “A—when?”

“I’ll leave tomorrow morning, at dawn. We’ll fly out to India, and then make our way as best we can to the priory, checking at the usual points along the way to see if perhaps the loss of contact can be explained away. If I’m lucky, when we get there everything will be fine and we’ll call a technician or some’at.” He smiled grimly. “But that’ll be a true miracle.”

“What—do you have any thoughts about what it could be?” she asked. “Electrical failure or an avalanche, maybe?” He shook his head.

“There are measures around those sort o’ things. They should have gotten back with headquarters by now. This is becoming too suspicious to ignore.” He cleared his throat. “I’ll be
back, best case, in late November, after dealing with the problem, reestablishing contact, and making any necessary repairs to staff and buildings. Worst case scenario...” he shrugged. “I don’t come back at all. Beyond that, it may take until December. I’ve had it go for three or four months at a time, on some harder cases.”

“That’s… damn,” she growled, running a hand through her hair. “Is there any way you can get in touch with me, if it’s going to take longer than originally thought?” He shrugged.

“I dunno what’s it’s like up there,” he answered. “Last time, they had a telephone, but if electricity’s been cut, then we’ll be stranded.” She nodded gravely, knowing that there was no getting around it. His higher-ups had instructed him to go, and he had to go. Even if it was at the most inopportune time in the world.

“Well, we’ll figure something out,” she said. “Even if the Christmas gala has to turn into a New Year’s something-or-other. Don’t worry about it; you just focus on coming back alive,” she ordered. He nodded. They both stood, parting at the dining room door to go and finish their never-ending piles of work and business that had to be completed before bedtime.

She stepped into Alucard’s chambers, but only walked halfway across the room to his chair before stopping. At first glance, he didn’t seem to be in. But when she turned her head, his voice slinked through the air.

“Police Girl.” She turned her head back and he was in his chair, just like he always had been there. She knew better than to think that she’d just overlooked him. Her heart leaped at the sound of his voice, although it was just as much her as it was her vampire instincts. She was happy to hear him again; it was like two old friends who had met after years of separation, although it had been only a week.

“Master,” she said gently, listening to the sound of her own voice echoing in the empty room. It was gliding and gentle, so unlike his booming, yet silky tone. They were the difference between night and day, but when they came together they made a good team. It was strange, how it worked.

“Come here, little Seras,” he said enigmatically, giving nothing of his mood away. He crooked his finger at her, motioning for her to step closer. “Surely you’re ready to make amends, aren’t you?” She didn’t move forward immediately, instead watching him, taking him in. Then, just as emotionlessly, she stepped forward until she was just out of reach. If he wanted, he could have sent his shadows after her, but he left her alone for the moment.

“Well?” he asked, and she waited, wondering what he wanted. He probably expected her to throw herself at his feet, or on his body. Perhaps he even wanted to see her begging forgiveness for putting them both through it. Even though they were both at fault, the days that she would have argued with him about who was more to blame seemed to be gone. She didn’t feel the urge to set him straight; mostly because anything she would have done or said wouldn’t have an effect on him at all.

“I’m glad that you sent Baskerville,” she confessed, and at the sound of its name the dog walked by her legs and lay down underneath its master’s end table with a soft huff. She watched it before meeting his eyes again, her own expression set in an indifferent smile. He laced his fingers together and shifted in the chair until he was sitting straight, his chin resting behind his hands as he kept his eyes on her.

“Is that all you have to say to me?” he asked harshly, and she resisted the urge to flinch.
She stepped forward until she was at the side of the chair, her hand brushing the armrest as she looked down at him.

“What do you want me to say?” she asked, never raising her voice beyond the calm tone she’d been using, although she heard her own displeasure bubbling behind the words. “That I didn’t deserve this?” She glared at him. “That you didn’t deserve this?” She knelt by the chair, leaning her weight on one knee as she came eye to eye with him. “That I missed you? What? What emotion do you want me to show; what tone do you want me to use? What’s going to make you content enough to let this go?”

“You shouldn’t have to ask,” he growled fiercely. “This whole week should never have happened!”

“It shouldn’t have happened.” she agreed, keeping eye contact with him. “We both let this get too far. It shouldn’t be a power struggle every time one of us says something.”

“I’m so glad you came to that conclusion all on your own,” he sneered. “Whatever do you propose we do about it?”

“I don’t want to fight about it anymore.” She took a deep, steadying breath. “We shouldn’t have to quarrel like children to get along. We’re better than that.”

“Do you remember how all this started?” she asked him abruptly, sounding completely off subject. “Your damn hair,” he hissed, taking a deep sniff. “You’re using it again, anyhow.” She shook her head.

“But that’s not the problem. Before that.” This seemed to take him by surprise, and he actually stopped to think for a moment.

“I killed the boy-childe,” he said tentatively. She shook her head again.

“Before even that.” Now he really seemed stumped, and he stared down at his boots, the gears turning quickly in his mind.

“I hypnotized you.” A shake of her head, blonde locks going everywhere. “I was angry you left for town….”

“Too far back,” she said exasperatedly, raising her voice for the first time. He paused musingly, one hand stroking his chin, anger forgotten for the moment.

“Because that whelp attacked you?” he finally said in disbelief. She nodded and he narrowed his eyes at her. “You speak nonsense, Police Girl.” She scoffed, resting more comfortably on her knees at his side, taking his nearest hand in both of hers and looking at it as she gathered her thoughts.

“If I hadn’t been attacked, we wouldn’t have known about my shampoo attracting everything in Creation. And we wouldn’t have argued about keeping from showering, which would mean I’d never have dunked myself in the fountain, and we’d never have had that power struggle, and…” she rubbed her thumb over the symbol etched on the gloves. “And I’d never have thrown one of my men. Ever. This all stems from that woman and her obsession with me.”

She stood up, her eyes lifting to the moonlight streaming in from the windows. “They’re coming after me, aren’t they?” It wasn’t a question, really; it was more of an unspoken when.
“In the spring, when the mountains thaw and the Sirens are able to travel longer distances, they will come.” He looked at his arm, suspended in the air with her hands still clutching his. At his answer, her nails bit into his flesh through the gloves, and he saw for the first time the unbridled fear in her eyes.

“What about my men? What about Sir Integra and Walter and…” she faltered, her eyes still glued to the windows. He waited for the eventual continuation—what about me?—but it never came. Instead, two crimson tears trailed down her cheeks and dripped to the floor.

“What am I going to do?” she whispered at last, voice cracking.

“You will fight,” he answered, as if it were the simplest thing in the world. “None of our kind will come to her aid. She’ll be alone, save her flawed creations; and they’re born of sin and depravity.” She looked down at him, her eyes swimming with tears, unsure.

“They won’t be able to breach the holy barriers that Judas Priest will undoubtedly raise around the manor. And if they do, they won’t last long before falling apart. It’s a weak offense, at most.” He offered the information, looking surprised that she hadn’t already thought about it. She shook her head, crestfallen.

“But… Anderson won’t…he doesn’t like….” She couldn’t go on. Alucard raised one finger and pointed at the ceiling, his eyes burning a hole in her face.

“He might not like us, but he won’t let them get to our master, Police Girl. He respects her far too much to let her die at the hands of godforsaken, demon-infested souls.” He grinned darkly. “As for Erzsébet Báthory, I said that none of our kind will help her. I didn’t say anything about them not helping you.”

“But I don’t know any vampires—”

“I do. And although most will remain neutral, a few in the neighborhood will perhaps show up to lend a hand, if they see that we need one. However, I highly doubt it will come to that. Erzsébet, while tenacious, won’t stand up long against me. I plan on hand-delivering her to the demons she’s made contracts with; no one threatens what’s mine and leaves my presence alive.” His shadows leaped in time with the sadism and promise of bloodshed in his voice.

She knelt down all at once, her knee balanced on the edge of the chair as she loomed over him. He looked up and she kissed him tenderly, her lips barely touching his as she broadcasted all the fear, devotion, agitation, passion, and stress she felt to him. He pressed forward to deepen the kiss and she pulled away, her fingers trailing over his cheekbones as she rested her forehead against his briefly. She pulled back and looked at his impassive expression, his eyes unreadable as he watched her.

“I don’t want to fight with you,” she whispered, “only to die come spring, and leave you alone with harsh words as memories.”

“You will not die,” he promised quietly, with a solid conviction that she wished she felt. She pulled back fully, hands at her sides.

“I’m going outside. It’s been a week since I’ve seen the moon, and I can tell that it’s clear tonight.” She glanced at the windows again briefly before turning away.

“Don’t think this means you won’t be punished for such blatant insubordination,” he called after her, his voice rough. “Attack or no attack, I won’t stand for my subjects to be such upstarts, even if
you are mine. Especially since you are mine.” She looked at him over her shoulder.

“If that’s what you think you need,” she replied cryptically, speaking more between the bond flourishing between their minds rather than aloud. “Although if you look at it in a certain light, you should be punishing me for blatant subordination, because my obedience was the straw that broke the camel’s back for Sir Integra.”

With that, she left the room and he listened until the sound of her feet hit the tile of the foyer and then was gone, lost to the world beyond the front doors. He sat back in his chair, staring at a point on the wall without really seeing it. Soft snoring from the shadowy familiar beneath the table was the only sound in the room.

He looked to the ceiling, considering her words. He’d never disciplined someone for being obedient to him before. It was the most ironic thing he’d ever heard. How fitting that it had come from the mouth of the most befuddling creature on this Earth; the only woman he’d never been able to completely figure out, even though he knew her better than any other mortal on the face of the planet.

Chapter End Notes

“You don’t… shop around the corner?”
That’s my favorite line from Shakespeare Retold’s “Taming of the Shrew”. Best way to ask someone about their gender preferences, in my opinion.
Chapter Notes

What? Me? Updating more of this story? Actually getting it closer to being caught up?

I don't know! What a crazy time this is!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The chilled air of winter was already on top of the mountain, and the snow that stayed permanently on its peak continued to renew itself as the cold winds brought moisture to it. It was much warmer at the base of the mountain, where the first "checkpoint" was, as the people who trekked up and down the mountainside called it. However, even here the wooden building was surrounded by temperatures barely above freezing.

It wasn't any sort of checkpoint, really. It was just a safe house of sorts that offered a hot meal and a warm bed to travelers passing through the region. It was run by the Catholic Church, which wasn't a very powerful influence in this part of the country. Still, everyone in the nearby village knew the three frocked individuals who called the humble building their home, and they were well liked.

However, there was always the hint of violence for the devout worshippers of that "minority" religion, and so when it was known that four strangers had entered the village with the intent of reaching the way station, word was quickly sent to them that they should be on their guard.

But there was no need to worry. When a knock came at the door, the lone female who lived at the station hurried to see who it was. They were able to take care of themselves, and she'd never turn down a stranger in need of food and fire.

Peeking out a curtain that hung across the window on the door, she saw four hooded figures standing there. One was much taller than the rest, and broader at that. The two smallest, clearly females, were using the tallest as a shield against the wind, huddled close to him while the other one, a male, stood at a respectable distance while still gaining a barrier against the chill. Four pairs of eyes blinked blearily back at her, and she opened the door just a crack.

The smaller male stepped forward, pulling his hood back enough so that she could see his face. He was a white man, his brown hair falling into his face and streaked with gray. He had a mustache and a beard, good protection against this sort of weather. His blue eyes sparkled in the light coming from the house.

"Hello!" he called out over the wind. "My name is Oliver and this is my team. We were sent by the Vatican to respond to a disappearance of a priest and an entire priory?" He made it sound like a question, as if he couldn't believe that a whole group of people would just vanish without a word.

"Oh!" The native woman opened the door, ushering them inside and fixing her veil as it was knocked askew by the harsh gusts. "Please, come inside! We've been expecting you," she said cheerfully. Turning around, she called to the inner chambers of the building. "What do you know, Brother? God's been good to us; the Church has sent reinforcements!"
The four stepped inside and silently followed the nun as she ushered them into a large central room. A fire was crackling merrily in the heart and the two women hurried towards it. One, a young woman with short blonde hair and glasses, threw off her hood and knelt before the fire. The other didn't remove her hood, but her bright red curls spilled out around her face and she held her hands towards the flames, removing her fur gloves.

The tall, broad stranger pulled his hood down as well. He was also blonde, with a large scar on his face. He said nothing, but looked around quietly as his counterpart dealt with the woman.

"You'll stay here overnight and speak to Brother Robertson, I hope. It's much too cold to stay out in that weather, even though you're warmly dressed." The man named Oliver nodded and she produced a large notebook off of a desk. "Well, in that case let's get you signed in and then we'll get some supper in you. Now," she continued, licking her fingers and flicking through the pages until she found where she'd ended last. "Please tell me your full name for my records. You can go first, Mr. Oliver."

"Oliver Jansen," he replied quickly, pulling off his outerwear and revealing a very skinny, pallid form beneath. He ran a hand through his graying hair and nearly jumped out of his skin when he was addressed by a strange voice.

"Give your garments to me and I'll put them away in a safe place," it said, and an elderly man in a black habit and brown scapular stepped out of the shadows and offered a hand. Meanwhile, the nun had moved near the fire to accost the women.

"Heinkel Wolfe," the blonde said without looking up.

"Oh, spell that out for me, dear," the nun chirped. The younger woman shot her an impatient look, but obediently spelled her name out loud. "And you?"

"My name is Siobhan," the other woman said quietly. "I have no last name; if I did, it's long gone now." Before being asked, she also spelled out her name for the nun before turning back to the fire and stepping closer to speak quietly to her companion. The nun turned to the larger man last, an expectant smile on her face.

"Father Alexander Anderson," he said softly, before looking down at her. "What happened to Father Fischer?" The nun sighed and shook her head.

"He went to be with the Lord about three years ago. He was still young, I suppose, being only 60. But his heart gave out one day and he was bedridden for a week before passing on." Father Anderson nodded grimly. "Did you know him, Father?" she asked politely.

"Aye, I—my mentor was very close with him, long ago. The last time I was out here I was helping him build this place, as well as the other two way stations further up the mountain." Her eyes widened in surprise.

"But he built these stations over fifty years ago!" she exclaimed. "You can't be that old yet, Father! Why, you hardly look forty at that!" He smiled at her, but didn't explain any further. She opened her mouth to ask again, but Brother Robertson had returned and placed a hand on her shoulder, shaking his head.

"Go and see about supper, Sister. I'm sure that these people are weary, and they are ready to rest. They still have a long journey ahead of them." The nun nodded, although she still looked a little wary. She bustled off down the hallway, notebook in hand, and the others began to remove their coats and gloves and scarves. "Father Anderson," the man finally said. "It's nice to see you again. I
was wondering if you'd ever have a reason to come this way. I only wish you could have seen the Father one last time. He always spoke well of you."

"He was a good man," Anderson replied as he handed his coat to the man, along with everyone else's clothes. Brother Robertson left to put them away and Siobhan approached the paladin, pulling a cloth over her long, vibrant hair.

"What do you think?" she asked in her soft voice, looking over her shoulder. "They seem to be fine. Perhaps it's another station, farther up, that's been compromised?" She admired Anderson, and as one of the few who hadn't been raised by him and instead had come to Iscariot through an outside force, she had made her impression of him by his actions and had come to trust him better than some of the others at the Vatican.

"Perhaps," he conceded, but his eyes were dark. "However, I doubt it's the case. Ye think as ye please, but something's happened in that priory and I aim to find out what. I think the further we go, the more information we'll find on it." Oliver nodded, stepping closer to speak in a low voice.

"I don't think that these people are untrustworthy," he admitted. "But at the same time, we should be on the lookout for any sign of deceit. They need to tell us everything that they know, so we can be as prepared as possible for what we may face."

"So... you think it's really something terrible in that priory?" Heinkel said, speaking up for the first time since they'd started off. Compared to seasoned veterans like Oliver and Siobhan, who had been on countless daring missions that had nearly cost them their lives, she was not much more than an amateur.

After all, she was the youngest of them all and most of her missions had been against human foes, not supernatural enemies. And she didn't hold a candle to Father Anderson, so she'd been uncharacteristically silent, soaking up the knowledge and experience from her betters. After all, it was an honor to be put on such a mission, and if she ever wanted to survive long enough to be a veteran herself, she knew that she had to learn from the best and make every moment of this mission count.

"I'm not sure what to think," Anderson muttered as the two residents came back in and ushered them off to the kitchen where stew and bread awaited them.

"This is her?" Integra looked up sharply, startled by the presence of someone in her office when no one had knocked. The only ones allowed to just waltz in without making their presence known were Alucard, Alexander, and on some rare occasions Walter. But before she could scold the butler for allowing anyone to get into her sanctuary, her jaw dropped as she saw the man standing in the doorway.

The man was taller than her by only a hair's width, and spindly at that. He wore very tight blue jeans with a plain black belt, a white tee-shirt, black blazer, and an olive scarf tied in an elaborate knot. He had a thin mustache and his hair was slicked over in a very neat, stylish look. He scrutinized her, one hand held at his side, arm bent at the elbow and palm up, while the other one held a black binder filled to the brim with papers and drawings. Walter appeared behind him, panting at the effort of trying to keep up.

"Sir Integra," he wheezed, catching his breath. "Lady Katherine has sent... her personal tailor... to design your gala... outfit." Integra looked from him to the metrosexual-styled man and back again, her mouth working wordlessly.
She wasn't sure whether to be furious, shocked, or frightened. Perhaps all three. She should have known that Lady Katherine wouldn't have let her choose her own tailor for "such an important occasion". And she had to give the woman credit—if she'd called and said that her tailor was coming, Integra would have made sure that she wouldn't have been anywhere near the manor today.

The man stepped closer and slowly circled her, reaching out to grab a strand of hair or pluck at her sleeves before she or Walter could react, voicing his opinions aloud.

"Hmm, skinny, but there's potential in your hips..." he murmured, gazing on her with a professional eye. "The hair's a bit limp, but if I can get Gary in here he can take care of that. Good skin, bad posture, and your arms are sticks." He stopped in front of her, his lips in a pout as he stared straight into her eyes before pinching her cheek fondly.

"Mrs. Kitty was right; you're beautiful, but you hide it too much. Well don't worry Honey, because I am going to make you shine." He patted her cheek and she raised her hand to slap him away before he turned and clapped his hands at Walter. "I've made my decision," he announced grandly. "I'll do it. Call in my assistant and tell her to bring my bags!" he sang before turning to Integra, growling things to himself under his breath.

"Take measurements, oh—a Grecian style dress or perhaps something from the late 1800s with a modern twist, and..." he paused, eyeing her strangely. "She said I had a man's tailoring to do as well."

"He's on business in India," Integra managed to choke out, grabbing onto the edge of her desk for support. She was going to murder Katherine Penwood. "He won't be back until November, maybe early December." The tailor swooned and caught himself, long, skinny fingers resting against his temple.

"December? Oh hell!" he squeaked. "Well, I'll consider it a personal challenge," he said weakly, before turning as a young woman entered carrying two large duffel bags and a spiral notebook. "Valerie, prepare yourself, darling. We're going to make this..." he looked back at Integra with a lost expression. "...This... into a swan!"

The woman, a small, well-built thing with dark brown hair cut to frame her chin and cat's-eye glasses, grinned. Her plum lipstick made her teeth shine brightly and she dropped the bags and the notebook, handing a roll of measuring tape to the tailor with a reverent gesture. He snapped the tape, flicking his scarf over one shoulder as they both advanced upon the heiress, who had somehow managed to stay still when all she wanted to do was back as far against the wall as she could.

"Leave us!" he demanded to Walter, who sent his charge a helpless, "I'm sorry" look and closed the door, praying that Integra could keep her temper long enough for something as simple as a fitting.

Thankfully, by the time afternoon came, Walter was allowed to come back inside. He was ushered in by the assistant, who was both unhurt and not crying: two good signs when someone left Sir Integra's office. He was also pleased to see that the tailor seemed flustered and impatient, but alright as well.

Integra was arguing with him over the notebook, outright refusing some of the pictures he'd drawn on there and wanting others altered around. Finally she growled and threw up her hands, walking over to her desk and pulling out her cigar case.

"Look," she hissed around the cigar as she lit it and took a deep breath, "I just want a dress that
reaches to the floor, doesn't show a lot, isn't ridiculously poufy, lacy, or covered in spangles, ribbons or any of that nonsense. That's it, really; I want a no-nonsense dress." She smoked in silence as the tailor threatened to break his pencil in his iron grip, fists straining.

Finally he turned to a white sheet of paper and began to sketch, mumbling under his breath. Valerie looked over his shoulder and whispered suggestions in his ear as he drew. Then he gasped, looked at Integra once more, and erased half of what he drew before sketching up a storm. Then he wiped the eraser residue off, blew on the paper, and presented it with a flourish for her to see. Integra and Walter both stared at the page.

"That's it. Perfect," Integra said with a rare smile, flicking ashes off the end of her cigar.

"It's lovely," Walter said appreciatively. Valerie beamed.

"The top part was my idea," she said happily.

"Of course it's lovely," the tailor scoffed. "I said I was making her a swan, wasn't I?" He eyed her. "However, with her complexion I think a sapphire color will be much better than white." He nodded to himself and sighed. "But I do wish you'd let me do something a bit more... flamboyant." Integra thought for a moment before eyeing Walter mischievously.

"Well, I do have another female in my army that needs a dress, and I'm sure she wouldn't mind being covered in lace...." The tailor's eyes lit up.

"Do tell," he purred, leaning forward.

"Green."

"Red."

"Green, my good sir!"

"Red. Walter, remove this human." Alucard loomed over the tailor, who looked positively terrified but held his ground.

"I assure you, this young lady would look much better in an olive color, like this," he said as he brandished his scarf. "Or even a lovely emerald, or a forest green."

"No." Alucard was anything if not persistent. The tailor puffed up, and Walter stepped in decidedly.

"Maybe not a crimson color, per say," he offered. "A..." he paused, thinking hard. "Another kind of red," he said finally. He wasn't one for colors; red was red, green was green, in the butler's opinion. But he knew Alucard wouldn't wear green, only red or black. And he was certain Integra wouldn't allow Seras' dress to be black. It wasn't a funeral.

"I don't mind burgundy. What about burgundy, Mr. Lewis?" Seras was much easier to please than Integra, and hadn't thought twice about it before picking one of the wilder dresses that the tailor had shown her. The tailor sighed, rubbing a migraine starting in his head.

"I suppose burgundy could work..." he agreed, before turning and scowling at Alucard. "But her accessories, and the trimmings, will be green." The vampire grinned viciously, which made Valerie back up and use Seras as a shield of sorts.
"That will be fine, just fine," Walter cut in, practically pushing the tailor and girl out the door as fast as he could. "You can just send us the bills later, and next time please call before you show up." They disappeared up the stairs and out the foyer, leaving Seras and Alucard alone in her bedroom.

"I didn't mind it being green," she said quietly, finishing buttoning up her uniform over her undershirt. "You didn't have to have a green suit, just the tie or something." Alucard huffed, crossing his arms as he watched her fix her outfit.

"I don't care for green," he retorted. She gave him "a look", but didn't say anything else. Now that their punishment was over, she had become a much quieter, reflective person. And although she and Alucard still stayed by each other more than they did anyone else, something had changed. It wasn't about silly things anymore. It was a much more subtle struggle brewing beneath the surface, and even if it was for dominance it was still subdued where even they didn't think about it often.

Alucard hadn't changed much at all, which led Seras to believe that he'd only been humoring her. While that thought was a blow to her pride, and certainly to her mental stamina, she couldn't help but feel as though maybe he took her just a little more seriously now. Perhaps it was just a foolish hope of hers, but he'd been more… indulgent of her lately. Then again, she'd grown up some, and her new preferences weren't exactly the same as the way she'd been before.

Oh, she was still silly with her men, and played paintball on the fields and joked around with Walter, and laughed and sang songs in the shower like she always had. She hadn't been changed completely—underneath it all she was still Seras Victoria, the young woman—but she'd also found that her priorities weren't exactly the same as the way she'd been before.

She began to understand Sir Integra a lot better than she had before. While she wasn't as serious as her boss was, she now had a certain sense of comprehension about why Sir Integra acted the way she did. And with it came a sense of compassion for the woman, although she couldn't place her finger on where it had come from. But it gave her enough insight that when she went inside her office after her week-long isolation, she had been able to apologize in such a way that Sir Integra had forgiven her without a second thought.

And perhaps it was because she could understand the master better, that she could also understand the servant better as well. It was as if a light had been turned on in a room, where the beams didn't reach into the dark corners and uncover everything, but it shone brightly enough that she could see better than she had in the dark.

She saw enough of Alucard that when he did things with her (the same things he always did, chiefly; in that especially he was unchanged) she saw the meanings behind some of them. It was nearly laughable, the thought that she'd been able to understand him before, when she was more childish. It was almost as if she'd been in denial; as if she hadn't wanted to see. But now she watched him more carefully, and kept her thoughts inside her heart so that he couldn't see that her perception of who he was, was changing.

She was beginning to see him for what he truly was. Before, from the time they'd been in that dusty chapel and their eyes had met over his gun, she'd had her impression of him. She'd thought him omnipotent, her perfect master who was cold and collected and never had to answer to anyone except those he chose to.

But now— although she knew that her thoughts about him had been changing for some time— being alone, without him to influence her feelings, had turned on the light for her. He wasn't undefeatable. He'd been defeated before, many times. The proof of it was on his gloves. He wasn't always calm; she'd seen him at his worst, when he destroyed everything and everyone who stood in
his way.

And she realized now that even if he tried to forget it, the undeniable truth was that he'd been a human being once, and his heart still held the passions of a human. She'd seen him happy—even if something was being destroyed for it to happen, the delight was still the same—and she'd seen him take interest and be curious about the workings of the modern world. She'd seen him furious and fuming with rage over the way others behaved. And when he crawled into bed with her sometimes at night, and wouldn't speak more than a few words to her, that's when she saw him sad, depressed, and maybe even a little afraid.

She also saw his thinking. She knew that his plan hadn't been to stay in England, and even now that his plan wasn't to remain in England. He'd stay for a while—a few more hundred years, possibly. But not for eternity. She also knew that any ties to this place, including her, hadn't been in his plan. She had figured out that his decision to ask her along for the ride, as it were, was about as spontaneous as he got. What was it that had he called it? A whim?

All these thoughts were what had been tumbling around in her mind for the past few nights, when she wasn't training or busy. When she lay in her coffin, or sat at her little table eating, or stood on the grounds looking up at the stars, she had these sorts of introspections that took hours of her time.

She wondered if one day, she might let Alucard know that she knew these sorts of things, and thought about them. She decided that she might, and with good reason, but only once she was sure of more than what she was at the moment. Because she didn't want to seem silly to him anymore. She was more than ready for him to look at her and see someone worthy of his time.

The affection that she harbored for him—the affection that existed between master and loyal servant (although she never really served him all that often), had slowly turned at some point into love that a woman can have for a man. She didn't know exactly when, or how or even why, but it had happened, and now she knew that she was in love with him.

She didn't hate herself for loving an evil, fallen King of vampires, but it was terrifyingly overwhelming at times. She didn't really know what to do with herself. He didn't love her. That she was absolutely positive of. She wished he did, she wanted him to, but she was certain that if he had known how to love at some point in his life, it had been beaten out of him until all that was left was hate and anger towards the world.

She wished, more than anything, that she could help him. That was the thing about love—even if it's unrequited, you can't stop it. She wanted so desperately to make sure that he felt loved at least once in his existence.

But the thing that made her most afraid, was that she wouldn't be enough to make it happen.

November came, and by its second week it was clear that fall was over. The leaves had fallen, and been gathered and burned in large piles in the "garden-garbage pile" corner of the mansion grounds. The wind blew cold and the water froze in the fountain, forcing Walter to turn it off until the spring.

The soldiers were given leave to pull out the winter uniforms, to their relief. There wasn't much difference; long sleeves and better-insulated vests for the men, and for the guards their berets were traded in for trooper hats to keep their ears warm during the long hours out of doors. However little it was, it was better than being cold. Even so, most of the men made use of the indoor shooting ranges and padded training rooms during these cold winter months, leaving the outdoor ranges free for Seras and Alucard to do as they pleased.
Since vampires have no significant body heat to speak of, the cold didn't bother them as much as it did humans. Truthfully, the only way they knew it was past time to come inside was when they started to get frostbite on their limbs, and even that took longer than it would for a human. It was strange to seem them outside as well. Even though Seras took to wearing a hat and scarf for fashion purposes during the winter months (it made the soldiers feel better since they felt cold just watching her walk around outside in short sleeves) she didn't need it, and her breath didn't fog in the air like a human's would, since it wasn't warmed by her lungs beforehand.

Integra stepped outside for a moment one day, and then promptly returned to stay in her warm office until the winter was over. As a cold-natured person, she was even worse off come the cold season. Often she bundled up in layers walking around the drafty mansion, and she kept a nice blanket in one of her many desk drawers to drape over her legs when she spent hours upon hours doing her work.

Walter had a nice black scarf and warm set of mittens that he donned whenever duty called him to go outside, but this year he really began to feel the cold. His arthritis began acting up more and more, and often one could find him in the heated kitchen, soaking his aching feet in a pot of hot water as Cook fussed around him getting warm stews and casseroles made for the soldiers when the guard changed duty and came in for their meal break.

Now that the winter blues had set in, everyone seemed to be looking forward to Christmas. Walter hinted at getting decorations, Cook planned the gala feast with growing anticipation, the soldiers talked among each other about ideas for gifts for this one's wife, that one's brother, the other's mother. They even chipped in together on the postage to send a nice gift and handful of letters to Roans in the States. Seras skirted around with bundles that came delivered in her name, trying to sneak past a suspicious Walter with the offhand excuse that "it might be your Christmas gift. And it might not be".

Roans sent them a long letter back, along with three large, refrigerated boxes that were shipped special. They turned out to be boxes of cookies, sent after Thanksgiving and made by the man's own mother. He thanked them for the gift, and wished that he was back with them. He also sent a separate letter to Seras, who burst into tears when she read it and wouldn't let anyone else see, although she assured him that "it was too touching, not mean at all".

"Goodness me, it's already the end of the month! I daresay, this November has one of the busiest ones in a long time, and yet there have only been a mere handful of problems we've had to deal with!" Walter sat out Integra's tea, cup and spoons rattling lightly.

"You've got another set of letters, this time from Sir Irons, Sir Walsh, and Sir Grey respectively. They all are happy that your supposed "release" from prison this past week has gone without a hitch—thanks in part to Sir Penwood, of course—they're happy you've decided to forego a press report, and they all send their RSVP for your party next month." He finished laying out the tea and tucked the empty silver tray beneath his arm. "Reply to them at your leisure, of course. And also, seeing as it will be the first of December; shall I set out the holiday decorations tomorrow?"

Integra didn't acknowledge that she'd even heard; she was staring at her desk, her mind leagues away. Her pen, which was still poised to write, had stopped halfway down her paper where she'd only written the "arbi" of the word "arbitrary". Walter waited for a moment before speaking again, this time loud enough that his voice echoed in the nearly-empty office.

"Are you all right, Sir Integra?" he boomed. Her eyes widened and she looked at him before taking her teacup and stirring the hot liquid with the spoon.
"What? Oh, yes, Walter," she mumbled, shaking the cobwebs out of her brain as she continued to absently stir her tea. "Get the Police Girl to help you," she added as an afterthought, looking down at her paper and finishing "arbitrary knowledge" before signing the paper and stuffing it into an envelope.

"Are you sure you're alright, Sir?" he asked, his voice hinting at his amusement.

"Why wouldn't I be?" she snapped, taking a sip of her tea and sucking in a breath when it scalded her tongue. "I'm fine. I'm just very busy today."

"Normally I'd take that as an answer, Sir," he replied. "But I've set a steaming plate of Cook's own cinnamon buns right next to you and they aren't half finished yet." Integra looked to see that he was right. She scowled up at him, getting only a laugh in return.

"I don't eat them that fast," she argued as she went ahead and placed two giant buns on her plate, taking a fork to them instead of just stuffing them in her mouth. She only did that when she was completely alone.

"You used to," he said wistfully, taking one for himself and unrolling it, tearing off bite-sized pieces. "When you were younger, Cook would make a batch and you'd get four or five at a time. I remember once when you were very small, your father told you he was going to eat them all at once and you raced him across the foyer to see who could get to the kitchen first. Do you remember that?"

Integra shook her head, already finished with one roll and working on the other.

"I don't think so," she admitted around mouthfuls. "Who won?" Walter laughed outright.

"You did, of course. Although Sir Hellsing let you win; you couldn't have been more than three years old. Then, when you had two handfuls' worth of buns and he was getting his share, you fussed at him. You said, "Don't be greedy! Save one for Walter!" They both chuckled.

"Well, give Cook my regards, and my thanks," she told him once they'd both quietened down. He bowed and she grabbed another one, sipping her tea and sighing before cutting into it.

"Your mind is elsewhere tonight," he remarked, straightening up the haphazard pile of papers stuck in her "outgoing" bin. "I wonder if Cook is right," he murmured to himself, staring at her out the corner of his eye. He hadn't meant for her to hear, but she looked at him, the corners of her mouth dropping.

"Right about what?" Walter paused, blinking wide-eyed at her before shrugging and looking away.

"Oh, you know how she can be sometimes. Gabby is such a romantic; she always has been, you know. Even when we were children, she was always making up little stories about—" His hands began to twist the edges of his apron, and her eyes narrowed. She'd known Walter all her life; she knew that when he began to fidget with his apron, he was trying to hide something from her, be it birthday presents, bad news, and now kitchen gossip.

"Right. About. What?" she growled, her hand tightening on the handle of her fork as she stabbed it into the cinnamon bun. Walter cleared his throat, backing away a good three steps from the desk, hands wringing the life out of his apron.

"Oh, just things, is all. It's why she made the cinnamon buns for you; she was only trying to help, you know. She just gets these… ideas, you see, and—"
"Walter!" she yelled in her most authoritative tone, the one she learned from her father for when she wanted people to do her bidding, and do it now. Walter jumped slightly, giving her a wounded look that also seemed to say "well, you asked for it".

"She—er, well—she made you the cinnamon buns so that you would feel better, Sir." Integra glared at him, her mouth set in a thin line.

"Why do you people insist that I'm ill? I'm perfectly well, Walter. Please don't worry about me." She shook her head, looking down at her paperwork. Why was it that old people always thought that you were sick with something? They were the ones that stayed ill all the time, with arthritis and bunions and shingles! Did they think that because they're sick, everyone else has to be too?

"Well, she doesn't think that you're ill, per say," Walter corrected slowly, his hands moving behind his back and shoulders hunching. Integra looked back at him, pen pausing on the paper as she studied his reaction. "She—she thinks that you're, oh how did she phrase it?" he muttered, before he caught sight of the irate expression on her face. "She thinks that you're pining," he blurted.

She slowly put the pen down, sitting up straight and squaring her shoulders as her expression darkened. Her frown became more pronounced as she deliberately pushed the plate of cinnamon buns away before lacing her fingers and sitting her hands on the desk.

"Pining?" she said in a calm voice. "And just what am I pining for, Walter?" she asked, her eyes daring him to answer. He was in very dangerous waters, and poor Walter was floundering. He coughed, averting his eyes and edging towards the door.

"I have no idea how that woman's mind works," he said honestly. "You'd have to ask her yourself." Integra stood suddenly, picking up the plate of buns and stalking around the desk to where he stood.

"Perhaps I will," she said with a malevolent air. "Come on, Walter, let's go down to the kitchens and find out exactly what my staff is saying about me," she hissed before swooping out the door and stomping down the hall. He took a deep breath and followed after her, wishing he had enough sense to disobey orders and head to his office, away from the typhoon brewing in the heiress's blue eyes.

Anderson was stomping as well, but for a more practical reason. Where he treaded, beating the rotting floorboards beneath his feet, the others also stepped. If the old flooring could handle his weight, than theirs would be no issue.

"I think ye can handle it from here, Siobhan," he called over his shoulder, and the slender redhead made her way around him to the concrete safety of the main pillar holding up the priory's south wall. She balanced on it gracefully and held out her hand for Heinkel to hold onto as the younger woman picked her way across as well. "Oliver and I will head back downstairs to the file cabinets and see what there is to see." The two women nodded and continued into the murky darkness on their own, a single lantern lighting the way. The ladder that reached the attic had been destroyed, so they had to go around the long way, crawling across the beams and insulation to reach the room. It was a necessary endeavor; they had to see what was in the attic, just as they had to see what was in the filing cabinets. If there was anything of value there, it had to be taken and archived before the place was set ablaze.

It had turned out that vampires were the cause of the communication breach. Or, to be more
specific, a coven of vampires led by a very strong, influential leader had decided to turn the priory into their new haunt. The leader was a well-known vampiress, worshiped as a goddess among the humans and taking whoever and whatever she pleased as she travelled around the Himalayas.

When the foursome had arrived at the priory, they'd found a veritable hell on earth waiting for them. Body parts, scattered in the snow and frozen solid; the priory was in horrible shape. The humans had put up a losing fight.

The vampires, holed in their new den, had also put up a fight. It took a solid two weeks of battle, of go and retreat, get supplies, hunker down, kill the vampires, repeat, repeat, repeat, for them to make any headway. Finally, they were able to storm the building once the vampires had been weakened; they had killed every bloodsucker that left the building, and so the vampires inside were slowly starving as a result. They had no way of getting a fresh supply of food like the Iscariots did.

It was a ferocious battle that had taken over 24 hours to finish. The vampiress' own daughter, a half-vampire who had wanted no part in the horror unfolded by her mother, had sold out the coven and had escaped in Vatican custody after consenting to experiments and studies in exchange for her life.

In the end, there were only casualties on the side of Iscariot, and death for every vampire in the priory. Anderson had dealt the finishing blow to the Vampiress herself, making sure that she would never again rise from the greasy puddle of ash and blood she'd been reduced to. Oliver had two broken toes from a vampire slamming his foot in a door, and Siobhan had a long scrape on her face that was the result of falling from a beam during hand-to-hand combat with three vampires at once.

Then there were two weeks of reestablishing contact: rewiring telephone cables, checking electrical boxes; mundane things that became dangerous when done in subzero temperatures. The heads of the Vatican decreed that they should gut the priory, set fire to the main building alone, and say that the humans had died in a terrible fire. It would cover up any suspicion and keep the village beneath the mountain calm. Natives didn't do well when told that four white people killed the creature they worshipped as a goddess, even if that "goddess" had been a murderer.

So now they were in the final processes of their work, and home was within reach. These were the last few places that had to be checked—the attic and the record room. While the girls busied themselves in the attic, the men began the laborious process of looking through thousands of manila folders and jumbled papers, sitting back to back on the floor with stacks of records towering above them.

"These are dated!" Oliver exclaimed, his hands full of a folder's contents. "Why, these are all from nearly a century ago!"

"They're just past records," Anderson replied. "These are the vampires that haven't caused a stir in a century or more. We keep them on file for reference. This all must have been overflow from the main headquarters." Oliver nodded, even though the paladin wouldn't see him, and continued to sort through the files marked F-L. They were silent until Anderson, who was emptying the first cabinet, made a surprised sound.

"What is it?" Oliver asked, turning around. Anderson had a folder in his hands, looking at the contents. Oliver looked over his shoulder at the smiling face on the wallet-sized portrait in the corner, standing in for a proper picture. "Elizabeth Báthory… she's that looney that bathed in blood, wasn't she?"

"Aye, she was. The library at the Vatican has the original trial records on file. I've looked at them." He put the folder aside. "She'll like to see tha'," he said to himself as he pulled another stack of
folders towards him.

"Who would?" Oliver asked, poking at a tiny jumping spider that had crawled out from between two pages in a folder. It jumped on his coat and he panicked, brushing it off with wild motions.

"My wife," Anderson replied distractedly as he flipped through the folders. "Oh, these're already marked for shredding. I guess we can leave them here then." Oliver made a low sound in his throat.

"Mmmn... so the—the rumors are true, then?" he whispered conspiratorially, looking up as if he expected the women to come tumbling down from the ceiling and overhear them. Anderson stopped, turning around to stare at him vacantly.

"Wha' rumors?" he asked indifferently, clearly lost in his own world of folders that should or shouldn't be left to burn up. "Who's been spreading rumors?" Oliver, who had worked with the priest for over twenty years and was used to his absentmindedness, merely rolled his eyes.

"The rumor that the reason you left for England is because you were married!" he explained, as if it were the most obvious thing. "I mean, everyone heard Bishop Maxwell screaming about it upstairs that day, but we didn't know... I mean, we all wondered if he would agree to it." He looked around again, clearly about to say something risqué (to him, anyway). "You—you went outside the Cupids, didn't you?"

"The Cupids" were the jokey colloquial term for the members of the Valentine Organization. They were under the doctrines of St. Valentine (supposedly), and were the main team in charge of the recordkeeping and arranging of the marriages between members of the Vatican's special divisions. The term had been coined so long ago that it had become more than a joke and actually a common term, to the point that even the Organization's own members referred to themselves as Cupids unless it was a formal occasion.

The Cupids were the people to submit your name to when you wanted to appeal for a marriage. In most Vatican cases, their "behind-the-scenes" workers had too much on their plate to think about dating, and since most of them couldn't speak about their jobs to laymen, they either went unmarried or married inside the agencies. And if they wanted to do that, they had to go through the whole appeals process, where the Cupids would set them up with another potential. Like a dating site, only... more medieval.

It wasn't a bad process; in truth, it was well known around the Vatican that the Cupids hardly ever made a bad match. There were interviews, surveys, testing, psychological profiling, and much more involved in the appeal process, the results of which the Cupids thoroughly weighed against other potentials. Every small thing was taken into account, and most people were actually surprised by their matches, and how well everything turned out.

However, to go outside the appeal process, and the Cupids, and pick your own spouse was unusual to the point of being scandalous among the more gossip-prone agents.

"And what if I did?" Anderson said lowly, emerald eyes boring into Oliver's prying ones. The other man shrugged and wisely kept his mouth shut on the subject. "I don't remember that being against the laws."

"Well, it's just surprising that you would choose, well—" he paused. "There's nothing to it. I don't care one bit who you chose. It's no skin off my nose." He busied himself with the papers. "I was matched myself, before we left."

"Congratulations," Anderson responded automatically. A match was a cause for celebration, as
some cases took years to find a suitable spouse. Oliver took it with a nod before pulling out a picture from his coat and waving it at him. Anderson looked at it only to burst out laughing. "A Luke?"

The Lukes were the lowest on the totem pole; they just kept up with written records for the entire Vatican. A mundane job that you were put in if you weren't good enough for other jobs. Of course, that wasn't really the case, but it was the general thought on the subject.

"She wanted to be in Luke," he said with a growl, clearly already used to defending his match. "She's a very beautiful woman, and she likes the same things I do." He smiled at the picture. "I thought the same thing, at first. But when I started talking to her at our first meeting, I couldn't get enough of her. I think I could grow to like her, hell, maybe even love her." He smiled thoughtfully at the picture. "Her name is Laura. Laura Karcovitch, age 39, Luke, Division 3."

"I'm happy for ye," Anderson said genuinely as he threw the folders that didn't need to be saved across the room, starting a pile in the corner. Oliver pocketed the picture and followed suit with his own stack of not-to-be-kept folders. They lapsed back into companionable silence until they finished sorting the files and the room had grown dark with the dim light of dusk.

For the second time in two months, Walter was tossed unceremoniously out of a room in the manor. As he walked away, thanking his lucky stars he wasn't part of the fight, Integra was facing off against a woman with the girth twice that of her husband and the obstinate bluntness of a Round Table wife—not a good combination for her.

"You are, my love." Integra bristled, slamming the pan down on the countertop.

"I. Am. Not. Pining." She was on full defensive, the allure of cinnamon and butter forgotten.

"You are!" Cook insisted. "You've been staring off into space, sighing as if your little heart was breaking," she cooed and Integra barely refrained from laughing in the woman's face. "You're missing him. And I wouldn't count it against you—if I had a strong, muscled-up man like that, I'd miss him too! Such a nice, voracious appetite," she purred, lost in her own fantasies. Integra felt rather awkward, but stood her ground, shaking her head.

"I don't miss anyone. It's just… the weather or something," she growled. Winter always made people more disheartened. Maybe she should just lie and say she was sick after all? No, Walter would see through it. But Cook's answer wasn't the truth, either. She wasn't a hopeless romantic like the elderly woman was. In any case, she definitely wasn't pining for her husband.

But… she did miss him, really. She'd grown used to seeing him around every day, at supper or when they lay down to sleep. She'd grown used to having a never-ending source of heat in her bed that she could curl up against, especially now that it was cold outside. She missed his mind, too; usually he had something witty, or at the very least intelligent, to say about whatever tomfoolery was going on in her house. She hoped that he was alright, and not dead at the bottom of a Himalayan mountain. And yes, she did want to see him again before the New Year.

But she sure as hell wasn't pining. That's just not who she was. Cook was trying to do play "Romantic Novella" with other people's lives.

"It's not the weather." The chef declared. Integra bit back a groan, and it came out as a sigh.

"See? There you go again, poor dearie."
Chapter End Notes

ORIGINAL NOTES, TRANSLATED:

Back when this chapter was written, there was a certain Haverty's commercial where the snobbish patron of an art museum shouts "THIS IS FIREFACE BY DIEGO!" in a very flamboyant tone, while the couple insists that their Haverty's couch is better than any work of art. You couldn't get away from that commercial to save your life (in America at least). The tailor is subsequently based off him.

The Valentines (subsection of Peter) are also a flub that became part of my story's canonverse. AvengingNeko (dear friend and avid idea-tosser) misread "Vatican" as "Valentine", and the holy order of St. Valentine began spreading love through Rome as a result. ;}

For many of the various Special Operations members housed within the Vatican City, it was rather
disturbing that the distance from their residences to their offices was such a long trip. The offices
had been built in order, so for the men and women working for John, it was about a ten minute
hike from their houses and apartment complexes to their office. But when you got to Sections X
and XI, it was at least an hour's walk. By the time you reached Section XIII, it was silly to think
that you could walk from your house and get to work on time.

Thankfully, when you worked for Special Operations they gave you an endless metro card. So
instead of walking, three quarters of S.O. members (Section V and onward) took the underground
to work. The metro was often filled with weary workers dressed in matching colors and heading to
their offices, hoping to finish the day's work quickly and get a chance at leaving before dark.

The offices themselves were nothing special—it was true that they were as ornate and elaborately
decorated as the neighboring tourist attractions, but they held nothing of value for anyone other
than those that worked there. Most were two-storied buildings, but a few, like Iscariot's, were
three.

The bottom foyer of the Iscariot offices was the usual office setting: receptionist's desk, bathrooms,
information, and meeting rooms branching down the long hallways. The second floor was filled
from wall to wall with cubicles, one for each lesser agent with a few saved for foreign
representatives that needed to finish up work while they waited on their other duties in the City.
The third floor was the floor for individual offices. Maxwell, Anderson, and a few other select
members had their offices here, needing more space for their heavier workloads than a cubicle
could provide.

As Anderson led the way to the offices and they reached the second floor, all four members of the
Himalayan recovery team breathed a collective sigh of relief. Most agents, even higher level ones
like Anderson, spent so much of their time catching up on work in the offices that it often felt more
like home than their own bedrooms did.

Most of the agents present and not abroad were gathered around an ancient copier. Its guts were
laid out on the stained brown carpeting and a woman from Andrew was bent over them, hand on
her chin and tool belt laid out beside her.

"Is the copier broken again?" Oliver complained, shaking his head. Siobhan sighed and an agent
named Carrie turned around and waved at them.

"Yes, regrettably, and the Bishop's not being compassionate about it at all. "I need twelve hundred
of these on my desk by tomorrow evening!" she growled, mimicking Maxwell's commanding
sneer. "I told him up front that unless he gets the copier fixed, he'd be lucky to see twelve."

"Oliver!" Another agent, this one male, called from across the room where he was leaning his
rolling chair back as far as it could go. "Your lady-love from Luke left you an email!" he jeered.
The woman from Andrew glared at him, as well as the other female agents in the room.

"At least he has one," Heinkel called back, her face set in a deep scowl. The man's friends in the
next cubicle "ooed" and began to laugh as he peppered them with balled up memo pad pages. At
the sound of her voice, Yumiko barely peered over her cubicle, looking at them all warily before
raising up and motioning her best friend over with her hands, her eyes large and frightened. The
scowl morphed into a concerned frown and Heinkel weaved around the cubicle walls to reach the
young woman's workspace, disappearing from view.

Siobhan dipped her head in farewell to Anderson before bypassing the crowd and sitting down
neatly at her own cubicle, pulling up her desktop and opening a report template. She began to type
out her initial report, clearly ready to send it in and head to her home. Anderson couldn't blame her;
no one got more than four hours of sleep at a time in the Himalayas and while they'd been trained
to run on less, it wasn't any easier to stay awake once they were safe and sound. The only thing in
his mind was the bed at Hellsing, soft and with an abundance of pillows.

He punched the elevator button and got inside, leaving the bedlam behind for the quieter space of
his office. He reached the third floor and nearly collided with Maxwell, who was trying to get in
just as fast as he was trying to get out. As it was they both stopped short, Maxwell's reading glasses
sliding sideways on his face. He shifted the large stack of papers and adjusted the glasses back into
their proper position.

"You're back," he sighed in relief. "I need that report as soon as you can, Father Anderson. I don't
think I can hold off those pesky Johns much longer."

"They'll get my report when they get it," Anderson replied bluntly. "They can wait. I've had to wait
on them enough o'r the years." He paused. "The photocopier downstairs is broken again." Maxwell
grunted unsympathetically, shifting the papers in his hand.

"I alerted the Andrews. They should have sent someone," he answered. Anderson cut him off from
the elevator.

"They really need a brand new one. Tha' thing's been taken apart and stuffed back together I dunno
how many times now." Maxwell's eyes narrowed as he tried to sidestep Anderson again.

"Yes, well, you explain that to the Accounting Offices. I'm sure they'd love to lend you the money
for a new one," he sneered. "Now if you'll excuse me, His Holiness is expecting me." Anderson
glowered at him a second more hitting the down button and stepping out of the elevator. Maxwell
stepped inside and stared straight ahead haughtily until the metal closed and the elevator whirred.
He shook his head and went into his office, shutting the door behind him and collapsing in his desk
chair, head in his hands.

"Lord, give me patience with tha' man, and the strength to stop myself from deckin' him one good
time and breakin' his nose." he prayed, before fiddling with his mouse and beginning his own
report. His eyes were heavy and he wished it was noon, when his secretary would come in and
bring him some coffee. She only worked half-days on the weekends, and until she came in he'd
have to fend for himself. He hoped it wouldn't take that long, though, and he'd be out by the time
she came in to finish her own stack of work. He glanced at the clock—9:05 am.

He let his glasses slide down his nose and stared at the blinking screen, typing away.

"Bishop Maxwell…." The Pope leaned forward wearily in his throne, resting his hands on his
knees. "We must stop this unnecessary bloodshed. My people make such a great sacrifice for the
Lord as it is, living away from their homelands. They shouldn't have to fear attacks such as these."

"Your Holiness," Maxwell murmured reverently, bowing on one knee and eyes respectfully
downcast. "Tell me your orders, and I shall carry them out to their fullest intent. I am your humble
"I want you to double communications with all outposts. Twice a week should be plenty. Also, send teams out to the most high-risk areas to do thorough border checks once a month. Any concerns should be dealt with at that moment, and the paperwork can be filed later. I'll meet with the other heads of Special Operations and have a plan drawn out. I know I can trust your full support."

"Yes," Maxwell ducked his head even lower in agreement. "I'll begin immediately." Secretly, he had no idea how he would carry out these orders. They were spread thin as it was, with not enough agents to go around for all the missions that landed on his desk. But he had a job to do—he had to obey the Pope and do his best. They'd just have to finish their work quicker, and sacrifice some of their time to the cause. He stayed still a moment, wondering if it was time yet to leave. But the Pope continued.

"Also, Maxwell, I have heard news from Europe, as well as the Dalai Lama in Asia. All reports are telling me that vampires are converging at an alarming rate. Across the world, they are gathering for something, but no one knows what. Do you know about this?"

"Yes, Your Holiness. We have not acted yet, only because they haven't given us a reason to act. They aren't massacring humans, and they aren't causing trouble among the villages and towns. We have no cause to attack them and cause an attack in return on ourselves. Our enemies have also seen fit to leave them be, for reasons of their own I'm sure." The Pope nodded again.

"Yes, I've heard that the Hellsing Organization is ignoring them, for the most part. This sets me more at ease...." He looked musingly at his hands, folded now in his lap. "I believe if they were going to be a nuisance, Hellsing would have already tried to invade upon our lands and take them out. They've never hesitated to do it before in years past."

"I agree," Maxwell responded. The Pope sighed.

"I'm sorry to always be putting such burdens on you. But please; keep an eye on them. If Hellsing makes a move, then we should be ready. In the past, history documents that while we are not on the best terms, we have many of the same enemies. If they strike Hellsing, who is to say they will not strike us next?"

"I understand, Your Holiness," Maxwell answered, standing up. "I will take care of it all. Do not concern yourself with such paltry matters anymore; they will all be handled." The Pope smiled, his eyes twinkling behind his glasses.

"I'm happy that I can count on you, Bishop."

"No one's forgotten the Berlin incident. 1996?"

"There is no way we owe that much money," Heinkel crossed her arms, looking rather imposing as she faced off against the Accounting Office's twins. "Das ist unbegründet!" Leonardo's mouth became a thin line and he worked his jaw, his brother stepping forward to fill in.

"Well, that in itself wouldn't be much, if it weren't for your outstanding debt," he said helpfully. "You must remember; you're still making payments for damages and psychological fees from that time in Palestine...."

"But that was years ago!" Yumiko countered, still cowering behind Heinkel and peering over her shoulder. "Surely, surely we've paid that off by now!" The twins shared a look.
"You would have, if you'd made every payment on time. But when you add your delayed payments, with interest and late fees, and then on top of that your other, more recent debts—"

"Interest?!" Heinkel roared at the same time Yumiko squeaked out "Late fees!?" Both girls looked at each other before turning to the identical men standing before them, blocking them into Yumiko's cubicle so that there was no chance to escape. "That's not fair!" they cried together.

"Life's not fair," the twins retorted in sync, stepping closer. The elevator dinged and opened to reveal Anderson, a finished report in his hands and bags under his eyes. He glanced at them without really seeing them, headed towards the drop-box in the corner of the room near the stairwell.

"Father Anderson!" both girls called, banking on their old mentor to get them out of this mess. "Tell these rats that they can't tack interest onto a legalized lump-sum payment!" Heinkel fussed. Anderson dropped the report into the box carefully, making sure it wouldn't fall back out before turning back to them with a yawn.

"Take it up with their heads at the Accounting office," he suggested. "Or, if it's that important, give it to Maxwell to take care of." Heinkel and Yumiko both grimaced.

"He's still sort of… angry with us," the nun admitted, wringing her hands. "Over July's budget… and those Indonesian monasteries…." She lowered her head, tears in her eyes. "Oh Heinkel, we can't get that sort of money!" she whispered in her friend's ear.

"Well, we can always discuss refinancing," Lorenzo said gently, offering the sniffling girl a handkerchief from his pocket. "There's no need to cry about it." He patted her on the shoulder, and Heinkel moved in to block him off.

"Don't you touch her," she growled. "I've had just about enough of you people." Her voice was rising steadily, causing heads to pop up over cubicle walls all over the room at the prospect of a fight. Siobhan caught Anderson's gaze as she peered around the edge of her cubicle and rolled her eyes, shaking her head at the faceoff before disappearing again. Lorenzo backed away, hiding behind his older brother, and Leonardo bristled, his brown eyes cold over the rims of his dark glasses.

"It is incredibly frustrating," he agreed, clearly saying the same thing about her. His brother grabbed his arm, pulling him back slightly as Heinkel's hands balled into fists. Anderson stepped between them, thinking to himself that he was much too tired to deal with such childish antics at the moment.

"Just come back tomorrow when Maxwell is here, and all four of ye walk up and discuss it with him," he ordered firmly, pointing upstairs. "There's no need to be fightin' in here; it's a God-ordained building, office or no," he reminded them, and Heinkel and Yumiko both backed off as much as they could in the crowded cubicle with a mumbled "Sorry, Father." He turned to the twins, the two women glancing around his large frame.

"Come back tomorrow," he repeated more gently, and they nodded together.

"Alright," Lorenzo said, still trying to maintain a cheery tone. "We'll—"

"We'll take the stairwell down," Leonardo finished icily. "Good day, Miss Wolfe, Miss Takagi." They turned and walked off calmly, although Lorenzo was whispering in his brother's ear with a rare look of irritation. Leonardo shook his head and his brother snapped something, his voice barely gaining an octave before they disappeared behind the door to the stairwell.
Anderson sighed before turning to the two women, looking at them the same way a father would look at two misbehaving daughters.

"Heinkel Wolfe, ye have to learn how to control yer temper." The cross-dressing nun looked at the far wall of the cubicle obstinately, her jaw set and a blush creeping across her cheeks. "It won't do for a member of Iscariot to be more hot-headed than their leader. And likewise," he continued, addressing Yumiko. "Don' cry every time things look bleak. You've got to have faith that it'll work out." He wasn't usually so harsh with them in public, but he was tired and honestly was beyond caring. They were just an obstacle keeping him from his bed.

"Yes, Father," they replied softly, looking thoroughly chastised. He glared around the office and over half the peering heads ducked back down, afraid of getting a scolding of their own from the man who'd raised them.

"I'm goin' home," he announced, and turned to leave without another word. The office was quiet enough to hear a pin drop until the technician from Andrew stood up and announced "I've got it fixed!", which was followed by a mad rush to the barely functioning copier.

"Good heavens!" Anderson turned quickly, surprised to hear a voice, and saw the butler standing with his hand over his heart beside the closet where he'd been putting away Integra's clean suits. "You gave me a fright!" he chuckled as papers burned up in the air, shaking his head. "I must be getting slower in my old age; those sorts of things used to never startle me," he murmured more to himself, finishing his task before closing the closet door.

"I 'pologize," Anderson said sleepily, wishing that the butler would hurry up and get out so that he could roll over and get some shuteye. He was still on India time at the moment, and then having to move between Vatican time and England time; his mind was such a jumble of numbers that he had no idea how long he'd been awake. He peeled off his boots and gloves with a sigh, putting the boots by the foot of the bed and throwing the gloves onto the bed itself.

"Oh, it's quite alright," Walter dismissed with a wave of his hand. "Shall I let Sir Integra know you've returned? She's in the middle of a fitting right now, but I think she'd use any excuse to get away from that tailor. They've been arguing off and on all day," he said with a measure of amusement, a small smile on his face.

"If you wanna," he answered indifferently, standing up long enough to remove the cassock and his cross, draping them over the side of the bed as well and then lying down and closing his eyes, hands resting on his stomach. "She'll find out sooner or later," he added in a half-whisper, already dropping off. Walter watched him for a moment before walking out of the room, shutting the door softly so as not to make any unnecessary noise.

He went to the laundry room first, finishing all of his ironing and then separating his clothing from Seras', putting the former aside and then sneaking to the basement to stick hers into her drawers. Pausing, he listened for any sound; the room was so silent it could have been unoccupied if not for the closed coffin-bed in the corner. He smiled and went to lay a hand on it, but as always something inside made him stop before his hand touched the wood. He often wondered why he felt that way; but Seras was nearly as protective of her coffin as Alucard was of his, and he imagined it must be some self-preservation telling him to not touch it.

Then he put his own clothing away, stopping to look at the pictures that filled the many frames above his bed. It felt to him that the older he got, the more sentimental he became, and the pictures meant more to him that ever before. He laughed at one taken of him—he must have been 25 or so, because Gabriella was with him, her flour-stained apron messing his black clothing as she hugged
him and smiled for the camera.

Then there was another, tinier one taken with a Polaroid of some sort—most likely by Sir Arthur. The younger Walter was smiling, although he seemed confused as he held Integra, who looked six months old at the most. She was watching him with a look of infantile wonder, her hand reaching for his long hair. He remembered that she had a certain fascination with his hair, always pulling it and touching it with her fat little fingers. Back then, he had no idea what to do with a baby. It was almost laughable.

Another one, one that not even Sir Integra knew that he had, was one that he'd found when cleaning out Arthur's room after his death. It wasn't like him to pocket things for himself, but when he'd looked at the picture, he couldn't help but want to keep it. It was the perfect representation of how he'd always remember Arthur Hellsing—not frail and bedridden but alive and hale, his eyes twinkling and clothing filled out with the muscles of a healthy man.

He held Integra on his knee, who at this point must have been only three or four. Walter wasn't sure who had taken the picture or even where they were, but he knew that it wasn't Hellsing. Arthur was telling his small daughter something that was making her laugh, her hands over her mouth as she giggled. It was a nice picture of the way things used to be, and while Walter knew he should have probably given it to Integra he had been selfish. He'd wanted that memory all to himself.

"You really did love her," he told the Arthur in the photograph, smiling wistfully. "I wonder what you'd say if you could see her now; she's certainly changed since then." He sighed and left his room, going up to the second floor wing of guest bedrooms. Opening one, he saw the child-now-woman nearly at her wit's end as she stood on a stool, the tailor moving quickly around her with pins hanging out of his mouth.

"Walter!" He couldn't help but laugh at the way her hair had been piled haphazardly on her head to keep it out of the tailor's way, looking like a tangled rat's nest. The dress that hung loosely off her was gorgeous, although the tailor had told him the last time he was here that once he was done, it would be all the more beautiful.

"It'll have silver on it," he swore up and down. Right now, he was swearing up and down for a completely different reason. Every time he tried to stick a pin in the silken fabric, it either came loose from the dress or accidentally stuck Integra. The woman was on the verge of kicking him for poking her one too many times, and he was on the verge of pushing her off her stool for shouting at him.

"So, Lewis, how does it come along?" he asked pleasantly and the man's head popped around his living mannequin's waist, three straight pins dangling between his lips. He'd foregone the scarf today and was wearing a navy blue turtleneck and those tight pants of his, although his black boots had been left at the door. His assistant was meandering around the room with jewelry and accessories, making up her own mind about the "trimmings" of the heiress's gala outfit.

"Tragically," he replied melodramatically as he began taking the pins out of his mouth, his expression baleful as he scrutinized the dress. "I simply cannot get this bust line right." Integra crossed her arms over her chest and frowned.

"You should worry about getting this hem right; I refuse to be tripping all night over my own train." Lewis pursed his lips and shook his head, running a hand through his meticulously gelled locks.

"Valerie, I need motivation!" he called, and the young woman's head jerked up with a sympathetic
"Remember those pictures of diseased lungs," she said kindly. "And besides, you've been without a cigarette for three months now."

"Don't remind me," Lewis snarled under his breath as he narrowed his eyes, sticking a pin in the waistline and succeeding only in bunching the fabric. "Dammit!" he howled.

"Perhaps it's time for a small break?" Walter suggested. "I know that Cook has some cake fresh out of the oven in the kitchens, and we have both tea and coffee." Valerie raised her eyes to her boss, dropping the silver chain she was holding. Lewis sucked in a breath through his teeth.

"I don't know," he said with a small frown. "I've been holding back so I can eat more at Mother's house for Christmas when I head back home…." Valerie rolled her eyes and he clapped his hands. "Oh, what the hell! One piece isn't going to ruin these hips. Come on, Val, let's get this dress onto the stand; I need to indulge myself today."

Walter closed the door and waited outside while they undressed their client. A few minutes later, the two tailors came out arm in arm, talking about some corset display at a fashion show. Integra followed behind, running her hands through her hair in a desperate attempt to get it lying flat after being up for so long. She wore a plain shirt and pants, not bothering with the rest of her suit since they'd be coming right back. Walter grabbed her arm and pulled her aside while the other two went down the stairs in search of the kitchen.

"I thought you might like to know; Paladin Anderson has arrived just now."

"Here!? Where?" she asked, surprised.

"Your bedroom, ma'am. He seemed rather exhausted; this mission must have taken a lot out of him." She looked at the stairs, where the voices of her tailors could still be heard echoing in the foyer, and then bit the inside of her cheek as she glanced in the direction of her bedroom.

"I should go and check on him," she said finally. Walter gave a small nod and pushed her lightly in the direction she chose before heading down to point the strange fashionistas in the direction of pound cake and honeyed tea.

She quickly headed to her bedroom and stepped inside, closing the door with a sigh. She was already past her breaking point dealing with these tailors, who had measured her at least two other times before bringing her the prototype dress and stuffing her in it, throwing her hair every which way and making her stand in all sorts of uncomfortable positions. No one should have to suffer so much for beauty.

Resting her head against the cool wood of the door, she regained her poise and turned around, walking over to the bed. She tilted her head sideways, staring at the sleeping giant sprawled out on the blanket. He'd forgotten to take off his glasses, and now they were bent sideways and hanging off the edge of his nose with the way he was laying.

She reached down to remove them, but the second her fingers brushed his cheek he was awake. It didn't surprise her; Walter did that too—apparently it was a life-preserving side effect from the military, to be awake and asleep at a moment's notice.

"Hello, welcome back," she greeted him quietly. He grunted in reply and ran a hand over his face, stopping when he reached his glasses. He growled and pulled them off, squinting and carefully bending the frames back into shape before folding them and tossing them onto the end table.
"Thought ye were with the tailor or somethin'," he murmured drowsily, his eyes closing again now that the imagined threat had passed. Integra sat down on the edge of the bed.

"We're taking a... breather, I suppose," she explained. "It's more tedious than we had thought it would be." He barely nodded, the motion almost imperceptible. She sat for a moment, basking in the near-silence of the room, broken only by his slow, even breathing. It was comforting, after hours on end listening to the highly overdramatic tailor and the chittering, high-pitched tone of his assistant.

Standing up, she gathered his things off the bed and put them in neater order. His gloves went beside his glasses on the table, the cross on the vanity where nothing would bother it, and she hung the long cassock behind the bathroom door on the empty hook that once held her father's dressing gown. She left his boots where they were, for lack of a better place to put them. Looking back at the quiet figure, she supposed that he had fallen back asleep and was considering when she might need to head back to the guest room when he spoke.

"C'mere." She walked over and sat on the bed again, watching him. "We had to starve them out," he said. She frowned, trying to decide what he meant.

"Who?" she finally inquired. He opened one eye, staring at her before motioning for her to come closer. She leaned forward obligingly.

"The vampires. They're moving, aren't they?" She paused, wondering if that was the answer to her question, or if he'd changed subjects. Even further, how had he known that they had been tracking the growing migration of vampires to and from Europe? He had been isolated for over a month; who had told him? He tugged at her shirt and before she knew it she was lying down beside him, curling into the warmth he provided.

"How did you know?" He grinned, but kept his eyes closed.

"I know things. I get this feelin', on the back of me neck. Crawling skin and all tha' good stuff. It's kept me alive—I know to trust it. And the more time goes by, the more I'm feelin' it." She rested her head on one arm, thinking solemnly.

"They aren't doing anything. That's what I'm worried about. What are they gathering for?"

"Somethin's comin'; simple as tha'. But not for a while yet, I think." She frowned, letting him wrap an arm around her and breathing in the scent off his clothing. He smelled like something strange, spicy almost. It was the aroma of a foreign place. But above that was the smell of smoke.

"You smell like you've stood in a fire," she said uncomfortably, her nose wrinkling. It wasn't like a fireplace—it smelled like moldy wood and things that shouldn't be caught up in fires.

"Aye," he answered. "We had to set fire to the priory. The vampires had went and ruined it with their blood n' battles. Didn't want nothin' left, and it was easier to tell the rest of the missionaries that their fellow brothers and sisters died in a fiery blaze, rather than letting them know that God-damned beasts tore them apart while their hearts were still a'beatin."

"I'm sorry," she said suddenly, not really sure if she meant sorry for the loss of life, or sorry that their work had to be burned down in the end. "For that," she finished, letting him make of it what he would. He nodded, but didn't say any more. She lay there another moment, wishing that she didn't have to go back out there and face Lewis and his exaggerated displays of frustration. But it couldn't be helped, and she reluctantly pushed his arm off of her waist.
"I have to go back and let them try to finish," she said unenthusiastically. "And you have to try and get some sleep." He opened his eyes at that and smiled wearily at her.

"Aye, that I do." He yawned. "I brought ye something, though. I'll find it later. Call it a late birthday gift."

"Very late," she agreed, and he snorted before rolling over onto his back. She stood and straightened her shirt before leaving, holding the doorknob until it was closed so that it wouldn't make a loud noise. Walking back to the guest bedroom, she couldn't help but think that she felt just a little bit happier.

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Chapter End Notes

Afterword:
A few of the things—well, a lot of the things, actually, in the first part come straight out of Crossfire. Section III John, in that world at least, is in charge of cover-ups and media leaks. Very important when you work for the Vatican, I suppose. Also, the incidents in Palestine and Berlin are from Crossfire as well; they're the first two missions that Heinkel and Yumie go on.
I supposed that the Iscariot office would be one of those places where everyone had cubicles, since they all have their own workload that needs to be taken care of. I'm sure they'd get along, right? I mean, divinely oriented or no, they're still humans and would take the chance to tease their coworkers. As for Andrew—I'm just going on the apostles' names and making up what they would do as I go along.

Also, funny, completely coincidental fact—when I was looking up the proper way to spell Takagi, I found out that Yumie's English VA is named Siobhan. That's ironic! I chose Siobhan's name from one of my original works; I had no idea there was an actual Siobhan tie to Hellsing! (OwO)

Also (also), there are rules for mistletoe. I had no idea. I knew that you were supposed to kiss someone or else you'd never get a chance to marry, but apparently you also can only kiss the girl on the cheek if you're doing it properly, and then you take off one of the berries. Go fig.
Anderson awoke with a start. His dreams had been dark as the night outside the windows, and filled with the sounds of gunfire, shells dropping from fighter planes, and men's shouts of fear and pain. Nothing that would terrify a normal person, but the dreams brought back memories he wasn't too keen to think about. Gulping hard and wiping the sweat from his forehead, he rolled out of bed and stumbled towards the showers.

The hot water made him feel calmer, and he reigned in his mind and focused on the sound of water hitting the tiles and the drain gurgling as it swallowed the soapy suds. Taking a deep breath, he turned off the water, careful to keep a light hold on the faucets. It was in this state of mind that he was liable to break something accidentally.

Drying his hair, he stared at himself in the mirror. The bags under his eyes weren't as pronounced, but even without his glasses he could see them there clearly. He looked haggard, and felt about the same. It was times like this that he wished he still drank and smoked; nicotine would calm his nerves, and the alcohol would put a fuzzy edge to the memories so that he didn't have to think about them anymore.

But he had given both up long ago, and he wasn't willing to go and try them again. What he needed was a good meal and more sleep, not drugs. He wrapped the towel around his waist and went back into the bedroom, lying face up on the bed and basking in the silence. The bed's scent calmed him even more—washing powders, with an undertone of bleach and wildflower shampoo. He wasn't used to it yet, but it was becoming more comfortable to him.

He dozed as his body finished drying out and then shook himself awake, getting dressed in order to head downstairs and find something to eat. His stomach growled, seemingly in approval, and he went out the door, doubling back once to grab his glasses. As farsighted as he was, he'd be lucky to make it down the stairs without tripping if he ever misplaced the damn things.

The kitchens seemed empty, but he heard a loud ruckus in the next room and peeked in to see soldiers, dressed for wintery weather, sitting at the long benches in the room and eating. He bypassed the door and made his way further into the kitchens where steaming plates piled with some sort of vegetable casserole were sitting. It smelled good, but the plates might have been set out for others and he didn't want to steal someone else's supper.

Thankfully at that moment the head cook came back in from a door that led outside, bringing with her chilled air that raised gooseflesh on his arms. Since he'd been gone winter had set in, it seemed. She saw him and unwound her scarf from her neck, placing it and the matching hat on an empty expanse of counter.

"Eh? So you're back!" she chirped happily, coming over to pat him on the arm. "Was wondering when I'd see you!" He let her touch him before nodding at the plates.

"Those for somebody?" She looked at them, and then at him, before tutting and leading him over to a table in the corner.

"Sit here and I'll get you some. Don't move, now—oh! Would you rather have tea or coffee or—"

"Water," he answered her and she nodded before bustling around. In no time, a tall glass of water and a much larger plate piled as high as it would go with two different types of casseroles sat before him. He prayed over the food and quickly dug in, his stomach rejoicing at the delicious
meal. At the priory, they'd eaten whatever scanty supplies could be brought to them from the
outposts. While it was good, humbling food, he was more than happy to eat lavishly again.

She filled his plate twice more while he ate, all the while flittering around him and talking about
what he'd missed. He tuned most of it out, focusing on his food. It was only after his stomach
stopped clenching in hunger that he began to slow down and actually listen to her.

"—not that she was a particularly good eater before, I mean that she's never been picky but at least
when I make them, she finishes them! My heart broke for her, the poor dearie."

"Who?" he asked in-between gulps of water. She pursed her lips and stared at him incredulously.

"The young Lady, of course!" she said, slightly miffed. "Her appetite's just not been what it used to
be, not that it was anything spectacular to begin with." She offered more casserole and he shook his
head, pushing the plate away and working on finishing his glass of water. "After all, she use to eat
plates of my cinnamon buns at a time, but this last batch I made just didn't work! I'd made the buns
to help her feel better, but in the end she gave them back…." she trailed off with an annoyed glare
at the ceiling, as if she could see Integra through the floorboards.

"She sick?" he asked in surprise. He'd been half-asleep, but he was sure that when she'd stopped by
to see him when they had taken a break from her dress she had seemed perfectly healthy. The cook
nodded confidently, her eyes solemn.

"Ah, yes, she was terribly sick. Heartsick, she was." He stared at her for a moment.

"Heart…sick?" he repeated hesitantly. What was she talking about? The cook nodded again and
patted his cheek with her weathered hand.

"Pining she was. She barely ate, and she kept sighing and she seemed so tired." The elderly woman
clucked sympathetically and moved away, shaking her head. Anderson, wondering what in the
world the woman could have meant, took another drink of water. He was halfway through a large
gulp when her implications sat in and he choked, breathing in the water and coughing, wanting to
laugh at the absurdity of it.

"There now!" she shouted, running back towards him and beating him in-between the shoulder
blades, waving a cloth at his reddening face. "You men and your hurries! The water wasn't going
nowhere and no one was going to take it from you, dearie! Don't gulp it so!"

Two weeks before the gala, Seras was outside enjoying the fresh air. Well, she was supposed to be
enjoying it, anyway. She frowned at her team, who was supposed to be helping her string together
strands of lights for Walter to hang outside on the gates. However, they were too busy being…
men.

They had been teasing her by imitating what she sounded like in the showers, but that had devolved
into seeing who could skew the lyrics to her favorite carols enough to make her angry. She was
losing patience, and they kept dissolving into helpless peals of laughter at each other's
"contributions" to the cause. They'd already finished a rousing three-part chorus of "Deck 'is balls"
and were working on the lyrics to "Tyrant Night".

"Tyrant night, gory night….""Gentleman, please," Walter scolded as he stepped out into the cold to check their progress, ladder
in hand. "Need I remind you that there is a lady in your midst?"
"Well, you can always go back inside," one chimed, causing the others to fall into another lapse of merry laughter. Walter glared harshly at them, his mouth a thin line, and they finally stopped and stared ashamedly at their boots.

"We are soldiers, men—not schoolboys," Walter reprimanded them with a growl he surveyed the completed strings of lights. "This should be enough, Miss Victoria. Go inside and warm up, everyone."

"It's alright Walter," Seras insisted as the men tramped inside to the mess hall where Cook would load them down with something delicious to eat. "I'll stay out here and help you string these on the gates." He nodded and she grabbed handfuls of the brightly colored lights before heading out with him to the front gates. She looked up at the gray sky, cloudy enough to hide the sunset but no precipitation. "I do wish it would snow by Christmas."

"Snow?" he chuckled as he prepared his ladder. "Goodness me, that would be a mess. Shoveling the sidewalks, and people bringing snow into the foyer at all hours of the day," he mused with a grimace. "That's a lot of extra work."

"But it's pretty," Seras countered, which in her mind made up for the extra effort that went with it. "And maybe that gala would be postponed because of a massive snow-in, so Sir Integra wouldn't be so stressed." She thought to herself for a moment. "I don't know why she worries so much. She never seems to bother about what people think about her the rest of the year."

"This isn't just any "person", Miss Victoria," Walter grunted as he stretched up in an effort to loop the lights the way he wanted to. "This is Lady Katherine." Seras wondered if she should help when Walter finally managed to get the ends tied onto the sides of the gate. He pushed the gate closed and moved to the other one, string them from the opposite direction.

"Why is she so important?" Seras huffed as she slowly walked along with Walter as he strung, feeding him loops of the lights. Walter smiled and shook his head.

"You haven't met her yet; that's why it seems strange to you. Technically, she's Sir Integra's godmother, but that in itself doesn't give her much power." He paused to wipe his brow, sweating despite the cold. "Sir Integra and Lady Katherine are a lot alike," he confessed. "They both are blunt, stubborn, and completely at odds with each other. Sir Integra probably wouldn't be half as commanding as she is had she not had Lady Katherine for a role model during her teenage years."

"Does she wear suits too?" Seras asked curiously, wondering how two such women could exist in the world at the same time. Sir Integra was butch enough as it was, much less another English noblewoman sharing the same traits. Perhaps it was just a high-class thing. Walter laughed loudly, his voice ringing in the air.

"Not at all!" he assured her. "She's terribly old-fashioned. Sir Integra had a time with her the first time she chose to wear a suit, and for a while I thought there might be an outright civil war!" he explained. "But Sir Integra has told her that she would wear a dress to this gala. I must admit, I am looking forward to seeing her fancied up. She hasn't let anyone do that to her since she was a young child." He looked hopeful, and Seras smiled at the emotions twinkling in his eyes.

"I'm sure she'll look wonderful," she said, and held up a hand to help him down the ladder. They closed the other gate and looked at the results of their teamwork, shining brightly down on them. Then they opened them up again and walked back to the mansion, Seras carrying his ladder for him.

"You will as well," he added thoughtfully. "That tailor may be… eccentric, but he is very talented.
I can't wait to see you both." Seras blushed and shook her head.

"They can make me up to be a pretty porcelain doll, but I'm still clumsy enough to ruin the entire look," she replied.

"That sounds like something Alucard would say," he frowned. Seras shrugged and promptly stumbled over the doorframe, effectively proving her point and forcing Walter to choose between catching her and the ladder. He wasn't fast enough for either and with a loud bang both girl and equipment fell to the foyer floor, skidding on the tiles. "Oh dear; are you alright?"

"Mhmm," she winced, rubbing her forehead. "I'm sorry, Walter; I've made a mess of things again." He picked up the ladder and hoisted it out of the way. By the time he turned back around, Alucard had appeared from seemingly out of nowhere and was dragging the girl up by her arms. She stood, wobbly-legged, and blushed fiercely at him before muttering her thanks and running off to the basement.

"What on earth has gotten into her?" Walter asked in confusion, looking at Alucard. As usual, he couldn't see much behind the glasses, and the vampire's usual grin always somehow lacked enough depth to find a true meaning.

"Yes, what could it be?" Alucard responded, staring at the basement stairs. "If we only knew." He sounded smug, and Walter sighed.

"What have you done to her, Alucard?" he asked, wishing that he could give the ancient being a good dressing-down. It worked on the men every time, but Alucard was too old to worry about what Walter—or anyone else for that matter—thought of him. Any scolding on his part would be utterly ineffective.

"This time, it's more of what she's done to me," Alucard replied cryptically, his smirk growing. His fangs gleamed in the twinkling Christmas lights and Walter watched the colors dancing off the ivory canines with a sense of remote loathing. Somehow, every year Alucard managed to dim his Christmas spirit.

"Don't you bother that poor girl," he warned, wanting to tear into the vampire with his wires. "She's got enough to handle, not counting you messing with her, and staying on her all the time."

"I assure you, Walter: she's the one "on me" at the moment. It's interesting, actually," he said with a cool sort of inquisitiveness in his tone. "I wonder which of us will hold out longest?"

"My money is on her," Walter said arrogantly, though he wasn't exactly sure what Alucard was referring to. He almost didn't care—he said it only to spite his old war partner. However, Alucard didn't laugh like Walter thought he would. His smirk faded and he looked both grave and contemplative for once.

"So is mine." he said inscrutably before vanishing into thin air. Walter gazed after him, shaking his head before carrying the ladder back to the supply closet and minding the mistletoe at the archway. He didn't want to know what it was—it was a vampire thing and honestly, it would only make him concerned for Seras.

With only days to spare until the gala was upon them, the entire mansion was in an uproar. Walter had a handful of soldiers he was training to take people's coats and usher them to where they needed to be, as well as guards who would be stationed around the mansion for the guest's safety. He and Cook were tearing apart the ballroom and building it back up to their liking with
Anderson was being stretched between his two duties. Apparently, the Pope had issued a decree to enhance the safety procedures of outlying Vatican headquarters and stations abroad; this meant a hefty amount of paperwork as well as more traveling than ever before. If that wasn't enough, he kept having to try and schedule time around all this extra work to meet with Lewis and Valerie, who were scurrying to finish his suit in time.

It wasn't any easy for Integra either. Since she was technically "free" from prison, the paperwork from the rest of the Round Table started to flow in once more. That meant more for her to do, since they had been backed up because of her incarceration and were sending her everything at once. And then she also had to put her two cent's worth in on decorations and what sort of music and food should be in the ballroom and which chairs and tablecloths to set out; it was her gala, after all.

And then Lady Katherine was calling up, offering suggestions and advice on silverware and what sort of wine to serve, among other things. Integra was nearly tempted to ask the woman to host the damn thing herself, but she kept her temper in check with the thought that once all this was over, things would simmer down. Lady Katherine wouldn't bother her about dresses and husbands and hopefully, she and Sir Penwood would take care of the rest of the Round Table as well, so that Integra could get back to doing what she did best: actual work.

Seras was trying her best to split her nights between training, helping Walter with preparations, and dealing with her master. Even as a vampire with super speed and senses, she couldn't be three places at once and she ended up just as worn out as the rest of the manor's staff and inhabitants. Alucard wasn't any help at all, insisting that this party was a human affair and the only reason he was attending is because Integra was forcing his hand. The only time he seemed remotely interested is when Seras had to have her dress sized, and even then he only slunk around in the shadows and said little to nothing.

There seemed to be an endless stream of decorators, tailors, cleaners, soldiers, staff, and even a few overly-cautious Vatican agents sifting in and out through the front doors, bringing work and leaving everyone with more to do. Seras even got her wish for snow three days before Christmas week; although it wasn't near enough to stop the gala from happening, it was still enough that thoughtless soldiers tracked it in on their boots and were thoroughly rebuked by an agitated Walter.

So life went on as hectic as possible, with everyone too tired to fight, tease, or even look at each other as the calendar days flew by. And then, before they even had a chance to stop and catch their breath, it was the day of the grand party.

To Integra's relief, the day went as smoothly as planned. The only surprise was that Lewis, who they'd all written off to be homosexual, was actually married to a beautiful young woman named Carson and just really loved fashion. Carson's brother was the acclaimed Gary, who was gay as well as a brilliant hairstylist. Lewis's wife pulled a few strings and suddenly the overbooked man was free to do both women's hair for the gala.

He showed up that afternoon in a cloud of hairspray and flamboyance before immediately marching downstairs to do Seras' hair. The poor vampire was already up, having been unable to sleep for nerves and excitement. He spent most of the evening with her, and then Lewis trailed behind him to fix her dress. Finally she was allowed to look at herself in the mirror and gasped aloud, unable to recognize her own image.

Gary had put extensions into her hair so that he could "do more with what she had", and now it fell in luxurious golden curls to her waist. Her bangs were pulled out of her face with a crimson ribbon
and hung behind her, with only the shortest allowed to settle over her forehead.

Lewis had, as promised, made her dress a combination of green and red. The main part of the dress was scarlet and was built like a ball gown, with hanging sleeves that enveloped her upper arms and were outlined in a dark green color. It was tight on her torso, holding up her breasts with the help of some sort of modern corset that made her glad she didn't need to breathe all the time. It branched out in waves down the skirts, alternating between the bright scarlet and a darker red that was so subtle, you hardly noticed it. The ribbons and trimmings on the skirts were dark green as well, and shimmered slightly in the basement lighting.

The dress was long enough to cover her feet, so after some arguing Lewis had allowed her to wear plain flats, since no one would see and she was certain that heels would only make her more clumsy. She had bangles on her wrists, gold set with emeralds that were on loan from some jeweler that Lewis had connections with, and a matching gold and emerald necklace that was more a choker than an actual string of jewels, sitting high on her throat against her collarbone.

Valerie had come behind with cosmetics after the men had finished. Integra had fed them the same excuse about advanced porphyria, and so they hadn't batted an eye at her crimson irises for fear of being thought rude. Valerie had also spent time researching what might look best with her eyes, and had settled on a green so dark it was nearly black for the eyeliner, which she swiped across Seras' lids expertly. Then she dabbed on a grayish color on the lids and then mascara, which highlighted the strangely-colored eyes without making them overly noticeable. A lip stain the color of the darker red highlights in her dress completed the look.

She stood and stared at herself in the mirror, feeling like a giddy child. She swished her dress to and fro, watching the different colors come into light. It was truly a magnificent work of art, much better than she ever thought it would be. When she'd seen the prototype dress, she'd had an image in her mind, but this was much more than she could have ever imagined!

"Why, Miss Victoria!" Walter said in shock, and she turned around to smile at him and offer a small curtsy. He walked into the room, his eyes wide as dinner plates as he looked at her. "You—look at—My God," he murmured, barely touching the curls cascading down her back. "I would have never recognized you; you look so…." He paused, shaking his head, clearly speechless.

"Strange?" Seras guessed with a nervous grin.

"I think "captivating" would be a more appropriate term," he replied, clearing his throat. "You're very pretty all the time, but tonight you look positively stunning," he declared. Seras flushed, the color spreading across her cheeks and making her all the more darling.

"Don't make me blush, Walter," she mumbled, her nose crinkling. "Do you—do you think Master will approve?" she asked shyly, looking at him through her lashes. Walter nodded at once.

"I think he'd be foolish not to," he insisted. "But he better be on his guard," he added slyly. "With looks like that, you'll be getting more attention than I think either of you bargained for. He'll have to fight off the suitors." Seras reddened even more, the color spreading down her neck and turning her ears bright pink.

"Well… maybe I just might humor that sort of attention," she announced softly. "Master can fight if he wants, but I don't think he'd dare do anything drastic at Sir Integra's party." Walter hummed thoughtfully and patted her shoulder, treating her as if she might break.

"Just be careful, Miss Victoria," he advised. "You know how petty he can be at times."
"Walter, my ears are ringing!" The disembodied voice echoed throughout the room. Walter backed away with an apologetic smile.

"Are they, now?" he mused with a smile. "I wonder why?" He turned to leave, looking back at Seras one last time. "I suppose I should finish my duties and then find Sir Integra. She'll be at her wit's end trying to make sure all her ducks are in a row, as they say." Seras waved as he walked out the door, and then turned to face the empty room, looking around.

"Master?"

"Tell me true, Police Girl; what sort of women lets a man see her before...." His thought was never finished and she spun on her heel to see him standing against the wall beside her bed. He wasn't formally dressed yet, but she knew that all he had to do was use his shadows to get dressed and that he'd wait until he absolutely had to. He wasn't moving, or making any effort to complete his thought.

She lifted her skirts slightly and walked towards him, listening to the unfamiliar *swish-swish* of the fabric as she moved. She stopped before him and looked up at his face, trying to see his eyes behind his glasses. She hated that he wore them all the time; his eyes usually were a large clue to her as to his inner thoughts. She tapped their bond with her mind, but he'd completely shut off from her.

"You're right, Master," she agreed suddenly, and began to prod him out of the room. "I shouldn't be letting anyone see me until the party starts. So go and get ready; it won't be too much longer now." She pushed him out and shut the door, waiting to see if he would stop her. To her amazement he didn't, and she turned back to the mirror without another word. The woman in the mirror's smile seemed a little too crafty and knowing, so Seras grabbed a book from her end table, instead sitting in her chair to pass the time by indulging in fantasy.

She didn't like to think of herself as a vixen, but she had to admit; in this dress she felt rather... foxy.

"Come now, let us in!" Cook protested, trying to see around Lewis' agile form. The tailor blocked her off, pursing his lips in a frown.

"She's not done yet, my good madam!" he hissed, holding the chef at bay. "I promise you, when Valerie is finished you will be the *first* to see her!" Cook fell back, looking put-upon, and turned to Walter. Walter shrugged and leaned against the wall, waiting patiently, and the woman followed suit with a grumble. They waited quietly; they both had things to do before the gala officially started, but neither of them was going to miss this chance to see the young woman they'd helped raise all gussied up.

Finally, the door opened and Valerie stepped aside with a flourish to reveal the form of the heiress. Neither servant breathed, and the object of their focus became more and more agitated until finally: "Well?! Stop staring like that!" Integra demanded, bright pink spots appearing on her cheeks. "That's an order!" she growled when no one listened to her. Cook clasped her hands beneath her jowls, her eyes shining with unshed tears. Walter took a step forward, looking as if he couldn't believe his own eyes. Then the waterworks started as Cook burst into tears, stepping forward to run a finger under the slimmer woman's chin.

"Oh!" she sobbed with joy. "What a lovely young Lady you've become!" Integra looked flustered and stepped away, but the corners of her mouth barley lifted at the woman's acceptance of her
outfit. "I can't believe it—it's like a dream come true!" the woman blubbered, shaking her head as she stared in awe.

"You're beautiful," Walter summed up his thoughts with two words, smiling and holding her at arm's length, his own eyes uncharacteristically shiny as he bit his lip. "I could never have imagined… when I held you as a child, I would have never thought that one day you'd be standing before me, looking like this."

"Don't be sentimental, Walter," she insisted, but patted his hand on her shoulder comfortingly. He laughed and dropped his arms, instead going to pat the wailing chef on the back as she blew her nose into her apron.

"I'm afraid that's the fate of us elders," he joked half-heartedly. "We have to be sentimental for the rest of you young ones, so that you can live in the moment." Integra rolled her eyes and turned towards the stairs, heading for the ballroom.

"I suppose I better go down, she muttered.

"I'll come to finish up as soon as I can," Walter promised as Cook turned and began to cry into his shoulder, still going on about how beautiful she looked. Integra nodded gratefully and descended the stairs, steeling herself for what was to come.

If you'd told him when he was a child that one day he'd be standing in an Englishwoman's elaborate mansion, dressed in silk finery and ready to go to his wife's party, he'd have laughed. Him? In a mansion, in silks, with a wife that gave parties? Ridiculous! What was he, a high-class gent?

But now, he stood before the mirror and stared at himself, living out that very thing. He reached up and tugged at the jacket with both hands, being careful not to pull two hard and rip his own clothing off. He wasn't used to this slinky, silky material. He preferred the polyester of his own regular clothing. But the suit was also well crafted, and it fit him fine. He supposed that if it was only for one night, he could bear it.

He nearly ran a hand through his hair, but stopped at the last minute. That girl had used some sort of gel to tame it and while it wasn't slicked back, it wasn't all over the place anymore either. He probably shouldn't mess it up. He locked his hands behind his back and wiggled uncomfortably, still watching his reflection.

He'd been to social events before, with Maxwell. But it had been as a stolid protector, a bodyguard. He'd had been to dinners before too, and meetings at high-profile Vatican agent's houses where the elaborate settings were nearly laughable, but he'd always had a small part in those too. Now, he was the hostess's husband—that was a pretty big part. He'd never been in this type of situation before.

He had to try to make it work, though. He had an obligation to Integra, to make it work. Her hopes were riding on this gala and the approval of this mysterious Lady Katherine that everyone was so excited about. Personally, he couldn't figure what the big deal was. This woman wasn't the Queen, she wasn't the Pope and she sure as hell wasn't a Prime Minister, so why did this name have such prestige and authority behind it?

If it had just been the butler, or the cook and staff that had been excited, he wouldn't have been half as concerned. But even Integra herself seemed almost bullied by this woman into doing things she wouldn't normally do—wear a dress, put on a show, have a large party, and all to please Lady
Katherine. Who *was* this woman, who could force even his stubborn little wife's hand in a way the most powerful men in the country couldn't? He was beyond curious.

But the enigmatic Lady wouldn't be the only guest he had to watch out for. That damned vampire and his hellspawn would be there as well, keeping an eye on the guests as well as causing all sorts of trouble; he had no doubts in his mind that by the end of the night, they will have managed to get themselves in over their heads. And as much as he wanted to, he couldn't stake them to the ballroom wall. He had to stay his hand, which went against every decent bone in his body.

He shook his head, roughly dispelling such thoughts. He couldn't lose control—not tonight. He had to prove himself to these men, although for him it did nothing. He didn't feel that he had to justify his marriage to anyone; it was God and Church-ordained and for him, that was good enough. But these fickle Englishmen and their ways, wanting her to marry one minute and not the next… He'd have washed his hands of them all by now, but then again, he hadn't been raised in this world of political power and changing hands. He couldn't compare her actions to his, because she'd been introduced to this lifestyle a lot earlier than he.

Glancing once more in the mirror, he had the fleeting thought that his parents would have liked to see him dressed like this; his mother especially so. She'd gone on and on the first time she'd even seen him in his officer's uniform; surely even *she* would have never imagined that he'd be standing dressed like this one day.

He sighed and adjusted the blue and silver striped tie, squaring his shoulders. It was time to head downstairs.
Gâlceavă

The ballroom was truly a sight to behold. Stepping into it was like stepping from Earth into a small slice of Heaven. Completely white and gold, it had the illusion of being much larger than it really was. And now, decorated for Christmas, it was even more beautiful.

The ceiling was a very large fresco of a sky, with pale white clouds populated by angels, doves, and rays of sunlight. It had been painted in an expert's hand during the days of Van Helsing, and it was meticulously refurbished every year by a company based in Norway that specialized in such things. The floor was white tile etched in a golden color, forming large swirls and flourishes that seamlessly met across the dancing floor.

Mirrors stretched from floor to ceiling on the walls, also etched in gold and surrounded by pearly-white paneling. Between the mirrors, large sconces made to hold either electric light or candlelight were hung, gilded in gold and silver. There was a platformed area for an orchestra, cut off from the main floor by a gilded banister with rails fashioned from the Baroque period. They matched the fashion of the rafter beams, adding a sense of unity to the entire room.

To all this, a part of the dancing floor had been reserved for a dining area. Cook, with the soldiers' help, had taken a long oaken dining table from the canteen and placed it long-ways in the room. To make the table match she had outfitted it with a long white tablecloth, and candelabra were placed at intervals in the center. Each chair also had a white covering and each place was set with crystal and the finest china in the manor.

Each sconce had a decorative strand of ivy wrapped up in its ornate base, and white and gold poinsettias were weaved in with the bright green leaves. The centerpieces on the dining table were white and gold poinsettias too, lined with holly berries and ivy around the base of the crystal vases. The large chandeliers suspended from the ceiling also had been laced with holly, making a small border above their crystalline lights.

The normal velvet blue couches, supplied for guests to recline on, had been taken out of the ballroom. In their stead, golden settees with pale silken cushions had been brought. They were much more ornate, and fit the Christmas theme better. The entire room looked as though it came from a 1800s manor house, or an ancient castle fantasy come to life. It was beyond stunning, and the only thing missing were the guests.

When Anderson first stepped foot inside of it, he didn't know what to make of it all. It was far fancier than he was used to. Not that he didn't like it; it was very picturesque. He walked slowly to the middle of the room, gazing around at the décor with a sense of puzzled awe. He'd never really seen anything like it. The Vatican had its own style of ornamentation, and this… wasn't it. And he had never imagined such things like this existed as a child. Back then, a townhouse in the village with two floors and an indoor lavatory was the poshest thing he could think of.

He quietly watched the orchestra, which had arrived only an hour or so ago. They were setting up their instruments, tuning them while the conductor ran around helping everyone get their things together. Walter came in through a side door, dressed up in a very fine suit himself. He made his way over to Anderson and looked him over once before nodding in approval.

"Well, it's finally good to see all our hard work paying off," he said happily, glancing at the orchestra before looking around the decorated ballroom. "I'm glad it was able to warm up in here," he added conversationally. "Usually we keep large rooms like this shut off and they get so drafty. It's not a big deal in the summer, when we can open those." He motioned towards the French doors
on the other side of the ballroom, which were shut up and covered in a filmy curtain to divert the winter air from coming in.

"Aye," he replied vaguely, resisting the urge to scratch his head. That stupid gel was getting on his nerves already. Next time, he'd just stand up so that the little woman couldn't reach his hair and he'd just comb it through one good time. It might look better this way, but he was always going to choose comfort over style.

"Well, I think I'll go and check in on Cook before I head to the front doors." Walter turned and left, heading for the kitchens. His job during the first part of the night would be to greet the guests and take their coats, with the help of the soldiers he'd "recruited" to lend a hand. As the head servant in the household, he took this job very seriously. He paused, turning back to address Anderson again.

"Sir Integra should be in here in a moment. She'll be the one to insist on any last minute changes before the guests begin to arrive." Walter looked thoughtful. "Have you seen her yet?" Anderson shook his head wordlessly and Walter flashed him an astute grin. "I think you'll find her very changed. She hardly dresses up so. It's rather refreshing, actually." And with those cryptic words, he was gone.

Anderson watched him leave, the corners of his mouth turning down the slightest bit. He turned back and looked at his reflection in one of the wall mirrors. A very large man stared back at him, looking out of place in a suit and tie, with neat hair in an empty ballroom. He looked very changed, too.

He chuckled, rubbing his chin. So they both had to dress up in what could only be called a disguise. This suit wasn't him, and a dress wasn't her. But for social pressure, they'd bend and consent to it. Something about it seemed off; it seemed unnatural. It wasn't their natures to be deceptive. But in order to be considered "proper", they had to deceive.

Rapid footfalls alerted him to the fact that he wasn't alone anymore and he straightened his tie again with a grim feeling of resignation. The closer this event came, the more his stomach churned. He wasn't uneasy, but he was... apprehensive, was the closest term. He kept picturing all the things that could go wrong with this, and what it would mean. Not for him directly, but for Integra. And he knew that he would never hear the end of it if something happened that he could have prevented.

Someone turned the corner and entered the ballroom and made their way towards the orchestra, toying with their hairstyle. He didn't even recognize Integra until she looked up and he saw her face, and the distinguishing glasses. She stopped, looking at him as if seeing him for the first time, as if he hadn't sat across from her at breakfast just that morning.

He realized now that his tie was supposed to match her dress, with the silver and blue stripes. Her dress was the same shade of blue, bright and with silver edges, a whirling design running up the waist to the bust line and over the wide shoulder strap that held the fabric up on her torso. It was—there was a word for it, but he couldn't recall the name of it—it was like a toga, a... a Grecian style, that was it.

It flowed around her, fashionable and yet plain enough that it fit her. Her hair was a simple chignon that had silver ribbons weaved into it, and her earrings were diamond and barely hung off her ears. The tailor's assistant had given her a fragile look with the makeup, almost like a china doll or a Roman statue. Pale silver highlights on her eyes and even her lipstick was a lighter shade, although it did darken her lips enough to be noticeable. She wasn't wearing any gloves, and the only jewelry beside her earrings was her wedding ring.
His first thought was that he didn't know what to think. If he'd thought his mind was warring over what to do beforehand, he was very mistaken. That was a friendly sparring compared to the firefight between his emotions now. He was split in three ways, at the very least. Part of him wanted to throw his jacket over her shoulders and tell her that it was indecent to be walking around showing that much of her body, even if it was covered. Another part was nudging him to stop staring and tell her that she looked nice. The third part—well, that part was telling him to drag her upstairs and do things that would make them both sore and late to their own party; things that a priest most definitely shouldn't know how to do.

He settled with clearing his throat and nodding to her before looking away, his hands clasped behind his back. He hoped that he looked like he was happy with her dress and very interested in the décor. In reality, he was doing everything possible to hold himself back. He felt her eyes on him and warranted that she was waiting on him to say something, so he wracked his mind for anything that didn't involve her and him and the bedroom wall.

"The butler said tha' this room gets drafty." Wait, what? Of all the things he could have said; he bit the inside of his cheek and suppressed a sigh. "But—it's warm in here now." That was probably because his entire upper body felt like it was on fire.

"Yes, it's… warm." Her voice was strained, and he looked over without thinking to see that she looked nearly frantic. He turned around fully, his uneasiness washing out under a wave of concern. She was really taking this gala to heart. "I'll have Walter turn down the heat. If Lady Katherine gets too—"

"If she gets too hot, let her go outside," he replied in his best "calming down" voice, wavering a moment before patting her awkwardly on the shoulder. "Dinnae worry about this Lady Katherine." She shook her head, her fingers tapping the side of her thigh. He recognized the pattern—she wanted to go and smoke. "Have a cigar," he said firmly, wondering how he got in a position to tell his own wife it was alright to go and ruin her lung. "You have time."

"No, she'll call me out on the smell," Integra growled bitterly. "I told her I would consider cutting back on the tobacco." He arched one brow imperiously.

"But her husband knows ye smoke," he said quietly.

"What Sir Penwood chooses to tell his wife is not my issue," Integra replied curtly. "Besides, you don't know her; you have no idea how she can wear you down." He watched her, and when he didn't reply she looked up at him.

"What hold does this woman have on ye? Why her, of all the people in the world…" he broke off, trying to see the answer in her expression. "Ye dinnae even hesitate to argue with me about everything under the sun," he held up a hand as she raised her voice to protest, "but this woman—you'll hide an addiction from her, dress up for her, and what all."

"It's not like that," she hissed, her eyes narrowing. "It's—it's…" she stopped, shaking her head firmly. "I don't have to explain anything to you." Her fingers tapped her thigh harder; her eyes were cold steel.

"No, ye don't," he growled back. "But it'd be easier for me if ye did."

"Easier for you," she scoffed, looking away.

"Aye!" His voice echoed in the ballroom and the conductor stopped, turning around to see what was going on. The orchestra peered over their instruments, eyes gazing curiously at them. He
breathed deeply and caught her arm as she turned to leave, trying to stay calm. "How can I understand if ye never say anything on it?"

"I don't care about you understanding, or not understanding," she snapped, trying to yank her arm away from him. "I can deal with you tomorrow! Tonight, I have to deal with them!"

"The Penwoods?" She gave her arm a mighty tug, tripping over the train of her dress and nearly falling.

"No!" she shrieked, and the orchestra stopped again. She gave them such an evil glare that the conductor started in alarm and turned back to his ensemble, giving them anxious, furtive glances out of the corner of his eye. "Lady Katherine, and Sir Irons, and all the others who've ran my life from the time I became heiress!" He stared at her, watching her still try to loosen his iron hold.

"I don't understand—" he began, but she cut him off before he could finish his thought.

"I don't expect you to understand! How could you understand?! You have no idea what it's like to have every move you make scrutinized and stripped apart, to have no say for yourself, to have to live every day with the thought that if you even breathe the wrong way, you'll be booted out because you're not fit enough, all because you're female!" She took a deep breath, finally shocking him enough that he let go and she rubbed her arm, stumbling back a step. Her anger and frustration bubbled up and she couldn't hold it in.

"And if that's not enough, you have a nosy old aristocrat breathing down your back, declaring that you should wear dresses and god-awful corsets, and do your hair every week and get your toenails painted red; and even if you have an army that you have to fight to make them respect you, it's not enough! It's never enough for her, and—it makes me hate her sometimes!" She shouted. "That's what it is! How can you understand that?"

Anderson was quiet, staring over her head with a strange expression before looking back at her with a mix of sympathy and warmth that made her feel bad for shouting at him, even while she felt good for yelling in his face. A tiny part of her knew that he was only trying to make it as easy as possible for them both to coexist together, but she really didn't care. He didn't comprehend her actions, and she knew he never would, fully.

Someone cleared his throat behind her and she turned to see the worst possible thing—of course, this gala hadn't even started, and was already far from being a success in her books. She straightened up, staring straight ahead at the couple standing across from her: the sweating, portly man who was mopping his brow and inching away from his wife very slowly, as if she were a bombshell that hadn't detonated, and a woman about her own height and twice her girth in a beautiful lilac dress, gloved hand clenching a fan and hazel eyes glaring haughtily into her own as her face turned a dark scarlet.

"So," she said at length. "This is what she calls gratitude." Sir Penwood looked between his wife and his coworker, who seemed unsure whether to face up to the woman she just claimed to hate, or hide behind her husband. Paladin Anderson's expression bordered dread, presumably at what was clearly about to happen between the two women.

"Lady Katherine," Integra started as civilly as she could muster. The woman snapped her fan shut, bringing it down in one hand the way the nuns at the orphanage did with their "discipline" rulers before brandishing it at the younger noble.

"Don't deny you've said it!" she yelled, waving her fan about, feathers flying. "I heard every word! I was standing right here! Don't deny it; you weren't lying!"
"I wasn't," Integra agreed, her tone icy and even. "I meant every word I said." Anderson wasn't sure if this was 100% true, but he wasn't stepping into the tiger's den now. He was too busy trying to figure out a way to salvage this situation.

"After all I've done for you," she snarled in reply. "After all I've sacrificed for you; I've treated you like my own daughter—"

"All the more reason to thank God my father raised me," Integra cut in, her own face a mask of unbridled anger. Lady Kathrine gasped audibly, hurt evident across her features. "I'd never have been a good leader if you'd raised me. You're too focused on materialistic gain to care about the important things."

"I-important things?!" Lady Katherine screeched. "That's only unimportant to you! Looking presentable and acting a lady is very important in this world, young lady!"

"That's the kind of person you want me to be?" Integra shouted back, looking rather affronted. "What would looking and acting like a lady possibly do for me? Will it make me more commanding person?"

"It would make you a better person!" the woman exploded, causing her husband to literally jump in the air as she threw her fan on the ground. "A kinder person, a gentler person! Not what I see before me!"

"Pray tell, what do you see before you? I've done everything you asked me to." The older woman's shoulders squared and she stepped forward threateningly, thought Integra stood her ground.

"I should have known you'd manage to mess this up for me," Lady Katherine spat, her voice low as she advanced. "Stubborn, impudent, cheeky, difficult, willful-minded, with a complete lack of respect for your elders, bringing your family disgrace with your mannerisms and your temper! Your father would be shocked to see you behaving this way to me, Integra Fairbrook Wingates Hellsing! You are acting like a spoiled brat!"

Silence reigned. The conductor and orchestra had booked it a while back, scurrying out of the room with the muttered excuses while the elder noblewoman rattled off her list. Sir Penwood was gasping for breath, his hands raised imploringly, kerchief still in hand. Walter had appeared in the doorway, but on seeing what was going on he'd gone back into the shadows, watching nervously. He, like the other nobleman, didn't dare step over to get a word in edgewise.

Anderson felt a rush of anger towards the woman. How dare anyone yell at his wife like that! This woman claimed to be of a graceful lineage, of acting the part of a lady, but here she was getting just as loud and temperamental! He didn't care much for hypocrites, and only his complete lack of aristocratic background and inner fortitude that life in the priesthood gave him stopped him from dragging Integra out of the line of fire and giving this loudmouthed Lady a good talking-to.

"Is that all you have to say to me?" Integra was the one to break the silence, her voice a mere whisper. He saw her hands shaking at her sides and knew that she was near her breaking point. She was going to fly at the woman, or… a lesser woman would burst into tears in front of everyone, but he knew that she wouldn't. Not where all could see.

"No, it's not," Lady Katherine replied shortly, her ample chest heaving. "But it's all you can handle at the moment." She stared at her fan before turning away. "It's too hot in here," she said loudly, her voice cracking. "I'm going out to take in the air." Her last words ended on a sob and she quickly walked out the way she'd come in.
"Kitty," Sir Penwood said weakly, raising a hand and making as if to follow her before faltering, bending down to pick up the fan and staring at it with a sad expression. Anderson felt a breeze beside him and turned to see that Integra had left as well, the edge of her dress turning the corner as she went into the mansion. He looked back at Sir Penwood, who was eyeing him with a mixture of disdain and confusion.

"Well." He swallowed hard, grimacing. "Could it have gone worse?" Sir Penwood rubbed his temple with one hand and wiped the sweat off his mustache.

"I shouldn't be surprised," he said at last. "They were long overdue for one of these rows. I told her that we shouldn't have arrived so early, but… well, what's done is done."

"Aye," Anderson agreed thoughtfully. "What should be done?" Walter appeared at the door, his feathers ruffled.

"Lady Katherine has retired to the gardens, Sir Penwood." He looked gravely over his shoulder. "As for Sir Integra, I'm not sure where she's ran off to. Oh dear…" He tore off one glove and began to wring it in his hands, looking put-upon and tired. "I'm afraid this evening is nearly over before it started." The three men stood in silence, before Walter turned away. "I believe I'll go inform Alucard and Miss Seras of the situation," he announced; as if the vampires needed to know, or even cared.

"I'll go find Kitty," Sir Penwood volunteered, giving Anderson a baleful glance. "You can deal with her." He jerked his thumb in the direction of the manor's interior, looking hopeful that the paladin might be shot in a fit of rage or something before wandering out into the night, his jacket slung over his shoulder as sweat continued to bead on his forehead.

Anderson stood alone, thinking hard on where she might have gone. He walked slowly up the stairs, his hands in his pockets as he started with her office, suppressing a groan. He half-heartedly thought that it might have been better to find another mission, this time one in a place far away. It was summer right now in the Southern Hemisphere. Antarctica might be nice.

"Poor Sir Integra," Seras murmured sympathetically, casting a scorching glare at Alucard, who was sitting in his chair and beside himself with wild laughter. She had heard the muffled yelling from upstairs, and had hurried to her master's chambers to hear the news (when he was in a good mood, his bond with Sir Integra was a good grapevine to spy through and he'd tell her the happenings upstairs).

He'd let her in and she saw none of his earlier… strange behavior. However, as she'd told him about what she'd heard, she'd noticed that his eyes had hardly strayed from her no matter where in the room she'd moved.

However, before he could tell her what was going on Walter had come hurrying in with news that the gala, although a full hour away from officially starting, might not be happening at all! Sir Integra had lost her temper and gotten into a tiff with the mysterious Lady Katherine, who had been the louder, more pronounced voice that Seras had heard from her position in the upper basement.

"So her ladyship's feelings were hurt, and then her pride was hurt, and now they've both gone and said far too much." Walter was clearly very worried, and kept glancing to the ceiling as though he could hear them still. Alucard was no help at all, finding the situation sidesplittingly funny, so Seras felt that it fell to her to help him.
"Don't worry, Walter," she said, wrapping him in a comforting hug. She came at him from the side and her arms overlapped around his thin waist, squeezing him as gently as she could while she laid her head on his chest and heard the quickening *thu-doon, thu-doon* of his heart against her ear. She closed her eyes, enjoying the sensation of hearing a heartbeat up close, sniffing the dust-and herb smell of his good suit and cozying up to his warmth.

He wrapped an arm around her shoulders and squeezed, but at the same time he shivered and she reluctantly pulled away, knowing that her lack of body heat made her feel very cold to humans and didn't help with the chilled basement air all around them already. She opened her eyes and tucked a stray curl back behind her ear. Alucard had stopped laughing; instead he was staring at them with an expression she couldn't place. It wasn't anger; it was almost… envious. She stared blankly at him and he looked away, tilting his head.

"She's shooting something," he said, a trace of glee still in his voice. "Or someone." Walter frowned reproachfully and murmured about the vampire's "complete lack of tact". Seras shook her head, wondering why the butler had thought better of her master. He didn't care if Sir Integra was unhappy. It didn't affect *him* adversely, so it was beyond his notice—save the humor that it induced.

"Are you going to go and find her, Walter?" Seras still kept an air of calm, but inside her mind she was becoming concerned herself. "I mean, all these guests will arrive soon, and they can't be there without their host." Walter shook his head.

"Paladin Anderson has gone to collect her, I believe," he responded. At the sound of the name, Seras paled slightly, and Alucard snarled and ran a hand over his face, his other fist crashing against the arm of the chair. Walter wondered if the two vampires would ever get used to having a vampire hunter living over their heads. Seras maybe, but not Alucard. He and Anderson went as well together as a werewolf and a silver bullet.

"I-I hope it's not him she's shooting," Seras joked, trying to smile and keep a cheerful tone. Alucard snorted and her smile faltered, glancing quickly at him for some sort of confirmation. He shrugged and she hugged herself, rocking on her heels. Walter smiled at her, grateful that she was trying to diffuse the situation, even if it wasn't working.

"I just thought I'd keep you posted. Would you like some more to drink while we wait?" They both shook their head and with an uncertain bow Walter left. Seras watched him leave, absently tugging at her extensions. Alucard didn't move from his chair, but he laced his fingers and rested his head on them musingly.

"Do you think it'll be alright?" Seras asked, walking back around to stand beside his chair. "Do you think they'll go on with the gala?"

"Oh, they'll go on with it," he replied slowly. "But what happens afterwards will be… interesting, to say the least." Seras bit her finger as she considered what he might mean. Finally she crossed her arms with a huff and he patted his thigh invitingly. She looked for a better option, but found none.

"No tricks," she warned and settled herself on the edge of his lap, her skirts billowing up around her. He kept his fingers laced and they sat in silence, waiting patiently for whatever would unfold.

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Sir Penwood was in deep, deep trouble. Not for anything he'd done more or less, but because his wife and the Round Table’s only female Knight were once again at odds. It was hard to keep them in the same room as it was, but even *he* had been shocked at what had happened in the ornate ballroom.
They'd let themselves into the room, and had happened upon the lady of the house and her disastrous choice of a husband in the middle of a marital spat. That in itself wouldn't have been bad, if she hadn't been ranting about his wife, and plainly said "it makes me hate her sometimes".

Penwood knew that Sir Integra hadn't meant it; at least, not the way his Kitty had taken it. She'd only meant the same thing that everyone who knew the woman—yes, even himself—had thought to themselves at some point or another. His wife had certain tendencies to be annoying and overbearing; and when dealing with them, those tendencies caused feelings of overwhelming frustration and near resentment that often did feel like at that moment, you hated her. Of course, the feeling soon passed and no one truly hated Katherine Penwood. They just hated her pigheaded nature.

Walking in the twilight, he found his wife not too far from the main gates, kicking at frosted shrubbery and crying her heart out. He observed her for a few moments, making sure that her current state wouldn't be in position to cause any bodily harm to his person. She'd punched him before, hard enough to floor him at times. It wasn't the most fun a man could have, and he didn't want to deal with a black eye right now on top of everything else.

Finally he crunched through the snow and wrapped her in a tight embrace before she could protest; feeling how the cold air on her bare shoulders had already left an impact. She struggled wildly before realizing who had "caught" her and then she was burying her face in his neck, her body racked with sobs.

"There now, my darling, my love," he murmured, patting her back and stroking her hair. "Don't get yourself all worked up; it'll be alright, you'll see." He knew from experience that he had to calm her down before she would see reason. She had gotten too overemotional and now she'd gone and made herself weepy. It reminded him of those stressful months during her pregnancy, when she'd fly off the handle and dissolve into tears at least once a week.

"She hates me!" she wailed, her voice thankfully muffled by the coat still slung across his shoulder. He laid his chin on her head, rocking her in a soothing motion while trying to actually hold them both up at once—a feat he was surprised to find was still easy for him, even in his older age.

"She doesn't hate you, and you both know it," he contradicted gently. "She's only mad, and you are too. You've hurt each other's feelings." He pulled her off of him, grabbing his coat and wrapping it around her shoulders, tucking her arms under the sides like he used to do for her when they went to plays and assemblies during their courtship-filled youth. She sniffled and he grabbed his sweaty handkerchief by mistake, offering it to her.

"That's disgusting, Shelby," she murmured and he stuffed it back into his trouser pocket with a blush before pulling out the clean one on the other side. She accepted it and dotted the corners of her eyelids before blowing her nose as daintily as she could. "Am I really that awful to her?" she asked hesitantly, giving him a doe-eyed expression.

"I think—" he started, wringing his hands, "I think life is very stressful for her, sometimes. Perhaps even more stressful than it would have been if she were a boy. There's no denying that there's a glass-ceiling, and she's managed to put herself in a position that is awkward for the men who still believe that women have no place in politics."

"But am I too hard on her?"

"No, I don't think that's it," he answered sincerely. "I think that perhaps she doesn't understand that you do care about her, no matter what she wears." Lady Katherine looked astonished.
"She does understand!" she replied, shocked. "She should know that I love her as dearly as if she were my own daughter! It doesn't matter that she walks around like a colonel in her own home, as long as she acts ladylike around others! I don't care what she does at home at all."

"Yes, you do," he protested weakly. "Or at least, you make it seem as though you care a great deal."

"Do I?" she inquired dubiously. "I don't think I do."

"Well, we'll speak more on it later, Kitty dear." He patted her hand and she wrapped herself around him once more, kissing the underside of his jaw. He suddenly felt quite warm despite the snow and found himself smiling like a fool, happy that it was just the two of them outside so that no one else could see. "Now, now," he sputtered as she moved up towards his ear, tickling his neck. "We're not at home, you know. Save it!" he yelped, rubbing his jaw and pushing her off of him.

"My dearest," she sniffed, wiping the last of her tears away. "Always making me feel better." She hiccupped. "But," she continued, looking back at the manor, "I'm not finished with her yet. I won't say anything tonight...." she trailed off, her frown becoming more pronounced. "What a disrespectful thing she is sometimes."

"Yes, she most certainly is," Sir Penwood agreed. "Come now, let's go back. You'll catch cold in this snow, unless you come inside and warm up." He led her back in the direction of the manor, his wife uncharacteristically quiet. He basked in the moment. But, like all things, it met its end as they neared the front doors, lights spilling out and making the snow glitter.

"That man she was with. The tall blonde. Is that—?" Sir Penwood coughed loudly, his mustache bristling.

"That's her husband," he all but snarled. "A verifiable brute. He cost me a fortune, paying off those debts!" Lady Penwood lapsed back into thoughtful silence, which made her husband wonder. It wasn't often that she thought hard enough about things that she didn't speak while thinking about them. Finally she gave a solemn nod.

"Yes, that's the only type of man I could ever see her with. And you said she chose poorly, Shelby. Pish-posh!" She waved her gloved hand, upsetting the coat on her shoulders. "I think he's a fine man."

"Fine?! Fine!?" Sir Penwood sputtered. "You haven't said a single word to him! You have no idea of his character to call him fine!"

"Where is he now?" she asked as he helped her up the stairs and through the front door. Walter met them and asked if they'd like to warm up in the kitchen while waiting for Sir Integra and they agreed.

"He's gone off to find her, I presume," Sir Penwood replied as he tucked her arm more firmly around his, following the butler to the kitchen. Lady Penwood smiled and nodded again.

"See? There you go." He didn't have the heart to argue with her, so he sighed and let her be. It earned him another quick kiss before she let go of him to stand next to the fire and talk to Walter about "old times", and he couldn't find it within himself to complain too much as he sat at a table and sagged into the chair, trying to relax his tense shoulder muscles.

After all, it could always be worse.
As fast as her pistol would reload, she shot the target. It didn't matter that she was in a gown and the noise-cancelling earphones didn't fit quiet as well on her head with her hairstyle in the way. It only mattered that she was angry beyond belief, and this was the next best thing to shooting the good lady herself.

The target was ripped to shreds by her expert aim, the head and stomach being torn apart and leaving behind only a paper torso fluttering to the ground. Even as satisfying as it was, it wasn't enough for her and she ripped off the earphones angrily, slamming them on the counter in front of her and the gun beside it. She wanted to run her hands through her bangs, but they were tucked up in her hair at the moment and she felt helpless, her hands unable to do anything.

"Feel better?" She spun around, shocked, and saw Anderson sitting on the stairs. He stood up when she noticed him and stepped into the room proper, his hands behind his back.

"No," she snapped, stomping over to the ammo closet and grabbing more bullets. "I don't." He took the box from her and sat it beside the gun, tugging her over to the stairs and making her sit down. She tried to stand back up, but he pushed her back and then sat beside her. He rested his elbows on his knees, staring silently at the felled paper target as she fumed beside him, her agitation increasing with each minute he made her stay.

"I think I understand a wee bit now; why ye strive so hard for this woman. She can be downright hurtful, I see." Integra sniffed, wiping the edge of her mouth. This stupid lip gloss, or lipstick or whatever it was—it drove her to distraction, and with her present state she wanted to march upstairs and just wash it all off.

"I'm not hurt," she scowled. "She can think whatever she wants about me. I don't care; I never cared for anyone's good opinion. I do what I have to in order to protect my men and my country. Nothing more, nothing less."

"Ye do care," he argued, voice soft. "Otherwise ye wouldnae have tears."

"I didn't cry!" she shouted contemptuously, glaring daggers at him. He was silent, but reached out and barely rubbed the edge of her face gently with his thumb, his glove cool against her skin. It came back tinged with black and she stared at it in confusion. Then she realized that her mascara was smudged, and rubbed the edge of her eye with her own fingers, trying to wipe it away correctly.

Alright, so maybe she had blinked back a few tears, but it was only because the noblewoman's words and made her utterly furious! They had stung, and they were all completely unfounded! After all she did to try and bend to Lady Katherine's demands in order to keep the peace, after all she did for Hellsing and her countrymen, and then to be shouted at and degraded like her work was nothing? It had been too much to bear!

She stopped the futile rubbing and sat miserably on the step, wanting nothing more than to just crawl into bed and hide her face in her pillows for the next thousand years. She felt frustrated; she had never really cared about Lady Katherine's approval. It was just easier to try and keep the woman off her back. But how could she do that, and still keep her authority at the Round Table? She couldn't seem to find a way to do both; it was either one or the other. And each seemed to be equally important in its own right.

He removed her glasses and began to wipe under her eyes for her, staining his gloves with streaks of black as his fingers drifted over her face. She closed her eyes as he worked, holding still as the
lump that had been stuck in her throat slowly loosened and worked its way back down. She had the sudden urge to bury herself in his arms and tell him to go and scare away all her guests so that she didn't have to deal with them.

But that was unrealistic, and instead she let him put her glasses back on once he was done and graced him with a small appreciative smile, thought her expression still showed how upset she was. They sat in silence for a few long moments, just staring at each other, before he looked upstairs.

"I think ye'll have to go back soon. It cannae be long before the others start comin' in."

"Do I have to?" she asked, rubbing her temples with a suppressed groan.

"I believe at some point, it will be necessary," he joked, standing up and offering her his hand. "Come on." She paused, looking uncertain. "Come on." He jerked his head. "If she starts to yell at ye again, just leave it to me." She let him pull her up at that, glaring at him.

"I wouldn't dare. She'd try to find an ally in you, and if she started using you to get to me, I'd have to have you both killed."
Gala (Part I)

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for \textit{notes}.

It was a cold November day, but Katherine Penwood didn't worry about that. Her mind was on other matters. Even though she was in her late forties and had put on her fair share of extra pounds, she was still a spry woman. It showed as she practically sprinted up the long walk, her skirts flying behind her and showing plump legs and fashionable boots. She hastily brushed her curls out of her face. This morning before the mirror, she had lamented the gray strands that were beginning to interweave with the deep chestnut color, but now it seemed silly to cry over such things.

She burst through the door on her husband's heels, running into a madhouse just inside. It was crowded and hot in the foyer; men were running everywhere, shouting orders and bumping into one another in their frenzy to get things done. The black-and-white tile beneath her feet was cracked in places, and the tables that usually held small knickknacks were overturned. Someone had ransacked the place, it looked like.

She paused in the doorway, a manicured hand over her mouth as she watched the scene unfolding delicately. Irons was in the middle of it all, shouting at the top of his lungs. Hugh Walsh was in the corner, speaking to a strange man. She looked more closely at him, finally recognizing the vampire that used to hide beneath a wide-brimmed hat and orange sunglasses. Now, he wore skintight leather with buckles and chains, like some New Wave punk down at the alleyway between the shoppes.

He glanced at her, his eyes smoldering as if fires were lit within them, crimson as hellfire and full of contempt for the humans around him. He might have been able to read her mind. \textit{Good}, she decided as she stared back at him unabashedly. Then he knows how I hate the sight of him; I thought that Arthur had him locked away forever.

He looked back at Walsh, dismissing some comment and grinning savagely as he jerked his thumb towards the basement.

From the basement stairs came men in hazmat suits carrying stretchers between them. Their gloves were stained red, as well as the shrouds covering the contents of the stretchers. Some of the shapes beneath the tainted, sticky cloth didn't even resemble anything human, but the last one still held a familiar look to it.

A hand dangled from the stretcher, and she recognized the Hellsing emblem on the cuff as well as the ring on the man's finger. The skin of his hand was white, and for a moment she thought it was a glove until she realized that Richard Hellsing's corpse was completely bloodless. She shuddered in repulsion, looking away as her lunch rose in her throat. She moved aside as they carried the stretchers out, their faces grim.

"Penwood!" Sir Irons roared above the din. "Thank God you're here; I can't find Dornez anywhere!" Her husband was already sweating at an alarming rate, the heat of the bodies crammed into the foyer doing nothing to help the beads of visible stress already rolling down his cheeks. She handed him her second-to-last clean kerchief and he looked dismally at her, running it over his face once before he jogged to join his comrade, fat jiggling beneath his pinstripes.

Looking around the foyer, she realized that it had done no good for her to come. Even if Arthur had been her close friend, there was nothing she could do at the present moment to help the situation. A coup was a coup, and that was something the men handled better than she did. A wave of helplessness washed over her; it was a bitter feeling, as she hated feeling powerless in any
Suddenly, a group of men moved and she caught sight of the one thing she could do to help. Sitting on a settee off in a corner, watching the men move about her with a weary gaze, was a girl.

She looked no more than thirteen, if that. She wore a white button-up blouse with a pale, bland ribbon around her neck, tied like a man's tie beneath her collar. Her skirt was the same off-colored tone as the ribbon, reaching to her ankles. Her shoes were plain brown loafers, stained dark with bodily fluids. Her large, round glasses dwarfed her elfin face, which was blood-splattered and morose.

The sleeve of her right arm had been torn cleanly at the seam (by the paramedic, no doubt); the alteration showed a glimpse of her plain bra, and her entire right arm was bare. Her upper arm had been bandaged, a hint of blood leaking through the wrappings. Nothing about her was remotely fashionable or well-kept, for even her hair hung lankly in her face and tumbled down her back—though it was at least brushed. However, she had the air of one who could be somewhat pretty, if she wanted to be.

There was no doubt in Katherine's mind that this was Arthur's child. She'd been named godmother, but she had never met the girl. She'd seen a picture of a tow-headed babe in a nurse's arms once, but that had been long ago. Arthur had kept them updated with a few letters and phone calls, bragging about her intelligence and what a wonderful thing she was growing up to be.

He'd been every bit the proud father, and while she couldn't say she was entirely happy about an unruly man like him raising a daughter, she was pleased that he was able to experience the joys of parenthood in his remaining time on earth. But now she looked at the child and felt sorrow. If only she had fought harder, Arthur may have given in and the girl would have been spared this pain.

She was astounded at the fact that Richard would have shot his own niece. While the man had been a little seedy, she hadn't thought him capable of murdering his own family, much less an unarmed child! She wondered if he may have done something to Arthur as well. But no, that couldn't have been. Walter would have watched after the man himself, and Richard wouldn't have had any way of doing anything. Even if he had, she had been assured that Arthur had been lucid up to his dying moments and she knew that he would have told Walter or even Shelby that his brother was up to something.

Wouldn't he? Katherine felt her heart sinking. Arthur had never denied that Richard had taken a bad path as of late, but he'd loved his younger brother. She remembered in their youth that Arthur had always been taking up for Richard, bailing him out of trouble and trying to keep an eye on him, the war, and the country all at the same time. Perhaps he didn't realize what his brother was planning, or he turned a blind eye to it, hoping that it would work itself out. Or maybe he was like her, unable to believe that his own brother would go to such lengths as killing his daughter after his death.

She felt around her bosom for her last kerchief, pulling out with a grimace. It was her favorite, one of three owned by her mother and embroidered with different flowers on each. This one was the one with little roses on the corners. But even if she shivered at the thought of being unable to use it due to stains, she had no choice.

She approached the girl, who was still sitting alone even as others moved around her. She seemed completely consumed by her grief, and Katherine couldn't help but feel pity for the child. She was orphaned, her only family had turned against her, and now the only thing she had to look to for protection was a ruthless vampire and a reckless butler that was God-knows-where right now, instead of where he should be at his charge's side.
"Poor dearie," she murmured, sitting on the settee at the girl's side. She gently cupped the child's chin and turned it, patting the kerchief to the smooth cheek. "They doctored you, but no one even thought of cleaning the blood from your face." She methodically wiped the crimson liquid from the girl's skin, taking care not to jostle her hurt arm.

The girl pulled back, her eyes clearing as she came back to reality, her thoughts dissipating. She gazed warily at Katherine, her hands fisting in her lap.

"Who are you?" she asked, her voice sounding hoarse. Shock, Katherine thought. *She's still in shock, otherwise she'd be crying now.* Katherine smiled gently and continued her ministrations, making an effort to be calm and patient with the poor little thing.

"My name is Katherine Penwood," she said quietly, tidying the girl. Tucking her bloodstained kerchief back into her dress, she brushed the girl's bangs behind her ears and gentled her as best she could. "I know who you are; you're Integra, right?"

"Yes, I am," the girl confirmed, slightly surprised. "How—how do you know me?" She stopped trying to pull away, her puzzlement and curiosity winning over her already exhausted self-preservation.

"My husband and your father were good friends, when they were both younger." She smiled in a friendly way. "In fact, you may not know this, but we are your godparents." Something in Integra's eyes cleared, like the sun breaking through clouds.

"Godfather," she breathed. "Yes, my father—he said if I needed anything, to ask Mr. Penwood and he'd get it for me. I remember now..." she trailed off, grief entering her expression once more. Katherine put a hand on her uninjured shoulder, barely rubbing.

"Yes, that's right," she encouraged. "If you ever need anything, anything at all, you must tell Mr. Penwood or me. You can even call me Auntie Kitty if you would like. We want to take care of you," she insisted, looking her dead in the eyes.

"I—thank you," Integra said softly, returning her gaze steadily. "As the new head of the family, I may need some favors from time to time. I'll be grateful for any assistance you could provide." Katherine was astonished; such a proper, businesslike manner this child had! Had Arthur raised her to be a capitalist from the time she was out of diapers? It sounded that way!

"Well," she laughed awkwardly, her smile barely faltering before coming back full-force. The girl wasn't so bad. A bit stuffy, perhaps, but good manners were always becoming in a young lady. A bit of makeup, some stylish clothing, and a few lessons in grace were all that was needed.

She scooted closer to Integra and put her arms around her lightly, pressing the tiny form to her in a motherly embrace. "I promise you this; I shan't let anyone hurt you ever again. I'll kill them myself if that happens," she whispered fiercely. "I'll take good care of you, don't worry."

The child stiffened in her arms and pulled back, looking at her strangely. Rubbing her arm, she put a good few inches of space between Katherine and her body, wiggling slightly. Katherine felt her eyes widen; it was as if the girl had never had a hug in her life! Was she completely against physical contact?

Integra glanced cautiously at her again before looking around the room and avoiding her eyes, her hands falling back into her lap. She looked at the door and her face crumpled for a fraction of a second before taking a relieved expression.
"Walter!" she called, and Katherine could hear the hint of tears in her voice. Several objects clattered to the ground and she looked to see grocery bags littering the floor, their contents rolling all over the place. The man himself was running towards the settee, sliding to a stop onto his knees. His hands professionally studied the wound, running quickly over the girl as if he didn't believe the doctors did a proper check.

"Miss Integra!" he said breathlessly, looking her in the eyes and seeming as much a frightened parent as any father would have been. "What happened? Why are you hurt? Where's your uncle—" He stopped, glancing at Katherine briefly before seeming to remember something. Twisting, he looked at the vampire and his mouth dropped open, his usual professional demeanor forgotten as he stood and gaped.

"Hello, Angel of Death," the vampire purred viciously. "Long time, no see." Sir Irons moved forward, blocking the vampire from Walter's view.

"Dornez!" he screamed, his face mottled with rage. "Did I not specifically tell you to keep both Richard and Integra in your sight? That he wasn't to be trusted? That she was in danger and you needed to guard her with your life? Tell me, where was I not clear enough, that you assumed it was acceptable to leave her in her traitorous uncle's care!?"

"I was only going to be gone this hour or more, running to the grocer's for Cook since the main staff was off duty for the funeral…" he faltered, realizing on his own what must have happened.

"No," he said, with a new conviction. "No. This is all my fault. I should have stayed—I only thought… I mean, I had hoped that your feelings weren't based in any fact. I disobeyed, and this is the result of my actions. I take full blame," he finally murmured, head bowed and thoroughly ashamed and chastised.

"Yes!" Sir Irons agreed wholeheartedly. "Because of your thoughtlessness, Arthur's sole child almost lost her life! You left a poor, defenseless little girl in the hands of a Nazi-sympathizing monster!" he howled with indignation. Walter's head sunk even more, the full weight of the issue at hand written on his face. Katherine was about to stand up for the poor lad and tell Irons to shove it, since yelling wouldn't undo what had been done. But before could move, she heard Integra speak.

"Defenseless?" she said, almost as if she didn't hear Irons clearly. She looked up at him, her eyes hardening even as they glistened wetly. "Defenseless?!" she said again, standing up, her jaw set. "I'm not a defenseless little girl! I killed my uncle with my own hands!" Walter and Sir Irons both looked down at her in shock, and she was breathing as if she had ran a mile.

"I'm not!" she shouted, her shoulders beginning to shake. "I did! I shot him!" Katherine saw the beginnings of a complete breakdown, and took action. This was something she excelled at, rather than coups and military tactics.

"Come, that's enough excitement," she said, clapping her hands briskly. "Walter, carry Integra up and put her in bed; make her some tea, and some hot soup if she has the stomach for it. Irons, quit your bellowing and get some work done around here; I want this place cleaned up and ready to resume action tomorrow morning. Someone find my Shelby," she called out to the men.

They stared openmouthed at her and she gave them her best glare, the one that got things done around her house with no questions asked. "Well? Get going!" she thundered, the edge to her voice sending a shiver down every man's spine. "Get on it!" Immediately everyone rushed to find Sir Penwood, or to do as Irons asked, as he'd returned to shouting orders at twice the usual speed. Walter took Integra's hand and leaned over her like a strange, protective vulture as he ushered her
up the stairs.

When they reached the landing, Integra turned back and gazed at Katherine with a mixture of awe and slight admiration. Katherine smiled and waved, wiggling her fingers before blowing a kiss up at the girl.

"I'll be in touch!" she called, and Integra had the good sense to hide any anxiety the sentence gave her behind a different, less life-threatening expression; it made her look as though she were about to sneeze.

"You called, Kitty?" This was her Shelby, who huffed and puffed behind her. She turned and grinned at him, motioning up to the landing where the two forms were just disappearing around the corner.

"I think I love her already," she said with certainty. Sir Penwood smiled, although he still managed to look puzzled, and she crossed her arms with a nod of approval. "Yes, I think we'll end up being very close one day."

If only that "one day" would ever come," Katherine thought dismissively as she fought the heat of the kitchen with her hand fan. She still remembered that day like it was yesterday; the day she first clapped eyes on the most difficult, obstinate girl she'd ever met in her life. It was sad, because while it drove her mental, she still felt a sense of pride that Integra seemed to take after her a bit. At least no one ever walked all over either one of them.

But that was the problem too, wasn't it? She was far too stubborn for her own good. She didn't listen to anyone, and that meant Katherine as well. Shaking her head, the woman took another sip of the warm tea that Walter had whipped up and placed before her and her husband. After coming inside, they'd found the butler and had ended up seated at one of the tables in the massive kitchen.

Looking up at her dear Shelby, she noted that he didn't seem to be in any hurry. He'd all but collapsed at the table, mopping his face once more before sagging in his chair and closing his eyes. He'd barely glanced at his steaming cup, though he'd managed to take one drink of the warm liquid. She knew him; if he stayed there much longer, he'd be snoring.

Pursing her lips, she glanced at the digital clock over the massive ovens. It was getting late; the gala was ticking nearer and nearer, and soon the guests would be arriving. She'd been sure to force Shelby to leave in time for her to get to Hellsing manor at least an hour early, if not more. She'd wanted to speak to the girl's new husband, and get an idea for herself about his character. But things had taken such a turn!

She stood, adjusting her skirts as she humphed. Well, if Integra wasn't going to come down, she'd just come up. Or down, depending on where the woman was in the house. Pausing, she put a hand on her chin, one nail tapping lightly as she mapped out where the heiress might be. Perhaps she should start with the main office, and work her way towards the ammunition supply? Or maybe it would be better to start at the basement, and work to the roof.

"Where do you think you're going?" Shelby said dozily, opening one eye to glance up at her. She frowned and snapped her fan shut, tucking it into the pocket hidden in the folds of her dress.

"Where do you think?" she snapped. "To go find Integra, of course! It's very rude to keep guests waiting like this. And before long, others are going to be joining us. Are we to spend the night in a kitchen, of all places?!"
"She may have already gone back to the ballroom," he replied matter-of-factly. "What's she going to be coming into the kitchen for? A snack before the gala?" Katherine sniffed and put her hands on her hips, irritated that he would be making light of a faux pas like this.

"No," she scoffed, not appreciating his lack of concern. "She'll come into the kitchen, because she'll look for us, and know that Walter would have taken care of us. What better place to look for us than the one of the rooms in the house that Walter frequents most?" Her husband's brows rose in astonishment at her rather uncharacteristic grasp of logic, and then rolled his shoulders in a shrug.

"In any case, just wait here and she'll come," he replied vacantly. Katherine shook her head.

"I will not. Besides, she wants to act grown up? Well, let her cart her grown-up self downstairs and talk to me, so we can work through our problems like adults do." Shelby groaned, but didn't make an attempt to reply. She moved towards the door and he didn't try to stop her, either. Finally she turned with a shrug, passing Walter as he made to enter the kitchens.

"Walter, I'm going to find Integra." The man blinked at her before looking over his shoulder.

"She doesn't need to be found," he replied. "She's not lost." And true to his word, the heiress rounded the corner behind him. She looked up and saw Katherine, her face freezing into stone for a moment before she cleared her throat pointedly. "Ah, hmm," Walter hummed, looking between the two with forced politeness, as if he couldn't feel the tension rising in the hall. "Shall we proceed to the ballroom?" he suggested.

"No," Integra piped up. Walter looked at her in surprise and she cleared her throat again, motioning to Katherine. "What I mean is; you go on ahead with Sir Penwood, Walter. I think Lady Katherine and I need to have a talk. Alone," she added, as he narrowed his eyes at her and opened his mouth to argue.

"Yes, I agree," Katherine said, and between the two women's piercing glares the poor butler was forced to concede.

"Yes, ma'am," he bowed, managing to pacify both of them with the same gesture. "And I take it Paladin Anderson will be down…later?" he said with a half-shrug. Integra smiled wryly.

"Yes, I believe he will. He said he had something to do first." Walter's expression became suspicious, but Integra quieted him with a tiny shake of her head, gazing meaningfully at Sir Penwood still in his chair.

"Ah," Walter murmured in understanding. Yes, it was probably for the best that the two didn't stay alone together for too long without someone else there to handle things. Perhaps they might have both behaved and kept from causing a ruckus, but it was always better to be safe rather than sorry. Even Katherine gave a tiny nod of approval.

"Lady Katherine, please come with me," Integra said politely, though her smile was still a little stony. "I know a place where we can speak in private." She turned and walked away without making sure the other would follow, but she didn't need to. Katherine grabbed two handfuls of skirt and quickly caught up, despite having much more weight in both body and dress.

Katherine thought she might go to her office, but to the woman's surprise Integra ducked into one of the guest bedrooms on the second floor. It wasn't very big, but it was more than enough room to talk (or argue) and it was far enough from the main staircase that no one would hear them unless they began to scream.
Sighing, Integra crossed her arms and looked away, her mouth pressed into a thin line.

"I suppose an apology is in order," she admitted. "When I said that I hated you, I didn't mean that I hated you; I just don't agree with the things you do sometimes. And so, I'm... sorry." Katherine took a deep breath, steadying her nerves.

"When I said those things in the ballroom, I did mean them. But I was also very upset, and I don't always think those things, either. So I also apologize if I offended you." She paused, but she just couldn't keep the next sentence from tumbling out of her. "But you know that I'm right."

"What?" Integra asked, her voice strained. It was obvious she was making an effort to remain calm.

"Everything I do, I do it because I want what's best for you. Like it or not, you weren't born a man!" She glared intentionally at the curves emphasized by the dress the younger woman was wearing. "You have to—" she broke off, biting her knuckle to keep from going too far again as she gathered her thoughts.

"Why can't you just accept things the way that they are?" Integra asked. Katherine looked up to see the woman standing there, looking forlorn. "This dress, this party, the makeup and the hair," she began, her hands fluttering at her sides as if trying to gather all the things up into one bundle and offer it to the older woman, "I did it all for you. So that you would have… something that you could look on, to make you accept everything else."

She sounded authoritative and frustrated, the way she always did whenever she didn't come out on top. But as Katherine listened, and watched her grasp at the air as if trying to offer something she couldn't, she realized something important. It was so simple, so easy, that she wondered briefly why she hadn't noticed it before.

Integra was more like her father than anyone realized. Perhaps Shelby understood a bit more than the rest, but everyone else overlooked the fact that Arthur Hellsing was the sole provider and guardian for that young lady. Being raised by him, she had never heard sappy conversation or had long, drawn out talks about their feelings.

She'd always been taught to say things straight, and the problem was that as a woman, she was caught trying to say things that she didn't have words for, having been brought up in a masculine manner. In the end, she came up short without the language to express how she felt, and no one could understand what she was really trying to say. And Katherine was guilty of being just as blind as the rest of them.

She wasn't saying "Why can't you accept all this?". She was trying to say "Why can't you accept me?". The chic dress, the lipstick and mascara, the forced promise of one night with a proper hairstyle and no suits; she hadn't had to do it. Integra could have ignored her calls, refused to see her when she visited, and forced Katherine to eventually retract her wishes and leave her alone.

But she hadn't. She'd begrudgingly let herself be forced into the dress, let someone smear powder and paint on her face, had her hair yanked into position, and threw an elaborate party she hadn't even wanted. All for Katherine.

This party wasn't an expression of someone who had been beaten into submission. It was how she expressed her love, her willingness to do uncomfortable things to make someone she cared about happy, even if only for a night. It was the only way she knew how to, having grown up in a world of men that didn't speak a single word about love; instead showing it through their actions towards those around them.
"Darling," she whispered, voice breaking. She felt two fat tears roll down her cheeks and didn't bother wiping them away. "I do love you," she insisted, voice wavering with tears and sincerity. "I know you like your suits and your army, the same way I like dresses and ladies' night. I only ask for one night, every once in a while."

"Don't cry," Integra replied awkwardly, looking away and giving her elder some privacy as she dabbed at the corners of her eyes. "You'll get black smudged all over your face. And I didn't bring you here to talk about that." She passed a hand over her face, rubbing her temples, and became the stern leader once more. "I wanted to apologize for my inexcusable behavior, nothing more."

"Oh, Integra," Katherine sighed. She had to go and ruin a sensitive, groundbreaking moment didn't she? Give her a break, old girl, she told herself. She can't help it. She's already had one emotional meltdown tonight—she probably can't handle another one. "I didn't come to fight with you either, you know. I had come to get an idea about you and your man."

"My?" Integra sputtered, looking back at her incredulously. "He's not—I mean, he's his own—it's not politically correct to say—" she stammered, her cheeks growing pink. "He's my husband, not just a man," she finally answered quietly, almost to herself.

"Well, call him what you want—he seems like a wonderful bloke. And really, as long as you love each other, nothing else matters." Integra stayed quiet, suddenly interested in the toes of her flats peeking out from beneath the sapphire gown. Katherine waited, but then something in the air between them changed and her eyes narrowed questioningly.

"You—you did marry him because you loved him." No answer. "Integra?" she growled, using her "answer-me-or-else" tone that she used to pull on her son. "Look me in the eyes." Blue eyes met her own and Integra somehow kept herself from fidgeting, to the older woman's surprise.

"I—I'm fond of him," she said at last, the words pouring out of her in a rush. "And I respect him, and he's good to me and all that, so I don't really have any worries. After all, I didn't have a big choice; Sir Irons—"

"Irons?" Katherine cut in crossly. "What does Irons have to do with any of this?"

"Well, he told me that I had to have children, you see," Integra blurted, her cheeks dark red. "To take over the organization when I'm old. And it worked out in the end, because Alexander needed children too, so we only needed two—one for him and one for me, basically—so…." She stopped, licking her lips, knowing what the older woman must have been thinking.

"We had been stuck together—sort of—and one night he wasn't all there, and he asked me to marry him, and when he woke up the next morning and realized what had happened, but I didn't say no, he didn't say "oh, it's a mistake" or something like that. So we ended up married."

"But it's alright," she said quickly, as Katherine made to speak. "We never said that we had to care for each other in that way. It's only for the children; a marriage of convenience. The fact that we get along is just an added bonus." It was as if the floodgates were open. Once she started, she'd told the whole story before she knew it.

"Why did I not know about this?" Katherine said slowly, staring at Integra. She had no idea what to think.

"Sir Irons had told me personally; I just suppose it never came up in conversation," Integra confessed.
"He forced you into marrying someone, just for the convenience of having children," she repeated, still speaking in a low, slow voice. Integra felt the anger beginning to grow behind the tone as the words and their implications sunk into the lady's brain.

"It's alright, really," Integra promised, not really understanding why she was covering for the Knight. "And I don't think Sir Irons would have wanted me to marry Alexander Anderson, anyway. He's a bit taboo, in terms of relations between the Round Table and the Vatican. No one was really happy about it, I suppose," she added as an afterthought.

"What do you mean?" Katherine asked, one brow arching. Integra laughed drily.

"Well, his bosses were furious, but since I'm a Christian and there wasn't any real reason besides their own opinions why we couldn't be married; they disagreed but it was only a technicality in the end. And Sir Penwood reacted in the same way. The only ones who didn't care were us."

"If you knew it would cause such a stir, why did you go through with it if you didn't love him?" Katherine was incredulous now, her voice a squeaky falsetto. She couldn't believe her ears. All this had been going on under her nose?!

"Well," Integra began, her brow creasing as she thought. "He already knew about the vampires and what Hellsing did, which saved me some explanations. He's strong and knows a lot about different monsters he's fought all over the globe, which is a help. And he's very intelligent, so I can hold a conversation with him without getting bored. And…" she faltered. "He's not terribly ugly, either."

"He's all marred up! He's got a big gash on his face!" Katherine objected, pointing to her own cheek for emphasis.

"So?" Integra responded, honestly confused. "I don't mind. It's not genetically passing, anyway." Katherine stumbled slightly, sitting down on the bed. The comforter wrinkled and she pressed a hand to her forehead, running her fingers over her neat curls.

"How did I not know—not see—" She bit back something, finally slapping her hands on her lap with an unladylike "Damn that Irons!" She shook her head. "Integra, I'm—I'm so sorry. I don't know how far he'd take something like this. If I had only known, I could've stopped him."

"Don't apologize," Integra replied cooly. "I can handle Sir Irons. He doesn't frighten me. I can—"

"Don't," she interrupted, shaking her head again, this time despondently. "I know how he is, Integra. I can only imagine what he must have told you." She wiped the corners of her eyes, tears filling them again as she stared down at her lap. "Can you forgive me for not noticing this?"

"Of course I can!" Integra exclaimed, exasperated. "It wasn't your place to see it! It was between Sir Irons and myself, and it doesn't matter what he said to me; it wasn't even that terrible. He only said I should marry somebody, anybody, and have a child." Katherine was quiet for a long moment; with every passing second, the silence became more pronounced. Finally, she looked up at Integra.

"Did—Did Shelby know about this?" she asked softly, searching Integra's gaze for an answer.

"I don't know." It was the truth. Katherine stood, wringing her hands and looking much more suitable for the wife of nervous Penwood. The elder woman's shoulders slumped and she looked completely lost as to what to do next. Integra forced herself to put and hand on her shoulder, and when the woman looked at her she managed a small smile.

"I'm perfectly content with my situation," she admitted. Katherine stared at her, mouth set in a thin
line that was neither sad nor angry. "I'm not unhappy," she insisted. The Lady opened her mouth to argue, but they both heard a deep chime accompanied by the tiny clock on the vanity of the guest room chiming eight times cheerfully.

"Eight o'clock," Katherine murmured, and then her eyes widened considerably. "Eight o'clock! Good heavens, you have to be downstairs! Your guests will be here any minute, if they aren't already!" Faster than anyone Integra had ever seen, the Lady Penwood finished wiping her eyes, brushed back her hair with her fingers, pinched her cheeks, and within thirty seconds looked as if she'd never been upset at all.

"Yes, I should go down now," Integra agreed, and Katherine stopped her as she began to leave, grabbing her wrist. Licking her thumbs, she rubbed something off Integra's face, brushed her hair back, and dusted the beautiful dress off before looking her over. Peering into her eyes, she clucked and fished around in the folds of her gown. Pulling out a thin tube, she motioned for Integra to bend down.

"Dear, you've rubbed off some of your mascara. Here, take off your glasses and I'll fix it for you." Integra knew she was still on thin ice, and decided it wouldn't be worth the argument to ignore or deny the request. She obediently removed her glasses and tried to keep her eyes open. Thankfully, Lady Katherine was much faster than the tailor's assistant had been, and the deed was finished with three flicks of her wrist.

"Now then," she nodded, putting the mascara away again. "Perfectly lovely. I do wish you'd make yourself up more often. It brings out your eyes, you know," she persisted, tugging Integra out the door and down the hall towards the foyer. Integra stopped and corrected their movements, ushering them both down the hallway that would get them there faster. "You're too beautiful to have your hair in your face all the time."

"Later, Lady Katherine," Integra protested impatiently. "I…I can't be talking to you all night," she said, hoping the excuse would give her a moment's peace. "I do have other guests coming."

"Oh, that's my girl," the older woman said absently as she caught sight of her husband on the landing with Walter. "Think of the guests first, always." She patted her cheek and hurried to the two men, leaving Integra behind.

"Shelby," she tugged his sleeve, pulling him to the side. He saw her grim expression and paled significantly, gulping. "Yes or No; did you know about Sir Irons?"

"W-what about him?" he asked, looking at her anxiously. "Is he ill or something? No, he can't be," he corrected. "I just spoke with him last week and he was perfectly healthy." She poked him between the ribs indignantly.

"No!" she hissed, trying to keep quiet as Walter glanced over at them while listening to Integra's orders for him. "I mean, Sir Irons pushing and pushing at Integra to hurry up and get married."

"Oh!" he exclaimed, eyes widening. He caught sight of her expression and coughed, tugging at his collar. "Well, I knew he wanted that, but personally I never saw or heard him say anything. I always thought it was just something the two of them could work out on their own."

"Work out!?" she squeaked, pinching him and making a "shh" sound when he yelped. "You know you don't just work out something with Hugh Irons! What are you, mental?"

"I-I-I don't know!" he cowered, trying to avoid her attacking fingers. "I thought she had it under control; I never asked and she never said anything! Why?!!"
"That blustery old git," she swore, ignoring his attempts to grab her hands. "Just wait until he gets here. I'm going to tear him down so fast he'll be running for the hills with his tail between his legs before midnight."

Penwood looked down at his wife, seeing what he really didn't want to see. That familiar glint in her eyes, the way her jaw was set tighter than a bulldog's, her hands clenching and unclenching at her sides... He cleared his throat and turned to her, swallowing hard. Keeping his voice low, he looked her in the eyes as he spoke.

"You will not," he replied firmly, being as stern as he could be. He didn't usually try to take charge with his wife (mostly because it didn't work), but on the rare occasions that he did, she was always taken aback. This was no different, and she stared at him, stunned for a moment as he took both her shoulders in his hands.

"One scene per party is more than enough, Kitty," he said, tone severe. "I refuse to let you have another meltdown tonight. Whatever you want to say can wait until tomorrow; business talk during business hours, and whatnot," he trailed off under her glare, clearing his throat and taking his hands off her as he fidgeted slightly.

"Is that so?" she growled, before huffing and crossing her arms. "Well, I'll keep my mouth shut, but God help you both if he says one word to her about it. I'll be across that ballroom before he can blink twice."

"For God's sake," Penwood gasped, "he's going to say something about it! She married an assassin! He's works for the Italian thorns in our side and he's nowhere near a politician!" Katherine shrugged indifferently.

"Then he shouldn't have put so much pressure on her." She gave him a look that told him that Irons was walking a thin line with a noose around his neck. One wrong step and she'd bring out her guns, making sure he felt everything she believed he had coming to him. "I mean it, Shelby. He's not going to come in here and dictate everyone's personal affairs. Just because he got married at eighteen doesn't mean we all have to."

"Please use your discretion," he implored, but before he could say more Walter was ushering them both into the ballroom. The conductor was back and looked fearfully at them before deciding that they weren't going to be shouting down the roof anymore and he struck up a little ditty. Katherine hummed along, shooting him a meaningful glance that let him know that she'd just go ahead and do whatever she damn well pleased.

Oh well. I'll just have to keep my eye on her; in case she gets any ideas, he sighed before heading towards the wine on the hors d'oeuvre table.

Integra watched as Walter took the Penwoods, who were muttering to each other in fierce tones, into the ballroom. She wondered what the hell they were arguing about now. I'm going to have to ignore them tonight. Otherwise I'll go mental without my cigars. She sighed and heard a sound like a small mouse squeak. Turning on her heel, she spotted Seras peeking up from the stairs leading to the basement.

"Agent Victoria? What is it?" she said, a little testily. The girl blushed and presented herself properly, hands clasped demurely in front of her. Integra glanced over her quickly, satisfied with what she saw. Seras looked like a proper young lady—more like what Lady Katherine had always wanted her to be, with frills, curls, and ribbons hanging everywhere.
"It's eight o' clock," Seras announced shyly. "I was wondering if it was safe to come up." Integra had no doubts as to what she meant; with her vampiric hearing, she must have clearly heard the shouting coming from upstairs in her basement room.

Integra laughed, unable to stop the sound from bubbling up. Sometimes it was hard to remember that her female vampire was really only a few years younger than she was. She looked and acted so childish sometimes. She acted as if she was the one being yelled at, the way she was standing there so timidly! Seras only blushed harder and looked away, muttering something about "master" and "eels" under her breath.

"What?" she asked, and Seras started in alarm.

"Um, I said that…"

"Um, I said that Master said it wouldn't be safe to come up until Lady Penwood had been gagged, because she thought he was an eel anyway."

"An eel?" Integra repeated. Seras nodded.

"That's what he said." Integra grinned, wondering what little anecdote Alucard had that would explain why Lady Katherine called him an eel.

"Well, it's perfectly safe for you," Integra assured her. "She's only human, you know. You're much stronger than she is." Seras shrugged and she motioned towards the ballroom. "Go on, other people will be arriving soon." Seras nodded and pattered towards the ballroom, but turned back at the last moment.

"Oh, I meant to say that—that—" she paused before blurting out, "you look very beautiful tonight!" and ran through the doorway into the room. Integra blinked in shock and then felt another smile roll over her face. She chuckled at her officer's bashful nature.

"An eel, Alucard?" she murmured as he slipped out of the wall. He was wearing his normal long-sleeved white shirt and black pants, but he had traded out his regular vest for a newer-looking one, his riding boots looked polished, and he had even managed to brush most of his bangs out of his face. To her surprise he didn't wear his cravat, but a normal crimson tie that shifted like the colors in Seras' ball gown.

"Where did you get that?" she asked, pointing to the tie. He tugged on it and the crimson fabric dissolved into twisting black shadows.

"I took some initiative," he said cryptically. Integra knew better than to ask why. He'd come up with some offhanded insult or sarcastic remark that would make her want to shoot him, and Anderson had already taken the pistol away from her. "As for Lady Penwood, I believe she was referring to an eel's slippery nature. For the record, she also insists I'm a slimy bastard as well." He grinned savagely. "I'm beginning to think she likes me."

"Leave her alone," Integra warned. "I don't want to have to break apart any more fights than I have to." She frowned. "On that note, I don't want you bothering Alexander, either. That's an order," she added when Alucard's smile slipped off his face. "If you can't keep your mouth shut, then stay on the other side of the room."

"As you wish, my master," he snarled quietly. She waved him on with a gesture, as if he were a small child she was sending to bed.

"Go away, then. Just dally with your servant and stay out of my hair." She smiled, her gaze calculating. "They certainly did a good job on her, I must say." Alucard inclined his head, but said
nothing. She put on an air of false curiosity. "Hmm? Don't you think she looks rather pretty in that
dress? The longer hair is a nice touch, too."

"I suppose," he conceded, and dissolved into thin air. Integra grinned devilishly—I suppose indeed!
You can't lie to me; we share minds, or have you forgotten? Granted, she didn't often venture into
his thoughts, but sometimes she was more than a little concerned about things and had to delve into
his conscious. Thankfully, her mastery over him made it so that he couldn't hide everything from
her, but she never found a real reason to abuse the power she had over him.

She'd done it only once, when Seras had first come to live at Hellsing. Thankfully, she'd sensed no
malicious intent in his actions and (against her better judgment) let the girl stay. It was only by
sheer luck that Seras turned out to be such a kind, gentle girl and Integra had been able to abolish
most of her worries.

"Everything straightened out?" A hand clapped on her shoulder and she jumped in surprise, turning
around as her heart sped into overdrive with adrenaline. "No?" Anderson glanced around at the
empty foyer, and the doorway where music was starting to filter through.

"Yes," she answered, a hand on her chest as she willed her heart to settle. "You startled me, that's
all." She glanced at him, making sure he still looked presentable enough. "We may as well go in
there; I'm sure now that our "issue" is settled, Lady Katherine's just dying to pester you with never-
ending questions."

"Aye," he replied hesitantly, and motioned for her to ahead of him. She sighed and took a longing
look at the stairs, wishing she could call the damn thing off and go to bed. Still, she did have guests
en route and she couldn't say no now.

"Ah, so you took care of children before coming to live here? That's a good skill to have, looking
after the little ones. They're such rambunctious things; so full of energy." Lady Katherine nodded
sagely, swirling her glass of wine.

True to Integra's words, the moment she'd saw him she'd taken her chance and practically dragged
him to the side for an examination all her own. She'd managed to wring information out of him
better than any interrogator, and he saw how easily it would be for her to wear down an impatient
woman like Integra very quickly.

Already she'd made him tell her all about his childhood, his parents, the wars he'd been in, how
he'd been inducted into the Vatican's Special Forces, his job at the orphanage, and how he'd
managed to commute from Italy to England every day; that was just in the first ten minutes! If he
didn't know better, he was sure she could make him tell her all the secrets of Iscariot if he wasn't
careful.

Cook was already there in the room as a server at the appetizer tables, had exchanged her normal
kitchen clothing for a dress that was roughly the same color as the rest of the room. She still had on
a starched white apron, but it was virtually stain-free. Her salt-and-pepper hair wasn't down for
once, and it was strange to see her face without the usual frizz surrounding it. Instead, she had it up
in a sensible bun with sprigs of holly at the base, matching the tables. She'd even put on a little
powder and rouge for the occasion.

Lady Katherine had taken a quick break in the questioning to refill her wineglass, and one glance
from her employer was all it had taken for Cook to easily engage the woman in conversation.
Temporarily delayed, Lady Katherine hadn't noticed as Integra slid up to her husband.
"How are you making on?" she murmured, trying to hide herself behind him just in case Lady Katherine happened to turn around.

"This woman should have been one of your spies," he replied dryly. "She could get answers out of anyone." Integra's mouth twisted in a half-smile, half-grimace. Before she could say more, Lady Katherine came back for Round 2 and she was forced to sneak back to Sir Penwood, who was watching the spectacle with a bemused frown. He couldn't figure out if he felt bad for Anderson or not, seeing as he both disliked the man and knew how ruthless his Kitty could be.

Alucard was taking a particular enjoyment in seeing how uncomfortable the paladin was from his side of the room. They'd been glaring daggers at each other ever since Anderson had entered, but the vampire king had also caught the death-glare his master had sent, along with the mental warning and repeating of her earlier orders.

So he stood in the shadows with a glass of wine the Cook had pressed into his hand, watching with amusement as the tall man was tirelessly interrogated by the Lady. He'd never cared for Lady Katherine—she was far too nosy in his opinion, and he knew she disliked him, so he made her life all the more miserable for it whenever they were forced to exchange words.

Seras stood beside him, alternately sipping her wine and looking interestingly at Lady Katherine. The woman was nothing like she thought she'd look like, having heard her loud voice before ever clapping eyes on her. Alucard was too immersed in the paladin's discomfort to care about what she was doing, so she spent her time evenly between watching the oppressive Lady and staring at Penwood, who returned her gaze with an air of displeasure. She was pretty sure he remembered her only as the young lady who had fallen in on him from a ceiling tile.

Now Lady Katherine was drilling Anderson on the finer points of his job, her questions leaning towards her next topic being what Regeneration meant and how old he was exactly. But before she could open that particular can of worms, the next guests arrived. Walter appeared in the doorway, looking dignified as ever as he gazed at them all before announcing:

"The Lieutenant and Lady Walsh." Lady Katherine turned towards the door with a wide smile and Integra hurried forward to greet the pair that entered.

"Lt. Walsh, Lady Marie, I'm glad you could make it," she said in her best genial manner. Lt. Walsh was the one member of the Round Table who didn't often make it to every meeting or event, due to being in different parts of the country and the world at different times for military goings-on.

He was dressed in a modest suit with his gray hair slicked back instead of hanging all over the place like it usually did, and he'd trimmed up his scraggly beard. Beside him was his wife, a woman who had never made it an inch over 5'1". She was skinny as he was and her hair was still mostly brown, pulled back with a ribbon. She had faint laugh lines, but still looked young enough to pass for someone in their early fifties despite being just as old as the rest of them.

"Hello, Sir Integra!" she chirped, clasping her hand with a bright smile. Marie had never had a problem being the one person who was nearly always happy, no matter how dire the situation. Even in the midst of World War II when her house was bombed in a blitz, she only smiled and quipped "Well, my dear; I suppose now I can have a bay window in the sitting room."

Lt. Walsh also moved to answer, but had to do a double-take at Anderson and was struck temporarily speechless. He looked at Penwood, who blinked back with a despondent expression, and then at Lady Katherine, who arched a brow as if daring him to say something.

"Sir Integra," he said uncertainly. "I see you have a few other guests," he started, clearly expecting
"Yes, I know you know Alucard, and maybe you haven't met my other vampire, Seras Victoria," she pointed to Seras, who waved sheepishly. "The Penwoods arrived a customary two hours early, and you've certainly heard of my husband, Alexander Anderson."

"Husband?" he repeated, looking down at the ring on her finger before looking at him again. He took the news with the normal "Walsh air", which was made of equal parts of apathy and bewilderment. Finally he cleared his throat. "Ahem… Irons know about this?"

"He will," Integra replied ambiguously. Lt. Walsh hummed and shrugged, as if he could roll the news off his shoulders like water off a duck's back.

"Very well then; I just hope you know what you're getting yourself into," he said and nodded cordially to Anderson, showing neither like nor dislike. He then took a glass of proffered wine and began chatting to Penwood about a tricky sort of military communications problem in the South Indies. Lady Katherine took Marie Walsh aside and whispered in her ear, the latter's eyes widening before she nodded vigorously and giggled.

And so it went. More and more officers, Round Table Knights, and other high-bred socialites came, accompanied by wives, girlfriends, and the like. Many of the Knights took Anderson's appearance with a mix of trepidation for what Sir Irons would say, a concern for military secrets, and a secret hope that Integra knew what she was doing. Lady Katherine took all the wives and whispered furtively to them, making sure they understood something before letting them go.

By the stroke of nine, the ballroom was nearing capacity and the last of the guests were trickling in. The men and women had broken up into groups, talking and laughing about various shared aspects of their lives. Many hadn't seen each other for a few months at least and they exchanged stories and family issues, catching up on what all had transpired since the last big party.

Anderson was surrounded by a healthy amount of women, the wives all asking him questions. As much as they criticized Integra for being a forward lady that cursed like a sailor and commanded armies as if she was born a man, many still cared enough about her that they wanted to make sure she wasn't in any danger from this mysterious man their husbands were so distressed over. Plus, the potential for gossip material was just too good to waste.

Seras had been surrounded herself by a few young ladies her age, who asked about her gown and hair and allowed her to join in their conversation. It wasn't often she had a chance to have "girl talk" with other females and she relished every moment of it. Alucard stayed in the shadows, keeping an eye on her and all the dapper young men making eyes at the giggling group of dolled-up ladies simultaneously.

Integra managed to speak to everyone, playing the part of a good hostess. Lady Katherine had managed to teach her something, and though she didn't enjoy running around a party like this she had to admit it wasn't half as bad as she always made it out to be in her mind. She just didn't plan on having more than two a year, at most.

Finally, Walter entered with and announced that Sir Irons and the Lady Irons had arrived. Conversation dimmed to whispers as they came in, and Integra moved to greet them. Irons' wife was tall and spindly like he was, with a bony face and hair white as the walls of the ballroom. Even her eyes were a washed-out gray. Integra had always marveled that this skeletal woman had once been the brunette beauty in the wedding photograph in the Irons' drawing room.

"Well, Integra," she drawled, looking the woman up and down with a small sniff. "You certainly
can clean up, when you put yourself to it." She managed to make everything that came out of her mouth sound like an insult, even to the point that she and Marie Walsh had crossed swords over a soured compliment. Integra bit back a retort, licking her lips and taking a slow breath.

She could almost feel Lady Katherine's eyes boring into her back. *That's it, don't let it bother you.* Lady Katherine had been one of the few who had stood up to Lady Irons whenever it came to Integra and her "unladylike behavior". It had taken her a long time to learn how to keep the sting out of her eyes at the woman's low-handed rudeness, but now she was too old and too proud to show how the words still cut her.

Irons was about to say something, but his eyes caught Anderson's. It wasn't hard; the man fairly towered over many of the other partygoers. He'd heard Irons' wife, and his mouth was set in a thin line. He'd already seen more than enough tonight to comprehend what sort of people these high-breds were.

"Who is that?!" he exclaimed, as if he didn't already know. Integra raised her head, looking her elder square in the eyes, and answered in a clear voice.

"My husband." The entire gala was silent save for the music, everyone hanging onto the conversation. They crowded in a loose circle, peering around each other to see what would happen.

"What?" Irons hissed, eyes narrowing behind his spectacles. Integra's gaze didn't waver, standing rock-solid in the face of all the man's fury. "What is the meaning of this?" he continued, looking between the Vatican agent and his younger peer at a frightening speed. His wife frowned, obviously puzzled by her husband's sudden wrath.

"You said it yourself;" Integra declared, her expression calm and collected, betraying no feeling whatsoever. "I had to find a husband, so I did just that." The audience was captivated now. Alucard was watching just as closely, but he was unconcerned about the outcome, whatever it may be. Seras was apprehensive and had her finger in her mouth, chewing on the knuckle.

"So you did this to spite me?" Irons asked, something dangerous flashing in his eyes. "You would put your country in danger to get the upper hand in an argument? Has Katherine Penwood really rubbed off that much on you, that you would forego your training and become reckless and petty?"

Sir Penwood was barely able to hold his wife back at this point, both his arms pulling as hard as he could though the struggle stayed subdued. She was trying to force her way through the people, her teeth grinding together and looking every bit like a bear about to go on a rampage. She opened her mouth to yell something above the crowd, but thankfully her husband caught on and clapped a hand over her mouth to muffle her.

"Hush, Kitty!" he whispered desperately in her ear. "You'll only make it all worse!"

Sir Integra's nostrils flared the slightest bit as she pulled herself up to her full height, a tight smile stretching her cheeks painfully.

"Sir Irons," she began in an almost gentle tone, "the world does not revolve around you, or our arguments." Sir Irons looked taken aback for a fraction of a second, and she continued in the same tone, "And besides; is this really the time or place for such discussion?"

Marie Walsh was motioning frantically to Lady Irons, who hesitantly broke off from her husband to move closer to the fringe of the crowd. Repeating Lady Katherine's earlier behavior, she stood on her tiptoes and whispered into Lady Irons' ear, pointing unsubtly at Integra before nodding in Anderson's direction with a solemn air.
Lady Irons looked up at him before merging into the crowds and converging with the other wives; with the exception of Lady Penwood, it was a complete circle of the Round Table's better halves. She shook her head at once and turned to watch her husband, despite other women still trying to convince her to listen.

"No time like the present," Sir Irons proclaimed, straightening his suit coat and staring down Integra, attempting to loom over her with presence alone.

"You have us all gathered here in one room, Sir Integra." Irons continued in a low threatening tone. "What's to stop the heathen from cutting us all down in one blow? It would be a great day for Catholicism," He spat, complexion starting to turn the faintest red in his anger. "The Vatican's prize dog hitting the Protestants where it hurts!" His voice was beginning to rise; a few in the crowd were looking a little alarmed.

A sudden rush of air had Integra's eyes widening and she looked up to see Anderson standing beside her, having strode through the crowd easily as they parted for him like the Red Sea. His arms were shaking with his barely-contained anger and he took a deep breath, his eyes green fire.

"I wouldnae ever," he said slowly, pointing at Irons, "do somethin' so low as tha'." Where Sir Irons failed at looming he excelled, to the point that even Integra felt a small shiver run down her spine and the outrage rolling off the man's frame. "Such cowardly tactics; tha's reserved for yer filthy lot, ye bunch of Protesta—"

Integra immediately sensed the danger that would arise from a room full of "Filthy Protestant Something-or-Others", many of them hardened military men of all ages. She tactfully elbowed her husband in the gut, and winced when it hurt her more than it did him; however he took the hint and forced himself to stay quiet, but his eyes still blazed with fury.

Sir Irons' mouth had hung open during the entire time he was being addressed, his face slowly turning red. For a moment, he resembled more of a very thin Sir Penwood than his usual self. Finally he swallowed and, to his credit, managed to keep from backing away from the threatening figure before him. Integra stared him down, feeling a little braver with a man on her side who could render the haughty Sir Irons speechless.

"Hugh!" His wife stormed back out of the crowd, her face as beet red as her husbands. She paused, looking at Anderson up close once before stumbling back and putting her husband between her body and the angry paladin. "Hugh," she said again, her voice shrill, "Stop encouraging Integra in her distasteful displays!" She cast a scornful glance at the pair, nose crinkling, "People are staring."

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Integra took a half-step in front of Anderson as she felt him bristle, her expression cool and uncaring. Still, she could stop him from moving, but she couldn't stop him from talking. His voice was as threatening as his body language.

"If I were ye," he said lowly, "I'd keep my mouth shut, a'fore people started talking about ye. "He who is without sin among you, let him cast the first stone at her." Sir Irons didn't speak, managing to look unmoved, but his wife was another matter completely.

Marjorie Irons looked down at the pair—an impressive feat, considering Anderson was taller than her—and sniffed haughtily. "You act as if she is entirely blameless in this fiasco, when we all know differently, sir." She looked as if she had drunk a quart of curdled milk when she referred to Anderson. Even though her legs were trembling with the knowledge that the paladin was clearly tall and strong enough to put up a fight, she still managed to keep the shaking out of her voice as she faced him from over her husband's shoulder.
"I think yer husband made it clear it's me he's got the problem with," Anderson replied coldly. Lady Irons gave him a condescending once-over, brows twitching upward.

"Yes," she nearly purred, "and you wouldn't be here were it not for Sir Integra. How does that saying go? Trouble attracts trouble." There was a cruel little twist to her lip as she said this. "Yes, trouble is all she ever was, and all she ever will be. Just like her no-good father."

"Everyone seems very keen to bring up my father whenever they talk about me," Integra cut in sharply, eyes narrowed. "They seem to forget that my father is dead, and I am not him in the slightest."

"Oh, I didn't wait until your father was dead to let him know exactly what I felt about him," Lady Irons spat poisonously. "I told him back when he was alive that he was trouble, just like you," she declared, punctuating her words with points from her bony finger. "I mean, look at you!" she exclaimed, waving her hand dismissively at her body. "He couldn't even raise a child right!"

"That's enough!" The sound didn't come from Integra, or Anderson, but instead from the woman's own husband. "I won't have you talking that way in the dead man's house," he said, taking a shallow breath. "Especially when that man was my friend and coworker."

"Well," Marjorie said, feigning indifference with a shrug. "I'm only telling the truth." Of the Sirs Hellsing and Irons, it was Hugh that spoke first, cutting Integra off without even realizing it.

"Marjorie," he repeated in that stern, no-nonsense voice of his, "that is enough. Sir Integra?" He gave her a cold, stern, disapproving glare, having to twist around slightly to see her behind him. "We shall discuss this further..." he looked around at the crowd. "In private, I think," he said pointedly, and a few had the decency to blush and turn away.

He took his wife by the elbow and pulled her back into the crowd of Round Table members, conceding a temporary truce to the battle for the sake of both their family names in the face of the high-society gathering.

The party swirled around them and all became normal again, the crowd laughing and gossiping about the argument before a few meaningful glances from the more well-meaning partygoers had them on different topics.

Integra felt her heart racing in her chest, but with it came a sense of both pride and trepidation. She had just stood up to Sir Irons, and nearly won this time! It was a personal triumph, although she was sure it wouldn't bode well with her during their "in private" chat. She wondered briefly why Lady Katherine hadn't launched herself into their fray, but she saw Sir Penwood still trying to hold her back from where Sir Irons was and it became clear.

"Yer alright?" Anderson asked her as quietly as he could with at least twelve other conversations going on around them. She nodded, biting the inside of her cheek and she considered what had just transpired.

"I'm fine; I just—" She didn't know exactly how to answer.

"Ye made more waves than settled any?" he said knowingly, and she sighed, nodding again. "I'm startin' to believe the lady's right," he said musingly, and she looked up at him with a frown. He shrugged. "Trouble attracts trouble. It seems like we cannae be anywhere without someone getting in a fight."

She couldn't help but smile a little. Yes, it did seem that she attracted trouble wherever she went.
Alucard, Anderson, this house and its occupants; all of them were nothing but and handful of stress on her, the nuisances. Well, perhaps not Anderson himself as much as his reputation for being a Protestant-hating, blade-wielding strongman.

"Oh, that Marjorie Irons!" This was Cook, who had watched the whole thing with mounting anger and had now come over to pet and pamper her former charge. "I'd like to take a chunk out of her, but she'd miss it too much." She scowled, shaking her head. "Don't let yourself get skinny like that, love. That's what makes you irritable." She patted Integra's shoulder, peering closely at her face. "Keep a stiff upper lip, dearie. Dinner's in an hour." Then, as if this in itself were consolation, she returned to her post and began doling out wine once more.

Walter hadn't come over, but he had sent her a glance that was sympathetic and chastising all at once. She knew what he was thinking; in his eyes, it would have been better for her to dismiss it all promptly. That would have made her the bigger woman. And she'd been doing well enough, until everyone and their mother started to butt in with their opinions.

"Well, I like him!" This outburst was from Marie, who was part of the impromptu meeting going on in the Round Table's circle of matrimonial couples. She blushed as she realized she'd spoken louder than she meant to, and added something else in a hushed whisper that they'd all adopted.

"It looks like their discussing you," Integra noted casually. Sir Penwood and his wife had joined the circle, and while the latter was icily staring at both Irons and his wife she hadn't made a scene yet. Anderson chuckled.

"As if that would do any good," he half-sneered. "Let'm talk all they please. It willnae do a thing." And he was right; they could talk and beg, or even shun her completely, but it was already too late. And by the looks of it, Sir Penwood was saying roughly the same thing. She could sometimes read their lips—she caught "useless" once or twice, as well as "utterly", "suspicions", and "married". She thought she saw Lady Katherine say "ceremony", but this idea seemed as unwanted to the others as it was to her.

"Still," he added with a suppressed groan, "I doubt they'll leave ye alone about it." He looked almost regretful. "I hate to see ye having to act like this. If I'd known, maybe—"

"I don't care," she interrupted smoothly. "I don't care how much they argue about it with themselves. I'm perfectly content and I wouldn't change a thing." She'd said it once before tonight, and she'd meant it both times. Their eyes met and she felt strangely breathless for a split-second before his expression hardened and he looked across the room, scanning the crowds for something.

"Wha's he starin' at?" he grumbled, and Integra didn't even have to ask. She followed his eyes and met the cool, amused stare of her servant from his appointed place across the room. She frowned sternly at him and he grinned even wider before obediently averting his gaze. Seras was watching too, but she offered a tiny wave and a warm smile before tugging her master's sleeve and saying something, her expression darkening. Was she scolding him for staring? The thought was laughable.

"Who knows?" she replied, before motioning him to follow her. "Come on; and don't you dare leave me alone for the rest of the night," she warned him. "If I get cornered by Irons again, or any of the Knights for that matter, I'm going to end up back in jail for homicide."

Chapter End Notes
This chapter ended up being, with both parts together, the longest one I’d ever written before (at the time). It was a bit of an accomplishment for me as a writer!
"Penwood, I'd have expected more caution from you." Hugh Irons was seething with anger, his face a twisted mask of fury and scorn. "You, of all people, have the majority of her respect; she'll do things for you that she won't do for anyone else. Couldn't you make her see reason?" Sir Penwood's lips were nearly nonexistent; he had them pressed together so tightly.

"By the time I had learned the truth, it was already too late." His eyes were cast to the ground, but had miraculously kept from sweating everywhere. One hand was on his wife's forearm, a subtle reminder to control herself. She had said nothing since they'd joined the other Knights and their wives in the circle/emergency meeting; a surefire sign that she was beyond angry and didn't trust herself to refrain from making a scene.

"I don't understand how she had time to pull all this together." Lt. Walsh was shaking his head. "We were all so careful; she was guarded 'round the clock." He chewed on his lip thoughtfully. "But the Vatican did send someone each week. There's record of it." His wife patted his arm and murmured little words of comfort.

"This is unacceptable!" Irons continued, shaking his head. "Someone was lax; someone must have been not paying enough attention! Someone must be brought to justice for allowing such a thing to happen," he declared.

"Don't start laying blame on people, Hugh." This was from Lady Katherine, who was unable to hold her icy silence any longer. "You're a fine one to start."

"And what is that supposed to mean?" Lady Irons scoffed. Lady Katherine turned her gaze to her, expression impassive.

"Why, it only means that your darling husband is as much to blame as anyone else," she replied calmly. Lady Irons colored, one eyebrow rising in challenge.

"The way I see it, there's plenty of blame to be placed on you two," she purred viciously, pointing out the Penwoods. "You failed as godparents; your job was to make sure you raised that… that heathen girl properly in the event of Arthur's death. And you couldn't even manage that," she concluded with a sneer.

"Yes, and Hugh's job was to instruct her in her position, not her personal affairs." She turned back to stare down Sir Irons, who returned her gaze steadily. "Tell me, Sir Irons, what exactly did you say to Integra? I've already heard enough from everyone else; now, I want to hear it from your mouth." She pursed her lips and waited.

"I don't owe you an explanation," Sir Irons retorted coldly.

"Oh, but I think you do," Lady Katherine answered in the same genteel manner. "You see, like your wife said, it's mine and Shelby's job to raise Integra. But you were so self-assured in your omnipotence as head of the Conference that you just had to stick your long nose in our business."

"W-what?!" Sir Irons snarled, face flushing in anger. A cold, calculating smile tweaked the corners of her mouth and for a moment, Lady Katherine looked terribly formidable.

"Yes, and I'd think you'd like to argue your case as well. After all, I've heard that you sanctioned any man, as long as his libido was still kicking."
"Kitty!" Sir Penwood admonished in a low whisper, and she pulled back from him.

"Don't you "Kitty" me, Shelby!" she fussed. "You know as well as I do what he's done, don't you?" Sir Penwood refused to answer, but the look on his face gave away the fact that he sided with his wife on this one.

"Don't be preposterous!" Sir Irons nearly shouted, although it was the nearly silent shout of someone who wasn't speaking above a hushed whisper. "I told her that she needed to find a nice young man to get acquainted with and marry. And that I didn't care—" he paused, realizing that he'd walked into a trap. "That I didn't care as long as she produced an heir, because she'd have to produce one whether she liked it or not." He was silent a moment before his mouth twisted.

"She knew what I meant. She only wanted to spite me by marrying some Catholic dog who's leashed to the Vatican, and our enemies." He frowned, looking as though he had just stepped in something unpleasant. "Tomorrow we'll meet at my home, and take a vote on—"

"Take your vote," Lady Katherine said confidently. "Take twenty votes, if you like. It won't change a thing. You can't force them to get a divorce."

"Who says I can't?" Sir Irons snapped.

"I do!" Lady Katherine replied indignantly. "You're not going to break apart a marriage just because you don't like the husband! You listen here," she continued in a louder tone when he moved to speak. "Like it or not, that man is a good Christian man, Catholic or not. He's a priest, you know."

"We know," Sir Grey said blandly. He'd been silent this entire time, but now cleared his throat. "We all know. But you must remember, Catholicism—"

"Believes that marriage is a lifelong bond between two people," Lady Katherine finished, staring him down. Sir Grey coughed into his hand and looked away, not challenging the headstrong woman again. "They went about it the right way. They're married, and I doubt that he'll want a divorce."

"Lifelong," Sir Irons repeated. "Who's to say he won't kill her once he knows enough? Then he can go trotting back to his masters without feeling a hint of doubt." Lt. Walsh frowned, but said nothing at the moment.

"Thou shalt not kill" is a commandment in both bibles, Hugh," Lady Katherine said solemnly, crossing her arms.

"He kills the creatures his bosses call heathens each day," Sir Irons argued.

"We kill vampires just the same," she retorted. Sir Irons laughed harshly.

"It would be nothing for him to strike down any Englishman in the name of God, since we're filthy, left-legged Protestants." Lady Katherine paused a moment, considering this point, before shaking her head.

"He's been here months now," she said. "He'd have done it by now; but he hasn't killed anyone on English soil since he's come. In fact," she added, "he usually is in Italy during the day, anyway." She turned to Lt. Walsh. "Robert, your spies in Italy—have they said anything?"

"As of this morning, everything was reported as normal," he replied, scratching the little bit of beard he had left.
"And your spies in the Vatican?"

"No covert operations are being planned, other than an increased surveillance on remote waypoints due to an increase in vampiric activity." Lady Katherine smiled, her point proven.

"And have any secrets fallen into enemy hands as of late?" she asked sweetly, but her triumphant expression was purely to spite Irons.

"Not as of late," Lt. Walsh conceded with a shrug. "Everything's been quiet."

"There," Lady Katherine said, as if that was all Irons needed. "You see? Nothing's happened, and he's been here quite a while." Sir Penwood glared pointedly at her; as long as she didn't give away how long a while he'd been here already. The other Knights were supposed to be in the dark about Integra's escapades outside of her cell. Lady Katherine gave him a stern look, as though irritated that he'd even think she'd breach his trust and betray his secret.

"Biding his time," Sir Irons said obstinately. "Earning her trust, I bet. Then, one night, all it will take is one swing of his arm and Alucard's free, the country is compromised, and we'll all go to Hell in a handbasket."

"Do you really believe she'd have let him in her home if she didn't trust him already?" This was from Marie Walsh, who had crossed her arms with a firm pout. "She's not a child anymore. She knows the dangers, just like the rest of us."

"Apparently she doesn't!" Irons replied. "She's careless! She's married an assassin, for God's sake!"

"Well I like him!" She blushed as her voice rose into a shout, her hand clapping over her mouth. She returned to her previous hushed tones as her husband tried in vain to grab her attention. "No, Robbie!" she batted his hand away, frowning. "I don't care what he is! You're all assassins too! You kill people in the name of England, he kills people in the name of God; between the lot of you, there's not much difference!"

"Yes," Marjorie agreed, though not without her usual hypocritical edge. "But he's not one of us, is he? He's nothing but trouble, being from that bunch of bead-counting—"

"Don't you think they said the same thing about her?" Marie insisted, almost tearfully. She always began to cry once she got worked up enough, even if she wasn't sad or angry. "You know they couldn't have been happy about him marrying her! I bet they thought she was more danger than he could handle!"

"More danger?" Sir Irons huffed. "The man can rip his way through a metal wall in two seconds flat."

"Yes, but you're forgetting what little Integra is now," Lady Katherine laughed darkly. "Anyone, especially the churches, knows the story of Adam and Eve and the temptations that women cause," she purred, flashing a sultry look. Sir Penwood looked towards the heavens with a sigh, and Marie giggled nervously.

"Integra?" Lady Irons asked scathingly. "Lord; with the way she dresses, we'd have to worry more about Reginald turning him on!" The man in question narrowed his eyes in anger, but before he could say anything he was interrupted by Walsh.

"That's enough," Lt. Walsh commanded, clearing his throat. "We can stand here and argue all night, but in the end, I think Katherine's right." He nodded to Lady Penwood, who blinked in surprise before comprehending that he was agreeing with her. "We can't force them to split up. If
they're married, then so be it. The best we can do is watch everyone closely, and hope that Integra had enough sense to think this through before diving headfirst."

"There you go," Lady Katherine said, crossing her arms with another triumphant grin.

"And do you think she thought this through, Walsh?" Sir Irons asked condescendingly.

"I do," he answered. Sir Irons' brows raised in surprise, but Walsh continued with an explanation.

"Integra's never been one to just throw herself into a problem all at once. She's a difficult girl sometimes—that's true—and she can be impulsive, but she's always showed a grasp of reality that's surprised me, even when she was younger. She understands how her actions can cause a chain reaction that affects everyone around her. Besides, she's thought long and hard about simpler problems than this; who's to say she hadn't sat in that cell and pondered for weeks before making a move?"

"The way I see it, I've trusted her with national security before and came out better than I was going in," Lt. Walsh concluded. "I think I can trust her with a personal matter like a husband. After all, it's the final product everyone's got their eyes on."

"With the Hellsing mastery of Alucard, and the Vatican's knowledge of weaponry and anatomy, her children would indeed be a work of military art," Sir Grey acknowledged. "A rather impressive force against the supernatural."

"But the Vatican would be controlling Alucard," Sir Irons countered, undeterred.

"Who's saying the Vatican gets all the control?" Sir Penwood piped up. "Integra's got to name the successor herself. That's how she was able to control Alucard while Richard Hellsing couldn't." The others looked at him and his ears began to grow pink as he continued. "So—then, if she has more than one child, only one can be the heir. Or heiress," he corrected himself. "That way, we can keep our end, and they can have a Regenerator, without anyone losing anything."

"Brilliant man," Lady Katherine purred happily. Sir Penwood shook his head.

"No," he admitted. "Integra told me that herself. She's had that part planned out, at least." He began to fidget under their eyes, his gaze flitting between theirs anxiously.

"Well, there you go," Lt. Walsh quoted Lady Katherine's earlier words, pulling out a carton of cigarettes and lighting one. He inhaled the smoke and sighed calmly. "Like I said; we can't force it on them."

"Like hell we can't," Sir Irons grumbled, anger still flashing in his eyes. The Knights who hadn't spoken looked at each other, murmuring between themselves their own opinions. Many of them didn't care, so long as it didn't affect their jobs and security directly. But they'd never say that outright; to do so would be nearly blasphemous. Not caring about the country's security?

"Hugh Irons, if you want to try, then be my guest," Lady Katherine growled. "But if I have to march my way up the ladder to the Queen and make her bless the marriage, I'll do it. If that's what it takes you to leave that poor girl alone. She already deals with enough each day as it is; she doesn't need you squawking in her ears as well."

"Don't worry," Walsh cut in. "If he's going to take it that far, he'll be sure to send us all a memo first." Nervous laughter broke up the tension at Irons' expense; everyone knew that the old man never made a key move without sending someone a memo about it. Sir Irons huffed and shook his head, but the meeting seemed to be over. Everyone began to disband, putting some distance
between them all in order to cool off.

"Is it that hard, to put your trust in that girl?" Walsh asked, sticking around for a moment as Irons straightened his coat again with a scowl. "After all, she *is* Arthur's girl."

"That's exactly why I'm so loath to do so," Irons replied gravely.

"You're being very quiet tonight, Master." Alucard looked down at Seras, who was watching him closely. He inclined his head in agreement, motioning over to where the Knights had been standing.

"I've been listening to their little arguments over there," he admitted with a savage grin. "They're all torn up over the Judas Priest in our midst." Seras rose onto her tiptoes, but couldn't see as far as he could, over the heads of the people to where Irons and Walsh stood quietly speaking.

"What're they going to do?" Seras asked curiously. "What *can* they do?" Alucard shook his head.

"Not much," he replied. "Some wanted to force them into a divorce, but I'm afraid that was met with a bit of opposition. Their hands are tied, and my master doesn't wish to hand them a knife to cut the rope with." He chuckled. "Humans are so fascinating, even as much as they annoy me with hypocritical thoughts." Seras hummed musingly.

"They're really that worried about it, huh," she murmured, one hand on her chin. She wasn't expecting an answer from him, and seemed to be working through something in her mind. He felt it buzzing with activity, but she wasn't letting him see her thoughts. It piqued his interest.

"Are you making a plan, Police Girl?" he asked her quietly, conspiratorially. He wanted to know what she was concentrating so hard on. She looked up at him once more, her red lips curving into a grin, the edge of one fang glinting in the light from the sconce above their heads. He felt his stomach clench tightly in eagerness at the sight, and was leaning down before he realized what he was doing.

"No, I'm just considering something," she answered vaguely, something in her eyes sparking before she looked back at the groups merging around each other in the general crowd. He set his jaw and straightened up slightly, holding back a grumble as he glared at two young ladies laughing far too loudly near him.

She'd been playing this allusive game with him all evening, and there was no end to it in sight. As impatient as he was, it infuriated him as she brazenly sidestepped all his questions and every word she said was laced with both innocence and suggestions, always making him second-guess what her real meaning was.

But at the same time, the unpredictable nature of it excited him, igniting something he hadn't felt in decades; there was a need to follow through to the end, to see where all this was leading. The needless banter, the sideways glimpses, the knowing smiles; all of these were familiar to him—hell, he'd even used many of them himself when pursuing a female—but somehow, it was also completely different and therefore unknown.

He had to give the credit where it was due; that damn tailor had said he was going to transform the girl, and he did. Never before had Alucard considered the one he created to be beautiful—comely perhaps, but not beautiful.

But she was, strikingly so. That dress took every curve she had and put it all on display, right in front of him and every other male in the room. And the color; he'd told them it had to be red, but
now he was second-guessing his judgment. The red fabric lying against her skin, as pale as she was, was enthralling to him. He could stare at it for days, weeks even. She licked her lips as she watched the people, rubbing the side of her mouth with her thumb as if trying to get rid of something that was there; perhaps she thought her lipstick had smeared. He watched her, thinking back to a time only a week or two ago when that same tongue had been against his cheek. She'd been seeking to usurp his control, and had succeeded outstandingly. He hadn't known that such a simple act would have affected him so; otherwise, he'd have kept her from doing it somehow. Just the memory of that night set flames in the pit of his stomach. Even if he hadn't gotten what he wanted, he'd still been pleased; he remembered her fist crushing his ribs, and the astonishment he'd felt afterwards that he hadn't seen such a thing coming. The fact that she'd been able to do that was almost as arousing as her "chaste" little kiss. "Harry!" A lone figure detached itself from the crowd and made its way over to the nearly-devoid corner where they both were standing. The officer smiled cheerfully and bowed exaggeratedly to Seras. "Milady, I've come to ask this dance," he announced in an over-the-top gesture of grandeur, complete with a hand flourish. "Seeing as I know your partner will most likely monopolize you for the rest of the night. And, of course, if he doesn't mind me taking you away for a dance or two." "Well, do you?" Seras asked, glancing at him. While the human was being completely honest in his question of whether Alucard minded, Seras seemed to be challenging him to say yes. That little smile of hers tugged at her lips again and he felt the sudden urge to grab her and carry her to a desolate place where he wouldn't have to share her with anyone. But as quickly as the feeling came over him, he pushed it back and it passed. He wanted to take her up on the challenge—truly he did, more than he'd ever wanted anything before as far back as he could remember—but he also didn't want to sound petty before this paltry human. The male was no danger. He could feel the man's aura; the officer didn't lust after his captain. "Go ahead," Alucard waved them away aloofly. Seras laughed and was pulled away by her second-in-command to a spot of the ballroom that was quickly clearing of people. Pairs began to gather and after a moment, the orchestra struck up a simple waltz. He watched as the soldier pulled Seras around the floor, showing a surprising display of grace from a human. Seras followed, not seeming nearly as clumsy as he knew she was. They were laughing and twirling, sometimes losing the beat yet somehow managing to keep from plowing into another dancing couple. His gaze wandered over to his master, who was watching the dancers with an inquisitive, attentive expression on her face. Even with all the human heartbeats in the room, hers stood out more to him. Perhaps it was because she was his master, and her heartbeat was of vital importance to him while she remained so. It was his job to see to her protection. But, at the same time, it wasn't his job anymore. The priest was more than capable of protecting the heiress, as much as Alucard hated to admit it. Alucard had no reason to be here, where he was surrounded by humans with their irritating heartbeats that never synched with one another, and the odors of flesh and sweat. It railed against his senses and left a bad taste in his mouth. It was the same way whenever he went into that godforsaken city of filth for a mission, or even when he was surrounded by the soldiers for one reason or another. There was a reason why
vampires created their dwellings in remote places. They needed to be close to food, but far away from the sensory disasters that came with large groups of said food.

Of course, he was an ancient being that was used to putting such things to the side, only thinking about them in times like this when he didn't even have to be subjected to them. He'd rather have been in his chambers beneath the basement, sipping blood and relaxing in the dusty silence of his shrunken domain. The only reason he'd come up at all was because Integra had commanded it of him—of course, getting a closer look at the Police Girl's exposed assets was a small bonus.

The song ended, the audience applauded and dancers applauded, and a new one was struck up in its place, with new pairings and a new tempo. It was the same damn thing—he could have been in a party in the 1800s, or the 1600s. Only the people and fashions changed; the party was still the same.

Seras was led back by her officer, who immediately procured a new lady on his arm for the next dance. She settled back beside him, silent and anticipating. He eyed her as subtly as he could, taking in the swell of her breasts. The dress heightened their shape, as if she needed much to begin with. He remembered the feel of them under his arm as he drank the life from her.

He swallowed, gaze flitting to her neck, which was outlined by the gold and emerald jewelry. He remembered the taste of her blood, too; rich and thick, with a sweet aftertaste. Later he'd asked in a rare burst of curiosity, and she'd told him that they'd had a party for a colleague before getting the call about Cheddar, and she'd eaten a piece of "golden cake with chocolate-buttercream frosting", whatever that meant. He was sure it was one of those ridiculously flamboyant concoctions that filled the windows of bakeries, the ones that Seras still drooled over despite being unable to eat them.

As if she'd heard his thoughts, her gaze flitted towards the loaded buffet table near them. His eyes followed hers, curious as to what captivated her and drew eyes like a moth to a flame. Roasted meats, thick puddings, gaily decorated cakes, creamy pies, spiced and candied fruits, fluffy potatoes, warm gravy, and all sorts of other succulent assortments were laid out on the table.

He felt no yearning for the foodstuffs spread in large platters all over the table. He felt no hunger at their sight or scent. But Seras was not the same. She looked at the food with a wistful longing. She was young—she most likely still remembered the taste of the meat and the texture of sugared sweets on her tongue.

To him it was too distant a memory; he couldn't even imagine what mortal food might taste like. He got a small glimpse of more overwhelming flavors of his victim's last meal, but it was a ghost of a taste compared to the potency of the briny, iron-like tang of blood. It seasoned the blood somewhat, but just like Seras' blood he could only taste the hint of sweet, not the chocolate buttercream or the moist cake itself.

"They've spared no expense for the feast," he murmured, leaning down to speak close to her ear. She started, glancing at him quickly.

"Yes. It makes—" She hesitated, biting her lip before finishing her thought quickly. "It makes me wish that I could eat that again, sometimes. I mean, I know I can't," she explained hurriedly, seeing the shadows flash in his eyes. He knew she was remembering month after month, day after day of battles over drinking her blood like a proper vampire. "It's just... Seeing the mincemeat pies and sugarplums, it makes me think about the foods I liked to eat once. And now I can't have anything except blood," she finished somberly, looking down at her shoes.

"It's a small price to pay for the glories of what you've become," he observed quietly. She looked
little and sad, a far cry from the brazen little thing she'd been all evening. He found, surprisingly, that it made his stomach twist in a way he didn't really enjoy. It was strange; usually he never bothered feeling remorse over anyone else's pain, physical or emotional. He wasn't sure why she would be any different.

"I know," she affirmed with a small sigh. "You've told me before." The song ended and her head jerked up as the people applauded politely. She was so enthralled watching the orchestra prepare for their next set of songs that she was caught unaware when he slid his hand up her arm to grip her tightly just beneath her shoulder.

"Come," he purred smoothly, a grin spreading across his face. "Your subordinate officer said that I'd monopolize you for the evening, and I'd hate to prove him wrong." She gaped up at him, eyes wide.

"W-what?" she squeaked, startled. "You really want to dance with me?" He arched a brow imperiously.

"And why wouldn't I?" he asked, amusement at her bewilderment glinting in his eyes. She opened and closed her mouth before clearing her throat.

"Well, I just assumed," she began, avoiding his stare as she gathered her thoughts, "I mean, I thought you wouldn't want to be caught dancing in front of all these people, and you'd just stay in the shadows all night or something, like you usually do."

"What have I taught you? Don't assume things," he replied matter-of-factly, tugging her closer to the dance floor. She pulled back, watching him warily.

"Why?" she asked, brow furrowing. He stopped and turned back towards her. She took a step backwards, hand fluttering up to her pale throat. His mouth grew dry at the sight, his mind going again to the way her blood had tasted as it flowed down his throat. "You aren't planning to do something low-handed out there, are you?"

"Not at the moment, but you're certainly trying my patience," he growled, holding out his hand. "Come along, Police Girl." She finally gave in and tentatively put her hand in his, letting him lead her through the crowd to the dance floor.

She tried keeping a safe distance between them, but her jerked her arm and she stumbled forward until they were flush with each other. Her face colored darker than her dress and she muttered an apology, but found quickly that his hand—which he'd put on the small of her back—prevented her from moving away.

She looked up at him with a stunned expression, but he only met her nearly-frantic eyes with his own calm ones. His other hand slid from her shoulder to her hand, lifting it up slightly as the music began. He twirled her into a waltz, her hand flying to his shoulder as she tried not to fall on him again.

They spun around the floor along with the other couples, aware and yet oblivious to the eyes of the crowd on them. She managed to meet his steps and was safe from tumbling to the floor, but she seemed adamant in her refusal to meet his eyes. He smiled to himself, getting a mischievous idea. He did love seeing her reactions to his little teasing gestures. And the way she'd been acting all night, he was certain she wouldn't disappoint.

As they moved about the floor in time to the music, he slid his hand further down until he was millimeters away from copping a feel. He felt her stiffen and she tried to wrench herself away from
him, but there wasn't much room to maneuver. Finally, she took her hand off his shoulder long enough to grab his wrist and force his hand back up her back.

He could have tightened his hold and made it impossible for her to move his hand, but he let her think she had the control for the moment. They managed to go around the room once more before his hand returned to the all-too-compromising position, and this time she gave a strangled yelp as he took a handful of her rear and squeezed.

The way her dress was crafted, the crowd couldn't see what he was doing. However, she didn't need to know that, and just being accosted in any way had riled her fury. She glowered up at him, her mouth set in a thin line that told him that if they weren't at the center of attention on the dance floor, she'd have lit into him with a sound scolding—it didn't matter if he was her master or not.

"Something wrong?" he queried, his eyes daring her to say something. She glared at him a moment longer; he could almost see the gears in her mind turning at a fascinating speed. Then, something flickered in her eyes and she smiled sweetly, moving closer.

"No, nothing's wrong," she replied almost viciously, her hand on his shoulder tightening. They finished the waltz and made it through five more dances before she finally pulled away. He let go and she stalked back to the corner, adjusting her skirts. He gave her a moment before joining her, wondering what she'd do next. She really did leave him guessing sometimes.

There was no doubt in his mind that his little touch wouldn't be forgotten without a fight. But while he was a good hand at combat, he also knew that this sort of battle was the most dangerous. If he managed to win, he'd have something better than the spoils of any war. But one false step and he'd spell a swift execution for himself. *Hell hath no fury*, he thought dryly. She may not have been able to kill him, but she'd already proven that she could match him in wit. He'd made the mistake of underestimating his opponent before; he had learned from those mistakes, too.

He stood next to her again, but was steadfastly ignored until his hand wandered too close again. She purposely stepped aside, her eyes locked on the dancers with a soured, impertinent look. It took everything he had not to laugh outright at her, for fear of encouraging such disrespectful behavior. It was times like this that he nearly forgot she was supposed to be his obedient little servant; her inner fire was too interesting to douse by forcing his hand on her.

"Oh, are they going to dance?" she asked suddenly, her voice shocked into posing the question despite her cold shoulder attitude. He looked up and saw Integra with one of the older officers, while the Penwood bitch was dragging the paladin onto the floor—a very impressive feat, seeing as he was much larger than she was. He looked embarrassed, but he obediently took her arm and began to dance. "Oh, he's not too bad," Seras acknowledged, watching him take the older woman around the floor.

"A man with poise in battle can find the same almost anywhere," Alucard admitted coldly, watching as well. He had to admit; his master and the priest were more similar than he liked thinking about. They both had won a begrudging respect from him by showing their prowess in battle, they were solemn and dignified, and they both had managed to be on the overweight, bellowing cow's good side.

"Resentful?" He looked down to see Seras eyeing him with an impish smile.

"Of what?" he retorted calmly. Seras nodded towards the dancefloor, not bothering to put what they both knew into words. He frowned and leaned against the wall with a lazy, uncaring air. "The Judas Priest doesn't concern me. The day will come where he and I will clash as nemeses; but until that time, I'll just have to deal with the fact that my master respects him enough to let him remain
"I think it's a bit more than respect," noted Seras eloquently. Alucard scowled.

"She does not love him. My mind and hers are joined until her death; I can feel her emotions keenly at times."

"She might not now," Seras permitted, but a dreamy expression crossed her face for a spit-second. "But she might someday." Alucard laughed callously.

"Naïve girl!" he crowed darkly. "The world doesn't revolve around your fairytale emotions!" She looked taken-aback.

"What do you mean by that?" she asked crossly, pouting. He sneered down at her.

"Love," he snorted derisively. "That's a trivial, foolish notion."

"You can't tell me that you don't believe love exists," Seras argued. He rolled his eyes.

"Love exists," he admitted. "But humans so rarely feel it. They categorize everything with love. They love food. They love hobbies. They love pets." He laughed again. "They have no real understanding of what it is to feel love. Shallow affection and camaraderie; that's what your "love" truly is beneath the bullshit."

"No." He looked down at her, and the conviction on her face stunned him. She had never before seemed so intent on something. She frowned, righteous indignation rolling off her body like waves.

"You're wrong. Just because you've never felt love doesn't mean it's not there. Love can come out of anything. Even in your day, when people arranged marriages; you can't tell me some of those people didn't fall in love!" She looked at him, eyes shimmering with certainty. "You'd be lying!"

"I'd be lying," he murmured in agreement, confused by her self-assurance. "But you've never loved, so you can't judge women like Integra off your own experience." She faltered only a moment, her expression softening.

"I have," she protested softly, and their eyes met. The light sparkling in her red depths made something in his chest drop to the bottom of his stomach. This emotion—was this dread, or something else entirely? It didn't feel like apprehension, but the symptoms were the same. "I've loved someone more than I've ever loved anyone ever before."

"Who?" he hissed, boxing her into the corner. She shivered at the darkness of his aura, and peered up at his face nervously. Something must have shown there, for her eyes widened and realization swept across her features, followed by horror and mortification. She knew that he knew. That he'd known, for months now. Still, would she confess? Would she lie?

"It's… I love…." She choked out, her face becoming steadily more flushed as she scrambled for words. Nothing more came, and they stood like statues, staring at one another. Minutes passed, or it could have been hours, for all he knew. She began to tremble and all at once tears spilled over her cheeks, a small sob escaping her lips. "I'm sorry!" she wailed, ducking beneath his arm and
running off, wiping her face with both hands.

He could still hear her stifled weeping as she ran through the wall, obviously too upset to realize that she'd missed the door and had phased instead. He stood alone, staring at the spot she'd vanished into. He felt wetness on his arm and looked down to see red dots spreading into a stain on the sleeve of his shirt. His shadows moved over the blotted sleeve, sucking the blood from it and leaving it spotless as before.

He tugged it back into position on his arm, his brow furrowing as he leaned once more against the wall's cool surface. He felt strange, so strange. It puzzled him to no end and he had no outlet, nor any way of processing what it was that he felt.

He understood the individual emotion, of course. Puzzlement, curiosity, something he knew was guilt (though he couldn't remember ever feeling guilty before), and a strange pang of bitterness. But feeling them individually was one thing; feeling all of them at once was something else entirely. What did it mean?

He looked around the room, satisfied that none of the humans caught what transpired between the two vampires. Everyone was focused on the dancing, or in their own conversation. Walter might have noticed, but he was too busy helping the cook prepare the individual serving dishes for the feast. Integra was talking with the officer who was wheeling her around the floor, and hadn't paid any attention either.

He wanted nothing more than to go to his chambers, sit down, and try to suppress the overwhelming emotions running rampant through his mind. But he could sense Seras' grief, and while she was broadcasting her emotion so clearly he knew he'd get no rest. Either he could make her stop, or tell her to keep her sorrow to herself.

Looking around once more, he backed into the wall and made his way towards the basement, mouth twisted in single-minded purpose.

Seras shut the door to her bedroom and slid until she was sitting with her back against the cold metal, knees drawn up to her chest as she tried to stop crying. It was lucky that her dress was crimson, so the tears staining the fabric blended in. Wiping her eyes, she whimpered as quietly as she could to keep from drawing the attention of anyone who might have been walking through the basement. She wasn't sure if she had been spotted leaving the ballroom, but if she had then Walter or one of the officers would surely come checking on her.

Staggering to her feet, she began to pace the room, making circles around her little table. She bit her thumb, running through the bewildered pain in her mind.

He'd known! What had started out as a little playful teasing on her part had turned into… into this! He'd made her admit that she'd been in love—that she was in love—and then he'd demanded to know who she was in love with! At first she'd deflected his question, not ready to admit that it was he who held her affections.

But then he'd cornered her, looming over her and ordering her to tell him. She'd seen the haggard look in his eyes, and the cold, expressionless mask that had become his face, and she'd grown nervous. Then something had sparked along their mental bond and she knew that he had figured it out somehow. She thought she'd hid her true feelings well, but he'd still uncovered the truth!

"How long?" she asked herself, her heart clenching. He'd known, perhaps for months, perhaps longer than she'd known! And all this time, he hadn't done anything about it, or said anything to
her. It was clear he didn't return her sentiments, and he probably thought she was the silliest creature he'd ever come across. In his eyes, she must have seemed like nothing more than a student with a puppy-love crush on the teacher.

Oh, how could she ever face him again?! Now her humiliation would hang over every word she addressed to him. To him it may have been nothing more than infatuation, but he clearly didn't want to see how serious she was! It was much more than a simple crush; she loved him. She didn't care if he killed millions, if he was ruthless and evil. She still loved the man she saw glimpses of beneath the dark-shadowed killer.

She continued to pace, so lost in her own thoughts that she forgot to keep track of what was going on around her. Tugging on her elongated hair, she turned all her options over and over in her mind, trying to decide what was best.

She felt as if she couldn't ever look him in the eyes again; perhaps she should go away? It was no secret that Hellsing had branches all over the globe. She could just ask for a transfer; somewhere far away, perhaps a tropical place. No, that would never work; she'd have to explain her reason for leaving and she didn't think Integra would completely understand that she could never stay here.

Maybe she should just run away. No one would miss her until tomorrow evening; that would give her a head start. Now, where to go? Crossing the ocean would be difficult, but not impossible. She chewed her lip, taking care to keep her fangs away from the tender flesh. If only she had connections that could get her onto a ship somewhere, or a plane.

Perhaps she could travel to somewhere like Alaska, where it was dark part of the year. No, that would be too remote. She had to think about getting blood. Without Hellsing, she'd be forced to find her own food. Maybe she could just go to mainland Europe, and find a crowd of vampires to blend in with? But she was taking Alucard out of the equation; even if she knew she couldn't look at him without feeling anything but mortification, that didn't mean he would just up and let her leave.

"Police Girl." A hand on her shoulder had her screaming in alarm and jumping away, claws and fangs coming out in self-preservation. She hissed at the intruder before immediately calming as she saw it was no stranger, but instead her master. She flushed and hid her face behind her hands. He was the last person she wanted to see at the moment!

"What do you want!?” she moaned in humiliation, turning away and wishing the earth itself would just swallow her up. Was it possible for a person to live with this sort of shame? She felt as if she would die of embarrassment! He didn't touch her again, but his aura was oppressive enough that she felt as if he were invading her private space.

"Perhaps you don't know etiquette," he said scathingly, "but one doesn't leave a party without saying goodbye. And," he added, "One doesn't leave with unanswered questions." She cursed mentally. He still wanted her answer? As if it wasn't clear enough! Any fool could look at her and know that she was in love with him.

Even when they had first met, she'd been attracted to his mysterious, charismatic attitude and smooth, suave manner. Even when he was in the thralls of battle, ripping enemies apart, she first saw him as something to idolize, and then something to covet. But it was very clear to her that he didn't see her that way. Perhaps he lusted after her, but he didn't love. If he did, he wouldn't have shot down her remarks in the ballroom as if they were the simple-minded words of a child.

"Seras, I demand an answer," he said firmly, tone severe. She peeked at him through her fingers, feeling as if he was ripping her insides out with every harsh word. Was this what other people
called heartbreak? If it was, she could easily understand how humans could die of a broken heart. This feeling—she wouldn't wish it on her worst enemy.

"Why?" she replied somewhat frigidly. "You already know the answer. I could feel it. You were… you were disgusted by it," she accused, collapsing onto the bed and sitting hunched over, curled in on herself as if to protect her vitals from any more emotional blows.

"I am not disgusted," he argued, and she looked up with every intention of proving her point. But at the expression on his face, she hesitated. He looked utterly baffled, standing there in the middle of her bedroom with his hands hanging limply at his sides. She felt something tickle her hand and looked down to see shadows moving over her dress, soaking up her leftover tears.

They moved up to her face and she scrunched instinctively, but they only wafted across her cheeks, catching every last crimson drop. There was no way to describe the feeling—it was not gentle or rough, neither cold nor warm. They felt shadowy, that was the only way to describe it. She had felt his shadows before, of course, as they changed her clothes or jumped to protect her from an enemy blow, but each time it was just as strange and just as unexpected.

She let the shadows finish and sighed dejectedly.

"You don't love me," she announced, not bothering to look at him and instead letting her gaze rest on the cement stone that made up her wall. It was glum in here, and it seemed to suit her nicely at the moment.

"No," he agreed with certitude, but beneath it she could have sworn there was uncertainty. She perked up, but immediately deflated again. Of course she'd sense that; that was wishful thinking. She was sensing what she wanted him to be feeling. "I cannot feel what I do not know."

"You know," she said quietly, looking down at her hands, "in the book, the Count says that he knew love once."

"That book is half wild-fantasy," he assured her coldly. "I've never—"

"It's strange to me," she cut him off, standing, "that you've lived so much longer than I have, but you don't know something as simple as love."

"I told you upstairs—love is naïve. It has no meaning."

That's one of the best things about it," she confided, voice soft. "It doesn't have to have meaning. It can be full of significance one moment, nothing but empty mysteries the next, and still be the same thing."

"Nothing can be two opposites at once," he countered with a shake of his head. She felt a burst of courage and stepped forward before she had time to rethink her actions, wrapping her arms around his waist in a tight embrace.

"It can," she mumbled, mouth against his vest. "It can, and it is." He didn't react to her hold at all—she could have been pushing him away and still gotten the same amount of feeling out of him. "I love you," she admitted, squeezing even tighter until her arms were shaking with the effort. "You say you've never known what love is," she half-growled. "Well, feel it now; know it!"

Holding on tightly, as if she were afraid of his escape, she tried to flood his mind the same way he'd flooded hers in the supply room that one night. Every feeling of unbridled joy, excitement, affection, and longing that made up pure, unfiltered love she pushed towards him, nearly begging
him to take it and experience it just once.

He didn't have a heart that could race beneath her ear, but she gave him the experience of a racing heart anyway. He had never known the happiness of just being in someone's presence, but she did, and she gave every bit of it she had. Every time he'd slept next to her and wrapped her in his semi-warmth, every time he smiled at her or praised her, all the times they'd just sat together under the moon, sharing nothing but company; she gave it all, wanting him to know. She wanted it more than anything.

She felt him stiffen and pull away, but she moved with him until they were both against the wall. Finally she was exhausted with the effort of forcing emotions onto him through their mental link and slumped against him, breathing as if she'd just ran for miles. She closed her eyes and realized for the first time that his breathing was labored too, though not as badly as hers.

When she managed to catch her breath, she opened her eyes and looked up to see him staring down at her in puzzlement. She met his querying gaze and he frowned.

"What was that supposed to be?" he asked disapprovingly, nose wrinkling. But she could see past his cruelty, down to the weary, perplexed man hidden within. She smiled wryly, her cheek against the cool fabric of his shirt.

"That's love," she said simply. He was silent for a long moment, before reaching down and detangling her anaconda embrace.

"I don't like it," he announced. "It's... bizarre." He scowled at her. "Don't do that again."

"It is bizarre," she agreed. "It's bizarre and chaotic and just..." she laughed. "I can't explain it! Didn't it make you happy? Didn't you feel anything?"

"No," he drawled with a snarl. She sighed.

"Maybe I should move off to Alaska," she muttered, this time holding herself. Her arms wrapped around her body, she turned away with a sniff, feeling tears pricking her eyes again this time from self-pity.

"What?" he snapped angrily. "Why would you do that?" She glared at him, wiping the corners of her eyes delicately.

"Because you're breaking my heart!" she barked in reply, finally irritated at his callous senselessness. There was only so much a girl could take in one night, after all. "Even you know what heartbreak is! You've had your heart stabbed before; just draw a bloody comparison," she growled, trying not to cry.

"Seras," he called, and something in his tone made her look back. He was staring at her with such intensity that it nearly frightened her. There was no tenderness in his gaze, but there was passion as well as a fierce possessiveness. "Defeatism doesn't become you," he finally muttered.

"What?" she sniffed.

"We'll be missed upstairs if we linger down here too long. Come; stop this incessant blubbering and blathering so we can return. I'd rather not have my master down my throat again because I broke your heart."

"Didn't you listen to anything I just said?" she asked incredulously, stunned. Was he really going to ignore it all?
"I heard every word," he grumbled impatiently. "I can't do a thing about it, though. If my being unable to… love causes you heartbreak, than it will just have to be." Seras thought for a moment, twisting her hands together.

"Unable, but not unwilling?" she clarified half-hopefully.

"I'm never willing to listen to a female rant and sob over feelings." Now he just looked put-upon instead of irritated. "I won't tell you again. If you don't hurry up, I'm going to kick you up the stairs instead."

"Yes, Master." She sniffed the last time and checked herself quickly in the mirror—she had red eyes, but that would quickly clear up. She rubbed her face and brushed imaginary dust off her skirt with her hands before returning to his side.

"Bend down," she directed him with a small smile. He arched a brow, but bent lower until their faces were level. She kissed his cheek gently, brushing his hair away and letting her fingers linger on his jaw. He turned his head and stared, neither accepting nor rejecting her little display of affection. "Since you know," she shrugged. "Unless you don't want me to."

"I let you, didn't I?" he growled, but didn't say anything against it. He led the way back upstairs and Seras followed, stopping only to shut her door before hurrying up the hall after him. She sighed, but kept her thoughts to herself.

So he didn't love her. She knew that; but he did feel… something. Perhaps he didn't even know what it was, but she could see it in his eyes. He bent for her like he would for no one else, and that mattered to him, at least. While it wasn't the love she craved in return, it would do for now.

He also hadn't outright rejected her affections, either. Perhaps he did feel something more from the emotion she had shown him; something that had made him think. And it was no surprise that he'd let her kiss him—he still desired her, clearly. That hadn't changed. Seras didn't know what to make of it, but one night wasn't nearly enough time to sort through what she felt.

She tried to put it out of her mind as they entered the ballroom, keeping to the shadows. After all, she had all the time in the world to think about such things.
Seras excused herself from the party around 3:00. Dawn was less than an hour away, and most of the higher-ranking soldiers that had been invited were already gone. The other guests that weren’t tipsy enough from the wine served with dinner were quickly becoming that way, glasses in hand and cheeks reddening. Alucard had finally had enough, leaving without telling anyone around 1:00. He hadn't been missed; Sir Integra was too busy trying to avoid the other Knights to even bother asking where her servant had gone.

The light from the ballroom spilled out into the foyer along with muffled laughter and music. Seras walked in the shadows until she reached the stairs to the basement, habitually trying to keep quiet. The manor was calmer than usual, the night watch having been dismissed early due to the party, and the third-shift servants cleaning up the kitchens. Once she descended to the basement, the only sound was the soft tapping of her flats on the weathered stone and the hum of electric lights above her. To a human, the darkness and oppressive silence would have been discerning, but to her they were comforting after the barrage of the ballroom and its inhabitants on her senses.

She reached her bedroom and entered it, shutting the door behind her with a barely audible click. Turning, she caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror and moved to stand in front of it, staring at her reflection. Her earlier tears hadn't had an effect on her physically; she was still perfectly pale and looked as dainty and delicate as ever. She had told Walter some time before that they would make her up to be a doll, and the words rang true now as she stood and quietly examined herself.

Strangely, her reflection reminded her of a clock from her youth. She was too small to remember where she'd been, but there had been a lot of adults going quickly between rooms and she suddenly had the impression that they were at this person's home for a funeral. But the focal point of her memory was the clock. It was a work of art; the base was of marble and porcelain, with a large rounded face embellished with blue and pink flowers and light green leaves. Beneath the face, a small girl in an old-timey dress spun one way and then the other, forever in time with the clock's ceaseless ticking.

It was the girl that Seras had wanted. She was in a powder blue gown with lace, and her blonde hair was up in a bun with feathers and pearls hanging above her forehead. Her thin little hand had held a lacy fan aloft as she spun from side to side in a tireless dance. Seras had wanted to touch the little girl, to feel the cool porcelain skin and run her fingers over the bows adorning the blue dress. But the clock, and the girl, was protected by a large bell-glass, too large for her infantile hands to lift steadily. And her mother had said no, even when she begged and pleaded. "You can look but you can't touch it, love," she had said firmly, pulling the clock down off the shelf and sitting it on her lap for Seras to examine closer.

Now, looking in the mirror, Seras felt as though the image reflected back at her should be like the little Colonial girl, locked behind a glass that protected from dust and the outside world. Her reflection was a far cry from her usual boisterous, tomboyish self; she looked as fragile and breakable as the little porcelain girl must have been, with her bright blue eyes and painted pink smile. But this image wasn't smiling back at her from the mirror; the porcelain doll in the glass seemed world-weary and emotionally drained.

She turned from the glass and mechanically pulled the bow from her hair, letting her bangs tumble back into her face and not even bothering with the extensions. She carefully unclasped the choker
and pulled off the bracelets, placing them neatly on top of the chest-of-drawers. She'd have to give them back to Sir Integra, so that Lewis could return them to wherever they came from. She stepped out of her shoes and placed them in the bureau, looking apathetically at her usual uniforms before shutting the door a little too hard.

She sighed as she ran her fingers through her longer hair, looking again in the mirror. She had stood here so happy before the party had started, and then so many things had happened all at once. She kicked at a dust bunny under her table, feeling the frustration boiling up beneath her skin. It wasn't fair. It just wasn't fair. She was an idiot; she had let herself fall so far, and now where was she?

In love with the one man on the face of the planet who couldn't love her in return, or at least didn't understand how to give her what she wanted. She could never have what she wanted, it seemed; not parents, not kids or a husband or a normal job. Even her living body had been taken away, and she'd been blessed—or cursed—with this stupid, unchanging body, with its unbeating heart and inactive organs, and unable to eat the foods she wanted or drink whatever she pleased or…. She suddenly wanted to do nothing more than curl up in her bed and go to sleep, to forget about everything for a while. She reached behind her to grab the stays of her dress and found that she could just barely grab ahold of one side, unable to get it untied at the top.

"Damn thing!" she cursed, feeling angry, annoyed tears in her eyes as she tried in vain to grab the ribbons. She was just about to move back to the mirror for a better view when two deft hands grabbed the stays and unlaced them quickly. She froze; her body was facing the door, and no one had come inside. Only one person…. "What are you doing?" she asked softly, her voice barely rising above a whisper.

"Your mind is racing, Police Girl." The hands continued working down her back, and she was too shocked to do more than grab the front of her dress as it began to sag. "I can't rest with you thinking hard like that." She clutched the dress even closer, her cheeks beginning to burn. Why, why would he even bother coming in here? He acted completely dense sometimes! She was thinking about him; if he wanted her mind to rest, than having his hands brushing her spine as he unlaced her dress wasn't the thing to do!

"T-thank you," she managed to squeak, taking a step away from him. "I-I've got it now. I was about to go to bed, so I should be asleep soon." He took a step closer, putting them back in their previous position. She caught herself turning her head to look at him, but thought better of it and looked down at her hands tightened around the dress so that the knuckles were white. She heard him sigh; it sounded as heavy as she felt.

"I would give you—have given you more than I've ever given to anyone else, and still you cast me aside for something as paltry as emotion." His voice was biting, going straight to her heart. Damnit… she loved him too much to hear the bitterness, turning on her heel in one swift movement.

"Don't say that!" she shouted, the sound bouncing off the stone walls. "I'll stay with you until the end of time; I'd never cast you aside, because I can't bear the thought of you being alone!" He was silent, eyes widening almost imperceptibly. "I just want to be alone tonight. I'm tired. So tired," she echoed, closing her eyes and turning away from him again. "I know you don't love me, but that will never stop me from loving you, alright? You're just going to have to get over yourself and deal with it," she ordered irritably. There was a cold silence, and just when she thought he might have left, his clothing rustled and he stepped even closer to her, gloved hands delving beneath her dress to grasp her waist.
"Seras," he sighed again, ignoring her impertinent gasp, "My Seras. I'd worship you, if you'd just let me." She was too shocked to reply. What? What did he say? Am I hearing things? "I'd give you anything you wanted; clothes, jewels, servants... one day I will give you those things, and more," he swore firmly, hands tightening on her hips. She suddenly remembered the ruby bracelet, glinting on its lighted pedestal among the other finery in the jeweler's window. You'll never have to work again...I'll keep you safe in a castle...you'll want for nothing....

"And I'll give you today," he murmured against her hair, and then she felt the weight of him vanish as he disappeared into thin air. She turned, looking for him in vain, shoulders slumping as she let the dress fall to pool at her feet. There was a heavy lump in her throat, and her heart ached. You don't have to give me anything, she said mentally, knowing that he would be able to hear her. I told you before; I only want you. His mind brushed hers in an intimate way before he firmly shut her out, keeping true to his word that he would leave her alone today. She hung up the dress neatly and pulled on her pajamas, feeling dawn breaking somewhere above her head as she climbed into her coffin and pulled the sheet over her body.

She was asleep before she hit the pillow.

Dawn fully crested over the rolling hills of England, shining its first gray light on the manor and the people slowly dwindling out of its doors and into their vehicles. Bleary-eyed chauffeurs opened doors for ladies with wine-hazed eyes and cheeks reddened by the cold winter air, their equally inebriated husbands following closely behind.

"It was such an interesting night," Lady Walsh told Integra in her usual cheerful way, making even the worst of social gatherings sound like places one just had to be. "You must invite us back again sometime; your home is so lively compared to mine," she giggled as her husband helped her with her coat. "Don't be such a stranger," she added as Lt. Walsh all but pushed her in the direction of the door.

"Call her on the phone if you want to chat more, Marie!" he grumbled. "I'd like to get home and get a few hour's shuteye before heading for Paris." He nodded to Integra. "Sorry we can't stay longer, but this military meeting's counting on my input and—well, you know how these things go. Good party, though," he said over his shoulder as he guided his wife out the door.

Sir Grey and his wife left with murmured well wishes for the holidays, both of them too exhausted to say much more. The Irons' harrumphed in response to her polite goodbye and left with their bony noses high in the air.

"You'd think Lady Irons would have at least been a little more accommodating," she told Walter later, as they handed out coats and gloves to the last stragglers. "After all, I was polite and didn't dare say what I really felt about the whole matter." She thought it to be an impressive feat of self-control, considering how she felt towards them at the moment.

"You'll be wishing later on that a simple snub is all you have to deal with," he replied matter-of-factly, covering his mouth to yawn as he handed the Earl of Easton his hat. "In a few days' time, it'll be as though Hell itself broke open. Sir Penwood's going to seem like a mewing kitten in comparison."

"Pish-posh." This came from Lady Katherine, who had showed up behind them. "Sir Irons isn't quite as bad as all that. You just have to out-bully him and you'll be fine." Walter dug around and finally produced her hat and fur-lined coat. "If he bothers you, darling, you should just call me."

"I can handle Sir Irons myself, Lady Katherine," Integra answered wearily, and then the woman
made it all the more awkward for her as she grabbed the heiress in a tight embrace. "Really," she managed to grunt out, her face turning red as the thick arms tightened around her neck.

"Well, all the same… I'm sure you can now that you have a nice strong man to threaten him with," she laughed in Integra's ear before lowering her voice. "Or just threaten to convert to Catholicism. I hear he's quite frightened of that." She pulled away, giving her a quick kiss on each cheek. "Take care, dear."

"I will—"

"Do keep in touch, alright?"

"Yes, Lady Katherine, I—"

"And have a Happy Christmas."

"The same to you, Lady—"

"Kiss your husband for me, darling. I'm not quite sure where he's run off to…"

"Kitty, dearest, we must be getting along." She was thankfully saved the trouble of replying as Sir Penwood came around the corner, dragging his feet and all sweated out for the night. "Happy Holidays, Sir Integra, Walter." He regarded her tiredly as Walter fetched his coat. "Please don't send me any more budget requests until after the new year. I'm quite put out as it is."

"I can't make any promises," Integra replied with a small smile. He shook his head, but did manage to chuckle. "Have a Happy Christmas, Sir Penwood." She was quite fond of the old man, a bit more than she was the other Knights. It was moments like this that made all the nervous sweating worth bearing.

"Take care with Irons," he said as he went out the door, and paused to say something else, but shut his mouth and headed towards his waiting car. His wife followed after him, blowing a quick kiss at the threshold.

"Call me later! Let's talk about a spring soiree!" Walter furrowed his brow and grumbled, for once completely in agreement with his former charge.

"Spring my foot," he growled as he watched them enter the car before closing the door. "I'm too old to do this more than twice a year." His hip cracked as he leaned against the wall, scratching his head. "If it suits you, I think I'll instruct the morning shift to clean up the ballroom while I go for a —yawn— quick nap. I just can't stay up like I used to."

"Go to bed, Walter," she replied gently. "I'll give the servants their orders. You just go and rest." He nodded, but then eyed her suspiciously.

"You will go to bed, won't you?" She'd pulled that sort of thing in her youth, sneaking around under the pretense of doing something quickly, and then staying up all night. He'd find the next morning that she'd never went to bed and was nearly collapsing with exhaustion at her desk.

"Do you think I'd even try to work in this dress?" she asked, motioning to the offending garment. "I'd rather preside at a weeklong board meeting than even attempt to sit down again. I nearly ripped the damn thing trying to sit for dinner." That earned her a wry grin and with another pop of his old bones he ambled off towards his room. She stuck around long enough to make sure that the servants knew the ballroom was to be spotless by noon, and then she headed upstairs, seeking her
She entered her bedroom and collapsed on the mattress with a groan. She had been up over twenty-four hours; that wasn't unusual for her, but standing around for ten of those hours in toe-pinching shoes was not. The past three hours, she had been able to focus on little more than the pain shooting up her calves, and now she tore the torturous things off. She thought about throwing them in her exasperation, but instead she placed them to the side before lying back again. If she still slept alone, she might have just went to sleep just like she was, but now she couldn't sleep sideways on the bed. Besides, she'd paid quite a bit for the dress, and she had to admit that it wasn't entirely bad to wear for just one night, all things considered.

She stood again, her legs protesting after having the momentary reprieve, and began to search for the pins that held her hair up as she looked in the mirror. It was nearly impossible to find them, and after a moment she had only managed to get one measly tendril to come down. She sighed in annoyance and craned her head to the side, but she couldn't see anything from the mirror. The damn hairdresser had hidden them too well. She got back to work, her fingers fumbling to get the ribbons and pins to come loose and ended up only pulling her hair as a result.

She had taken to glaring at her reflection as if that would help, arms crossed, when Anderson finally managed to stumble in. He looked just as tired as she felt, but he held himself in a more stoic way instead of giving way to irritable feelings. He sat on the edge of the bed to unlace the shined dress shoes, looking at her with a question in his eyes.

"I can't find the pins in my hair," she explained snappily. "Where've you been?"

"The Cook asked me to help her carry tables," he replied quietly, the weariness evident in his voice. "Hang on a moment," he said, standing, and then shuffled over to where she stood and peered at her hair with a frown. He made a sound, pulled out one pin, and the entirety of her hair fell to the side, the others becoming visible. "There."

"Thanks." She began to pull the pins out, unwinding the ribbon as she went. She must have been sleepier than she'd originally thought, as it took much more dexterity than usual to undo the elaborate twists. She heard a phone ring and didn't think anything about it for a moment until Anderson answered.

"Hullo?" he murmured quietly, listening for a moment, one arm still in his suit jacket. "Aye, I am. Hmm? Wha'? Who did!?" he exclaimed suddenly. "Now? Aye, give me a minute to change clothes and I'll be there." He hung up and hurriedly pulled off his clothing, rushing to the closet and yanking out his everyday clothes.

"What's going on?" Integra asked, looking at the phone now lying forgotten on the bed.

"There's been a call from a team in the Caribbean. They've been investigating and they've found signs o' a man from a team tha's been missing nigh on a month now. We counted him for dead, but now… well, tha' much waits to be seen." He was already dressed again, and pulling on his boots.

"Why do you have to go out there?" she asked. "You've been up hours and you need some rest!" He didn't seem to hear her, and when he stood and collected his phone she felt a stab of anger. "Alexander!"

"Tha' man was on my team when he disappeared," he said abruptly, voice gruff with barely-restrained impatience. "It's my job to see wha's happened to him, and… if need be, free his soul to God. Go to bed; I'll be back sooner rather than later." She made a move to restrain him, but by the time she crossed the room there was nothing but pages floating down. She breathed deeply, hands
fisting of their own accord. How could you have an argument with someone and press your point when they could vanish into thin air? She felt a quick pang of sympathy for Seras as she turned back to the mirror, slamming the pins down on the vanity with unnecessary force.

"Why must I wait?" The woman paced angrily, looking at intervals at her husband. He sat quietly in his chair, facing the fire with a pensive expression, not answering. "I am running out of time," she said, her voice taking a pleading note as she looked over her shoulders at the firelight making the shadows dance on the walls. "I must hurry. I must have my revenge before it's too late."

The thing that was once a vampire had now ceased to even be a thing. It lay in the floor, making a sickening sound at intervals but otherwise unmoving. Its body had fallen apart long ago, rotting away and stinking up the place, legs nothing more than stumps on a body, hair and skin already turned into a puddle that soaked into the wood and stained it with the blackness of something that longed for death.

This is what the husband tried to avoid looking at, though his mad wife still doted on it as though it were a living, thinking soul. Every once in a while she would cease pacing to tend to it, but then her never-ending circle around the tower took precedence once more. She kept muttering to herself about time and fees of some sort, and then once in a while she'd take a book from her collection 'round with her, walking and skimming the pages for something. He never asked what she looked for, and she never told him voluntarily.

Eventually, she paused with book in hand, looking down at the thing-that-was-not-a-thing with a curious air. She took one scrap of flesh that still hung onto a sightless eye and held it aloft between her fingers, nails pinching the dead cells as she examined it. She nodded to herself before taking a log from the fire and stoking it, and then she placed the scrap of flesh and her book on the ground before lifting up the sack of mismatched parts and throwing it into the hearth. It gurgled once or twice before falling apart completely, the stench of it growing and adding a smoky aftertaste in the back of the mouth.

"My Ambrose is gone, so I must make a new one," she announced. "This one piece of him should suffice. I'll get his soul back later, but first I must make the body." Her husband said nothing, watching the leftovers melt and wondering to himself what it felt like to be licked by the hot tongues of hellfire.

Far below their feet, thousands of starving human girls were wasting away. Once they died and decomposed, the things in the other cage grabbed their body parts and dragged them through, eating with a mindless viciousness. With no one to feed them, they were getting crafty. The humans had long ceased to hope for escape or rescue, and some of them had even begun eating the other, weaker ones that died. Others simply sat in the corners, their minds gone, the last shreds of insanity rendered by malnourishment and the loud groans of hungry monsters. Even others said their prayers and rushed at the bars, hoping for a quick ending as the demonic scourges rushed at them, grabbing in an effort to reach the fresh meat.

They never screamed for long.

The Sirens had free run of the house. The masters they'd served were upstairs and hadn't come down, and they were all too beastly to figure out how to ask for orders. So they did as they pleased, going out and killing in the towns, mating and multiplying, all the while remembering in the back of their minds that they waited for something, and that they were supposed to be rewarded at some point, but not remembering for what or when. Sometimes one of them looked at a silver pistol lying forgotten on a table, and tried to remember, but other than the vague perception that the gun was
related to why they waited, there was no way for it to recall. So it just went back to guarding the
eggs laid by the females, waiting for them to hatch so that it could eat its fill until the mothers
drove it off again.

Alucard had gone through enough sleepless nights that one more didn't make a difference to him.
He wandered aimlessly around his chambers, sitting his chair or lying in his coffin only to rise
again after a half hour and pace the stone floors. He simply couldn't rest; his mind was not able to
relax after the night's events.

He had cut himself off from Seras' mind, giving her the solitude that she'd asked for. It angered
him to no end, but he found that he couldn't deny her anything it was in his power to give. She
could have asked for an entire country, and he'd have slaughtered any army that stood in his way in
order to place it at her feet. Sir Integra thought his powers were a danger, but she had no clue that
the real danger was his little police girl. Anything she asked for he felt compelled to give her.

He sighed, running a hand through his hair. Even love… if he could have managed to feel it, he
would have easily loved her. But she had showed him what love was, or what she felt it was, in any
case. It was nothing he'd ever felt before, bewildering and overpowering. It was as potent as any
rage, and deep as any grudge, but it encompassed emotions of joy and rapture, not anger and hate.
He simply couldn't fathom it, even after she'd allowed him to feel her love firsthand. It was the one
thing he didn't know how to give to her, and she asked for it anyway, as if all of his worldly
possessions meant nothing at all.

Infuriating little… but he couldn't hate her, no matter how hard he tried to. He didn't love her, but
he couldn't bear to be parted with her. He was dedicated to her, and he'd protected her and promised
her anything her heart desired, but still she insisted she only wanted him and his nonexistent
emotions. I just don't understand.

He wracked his brain, trying to think of something he could offer her in place of the wild, untamed
feelings she wanted from him. But try as he might, he couldn't think of anything to offer her that
would satisfy her. He hadn't lied when he said he'd worship her—he had no god to answer to, and
was more than willing to treat her like a goddess if she'd just…stop asking him for paltry things
like love, that he wasn't even sure existed! Sure, she had been convinced of her devotion to him,
but what if all she felt was mere affection and attraction? But what she had thrust into his mind had
been so much more than that. Was that really… was that love?

I only want you. Her voice still echoed in his head, though he was sure she was long asleep by now.
How could it be so simple, that she would turn down every materialistic thing as long as he never
left her? There had to be a catch. She had said, though… even as far back as he could remember,
she seemed happy enough to be with him. Of course they argued about things, and had even taken
it too far on one or two occasions, but through it all she'd wanted nothing more than that. Was that really… was that love?

But earlier that night—she'd been thinking about leaving when he came to her once she'd ran from
the party. He'd felt the humiliation and fear in her mind, and had even said that she was
contemplating leaving England for another place. He had realized then that if she left, he would
leave too. Without him even realizing it, her presence had made this place worth living in again. He
was never bored around her, the fascinating little creature that she was. Without her here, the
manor would once again be quiet and mundane; it was enough to drive him mad.

She'd taken it back later though, hadn't she? I'll never leave you, she said. He'd angered her, talking
about her casting him off. He'd meant to, and then instantly regretted it when he heard the hurt in
her voice. She'd told him that he'd broken her heart, and her voice had been the same then as it was
when she shouted at him for even thinking that she'd leave him alone.
He sat again in his chair, pouring himself a glass of wine habitually. He simply didn't know what to do anymore. He looked up at the rafters, taking a long drink and frowning. He hated his dead wife because she wasn't loyal enough to him. He wanted to hate Seras for being too loyal to him, but he couldn't. When had women become such a difficult thing in his life? For many years after being imprisoned by Van Helsing, he'd just taken lovers when he pleased and then disposed of them when he was finished. But then he'd been imprisoned, then released, had met a young policewoman in a forest, and his unlife had been downhill from there.

You're lying, mad king. You've never had it better. He took another drink, the cynical voice of his inner self laughing in his ear. She loves you; she's probably the first being to ever have loved you, even though she knows full well you don't love her in return. All she wants is you; can't you give her that?

I can, he thought finally as he finished the glass and poured another one. I can give her that.

Chapter End Notes

For some reason, this chapter was very short. Even when I originally posted it on ff.net, I made a comment about the length. I wonder why?
Chapter Notes

Author's Note:

This is what gives this story an M rating, if what came before hadn't. :3 hehehehe....

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Let's see... seventeen and nine and fifteen—how did they get fifteen? No, that's just one and five really close together, isn't it? God, I'm exhausted. Integra ran a hand through her hair, fighting back the weariness beating at her mind with sheer willpower. She had been back at the office by 10:00 am, barely giving herself a catnap before throwing herself face-first into her work again. Walter would have huffed and puffed if he'd known, but he was asleep in his room and most likely wouldn't be up before noon. Anderson still hadn't returned by the time the alarm had gone off, or he'd have agreed with the butler and probably forced her back into bed.

She looked up from the documents, taking a moment to close her eyes and rub her temples. This was far from the first time she'd done something like this, but it never got any easier. She didn't dare light a cigar—if her nerves were relaxed, she might lose her grip and fall asleep at her desk. It was far better to tough it out and smoke later, after the workload had been considerably lightened. She was barely caught up from her year in prison as it was; she didn't have time to waste lazing about in her bed while important government papers lay forgotten on her desk.

There was a light knock at the door and she opened her eyes, picking up her pen once more and trying to look studious before calling for them to enter. She relaxed her shoulders when the door opened to reveal that it was only Cook. The elderly woman looked well-rested and clean, though there was a measured exhaustion in her eyes that matched Integra's. She closed the door behind her expertly with one foot, both her hands caught in bearing a tray that she sat on the edge of the desk.

"I thought you might could do with a spot of lunch," she explained good-naturedly as she began to lay out the spread; there was water, coffee, and tea, Cornish pasties and sandwiches and sausage rolls and pies of some sort. It was far more than she could eat for lunch, but she said nothing as she let Cook make her a plate with a little bit of everything, instead taking the coffee and forcing it down black. The acrid taste roused her a little and she tried not to choke on it.

"Thank you," she managed to say, blinking back tears as she reached for the water glass. Cook beamed at her and sat the loaded plate before her, taking a seat in one of the chairs instead of standing to the side as Walter usually did.

"You'll forgive me for sitting," she said with a soft sigh, pulling the kerchief off her head and fanning herself with it. "I'm just not used to losing sleep; or at least, I can't afford to lose as much as I used to. Why, when the late master had parties, I'd stay up two or three nights in a row trying to fix everything just so—Walter too. But that's beyond my power now."

"Go ahead." Integra couldn't get much else out; the food had reminded her that she was far hungrier than she realized, and she was well on her way to making the old woman happy for once and finishing her plate. She was reaching for a second sandwich when the thought occurred to her that a full stomach would have a soporific effect. She forced herself to refrain, disguising the
motion as a stretch. But Cook was too preoccupied with other things to notice her.

"You really ought to have slept longer, dearie. You'll kill yourself with all this hard work that you do." She looked thoughtfully at the stacks of papers scattered across the desk and piled up in untidy stacks.

"I'll rest more when the work's caught up," Integra replied, a small part of her knowing that she'd just told a barefaced lie. Even if there was no work to do, she'd have been doing something productive, honing her fencing skill or doing shooting exercises at the very least. 'Rest' wasn't a word used very often in her vocabulary; it was even rarer to see it in practice.

"Heh!" Cook arched a brow, smiling knowingly. "You can't fool me. The master used to say that too when I'd fuss about it. "When I get this month caught up, I'll go on a nice holiday and won't even look at next month's work!" That's what he used to tell me," she repeated with a nod. "He only went on holiday once the entire time I knew him, and even then it wasn't a real holiday, but only a bit of government and missionary work in the Himalayas."

"That's when he came home with your mother," she added. "Never knew him to take a day off. Even when he was bedridden, he was a'shouting for Walter to bring him a budget report or the amendments to a new policy for him to look over. Being confined like that would drive him crazy, bless him."

She turned her head, looking at the portrait of the late man on the far wall. "Bless him," she said again, this time a sigh. "Poor man… but he was a sight better than you about eating!" she said suddenly, her tone brisk as she shook off the melancholy. "Get yourself another pie!"

"I can't," Integra protested, trying to inject some regret into her tone so as not to hurt the old woman's feelings. "I'll get too full."

"Don't talk bollocks," Cook insisted plainly, lips pursed in a thin line. "As tiny as you are? You can't get too full." Nevertheless, she began to gather up the remains of the meal. "That vampire girl downstairs has nothing but blood day in and day out, and she still has more meat on her bones than you."

"Besides, what'll you do when January sets in?" she asked, and then continued as if she hadn't expected an answer in the first place. "You'll catch your death of cold in this drafty office, that's what you'll do. All because you didn't take care to keep yourself well-fed. And I won't be the one blamed at the funeral."

"If I happen to fall sick in January with a cold," Integra began, straightening the papers on her desk into a more suitable tower, "then you can feed me a different meal every hour and I won't raise a single complaint."

"You're up early."

Alucard turned his head to look at his master, still seated at her desk. He'd felt her mind stirring well before noon, despite having been up most of the night. He had not been sleeping—his own thoughts had been a tumult that hadn't allowed for more than a few hours rest as well. Still, he wouldn't let her know, and instead graced her with one of his signature smirks.

"So were you," he retorted. "Aren't you humans supposed to get at least eight hours of sleep?" Integra didn't look up from her work, but he heard her chuckle.

"Tell me: have you ever known a Hellsing that slept a full eight hours all at once?" He considered
the question, the grin still evident on his face.

"Your grandfather was once drunk enough that he slept half a day and well into the night. Beyond that… no, I don't think that I have." He watched her work for a moment. "I suppose it must be genetic." She said nothing, instead sighing at something on the paper and then pulling a calculator towards her. Intent on getting a rise out of her, he walked over and hovered behind her, watching over her shoulder. When she didn't order him to move away, he spoke. "You're not curled up with your Catholic tonight?"

"You're not curled up with your Police Girl tonight?" she answered in the same tone, never breaking stride as she punched figures into the calculator. "For your information, he's gone on a mission and hasn't come back. Probably won't be back for a day or so, I suppose," she added. "What? No sarcastic comment?" she asked when he was silent.

Finally looking up from last month's budget sheet, she saw him staring out the window with an expression she couldn't place. The last rays of the setting sun shone on his face through the glass, throwing him into a warm light and banishing the shadows that usually hung around him. She realized with a shock that he looked almost… sad. Tired and sad.

"What is it, vampire?" She tilted her head, a rare bit of sympathy in her voice. "Does your existence weigh heavily on you tonight?" He didn't seem to have heard her, his gaze focused on something beyond the window and brow furrowing as he thought about God-knows-what. She tried to peer into his mind, but he had impenetrable walls thrown up and she couldn't even get a reading on his emotions. "Alucard?"

"Hmm?" He turned from the window absently, a quick expression of irritation at being caught off guard flitting across his features before they were stoic and cryptic once more. "Forgive me; my mind is elsewhere this evening," he explained in a way that sounded more like he was mocking her concern for him. She gave up, ignoring him again as she tried to figure out why her calculations weren't matching up with the sums on the sheet. She caught the sharp scent of dust and blood as he reached around her shoulder, tapping the paper. "Twenty-five divided by four is six and a quarter," he pointed out.

"It is, isn't it?" she murmured crossly, fixing her calculation. She was nearly ready to drop onto the desk and fall asleep where she sat, but she still had twelve more papers to sign and three new policies to review and summarize before she could turn in for the day.

"If you're too tired to do basic mathematics, you should probably give it up," he declared with a sinister glee, apparently happy to have caught her in a mistake.

"Thank you for your input, Walter," she snapped before glaring up at him. "Now get out, unless you have something important to tell me. I don't need you hanging around, peering over my shoulders and breaking my concentration; that's what Agent Victoria is for. Go bother her if you need amusement."

"I wish I could," he said, confusing her. Before she could ask what he meant, he was gone in a swirl of shadows. The sun faded behind the forest completely and she stared at the place where he'd been before shaking her head.

"I really should be more worried about them," she admitted as she turned back to her work.

"Good morning—er, good evening, Walter." Seras had woken to find herself more refreshed than she'd been in a while. Perhaps crying and confessing her emotions had eased the stress that had
been on her lately? In any case, she was ready to go the minute the sun set, and had come out of her coffin to see that Walter was already in her room, setting out her breakfast for the night. "Did you sleep well after the party?" she asked, swinging her legs over the side of the coffin and managing to stand without stumbling over her own pajamas.

"I did," he replied, somewhat irritably, "but when I woke up, I found that Sir Integra had snuck around me and only got about four hours. She's still up there doing work," he grumbled, nose wrinkling in disdain. "No matter what I say to her, it's always...." Whatever it was, he lapsed into silence without finishing his thought. Seras couldn't help but giggle; it was strange to see Walter acting cross. Maybe he didn't sleep quite as long as he wanted to, after all.

"That's like trying to stop the sun from rising in the east, Walter." Seras smiled. "I've only been here a year or so, and I know that. You might as well just let her go."

"She got it from her father, who got it from his father, and most likely back and back," Walter complained, waving his hand as if winding through history all the way to the very first Hellsing to ever walk the earth. "They've got to have something to put their minds to, or they're not happy."

"Idle minds and idle hands," Seras advised him with a wink. "What?" she laughed when he glowered at her. "That's what they say, isn't it?" He made to answer, but his eyes softened and then he laughed too.

"I'm glad to see you're back to your normal self, Miss Seras," he told her, patting her shoulder fondly. "I'd take a good teasing any day when compared to having you depressed over that damnable vampire." She nearly reminded him that she was a vampire too, but decided to skip over it; she knew what he meant.

"He's not damnable," she objected. "He's just stubborn. Maybe he gets a bit of it from his master," she added.

"Oh, I doubt that. He was stubborn far before she ever came along." Walter rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Did I ever tell you about the time that we were in Germany, and he locked me in the room with a werewolf and refused to help?"

"No," Seras said slowly, trying not to sound rude and burst into laughter at the thought, "but that sounds like him."

"Oh yes, he was a bastard back then, too." He finished setting out her bowl and glass silently, lost in thought. "Although he has changed a bit since those days; I doubt he'd do the same to you if given the chance."

"I'm hardly discriminatory, Walter." The bastard in question moved seamlessly through the wall and leaned against it, looking at the butler over the rims of his glasses. "Just because she's a Police Girl doesn't mean that I wouldn't lock her in the room with a werewolf."

"I didn't say that you wouldn't lock a girl up with a werewolf," Walter countered, still smiling as he turned to leave. He didn't speak again until he was at the threshold, poised to close the door. "I simply said you wouldn't do that to Miss Victoria." The door was then shut, cutting any chance of rebuttal. Seras, for her part, had already poured her meal into the bowl and glass and was drinking quietly, her eyes focused on the white china.

"Would you like to join me for breakfast?" she asked him, but the way she was sitting she could have very well been speaking to the bowl. There was a shuffle of fabric and then the chair opposite her was occupied. She moved to offer him one of the extra packs Walter always included (just in
case she was hungrier than usual), but he'd already conjured up a glass of his own, filled to the brim with his usual blood/wine mixture.

She briefly wondered about him drinking it that way nearly all the time. As much as he ranted at her for not drinking, she couldn't help but wonder if…. Did he use the wine like she used the soup bowl in her earlier days, as a catalyst to help her forget exactly what it was that she was drinking? She had taken to the bowl habitually, not wanting to just rip into the plastic like it was skin; had he done the same with the wine? She doubted it, but at the same time— well, she couldn't help but speculate.

Minutes crept along, punctuated by the tick-ticking of her little clock and the clink of her spoon against the bowl. She wilted under the awkward, oppressive atmosphere, but he didn't seem to be affected in any way by the stifling lack of conversation. She continued to glance at him periodically, but other than bringing the glass to his lips he hadn't moved. *Damn, if I'd known it was going to be this weird, I'd have asked him to stay away a little longer.* She had no earthly idea what to say to him to dispel the cloud hovering over the room. This was almost as bad as the time he sat her down and tried to talk to her about likes and dislikes!

She finished the bowl, spoon scraping the bottom. She pushed it aside, grabbing for her own glass. She peered at him through her bangs, looking away every few moments before trying to sneak another glance. She just couldn't figure him out; it was like talking to two people. Maybe he was trying to give her some space, but it was just as confusing as when he behaved with his usual less-than-caring attitude.

"Your mind is still restless, Police Girl." The words startled her and she nearly tipped over her glass. He swirled the liquid in his own, watching it lazily, as if he had all the time in the world. *We do have all the time in the world,* she reminded herself before forcing her hand away from the act of clenching her drink. If she kept that up much longer, she'd have shards of glass embedded in her palm.

"Sorry," she said, more out of habit than any real apology. "I've just been thinking."

"I know." The silence grew between them again, a gulf that she wasn't sure how to bridge. Part of her wanted to fling herself at him, declaring that she didn't care one whit if he loved her or not, and that she would do whatever he wanted if he'd just stay with her for eternity. But the other half couldn't bear to be with him, not when the inevitable outcome would always be a solid rejection of her feelings. She couldn't decide which half was more troublesome, as they both warred against the other and she felt so torn that she couldn't even speak. *Oh, why did I even have to go and talk about love?* she bemoaned silently. *I've gone and ruined everything.*

But even if she *had* ruined everything, would it have been any better for them to ignore everything and just go about like a bunch of oblivious clods? There was something there, between them, and it was growing far too large for anyone to ignore it. It was both their faults, really, that they had pushed it back so far. She hadn't even thought about it until he'd gotten so possessive of her after learning about how often she hung around Walter. And now, like an unwatched pot, it had boiled over into something beyond their control.

"So—" she began slowly, her mind scrambling to form sentences that would make sense. "Everything you said last night, everything you ever said, you meant it all?" She tried to look him in the eyes, but instead she found herself staring at her gloved hands, twisted together on top of the table. In her mind, she was going back through every quote, every moment, every little jibe that may not have been quite so teasing; the more she sat and thought about it, the more she picked up on. She really did act so *clueless* sometimes!
"I don't talk for talking's sake," was his only reply. She took that to mean that he had been serious, and her foot began a nervous tapping against the leg of her chair. She hazarded another quick glance to see that he was staring at her unwaveringly, eyes boring into her head. She ducked again, looking so closely at her gloves that she should've been able to see the individual fibers. Suddenly, like a light shining in the dark, the question she needed to ask came to the forefront of her mind and she blurted it out before she lost it again.

"I don't understand; If you don't love me, why did you say all that to me before? Why would you waste your time on me? It doesn't make any sense."

"No, it doesn't." He frowned, and then waved away the glass in his hand, banishing it to wherever it had come from. She fought back a frustrated groan, trying to keep herself calm. They needed to talk this out, and getting angry with his clear lack of reasoning wouldn't help her cause. His hair brushed the edge of his cheek and he lifted a hand up absently, brushing the dark strands back and scratching it through his gloves. He pressed down hard enough that a thin red mark arose before fading just as quickly.

Her mind jumped to the night in the supply room, where she had tasted him and driven him to throw her up against the wall. She couldn't help but remember his passion, his aggression, the way he ran his hands over her, the wild look in his eyes when he moved to kiss her fully and the puzzlement in them after she punched him to get away. The taste of her blood and the feeling of his fangs against her throat; she bit her lip now at the recollection, her chest aching. It had felt like nothing she'd ever known before.

His head jerked up and he met her gaze, looking as though he had heard her thoughts—he may very well have, her mental shields were nowhere near what she wanted them to be. If he did know she was thinking about that night, he didn't say anything. Instead, he just watched her with a patience she didn't know he had in him.

She met his eyes steadily, swallowing hard. When she first met him, she might have felt like weak, frightened prey staring back at the rounded orbs of his sunglasses, behind which parts of his eyes could be seen as he moved. She wasn't afraid of him. She was afraid of what he could do to others, and the power he held; but it was the same, almost insubstantial alarm that comes to the spouse of a government employee who understands the sway their mate has over the masses. It wasn't worth concerning herself over.

She stood, glancing once at him before going to the door and sliding the bolt. It locked with an audible clank and she stared at the door's surface, gathering her courage. Is this what I want? She took a deep breath. Yes, it is. I can't help it; I'm selfish. She spun on her heel, walking towards him and bending down until she was eye level.

"I want it," she murmured, reaching up and pulling off his glasses. She heard him take a sharp breath as she tossed them onto the table before knocking the hat off his head with a careless gesture and letting it fall to the floor. "Clothes, castles, jewelry; I want it all, everything you can give me."

"Seras." He was warning her; if she chose this, she couldn't go back. Not tonight. "I don't—"

"I don't care anymore if you don't love me," she interrupted him firmly. "You don't have to, not right now." She grasped his collar, tugging him gently out of the chair. "Maybe someday, but not right now." He sighed and she shook her head, taking his hands and pressing them to her hips as she moved closer. "Please," she whispered, pressing her face against his chest. "Give me everything you want to. Give me the whole damn world and I won't complain, I swear. But I want you, too. I can't keep on having just a part of you. I want all of it; I want to possess you like you
possess me."

"Seras—"

"I have to be able to drive you mad if I want to."

"Seras—"

"Please," she implored, looking up and meeting his gaze again, the desire in his eyes reflecting what she was feeling all through her body. "Worship me."

His lips crashed onto hers in answer, the taste of blood and wine filling her mouth as he forced his tongue past her lips. Her eyes fluttered closed, unable to help the moan rising in her throat and hearing it echoed by him as he pulled her closer. She tangled her fingers in his hair, hearing his half-muddled thoughts as one hand ran beneath her shirt to brush his fingers along her ribs teasingly. He knew—as she did—that something was morally wrong about this whole thing, but neither of them could find it in them to care. Maybe they'd regret it later, but right now wasn't the time to worry about it.

"The coffin," she gasped when they broke apart, panting despite the fact that drawing air into her lungs held no purpose now. She pulled him towards her coffin and he followed blindly, his eyes never leaving hers as she pushed him onto the mattress and climbed on top of him. She felt the growing bulge rubbing against her thigh and was overcome with nervousness. Her heart, though motionless, felt as though it skipped a beat and she hesitated.

"Is this really what you want?" he asked, his tone dark and low. His hands rubbed her thighs languidly, almost lazily, the gloves cool when they slipped off her skirt onto the few inches of exposed skin on her legs. She didn't speak, answering him by tugging his coat in an effort to get it off. His powers flared and the coat was instantly gone, along with the vest, leaving him in just the white shirt. She wondered briefly if they were even real clothes—he used his powers an awful lot, and she knew there wasn't a closet or even an armoire in his room. He chuckled as he heard the thought, but didn't answer her unasked question.

She bent over him, working on the tiny buttons to his shirt. She wished that she wasn't quite so clumsy; in her mind, her fingers were deft and she could easily part the fabric. But in reality she had to stop once or twice, her hands shaking slightly from nerves and excitement. After all these stress-filled months, they were finally getting somewhere!

Finally she managed to undo the last button, throwing the white fabric to the side and taking in the sight of the pale skin and muscle beneath. Her mouth went dry and she bit her lip; it wasn't that she hadn't seen him shirtless before, but this time it felt different. She wanted to taste every inch of his skin from his bony ribs to his flat stomach, and she doubted he would raise any protests if she chose to do so. Her gaze traveled back up to his face and he offered her a feral grin, licking his lips.

"Smug bastard," she growled. This earned her another chuckle, but it was quickly silenced as she licked up the center of his chest, biting down swiftly when she reached his collarbone. She tasted his blood and licked that up as well, remembering how he'd reacted when she'd teased him that way on evaluation night. He arched up into her bite, rising off the bed as he let out an unrestrained groan that set her every nerve ablaze.

She found herself wanting to hear it again, biting down harder as she felt him shudder beneath her. Her hands ran over his muscles, down to the waistband of his pants and back again. The mere feeling of his lean, defined body, coupled with the thick scent and taste of his blood, was unbelievably arousing. She couldn't imagine doing this before, but at the moment she was running
on her baser instincts. Maybe it was just a vampire thing? His hands stayed on her thighs, but she felt him pull the shadows from the room and they began to travel up her curves towards her breasts.

"No," she admonished softly, pulling her fangs out of him with a wry smile. "No shadows. I only want your hands on me." She felt shy saying such bold things, but she tried to keep the anxiety from her voice as best she could. *Touch me,* she added mentally, her mind brushing his in an intimate caress. He didn't seem to be angry or annoyed by her orders; on the contrary, his eyes burned with a dark fire as he obeyed, the shadows dispersing like smoke.

She allowed him to roll them over until he was on top, his hands nearly ripping apart her shirt in an effort to undo the snaps that held her collar upright. *You have no idea of the things I want to do to you,* he growled huskily in her mind, licking over her exposed throat. *What I will do to you.* He yanked her up long enough to push the uniform off her shoulders, and then tore the undershirt off her in one fell swoop. She shivered as the cool air of the basement hit her exposed skin, drawing in on herself in an effort to hide herself from his lust-filled gaze.

His expression turned mischievous and he ripped through the thin material of her bra before she could make a sound. She gaped in disbelief at the two halves of her bra in his hands before realizing that her chest was completely bare. She rushed to cover herself with an undignified squeak, even though she was fairly sure he'd gotten an eyeful the night he'd turned her into a vampire.

"That's not quite fair, is it?" he purred in amusement, staring at her bare arms crossed over her body protectively. "After all, you saw my chest." His hands grabbed hers and he pulled them away easily.

"It's not the same!" she half-wailed, looking away as a bright blush heated her face. He didn't reply, and after a moment she hazarded a look to see him staring down at her, brow furrowed as he studied her.

"No, it's not," he finally admitted in a satisfied hum, hands running along the length of her arms to cup two handfuls of her as his tongue licked up the valley between her breasts. "Not in the slightest," he murmured, lips warm against her skin. He licked and sucked until she was trembling with anticipation, a fine sheen of sweat coating her as he left half a dozen teasing little bites all over her stomach and breasts.

She could practically taste his scent on her tongue, heady with pheromones and oozing promises of unspeakable pleasure. The scent drove her wild and she writhed on the sheets, wanting him more than ever. She mewled in frustration as he continued his slow assault on her body, whispering some twisted prayer against her skin, the words too quiet for her ears to pick up. His hands roved all over, squeezing her breasts and tangling his fingers in her hair, surprisingly gentle compared to his usually rough petting. All the while, his hips ground against hers in a tireless, unhurried rhythm.

Her hands tightened on his shoulders, the nails accidentally biting into his skin and she smelled his blood. Before she could apologize, his steady hips faltered and he pushed up into her grasp, breath hitching as the pleasure flashed across his face. He hissed and she whimpered in reply, hips rising off the bed as she rubbed against him in a silent plea to continue.

She ran her fingers down his stomach and beneath the waistband of his pants, curiously feeling the smooth skin hidden away there. He tensed and she licked her lips, gathering her courage before tentatively delving into his underwear as well, her fingers running over his—his—she blushed, unable to even think it. If he had been in any normal state of mind, he would have teased her about being a naïve little virgin and probably made her feel mortified. But her innocence was clearly the last thing he was worried about.
"Tighter," he grunted as his hips thrashed forward, burying his head in the crook of her neck. She obeyed, her fingers tightening around him as she nibbled her lower lip. His neck was so close to her mouth, and she nipped above his pulse as he thrust against her hand, each movement inflaming her senses even though his body was no longer even touching her core. It was enough to hear him cursing and panting, knowing that she was the reason he was so uncharacteristically exposed. It was more arousing and empowering than she would have thought, and she loved it.

Enough. He reached down and pulled her fingers away before moving to her legs and tearing off her socks. Her hands covered his as he pulled down her skirt, inhaling sharply as she pushed the fabric over her hips and let him pull it off her. She couldn't look down at herself; part of her realized that if she saw him staring at her in just her panties, it would become too real and she would chicken out, even if she did want to do this.

He got off of her and stood next to the coffin, pushing her clothes off the mattress impatiently before unbuttoning his pants. With one swift movement, pants and underwear were both on the floor and he stepped out of them, standing unashamed as she stared with wide eyes. He was—handsome didn't even begin to describe it! And she'd had her hands on—on that?! She gulped, licking her lips, unable to look away.

What the hell have I gotten myself into?

"Too late for second thoughts," he growled lasciviously as reached for her panties, pulling them off before she could protest and throwing them over his shoulder, where they landed on her table. He crawled back up the bed slowly, resting between her thighs. She felt him nudging at her entrance and closed her eyes, her hands on his chest as she took a deep breath to ground herself. She forced her shoulders to relax, her hands smoothing across his chest and reveling in the warm, soft skin.

"Seras?" She opened her eyes to see him staring down at her, head tilted as he regarded her impassively.

"I'm fine," she insisted, winding her arms around his neck and tugging his head down, needing to taste his kisses again. He obliged, his tongue grazing against her fangs and sending her crazy with the little hints of blood she tasted. A few minutes later she was grinding against him again, the sensation all the more enticing without layers of clothing between them. One hand wandered down to her hip and he adjusted her, pulling away and licking saliva from her chin before addressing her in a serious tone.

"Do you want it over with quickly?" he asked, still rubbing against her core with long, slow motions. "Or shall I go slowly?" He was leaving the choice up to her? She blinked in surprise, unsure of which to choose. Which would be the less painful?

"W-which would feel better?" she finally asked, feeling her cheeks heat again at the sound of the silly question. He arched a brow.

"Better for me, or for you?" he retorted. She balked with an impertinent sound, but the corners of his lips twitched and she realized he was teasing her. Strangely, it did make her feel a little better, as if the status quo had been reached again between them. He mocked her, she pretended to get mad, they both were happy.

"I don't care," she finally sighed with a smile, shaking her head. "Do it however you want." She looked over his shoulder, noticing the door for some odd reason. Then it hit her. "But please don't get loud." She didn't want a wayward scientist or soldier on their way to the labs to get more than an earful of what was about to happen.

"I'll make you scream if I want to," he growled in reply, nose wrinkling in distaste at her prudish nature. "In fact," he added, bending down to lick the shell of her ear, "feel free to do so, my darling little Police Girl. Your voice does sound so lovely when you shout; I can only imagine how it'll
"S-Stop!" she squeaked, her cheeks flaming. How could he stand to talk so lewdly to her?! Even though he'd called her darling, too... she couldn't help but smile a little, even as her face continued to burn. She really had to stop acting like a complete greenhorn when it came to sex; she'd read books that were downright filthy, for Pete's sake! But it was different between reading it in a romance novel and having someone whisper it in her ear as his naked body moved against hers suggestively.

"Heh." He moved back to loom over her, one hand pushing the bangs out of her eyes. "Seras, I want you to say it now," he said vaguely. She paused, staring up at him blankly. "Say it," he repeated more forcefully.

"I don't—" She shook her head, unsure of what he meant, wracking her brains in an attempt to decide what he wanted to hear. There were a lot of plausible things he might want her to say to him in bed.

"Say it!" he snarled, and she drew back with a soft gasp. He seemed loath to say it himself, whatever it was! Her mind brushed his uncertainly, a question in her eyes, and then all at once she realized what it was he wanted her to say. Her mind reeled in shock and confusion—why in the world would he want her to...? "Seras!" He was getting really mad, for some odd reason.

"I—love you." He nodded slowly as if digesting it, but the phrase garnered no more emotion than if she'd said 'The sky is blue'. He seemed to be more trying to get himself used to the fact, but when she prodded she found that his mind was closed off from her completely. She was utterly confused now; before she could ask what was wrong, his fangs found her throat as he buried himself in her. She cried out in pain, biting down on her fist to muffle the sound as her muscles spasmed. He was still above her, his teeth leaving her throat and his tongue licking over the wound.

"You've drank tonight," he murmured, tone the closest he could get to sounding gentle as he waited above her. "Your body will heal, and the pain will fade." He sounded like he was on the training field, teaching her some new power instead of in her bed. She struggled to do as he said, staring up at the raised lid of the coffin suspended on the four columns above them. "Better?" he asked knowingly as her breathing began to even out again. She pulled her fist out of her mouth, grimacing as she took in the sight of the torn flesh between her thumb and knuckles. He shifted and took her hand in his, looking it over before licking the blood from it as well.

"Yes," she whispered, watching his tongue with the strangest sense of fascination. The emotion in her chest ached acutely and she wondered if it really was enough right now just to have him here with her. She wanted him, but she wanted parts of him that she wasn't sure existed. How could he be so cold and hate-filled towards the world, but then turn around and pledge his body and his possessions to her? He let her hand go, his eyes meeting hers and she shivered at the intensity of his gaze. Had he been listening to her thoughts?

If he had, he didn't answer, instead nudging her thighs apart as he slowly began to thrust. Don't look away, he ordered harshly as her eyes closed involuntarily against the sting still present in her core. She felt herself obeying despite what she felt, her eyes locked on his as he continued steadily. She felt overwhelmed by the burning desire she saw there, as well as her own bewildered, flushed face staring back at her. She wondered what he saw and an image of her naked form the way he viewed it flashed in her mind, lying against the white sheets spotted with blood from the bite on her neck, sweaty hair plastered to her forehead as his actions rocked her entire body over and over.

She winced at the sight, not finding anything sexy at all when she viewed herself like that, but she heard him snort derisively. It's not for you to see, it's for me; and I find you enthralling when you
look this way, he admitted, a smug light flickering in his eye.

Oh, shut up, she snapped, but the discomfort had turned to pleasure and now each time his hips met hers a delicious zing of pure ecstasy ran through her body. It was a strange feeling, being stretched and filled up, but it was far too delectable to hate. She found herself lifting her hips to meet him, trying her damndest to obey his order to keep her eyes open. He seemed content just to watch her facial expressions, his eyes boring into hers as he shifted her hips again and quickened the pace. She threw her legs around his hips as she arched up, listening in satisfaction as his teeth snapped together in an effort to rein in the moan that escaped.

His arms tightened around her as he moved even faster, grabbing onto her and kneading one breast roughly. She tried to lose herself in the sensations, pretending for the moment that he was completely hers, and this would last for all eternity. She wanted that more than anything; if he were to ever choose someone over her… her heart clenched painfully and she wrapped her arms around him, bringing her forehead to meet his, her eyes still open and caught up in his crimson ones.

"I'm yours," she panted, the immense fire in her stomach burning through every limb and making her feel too hot. She hoped that he knew. It didn't matter that he was her master; even if she'd taken her freedom in that hospital, or even in her bedroom after their fight about Walter, she was absolutely certain that she would still have given herself up body and soul to him, just because she couldn't stand for him to be out there in the world and not with her.

"You are mine," he acknowledged, sounding just as much out of breath as she was. She smiled, basking in the glow of his acceptance and feeling the emotion well up in her heart. A muscle in his face twitched and the look in his eyes changed from sheer lust to something… different. Not softer, quite, but there was a sudden possessiveness and affection in his mind that mingled with the desire.

"And you're—oh—you're m-mine?" she moaned breathlessly, needing to hear the answer, whatever it might have been. She gave him the love she had—enough for both of them, with some to spare—and he gave her that strange concoction of his in return. It filled her up, the closest thing to love that he was willing to dreg up from the back corners of his mind. It was…intimate, far more intimate than anything they'd shared before.

"Yes," he grunted with a sharp nod, his body tensing up. "Yes, my dear, yes." His hand slipped between their bodies, parting her folds and stroking her over sensitized body twice before she came apart. She jerked beneath him, her eyes widening and then shutting completely as she arched her back with a scream, fingernails scraping down his back and leaving thin red welts in their wake.

The fierce pleasure burned through her, pulling the energy out of every limb and leaving her limp and sated, her breath little more than ragged gasps. That...that...lord, why haven't I done that before now? was the only thought that ran through her head, once she came back to herself and was capable of normal thought once more. His thrusts became fast and short before he hissed, his body jerking uncontrollably as he finally found release.

He lay on top of her a long, silent moment before pulling out and rolling away with a satisfied sound. She felt the wetness on her thighs, the sweat on her body, her hair sticking to the pillow and—the blood! She sat up, twisting to look at the bloodstains on her nice sheets with a frown, and her legs shifted to feel the soaked sheets beneath her legs.

"Oh, damnit," she muttered, wincing and pulling away. "Look at my bed. It's stained."

"That's what happens when you fuck on top of the sheets," he replied unapologetically. "You'll just have to get some new ones…or perhaps you'd like to make Walter wash them for you?" he added snidely. She glared at him; it seemed that post-sex he morphed back into his usual mocking self.
"How about I make you wash them, considering you made half the mess?" He arched a brow imperiously and she motioned to the crimson splotches near her pillow. "You didn't have to bite me so hard."

"But with the temptation of your sweet blood just within reach?" he purred, watching her through half-lidded eyes. "I couldn't resist. In fact, I might be ready for round two in a few minutes, and I'll bite you again."

"What do you mean, 'round two'?" she snapped. "I've got things to do tonight! I can't stay in bed all night with you." _No matter how tempting that sounds_, she thought immediately, hiding the thought behind mental shields before he could see it and make good on his threat.

"Going upstairs to your men smelling of sweat and sex? I'm surprised at you, Police Girl," he answered with a smirk. She growled and he reached up, effortlessly pulling her down and wrapping one arm around her. He pressed his lips to her forehead, breathing in deeply. "If I were you, I'd shower first. If you stepped outside right now, a thousand vampires would be crawling from the belly of London to bang at our gates, and _that_ won't be any fun unless the Judas Priest is here."

"I was planning on it," she told him forcefully, but she didn't try to pull away. Even though he was just as sticky as she, his body was smooth and warm and she wished she didn't have to go upstairs and train her men in the snow. But the aftereffects were wearing off, and her mind was beginning to process what they've just done together. She'd willingly let him into her bed without stipulations; now what? He wasn't the type to date, and she didn't see him marrying her anytime soon. She didn't _want_ to marry him; she was still too young for that, even though she was technically in her twenties now.

"Did you not tell me you were mine?" he sighed, hearing her uncertain thoughts as they began to spiral towards panicking. She nodded, her chin against his chest. "And did you not say that I was yours?" Another nod, though she didn't know where he was going with this. "And I agreed with you."

"Yes," she conceded, lifting herself up to look down at his face. He looked peaceful, sleepy even. "But—"

"Then that stands. I won't leave until you order me to. You possess me, just like you wanted." There was a certain bitterness in his words, as if he didn't like the fact but had resigned himself to it anyway. "You're stuck with me now," he added with a malicious leer.

"Well, you're stuck with me too, then," she replied, feeling a warmth spread through her body. So he was taking their relationship seriously? It surprised her, but then again he had clearly been dropping hints while she walked around in a clueless daze. Maybe he was more willing to stay with her than she'd thought.

He made to answer, but the clock on her chest-of-drawers struck a quarter past eight and she looked at it in shock. "I'm going to be late!" She hopped off the bed, grabbing her clothes and dashing for the bathroom, not bothering to shut the door. "Are you going to stay here?"

"For a while," he called back, taking pity on the girl and using his shadows to pull the stains from her bedclothes as though they were stains on his body. He then dressed himself, the shadows wiping away the sweat and leaving behind all the marks she made. He lay back on the bed, closing his eyes as he listened to the shower running and smelled the telltale perfume of her flowery shampoo.

He had listened to her thoughts, knowing that she was surprised at him for being so nonchalant. He
knew that she expected him to be her lover, but little more than that. He also knew of her fear that he'd toss her aside for someone else. He shifted on the bed, frowning. If only he could tell her that she wasn't going anywhere; that he wanted her to be his queen. But the girl wasn't ready to settle down, and so he'd give her the illusion that she was free to choose.

Of course, it was lucky for her that she chose him; he'd hate to have to make her cry by maiming any potential suitor that popped up. That would be little more than a giant waste of time and tears.

Chapter End Notes

…inb4 Naughtypires (chorus of groans)

Also, this chapter was posted on the two year anniversary of the fic! Congrats to it, I guess!
"Look, will you just take it!?" Seras stared at her second-in-command, and then at the small package in his extended hand. There was a flush on his cheeks that had nothing to do with the snow falling around them. "We get the next four days off for Christmas holiday, so—I just thought it would be nice to give you my gift early," he ended with a mumble.

"Harry, we said we weren't buying anything for coworkers!" she argued, but accepted the package with a blush of her own. "To be fair though, I'd already bought you something too. I just planned on giving it to you after the holidays so that you couldn't call foul and run off to get me something."

"Why didn't I think of that?" he muttered, shoving his hands down in the pockets of his parka; he pretended to act interested in the snow collecting on the Hellsing insignia embroidered on the right shoulder. "Well, anyway...."

"Hang on and I'll grab yours." She ran, blurring out of sight in the space of a blink and coming back not two minutes later. She handed him his gift with a sheepish grin. "Sorry, I buggered the wrapping. I was never good at presents." He tore the awkward tape off the edge of the too-big sheet of wrapping paper and quickly unwound the package in the time it took her to get the bow off her own present. She heard him open the box and couldn't hide her grin at his excited cry.

"A pocket watch!" he gushed in a very unmanly way, throwing the box on the ground as he held the golden watch up to the gray light of the evening, turning it this way and that. He clicked open the casing to look at the face. "And it's even engraved!" He clipped it onto his pants beneath the parka and tried pulling it out of his pocket a few times for effect before lifting Seras off the ground in a tight embrace. "This beats what I picked out for you by a long shot!"

"Well, you had been complaining that watches these days weren't sophisticated enough." She paused, a teasing smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. "I stand by what I warned you, though. It makes you look like a complete dork to be pulling a pocket watch out of your trousers." He'd been wanting one since the spring at least, and she finally given in and ordered one through one of Walter's mail catalogues. So what if no one else even thought about pocket watches anymore? Stevenson was happy, and that was all that mattered on Christmas.

"Oh, pack it in!" he insisted, but her mocking didn't take away the pleased expression on his face as he pulled the watch out again. "Come on and open yours, before I start timing you." She obeyed, opening with growing excitement. After her parents died, she'd only gotten one present a year from the orphanages, and even that was charity case fare; more often than not it consisted of clothing and shoes. So she had been flabbergasted and a little touched when her first Christmas at Hellsing had presented her with a barrage of gifts from Walter and her men, and even a very thoughtful present from Sir Integra. Her master hadn't given her anything but a hard time (as always); still, she doubted that he even knew what Christmas was about. Most likely, he just didn't care.

"Oh, Harry!" She pulled out the little silver case and turned it over, admiring the elegant floral pattern etched into the vintage-looking box. "How pretty..."she murmured in awe, opening the box. The lid was a mirror, and she saw her crimson gaze reflected back at her. The bottom portion was clearly meant to hold powder, complete with a little puff, but there was ample storage space for anything.

She saw a little button near the bottom and pressed it, hearing a whir of machinery within. To her immense surprise, a little version of herself popped out, detailed from the pinpoint dot of crimson paint for eyes, and even a little Hellsing badge on her sleeve. The Seras figure spun around, a
tinkling melody playing that seemed very familiar. "What's that song?"

"Don't laugh," he warned her, "but it's 'Easter Parade'. I had the men help me with the details," he added quickly, as if trying to throw any blame onto someone else if she didn't like it. "They said that 'Swan Lake' was a too somber a melody for you, and this was the most upbeat one that they had in the shoppe." He nudged some snow with his boot. "I asked the boss for the picture from your file, because I saw in the window that they could customize the figure, you know…. I didn't think you wore powder, but I thought of you all the same when I first saw it downtown."

"I love it," she assured him, putting it back in the box to keep the snow off of it as she wrapped him in a hug. She felt him shiver after a moment and pulled back, knowing that it was too cold for him out here. He wasn't getting any younger, and the cold was icy enough today that even she felt a little nippy without her scarf. Unlike him, however, she wouldn't be bothered by frostbite and falling body temperatures. "You better get going if you want to catch your train. Your family will be missing you." He took the opportunity to pull the watch out again and eyed the time with pursed lips.

"You're right," he announced, as if the watch were the deciding factor. "I'll get on then." He stooped and picked the watch box off the ground before waving his gloved hand at her. "Happy Holidays, Mum."

"Have a safe trip; see you Thursday!" She waved him off like she had the other members of her team. Hellsing let out as a half-day this Sunday, giving the soldiers time to travel to their families to spend the four-day holiday before heading back to another solid year of work (save a week off in the summer). Stevenson had been the last from her troop to leave, probably in order to give her the present in semi-privacy.

She really did like it—she had no idea what to do with it, seeing as she didn't wear a lot of makeup, but it was a shiny, pretty knickknack and she liked it a lot. Besides, there was always that one Christmas gift that left you wondering, so she counted this one to be it. Taking it back to her room, she bypassed a few straggling soldiers from another troop and managed to make it down to the basement without getting stopped by anyone. She looked around her meager bedroom before brushing dust and romance novels off the nightstand and putting the powder box there.

It looked nice, sparkling in the dim light of the room. She bent down to pick up the books and put in them in the bottom of her bureau when the manor's resident magpie poked his long nose out of the wall and stared down at her gift with a frown.

"Where'd you get that?" She sighed as he climbed out the rest of the way and flopped down onto her bed, making the movement far more graceful than she could have ever pulled off. It was his new 'spot' now that he was sleeping with her; he pretty much spent every night in her room anyway, so there wasn't any reason to argue with him over it, no matter how much she wished he'd keep the chair and let her sprawl out instead.

Of course there was room for two, but if she ever decided to join him on there then he made it the night's mission to distract her from her books and convince her that certain other activities should take precedence. It was hard to keep focused when he was reading the plot into her ear with his silkiest voice, interjecting every so often with a "My, Police Girl; who could guess that you had such lewd taste in literature?" More often than not the book would end up on the floor with their clothes by the time the night was over.

"It's Stevenson's Christmas present to me," she proclaimed, her voice all but daring him to protest over her accepting gifts from other men. To her surprise he didn't say a word, only opening the lid of the powder box curiously and peering inside. She leaned around him and pressed the button to
make the little Seras come out again, and they silently watched her dance to the Easter parade song before descending into her hole once more. "Isn't it lovely?"

"Neat," he said sarcastically when it was done, and she blinked in surprise, watching him lie back against the pillow and kick off his boots. It was always strange to hear him use modern words; to hear 'neat' coming from him would normally mean that he was commenting on the cleanliness of something. Of course, he was using it in a sarcastic way, so it wasn't nearly as flooring as if he'd really meant it.

"Well, I think it's wonderful." She tossed her hair, determined not to let him ruin her good mood. One would think that having sex would mean that he'd at least attempt being nice to her, but outside of the actual act he was as mocking and disdainful about everything as he ever was. It irritated her, but she was almost certain that he enjoyed seeing her angry with him and wasn't about to give him the satisfaction. "It's better than what you're going to get me."

"And just what is that?" he asked, managing to hide his confusion well behind the usual verbal sneer in his tone. She turned with an arched brow, looking him over before frowning at the boots haphazardly dropped off the edge of the mattress.

"Nothing, just like last year," she answered in a snide voice as she picked up the boots and placed them neatly at the edge of the bed. He was so damn messy, but he probably had people picking up after him his whole life. He was the king, after all. She supposed that she ought to just consider it keeping up the tradition.

"You don't know that," he protested, crossing one leg over the other and nabbing one of her books from the still-open bureau drawer with his shadows. She tried to grab it in midair, but the book twisted out of her hands and he caught it deftly, throwing it open to a random page and reading with a solemn expression. She had the impression that he was actually thinking hard about something, but still wanted to annoy her at the same time.

"I do know that," she argued, sitting down at the table and crossing her legs as well, pillowing her cheek in one hand as she stared at him. "Honestly, what sort of Christmas present would you even begin to get me?" He turned his head, eyes moving seamlessly from the book to her face. "What do I like?"

"This again?" he grumbled, clearly remembering the last time they tried to discuss general likes and dislikes.

"Yes, 'this again'. I remember what you like," she pointed out. "That's why you're getting a cadaver for Christmas."

"I like killing things, not killed things," he claimed, just to irk her.

"I never claimed who's body it would be," she reasoned, playing along and not falling for his bait. "What if I told you that it was Alexander Anderson's head on a silver platter?" He closed the book, leaning up slightly on the bed to give her the full force of his gaze.

"I wouldn't object to it," he admitted. "But my master might."

"She'll be the one to have his head," Seras retorted with a laugh, reaching behind her for the hairbrush lying on the vanity. She began to pull the windswept tangles from her hair, still dampened with melting snow. "He's been gone two days now and she's beyond mad. I can feel it."

"I can too," he smirked, lying back and watching her run the brush through her locks, the book
forgotten on his lap. "She's more angry about the fact that he probably hasn't slept these past few
days, but the moment he returns he'll complain about her lack of rest. She seems to forget that the
Catholic Church has made hypocrisy its chief doctrine since the earliest days."

"That's a little harsh." She winced as she hit a tough knot.

"The truth often is." He shot her a considering look. "Aren't you coming to bed?" She twisted in her
seat to check the clock, which was counting the moments with its ever-cheerful tempo.

"Dawn's still two hours off," she noted, her voice measured as she resumed work on her hair. He let
out a half-muffled grumble as she brushed his offer aside, tossing the book back into the drawer
with an expert throw. She looked at it and placed the brush neatly on the vanity once more before
clapping. "You should have joined the BBL. Clearly your raw talents are being wasted."

"Speaking of wasted talents," he drawled, eyeballing her chest, "it'd be a shame not to…exercise
yours. I can certainly think of a few——"

"If you didn't get the hint, I'm saying no," she interrupted, glaring at him. "You don't have to go
begging every night."

"Begging?" he repeated with a bark of laughter. "No, Police Girl, you mistake my meaning." He sat
up completely now, scooting back to recline against the wall. He looked her over slowly, his eyes
burning a path across her body. "I merely suggested that we put your talents to good use. I
distinctly remember that you're highly skilled with your tongue, when it's not otherwise engaged in
your usual asinine prattle."

"Insulting someone isn't the way to lure them into bed," she snapped, her cheeks flushing as she
crossed her arms. "Why don't you just go away? Take a shower if you can't keep it together for one
night. I expect after——" She faltered, too embarrassed to even try and finish, even though the taunt
was first-rate in her books.

"After what?" he sneered, crossing his own arms to mimic hers. She tightened her lips and looked
down at the wood of the table, gathering her courage before finishing her sentence.

"I assume after a century of being locked up, you've gotten pretty good with just your hands," she
blurted out, thanking her lucky stars that her face didn't get any redder. His eyes widened in an
uncharacteristic look of unhidden surprise; it seemed that he didn't expect her to say that. Maybe
she was just getting bolder now that they'd 'went all the way', as it were. "Besides, I'm just not
feeling up to it tonight. If you want, I'll just make the standard 'I have a headache' excuse for your
benefit."

"There's no need to——" To her shock, he stopped himself and let out a strangled sort of hum, as if
rethinking his words midsentence. He looked cross, but the same thoughtful expression from
before was back on his face as well. "Fine then," he finally acquiesced in a low growl, "but come to
bed anyway. Two hours be damned," he snarled, raising his voice when she began to protest.
"You're not going to do anything else tonight anyway!"

"Alright, alright!" she grumbled herself, going for her pajamas. "You don't know what I might do in
two hours," she complained quietly, but obeyed him all the same. She could tell when she was
going too close to the invisible line; he'd only take so much sass from her in a night, lover or not.
She walked into the bathroom to change, hearing him huff in annoyance but taking no notice of it.
If he was going to get short with her, there was no reason for her to keep on humoring him.

When she came back out, he'd turned down the bedclothes and was lying on top of them in his
usual shirtless manner. She was more surprised that he didn't just sleep in the nude, but then again it was always better to keep *some* clothing on in case of emergency. She grabbed the remote for the bed and flipped off the light before crawling in and pulling the blankets over them both.

"Don't be cross," she murmured as they descended into the dark coffin, the lid closing on top of them. "Hmm?" she prodded when he didn't respond right away. Another, less heated huff was the only answer she got, but he did drag her towards him and loop an arm around her, fingers tracing patterns along her hip. She humphed and then closed her eyes, trying to get to sleep before the sun rose and forced her along.

"Sir Integra—"

"What *is* it, Walter?" Even on Christmas Eve with no soldiers on the base and no meetings scheduled, the butler still seemed dead-intent on keeping her from her work. This was the time that she should be able to work without distractions, getting more done in a few hours than she usually could in a day. If he'd just leave her alone and let her work through Christmas and into New Years, she might finally be able to catch up completely and be ready for the next fiscal year!

"Well," he faltered, his hurt tone audible over the phone. She immediately winced and regretted letting her exasperation get the best of her. The butler only thought of her wellbeing, as he had always done. Along with Arthur, it had been almost as if she'd had two fathers—one stern but gentle, the other kind but nagging. She partly blamed her lack of sleep; it was her fault for not taking a day off, but she refused to lie back and let the Conference say whatever they pleased. She'd be ahead of them if she had to pull a *week* of all-nighters, and then they'd have no reason to berate her for trying to handle a man's workload.

"I just thought you'd like to know that the paladin has returned, an in a touchier mood than usual." He mumbled something that sounded suspiciously like "and he's not the only one".

"So what?" she snapped, cradling the phone on her shoulder as she tapped a small stack of papers together and stapled them. "I don't want to see him. He should have just stayed in Italy until the new year." There was a long silence on the other end; she knew that he was smiling and trying to keep from laughing at her shallow impatience.

"My, my," he said at last in a dry voice. "Only a few months and we're already at ends with each other. I do hate seeing the Irons' opinion justified." She bit back a sigh and rubbed her forehead wearily.

"That's not what I meant, and you know it." She tapped her fingers on the desk, lips pursed as she stared blankly at a barely-decipherable list of appeals from the Research and Development team. "Mind your own business. You're one to talk, anyway; I'm sure between you and Cook, there's enough bad blood around over the years to write a television drama." This earned her a good-natured laugh.

"Bad blood?" he repeated musingly. "Well, I suppose we had our fair share of fights over the decades, but it was nothing compared to the scuffles your father got into with women. I recall one particular time that he knowingly insulted Lady Katherine and she knocked him unconscious with one blow."

"One blow was all it took?" She couldn't imagine Lady Katherine felling anyone, but the woman had enough weight to throw behind her; anything was possible. Still, she'd seen pictures at the Penwoods home that showed the woman had once been nearly as skinny as she was, so what had been the case?
"Oh, yes. You know what sort of temper she's got now—it was just as bad back then. And her father had taught her self-defense when she was a girl; she had a very powerful left hook in those days. It's probably rusty now, but I have no doubt that she could still hold her own in a fistfight this very day."

"You would think it would have been too unladylike to punch anyone, much less my father." Still, she could see it in her mind's eye: her father, cocky as he ever was, not expecting the willowy young woman with the chestnut curls to do anything. And her, hazel eyes flashing with righteous anger, striding up to him on her high-heels and swinging her arm back. The punch, the look of shock in her father's cerulean gaze as he went down, consciousness leaving as he hit the ground. Walter's cry of shock, Lady Katherine's huff of anger: it was all perfectly portrayed.

"It was a very ungentlemanly thing to say to her," he defended. "She had been nagging him about the unhealthy amount of women constantly trickling in and out of our doors—something he never found fault with until he met your mother, I'm sad to say—and he got angry. He looked her in the eyes, smarted off with "At least someone wants to sleep with me!", and the next thing he knew he was waking up in his bed with a pounding headache and the shame of being knocked out by a 95 lb. woman."

"But did he learn his lesson?" she asked, smiling despite herself. Even though the truth that her father had been a notorious philanderer hurt her pride a little, she'd never known that side of him; besides, for every one of these 'distasteful' stories, Walter had at least ten more about her father's better attributes. It was enough to cement in her mind the old saying that people remembered only what they wanted to about the dead, be it good or bad. It wasn't her fault that Lady Irons and some of the others only remembered the man's worst aspects. It did, however, make her wonder what people would remember about her after she died. Probably I'll be known as the aberrant woman who married a clerical assassin and took particular enjoyment from commanding an immortal, sadistic madman.

"Oh, I'm certain he did. He got back on her good side and made sure to never stray from it again."

"Wonder away, then. I hardly know myself." Because he was the first to ask, her mind offered, but she wasn't going to tell him that. It sounded too superficial. Because it was the easiest, of all your choices. That sounded even worse. "Go finish your work, Walter. I'll deal with him later. And do take tomorrow off. That's an order."

"Only if you will," he replied curtly. "Christmas is the one time of year that you ought to stay away from the desk. You're chained there the rest of the time, even on your birthday. Whatever you've got to do, it can wait for twenty-four hours. The government isn't open anyway, so all your bills would have to wait until the next—"

"Work, Walter," she interrupted before hanging up the phone. He really could be a nag sometimes—that's what the other Knights were for, not him. He was only supposed to be her well-meaning butler and sometimes fatherly figure. Though as old as he was, would that technically make him a grandfatherly figure instead?

Pushing the thought from her mind, she made herself focus on her work again. A mere half-hour later, she reached for her next report only to find that her inbox was miraculously empty. She stared at the forlorn looking tray, not able to remember the last time she'd seen the bottom of it. She then
looked at the neatly stacked papers in her outgoing tray. She'd actually accomplished what she'd set out to do; there was no more work.

Well, that was a lie. She could always answer emails now, or research into one of the many topics she had to present at the next conference…. But as she stared at her clean desk, the thought of *actively* seeking more to do sickened her. If more work came in without her approval, it couldn't be helped; but when she found it for herself, it seemed more like the workaholic Walter claimed her to be. She sat at the desk, listening to the ticking of the clock and looking around the room as if more work might jump out at her, giving her a reason to stay in her chair.

Finally she stood with a sigh, intending to walk down to the kitchens for an early lunch. Cook would be there soon, if she wasn't already; she had chosen to take a half-day today instead of taking the full day off. She'd spend most of the afternoon cooking a large part of the Christmas dinner early so that she could take part of the day off tomorrow as well. She could have taken both days off, but Integra knew that she wouldn't dare relax while there were still people in the manor to feed. She really did show her love through food, it seemed.

Passing down through the foyer, she paused at one of the windows to see it was a very lovely Christmas Eve. Without men to trample the fresh snow, it lay like a perfect blanket across the grounds and covered the flowerbeds and bushes in a white powder that sparkled in the afternoon sunlight. The sky was a brilliant blue without a cloud in sight; despite the yellow warmth of sunbeams shining through the glass, it was easy to tell that the world outside was a frigid one.

She stared out at it for a long moment, appreciating the view but not wanting to go out there and walk around. She would ruin the spotless blanket of snow, and she abhorred the cold anyway. She would just become a hibernating recluse until April, as she did every year. She walked on in the direction of the kitchens, unaccustomed to hearing her own footsteps. Usually the manor was alive with the energetic sounds of men laughing and talking, of servants running this way and that, bureaucrats coming and going at their leisure on official business…. Now all was silence for four days while the soldiers and employees were given leave to spend the holidays with their families.

Cook was in already, like she'd thought. The mouthwatering aroma of food was already heavy in the kitchen, and she was unceremoniously dumped in a chair beside one of the older hearths; it was used chiefly for a fireplace now that electric ovens were the norm. There, she sat out of the way while Cook fixed her a quick bite. She watched as the elderly woman worked, simultaneously basting, stirring, pounding, and kneading. She felt a sense of nostalgia for her younger years, sitting by the hearth as a child until her father finished his meetings, playing quietly with a drawing pad and pencils while Walter sat the table shining cutlery and Cook stirred the evening's meal on the stovetop. Apparently the woman's thoughts ran the same way as her own.

"It's been a long time since you've sat here and waited on your dinner," she remarked wistfully as she handed off a plate loaded down with the usual luncheon fare. "Most times I have to have Walter beat down the office door just to make you swallow a speck or two."

"I don't always manage to finish my work this early in the day," she replied, a little defensively. "And he doesn't beat the door down; I eat enough to make myself full, and no more." She bit into a sandwich laden with thick slices of ham, staring at the fire crackling in the hearth's grate and smelling the telltale aromas of mincemeat and suet.

"Aye, and you'll never get any larger with that sort of thought," Cook huffed. "At least you married well; I'd have not stood for you taking a spindly twig of a man instead. *He* won't be one to catch his death of ill by having the cold blow right through him, though with livin' most time in Italy I can't see how the poor fellow doesn't freeze the minute he steps out." She floured her hands and
began to knead bread dough, her large arms muscled enough to push and twist the squishy lump as she saw fit.

"Considering that he came from Scotland, I'm sure he can handle a cold winter," she replied in-between bites. "Do you…enjoy doing that?" she asked hesitantly, watching her with the dough. The woman paused, looking up with a puzzled expression and brushing her usual straying frizz out of her eyes.

"Doing what?"

"Cooking all the time, I mean." For as long as she could remember, Cook spent nearly every moment in the manor standing over a stove, or kneading dough of some sorts, or basting hams and turkeys. She fed three shifts of soldiers every day as well as a small troupe of servants that included Walter, herself, and handling Anderson's voracious appetite on top of it all now. She never ceased her work, but she also never complained or shirked.

"Well, cooking's always been my life," she said thoughtfully as she pounded away. "Even before coming to this house, I worked with me mum down at a café in town washing the dishes and cutting vegetables. Then mum got down in her back and taught me the recipes while she ran the front with the cash box. The late master liked my food so much that he took me in as the head cook, and he paid my family compensation enough that they didn't need me around to make the money. I've been here ever since."

"But that doesn't answer my question," Integra argued as she sat the half-empty plate down on the stones by her feet and drank the rest of her water. "Do you enjoy it?"

"Well if I didn't, I surely wouldn't have stayed around past retirement age," she chortled. "I'd have collected my pension and disappeared to the North someplace. But as it is, I've always enjoyed living here, taking care of the late master and now you. Your father was very good to me and my family; I'll never forget that. And Walter's been a very good friend."

"We were just talking earlier about any bad blood between the two of you," she teased, shifting in the chair to look at the old woman better. If Walter was like a grandfather, she would have to be the grandmother. "You never knocked him unconscious, did you?"

"Heavens, no!" Cook laughed, pressing the bread dough into a bowl to let it rise. "I doubt I could have managed that, even at a young age! I never learned much about self-defense; the one time I needed it, Walter protected me. But that's another thing entirely," she said, the smile still on her face. After a moment it faded to a troubled look, as if what she remembered wasn't pleasant in the least.

"Cook?" The woman shook her head, coming back to the present.

"Aye, another thing entirely. But in any case, we did have our share of scuffles. I used to do horrid things to him when he got snappish and rude to me. I'd disguise baking chocolate as regular chocolate, or I'd replace the sugar in his tea with salt instead." Integra smiled; it sounded like something Cook might do if you made her angry enough. "Oh, but we grew close despite it. I couldn't imagine him not being around nowadays."

"Why did you two never marry?" It seemed like a personal question, but in the same way it didn't feel too impolite to ask. "As the head butler and head cook, it wouldn't have been an issue with my father, I'm sure."

"No, but…" Cook trailed off, the wistful look back in her eyes as she began to roll out pastries.
"You've got to understand, we were such children back then. We never thought about marriage or families. And then he went to college while I watched house for the master while he went off to India, and then there was you afterwards. Walter and I, we got so busy with the master's affairs and watching to make sure you didn't take a fall down the stairs; by the time marriage even came to our minds we were already too old for whimsy like that."

"Marriage isn't whimsical," she blurted out, immediately regretting saying it. She was still young, young enough that Cook would still pass her words off as the passing folly of a child. But, at the same time, it really wasn't. Now that she was actually married—though it was the most backwards, untraditional marriage in terms of actually being together for any extended length of time—the feeling of being with that other person, even if you didn't do anything except what you'd been doing before you were married, just seemed different. And certainly not a blind flight of fancy.

She couldn't put the thought into words that would seem to make sense, and she felt that being in an unconventional marriage, she ought to keep her mouth shut; still, it rubbed her the wrong way. The thought that age was the only reason that two people that were obviously good for one another had stopped them from taking vows seemed absurd; she had the feeling that even if she wasn't married, it would still have been absurd to her. Walter and Cook acted married already, spending what time they had together and commenting on the household doings like they were the ones in charge (and they were, in smaller cases).

"Oh, don't get in a knot about it," Cook tsked as she watched the young woman frowning and trying to sort her thoughts into a coherent sentence. "Like I said, we were just children then. And there's really no sense in doing it now—we're both far past retiring age, and we're both happy with the way things played out in life. We're more than happy to watch you like you was our own, and if you'd ever do something about some children of your own we'd spoil them like they was ours, too."

"Cook!"

"What?" The woman pursed her lips as she stirred something boiling in a large stewpot. "It's nothing to be 'shamed of. What's with you young ones nowadays, not wanting to say anything to the older generation about it?" She shook her head and clucked. "It's not like we don't know exactly what's going on. In the old days it wasn't so secluded; walls were thin and privacy scarce. Everyone knew. Why, we used to sneak up on your father and—"

"I do not want to know of my father's… exploits!" she declared, standing up and putting the plate and cup back on the countertop, feeling her face burning in embarrassment. "Nor do I wish to discuss my own!"

"I don't either!" the woman exclaimed, eyes wide. "All I said was that I wish you'd hurry up and have children." She shrugged her shoulders and put the lid on her pot before taking the plate. "I hope at least one of them has his eyes. They're so nice. I've always liked green eyes," she blabbered on as she moved to the sink where a small pile of dishes waited. "I wonder how the genetics run in his family. What did his parents look like?"

"I don't know. He never had any pictures."

"Neve—what, you've never asked?" she replied incredulously, one hand on her hip.

"Pray tell; when does one's genetics come up in everyday conversation?" Cook clicked her tongue, but didn't reply. She finished the dishes and then took the lunch plate and filled it again with food.

"When Walter came through earlier, he said that that nice man had come home already and was
upstairs. I haven't sent him a bite to eat yet—shame on me, I'm sure—so I want you to take this plate up there for me." She stuck it on a platter with enough butter and fixings to feed an army along with an entire teapot full of water, and then slapped a lid on it before handing it to her. "Unless you're going to insist that Walter do it instead."

"I'd rather he do it," she complained, trying to get a good hold on the handles of the platter. "I'm not on best terms with my dear husband at the moment. You'll have to wait at least five years for those kids," she advised only half-teasingly.

"Oh, I've heard of all that too," Cook said easily, rolling her eyes. "You ought not be so harsh on him. Men do things like that all the time; it's a given."

"It's not the leaving that made me angry—well, it was at first—but he didn't call for… for days!" she grumbled.

"Knowing him, love, that man's phone is in Italy, or at the bottom of the ocean, or left on some forgotten landing in a pile of ash." She was about to agree when the validity of the point struck her as odd.

"How would you even know—" But Cook scoffed.

"We're just as capable of listening at office doors as anyone else, aren't we? And after all, when you're the quiet, subservient help, you get forgotten about often enough to pick up on some interesting dialogue."

"Even so…." she faltered, staring at her skewed reflection in the curved lid. "Even if it was gone, he still could have used an office phone."

"Oh, don't be so hard on him." She paused long enough to get the remaining fuzz out of her eyes and back where it belonged in the perpetual frizz that constantly surrounded her head like a salt-and-pepper halo. "Not because he's a man," she added when she saw her young employer trying to argue. "But because it's Christmas. Remember that little pincushion phrase: Love covers all offenses," she finished sagely, wagging her finger in the air.

_Christmas has nothing to do with it_, she thought, but she didn't push her point. The tray was growing heavy in her hands, so she turned without another word and walked out of the kitchens. _It's a different matter entirely._
His years in the armed forces taught him to take every mental picture, every scene that ever bothered him, and fold it up into tiny bits that he could tuck away in the back of his mind. Of course they resurfaced every now and again, sometimes more violently than others, but he kept shoving it back and back until he couldn't see. The piles of corpses and emancipated children were invisible, the burned remains of babes were covered in mental cobwebs, the sobbing men holding their own entrails were so far in his subconscious that he might have only imagined them, if the accompanying stench of sundried organs hadn't reminded him of the reality.

Even to this day, he still did it. Even if Father Renaldo reminded him again and again that emotionally it wasn't a good habit, even if he'd seen others crack after decades of doing the same thing, even if... even if.... Habits were hard to break. He lay completely still on the bed, surrounded by warm sheets and soft pillows that were of a luxurious grade he'd never felt before he came to this place, and he pushed back memories, viewing them one last time before packaging them in the vault along with the other nightmares that might send him mad if he dwelled on them too long.

A crying woman allowing her husband—no, the creature that had once been her husband—overpower her. Her trembling hands coming around his well-preserved shoulders in a lover's embrace, her head resting above his heart and her eyes closing as tears trickled down over smiling cheeks. The sharp nails pulling apart her torso, bringing a lung to the bloodstained mouth even as she still clutched him, the glazed eyes of the dead staring blankly as blunt, all-too-human teeth ripped into the flesh.

The cry of outrage from that damned soul's former teammate, the unsteady rush through the sand to the bokor's grinning face, his own hand stretching out to hold back, to save, but being precious seconds too late. The bolt of magic, the cry of pain, then the black insects swarming up from the exposed ribcage; the panic, the brief struggle, and the stripped bones lying in the sand a moment later with a porcelain sheen.

The battle, the cowardly escape, the chase across the island, through the water, splashing and running even with salt stinging his eyes and choking the breath from him, the waves rising into a monstrous wall that crashed over them, nearly drowning them, and the struggle back to shore with sopping clothes and bruised spirits. The search, growing more and more desperate as days passed and each brief encounter ended in failure. The ominous call back to headquarters where they were forced to return empty-handed, the desire for vengeance still burning in their minds.

The chastisement for a ruined mission, for letting locals see them battling in their Church garments, for letting two of their best fighters die at the hands of a madman, and for caring too much about their fellow men to obey orders. You were to strike him dead on sight, no matter if he was still one of ours or not. If you had obeyed, two Iscariots would have lived for the price of one already lost. The rage-filled voice pounded against his temples, mingling with his own conscience until the two were nearly indistinguishable. You have no one to blame but yourselves. You've disgraced the holy name of the Church, and your obedience has been called into question. Expect severe repercussions for this disaster.

Severe repercussions: as if he hadn't heard that one before. He'd heard it enough by now to know that it didn't mean the end of anyone's career. To willingly part with an Iscariot assassin would be a serious blunder on the Vatican's part. There was already such a high turnover rate as it was; the lifespan of an average Iscariot was ten years; twenty if you were lucky. To make it to the retiring
age of 55 was a miracle in and of itself, if you weren't a superhuman like him.

No, no one would be released from their duties due to the failure of this mission. A fine, a pay cut, scoldings and harsh manual labor—that was the definition of 'severe repercussions' to his superiors. He'd become used to it to the point that trying to frighten him with it was laughable. He'd always had a time following rules, even harking back to the earliest days….

*Just like yer da, yer pigheaded da with his foolish ideas. Impossible for ye to stay in yer place and keep yer head down—ye just have to go and state yer piece, and do whatever ye think is right even if it ain't so. It'll bring ye nothin' but trouble someday, mark my words.*

When will that day come? His throat felt tight and he swallowed with some difficulty, staying perfectly quiet and still as if he was afraid of startling himself with any sudden movement. *Today? Tomorrow?*

*Maybe today, maybe tomorrow. Who but God knows? He could almost hear her saying that, and tried for a moment to remember what it was like to be in her presence. What had she smelled like? Flour, probably, and coarse laundry soap and sweat. He'd forgotten with the passage of time; it had been so long since he'd stepped into that small cottage and saw her laid out, her once-round face thin and quiet in eternal rest. So short a time as fifty-odd years, and yet it was ages ago.*

"Are you awake?" The creak of the door was loud enough to be a scream, like a knife against his eardrums. He didn't want to be disturbed, he wasn't finished; he wanted to stay by himself for years, ignoring the past few days and trying to turn his thoughts to other, more pressing concerns that would expand and fill up every corner of his mind until there was no room left for disconcerting things.

That was the only thing he could do—the alternative was to lose himself in fantasies and fallacies, to drink himself into a stupor where the world stopped spinning so fast, to take a pill that would let days slip by like melting butter on a slice of toast, to go to another plane of existence for years at a time, leaving his body to rot away in a gutter while he floated on a euphoria of false bliss. He'd gone that route once when he was young, and he swore never to go back there again once the withdrawals were over and he was back safe with his parents in their small village.

He forced his eyes open to see *her* standing beside the bed, holding a large, bulky tray covered with a gleaming silver hood. He stared at her silently, marveling in her ease at barging into his solitude, breaking through his mental thoughts and refusing to let him continue just through her mere presence alone. She didn't even know it—just *look at her*, standing there, innocent of his struggles.

He wanted to hate her. A deep-seated part of him knew that he really should hate her, because she was everything he stood against. She fraternized with damned monsters, she worked for the enemy, she wasn't Catholic, she wasn't pure, she wasn't… she wasn't.

She commanded monsters, yet refused to put herself on their level. She worked for the enemy, the same enemy who had paid his debts. The same enemy whose army had accepted him as a new fixture of the household, who had been brought to their knees by the fact that *she* wanted him around and they could do nothing about it. She wasn't Catholic, but they still saw eye-to-eye on other things, things which made that fact just a little more bearable. She wasn't pure, but was anyone?

*I brought food, from Cook.* He'd been staring too long, she'd retreated into herself; now she was all business and stern looks, movements steady as she held out the tray, intending on him taking it from her. He watched her face, taking in the brows drawn together over the rims of her glasses, the small impatient frown, the distant look in her eyes; she was upset over something, and thinking
heavily on it. He roused himself to talk, voice sounding hoarse and rusty as it scraped his dry throat.

"I'm not hungry." There was a pause as her eyes widened, frown deepening as she looked him over once, twice. He'd caught her off guard; he'd never been not hungry before around her, she didn't know what it meant. She seemed at a loss, holding the tray a minute more before placing it on the nearer bedside table. He watched her, suddenly wanting something from her, but not sure of how to ask, or even what it was.

"Well, I can't see why not," she replied, clearing her throat quickly. Her eyes flitted from him to the door, and he realized that she was uncomfortable now that he'd broken the status quo. He was always hungry, usually putting away three or four plates at a meal; now he wasn't. He usually felt this way with a mission gone wrong, something within him feeling that if he tried to fill up the gaps in his mind with food, it would be one step closer to going back to filling them up with other material, worldly things.

"You look even more ragged than usual." Her lips thinned as she pressed them together, looking at him again. He sighed inwardly. Now would come the nagging, the accusations that he didn't call and that he left her in the middle of an argument, and then there'd be a fight that he was too drained to participate in. But as he waited for the first verbal blow, nothing happened. Instead—

"You're certain that you won't eat?" She took the lid off the tray, and the smell of food reached him. "At least take some tea." She didn't wait for an answer, instead taking the cup and began preparing it with small, quiet clinks of glass. "It's not much—she's busy with it being Christmas Eve, but there's enough." He stared at the food; he was sure that English food was supposed to taste bad, but he hadn't found a single meal the old woman cooked that he didn't like. Still, his stomach refused to be hungry, and so he simply lay there unresponsively and watched her pour hot water into the cup with a practiced air, stirring the tea around as it steeped.

"Just put it there," he said when she offered it to him, nodding towards the table. She hesitated, and then sat the cup down. Now her expression was concerned and pensive as she worked through something in her mind.

"You're not ill?" she finally came up with. He barely shook his head in reply. He hoped she might leave him alone so he could get back to his thoughts, but another part of him wanted her to stay and force him to come out of his stupor and back to normal. Usually Maxwell was the one to do that, shouting and screaming until he got up from his office chair and did whatever the bishop wanted just to make him shut up. But Maxwell wasn't here, and now that part of him relied on her to get him up and moving. It was rewarded as she sat on the edge of the bed, not touching him but still close enough to count for something. She seemed to be struggling to speak.

"Are you sure?" she asked then, the air of uncomfortableness coming into her body language again. All at once she was stiff and sitting straight, hands on her knees as she watched him out of the corner of her eye. "You're acting strangely."

"I—" He meant to say 'I'm fine', but the lie wouldn't come. She waited for more, but he was beyond speaking now, sagging back into the bed as the vacant corners of his mind filled now with something more frustrating and anger-inducing. It grew and expanded into a physical ache that resonated in his very bones, and he comprehended how easily it would be to let it overwhelm him and crack gaping holes in his sanity. "I'm tired," he admitted, the breath coming out in a long sigh.

"I know. I can tell." She stared openly at him now, her eyes searching his face for something; he didn't know what she might be looking for, but she seemed to find it, her expression one of quiet triumph. "You're weak. You need to eat a little something, if only to get your strength back." Her
tone evened, became soft and coaxing; it was the same voice used to get the younger children of the orphanage to eat their vegetables at mealtimes. It was the voice he'd always imagined would belong to a Siren, before he heard the real thing and had become disgusted by the inhumane shrieks that seemed so dulcet to the unprepared ear.

He sat up and she brightened, though not so noticeably that he would have seen if he hadn't known what to look for. When had he become so attuned? Her frown had lessened, the eyes softening the smallest bit… he shouldn't have caught it, but he did. The tray was brought, sat on the bed next to his hand. The cooled cup of tea followed it a moment later.

He took up a sandwich, gazing at it disinterestedly before taking a small bite. It was only when he swallowed that the hunger came and he finished it off in two bites, reaching with both hands for more. He was acutely aware that he hadn't eaten in two days, between chasing the bokor and facing his superiors in the Vatican, and then lying on the bed doing nothing at all. He ate without stopping until his innards protested, threatening him with the very real consequence of being sick from overindulgence.

He slowed, taking the tea and draining the cup with a long, measured sip. He placed it back on the tray beside the half-eaten plates, feeling the heaviness that always followed gorging oneself. He wasn't full, but his mind was hazy now and not as clear as it had been. He hadn't wanted to eat for this very reason, but once he'd started he hadn't been able to stop himself. He looked up, seeing that she still watched him; she took the tray and placed it back on the table without another word.

"What's different?" he asked, clearing his throat. It had been bothering him, but he hadn't been levelheaded enough to think about it when he first arrived. No, that wasn't right. He'd been too levelheaded, and with it always came the loss of senses as his mind was able to hone in on itself. It was almost like falling into a trance or being hypnotized, and the food had broken the spell he'd cast over himself.

Now he could sense it better; something—though what he couldn't say—was missing from the room. From the house itself, even. It was as if the walls were breathing a sigh of relief, battlements sagging from where they'd been held tense and upright for too long. Peace. She seemed to understand what he meant, her eyes traveling around the room and then up to the ceiling.

"What do you expect?" she replied calmly, pulling out a cigar and sticking it between her teeth without lighting it. "Our resident monster has procured a new bride." There was no doubt as to what she meant, and immediately revulsion ran through him like an electric current, bringing him farther out of his mind-numbed shell. "The tension has gone out of the house because the tension has gone out of him."

"And yer fine with that." He couldn't keep the disgust out of his tone. The very thought of goddamned monsters fornicating beneath his feet, in his house… he hadn't any clue when he'd started to think of it as his house, but that was the least of his concerns. She opened her mouth and then closed it, chewing on the cigar absently.

"She's good for him. Even as much as they argue, she's good for him," she concluded after a moment's thought. "He does things for her that he wouldn't stoop to do for anyone else. I've noticed it."

"Ye've said as much to me before." He laid back again, frowning as he worked over this new revelation. His mind was finally catching up now, leaving off the fixation of the botched mission for another time and letting him focus on the issues at hand. "I… I don't like this."

"As long as it's contained within the basement, I can't see any reason to stop it," she responded.
"After all, I separated them for a week and nearly had two lunatics on my hands." He raised an eyebrow at her; after it had happened, he'd sat and scolded her for a full hour on how he'd been the one to tell her that vampires didn't do well with separation, a fact that she took with hurt pride and silent obstinacy as she steadily worked on and ignored him during his rant. "I know. Don't start," she warned him when she saw the expression.

"The vampire lass—I cannae believe I'm even saying it—but the lass deserves a bit better than a black hearted fiend like him."

"And he doesn't deserve someone as good as her. But they chose each other, whatever the odds."

He raised an eyebrow at her as she examined the cigar, rolling it between her fingers. "He'll break her heart." She looked fully at him then, and to his surprise he saw a bit of pity in her gaze.

"He will," she agreed quietly. "But he won't mean to when he does. Don't ask me how I know that. I'm not even sure myself." She stared distantly at her lap, still rolling the thin stick between her thumb and forefinger. "I don't know, I just—" Her brow furrowed; she was speaking more to herself now, than to him. "Sometimes when our minds are bridged, when one of us isn't trying to shut the other out, then I can feel...." She trailed off, shaking her head in confusion. "I don't know what it is. But I don't think he ever means to hurt her. He certainly doesn't despise her like he does the rest of us."

"Even so; I still don' like it."

"Then simply ignore it. Do as I do and pretend the basement doesn't exist." She smiled at her own joke before standing and placing the lid back on the tray. "Get some rest."

"Tha's impossible right now." That was true; he was too tired to even think about getting sleep now. He was wired—had been wired since the earliest days in Iscariot—to thrive on surviving with little to no sleep. Now it worked havoc on his instincts, keeping him awake when sinking into a thoughtless stupor for a few hours would probably be more beneficial for him.

"Then bathe," she suggested, not missing a beat as she took up the tray again. "You smell as though you were thrown headfirst into the ocean."

"Yer not far off the mark," he admitted, trying to will his legs into swinging off the side of the bed and pulling him up. He hated to think that he might be depressed, but at least he was in a place where no one from Iscariot could see and raise an alarm that he might need 'talking to'. He wasn't depressed, not really; more just angry with himself and tired of always losing good men and women to the scum that lurked in the dark. The constant struggle against the demons of the world wearied him so that sometimes it was just easier to remain prostrate and gather his strength.

"Come and find me when you've tidied yourself up." He felt her eyes on him again, but didn't look over this time. There was a pause, and then she walked out the door and closed it behind her. He listened to her footsteps as they passed down the hall and then swung his legs over with a violent motion, standing up so fast that the blood rushed to his head and having to sit back down again until the blackness faded from his vision and the pounding in his ears went away.

"Hey, can I ask you something?" Alucard turned his head to look at the young woman lying next to him. She was on her stomach, propped up on her elbows and reading a book. His eyes followed the slope of her back through the pajamas, idly wondering how a simple curve could be so graceful.

"Yes? What is it?" he finally answered, shifting so that he didn't have to peer beneath his arm to see
her face. The sheet felt cool against his skin, but he wasn't in a mood to throw it off of him yet. He was almost ashamed of how lazy he could get once he was with her, lying together for hours on end without either one of them moving a muscle other than turning the page of a book or the occasional conversation. *Almost.*

"What would you call the love child of a snowman and a vampire?" she asked with the utmost sincerity. He stared at her for a long moment, gaging her thoughts, which were curiously neutral and buzzing with the normal inactivity of a restful mind.

"I'd call it impossible, considering the fact that men made of snow aren't sentient and vampires can't bear children." He put his hands behind his head, staring at the ceiling with a frown. "The abominable snowman doesn't exist."

"He doesn't?" Seras repeated incredulously, tilting her head in thought before she grinned. "But your answer's wrong anyway." She paused, a hand over her mouth. "You'd call him—*frostbite!*" She burst into peals of laughter as he pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed. It was clear that this whole 'Christmas this, Christmas that' bullshit had driven her completely insane, if she expected him to play along with her absurd jokes.

"Oh, come on!" she whined when he didn't respond. "Even you have to admit that it's just a little funny." She pursed her lips and turned down the corner of the page in her book before shutting it with a sharp *snap.* "Fine, be that way, Mr. Scrooge. I hope that you get coal in your stocking tomorrow."

"Coal is a very prudent gift," he remarked, reaching out to toy with a piece of her hair. "If I were to get anything, I'd rather it be useful than some foolish trinket." She rolled her eyes at him, moving closer to wrap her arms around his torso and lay her head on his shoulder. She didn't seem to be in a mood to get up and get ready for the night, but then again, neither was he. "What *did* you get me?" he asked. Whatever it was, he'd most likely never use it, and could even care less if she gave it to him. It was merely the curiosity of the not-knowing that made him bring it up.

"You can't find out until tomorrow evening," she declared, voice firm. "No matter how much you beg and plead, you have to wait until Christmas."

"Ah, so it's a challenge then?" he chuckled, tugging harder on her hair. She made an impatient sound and batted his hand away. "I never could resist a challenge."

"There's no challenge, because I'm simply not telling you," she argued. "No one's getting their gifts from me until tomorrow night. I'm just getting up to watch the speech and then I'm going straight back to bed until 8:00."

"So late?"

"It's the holidays!" She raised her head to look at him. "Of course I'm going to sleep in!" Her face twisted and she lay back down, tracing a pattern on his chest. "Can I ask you another question?"

"Is it another pointless waste of breath like the last one was?" Her nails dug into his chest and he leaned into them with a growl; when would she learn that punishing him with pain wasn't going to work?

"No-o," she drawled edgily. "And nothing I say is a waste of breath; you should know that by now, Master." He sniffed; everything she'd been saying this past week simply *reeked* of impertinence. It was starting to get on his nerves, but every time he thought of punishing her for it, his mind jumped back to that blank void she'd imposed on him when she was being his 'obedient servant'
and the subsequent actions that culminated in their separation. While he doubted she'd ever try anything so reckless again, he knew that she was cunning and could find a way to make things a lot worse than having to listen to a few impudent comments.

"Then what is it?" He managed to inject a warning tone into his voice, hoping it would steer her away from cheekier behavior. She was silent a moment, her sharp nails lessening their hold and resuming the soft brushing touch of her pattern.

"It's about—well; I suppose it's about vampires. Do we have a hive mind?" She sounded embarrassed to ask such a question, but he understood what she meant. When Midians began to grow in number back in the early days, and he'd first felt what he knew she was feeling now... he'd wondered almost the same thing. It surprised him that she could feel it. Lesser vampires couldn't, but she was growing stronger all the time, wasn't she? It was happening so gradually that he forgot to notice.

"You want to know if we can communicate and feel other's emotions, even far away and without being connected by a master-servant bond; am I correct?" He felt her nod, her breath soft and rhythmic as it wafted over his skin. "Yes and no: that's the short answer. It's hard to explain it to someone still as young as you are." He looked down at her. "Why do you ask?"

"Well..." she sounded more embarrassed now than before. "I didn't want to bring it up, but I can sort of feel—if I concentrate really hard—I can feel others out there. They're all anxious for something, like they know it's going to happen and they don't know what to do. I was wondering if that might be other vampires knowing about—about her." There was no doubt in his mind who she meant.

"Yes; I'm sure they know about Erzsébet Báthory, if not from personal communication with me, then from hearsay or simply intuition. Our kind has a sort of...sixth sense about things like this. It's purely preservative; it gives them time to run away from danger. She's become dangerous now."

"She wasn't before?"

"To someone like you, perhaps. A vampire of caliber would have been able to defeat her easily enough. But she'd forced her body to the limits in order to ascend over that of a mere Nosferatu. She's tapped into a power that not many dare to test the limits of." He felt her confusion in his mind, wrapping around his words as if trying to pull the sentences apart physically. "She's sold her soul to demons," he clarified. "For the power to rise against any who dared stand in her way. Now she's more dead than alive, even if she pretends to be otherwise."

"If—" Again she paused, but now it was for reflection. He prodded her mind and found that she was afraid to ask because the question might come off as an affront. Ask me, he ordered softly, giving her permission to insult him this one time, if her question would even go that far. She looked up at him and bit her lip before obeying. "If she was becoming a danger to our kind, why didn't you stop her before she became powerful enough to wipe out vampires?"

"Because that was her choice to make. I did warn her that selling her soul would have worse connotations than she thought. But she continued on that path alone, and I wasn't about to stop her. She's never openly threatened anyone until now; only now will I pass my judgment as king for her insubordination." She was silent, processing his logic. "I assume you didn't ask me about vampires just to learn more about the enemy, Seras." She shook her head.

"No, I—you told me that other vampires will come to help if they're needed." He wracked his mind, trying to remember when he'd said that. Then he remembered sitting in the chair, the night they'd come together after their forced punishment and she'd kissed him. Although most will remain
neutral, a few in the neighborhood will perhaps show up to lend a hand, if they see that we need one. However, I highly doubt it will come to that.

"Yes, it's true. Hordes of Midians remain faithful to me even in my servitude. I run my empire secondhand, sending directions through my most trusted advisors. But even more will come to see if I fall. If something were to happen to me, there would be a fierce struggle to see who would lead next." His hand moved to her shoulder, squeezing tightly. "I wish they'd come first; I'd kill them all for being such contemptible cowards. They're not fit to be one of our kind; traitorous dogs that they are." He grumbled under his breath. "But they hide in the shadows, knowing what would happen if they dared show their faces while I'm still around."

"Well, they'd travel all this way for nothing. You'll beat her easily." Her voice held such conviction that he was momentarily stunned. He was unable to keep from being astounded by her unwavering loyalty towards him; it shone like a beacon in her mind whenever she felt proud of him.

"You're right, my dear Police Girl. She doesn't stand a chance."

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* A city park in Hollywood, California

Two people sat together on the bench, dressed more for style than for the cooler December weather. The younger, a girl of perhaps twenty-five, was covered in leather from head to toe. She was popping her gum, her fierce ginger hair plaited down her back with festive green and red streaks woven into the strands. Her eyes were hidden by thick, dark sunglasses and her lipstick was a deep purple that stood out in her pale face.

The man was perhaps forty, dressed in a dark overcoat with the latest fashionable boots and a watch on his wrist that cost in the thousands of dollars. His blonde hair was slicked back neatly, and his sunglasses matched the girls down to the small cross motifs on each side of the frames. He was reclined backwards while his companion sat with her elbows on her knees, legs splayed like a man's as they watched hurried passerby with arms full of last-minute Christmas gifts.

No one spoke, both of them just people watching as the bench they sat on crept further and further into the nearest building's shadow with each passing hour. The sky grew overcast and the girl looked up, mouth opening as she blew a large bubbled before closing her plum-colored lips around it and popping in her mouth. The man crossed one leg over the other and shoved his hands further into his pockets, his head sinking down into the lapels of his coat.

A paparazzi reporter stared at them from a not-so-hidden clump of half dead bushes, camera at the ready. She knew she was lucky to get such a good spot, so close to such a famous actor! Perhaps the woman was his lover? The actor was well-known and loved by millions of women worldwide, yet no one was able to get a good picture of him outside of the movies. Besides that, no one could ever get close enough to figure out any details about his social life and status. He was the ultimate mystery, and if she could get a good picture… why, a Christmas and even an Easter bonus would surely be in the making!

The man moved one finger and the paparazzi reporter sprung up from the bushed like a rabbit, standing at attention. He peered at her over the top of his glasses, twirling his finger idly. Her face grew slack, eyes curiously blank as she handed him her camera and then turned on one heel to head back to her office with the swaying, jerky movements of the Mesmerized. The man gazed at the camera before shrugging and crushing it in his fist, throwing the remains into the bushes. With one more wave of his finger it was covered in mulch, waiting for some gardener to find and scratch his head at come spring.
"I just don't get it, Master," the girl sighed, taking off her glasses as the sun disappeared behind a thick wall of clouds. She rubbed her eyes, which were a lovely shade of orange-red that went very well with her hair. "What is this?"

"What is what, Childe?" the man replied stoically, flashing a close-lipped at a little girl walking by, bundled up to her nose and holding her mother’s hand. "The winter is most certainly a cold one this year," he remarked casually, as if forgetting that his servant of six decades had even asked a question at all.

"Yes, perfectly frigid," the girl replied disinterestedly, toeing the barren ground of the park with the edge of her boot. "But what I mean is this feeling. I have such a sense of… I don't know what. I don't think I've ever felt this way before; not even when I died. There's such a fluttering in my veins that I can't control myself." She put a hand over her chest. "I know that if I were a human, my heart would be pounding right now. But what could it be?"

"It's apprehension." He watched a gang pass down by the street corner, eyes flashing a dark auburn over the lenses of his sunglasses. "Fear for what's to come. Something's happening, and your instincts are warning you about it far before it unfolds so that you have time to run away, if you're the sort of person that runs." He grinned. "You shouldn't worry. I doubt it'll even make it this far west. And if it should, you and I will be long gone like the yellow-bellied chickens we are."

"You're the chicken, not me. I just follow you because you my master," she pointed out. "I bet stalking me was the most courageous thing you ever did, huh?" The man grinned this time, a full-fanged grin that didn't impress his little friend in the slightest, though it had won the hearts of entire nations. They thought his fangs were props on a set, and that his eyes were just contacts put in for publicity. He was a professional when it came to hiding in plain sight—but then again, most cowards are.

"You're probably right." The girl smirked triumphantly, leaning back and lacing her fingers behind her head. "So, are you going to tell me what it is, or is this another one of those 'none of your business, Childe' sort of things? I’d rather know now, if you ever plan on telling me." She was much brasher talking to her master than the other Children she’d met over her sixty years as a vampire, but the former baron never seemed to mind. In fact, she was pretty sure that the entire reason he became fixated on her was her quick wit, as well as her readiness to dress down anyone she felt needed it.

"If you must know: it's a matter of concern to His Royal Majesty. The lowly likes of us shouldn't become involved." He pursed his lips. "I shouldn't head back to England right now for anything. It's going to be a crowded power struggle just waiting to happen if something were to happen to Him."

"But I thought you told me that the king was the strongest vampire in Creation," she replied, glancing over at him before putting her glasses back on as the sun tried to peek out of a crack in the cloud-wall. "Isn't that so?"

"Of course it is. But that won't stop those highhanded prats from trying to jostle their way into the leadership if they think they have an opening." He sniffed. "No, I wouldn't be over there even if I were paid to show up. It's going to be nothing but a mess," he repeated with conviction before sinking back down into his lapels silently once again. His constant and closest companion watched him before smiling and scooting closer.

"Well, if you take up and decide to run a little farther, I wouldn't mind checking out Alaska."
"Tíngzhĭ." The large procession stopped slowly, the mind of a Ghoul moving only so fast. The one leading the others nearly tripped over the figure kneeled in the snow, managing to stop with an inch left to spare. There was a movement inside the gilded, decorated litter and the Ghouls carrying it groaned as they sat it down before returning to their designated 'resting' position. The silk curtains were thrown back, a slender figure stepping out into the lightly falling snow and regarding the nearly prostate figure before her.

She was beautiful, no doubt. Her skin was smooth as the silks she wore and perfectly without blemish. Her hair was jet black and gleamed with health. Her eyes were deep rivers with irises so red that they appeared black as night unless seen in full sunlight. But the eyes and countenance were cold and cruel, looking upon everything with a superior air. This was a woman that took peculiar delight in torture and bloodstains.

The kneeling figure looked up at her. Even though there was no need for such formal wear in the mountains, the woman wore an elaborate diyi that stretched across the ground and hid her folded hands from view. The crimson cloth was bright against the snow, covered in images of flowers and pheasants with the two bands of black covered in delicate designs of golden thread arcing over each shoulder and down the front. On her head was a stunning 9-Dragon 9-Phoenix crown, made up of gold, kingfisher feathers, and gemstones that sparkled in the light. He bowed again, pressing his forehead to the snow.

"Empress Jiang Shi," he murmured as reverently as though she herself were creator of the universe. "My beloved mistress."

"My servant," she responded without emotion. "Tell me, whelp. You bring news from the West?" Her voice crackled with far more ice than the snow that lay around them. He raised his eyes to her, revealing the round face of a child no older than thirteen.

"Yes, my empress. The battle itself—that is, the movement—is set for spring, when the mountains thaw around the palace of Erzsébet Báthory. Then, and only then, will she head for England." The woman's face contracted in an involuntary spasm of anger, her hand sweeping out of her sleeve to grasp his collar and hoist him to face level.

"What?!” she snarled, eyes flashing. "Where have you found such facts? Who have you spoken to that you deem credible enough to bring the news back to your mistress?!” The boy couldn't speak for a moment, his face reddening as he kicked feebly in the air. He didn't need to breathe, but he had to draw in air to talk, and doing so was more exertion than he was ready for after climbing the mountains in search of the procession.

"I have—a—letter," he managed to wheeze. "From the leader of the Voclain clan in the Eastern Catacombs." The woman dropped him and he took in a grateful breath before pulling a faded, crumpled piece of parchment from the breast pocket of his coat. "She is a well-informed vampiress with many strong allies. She refuses to get involved for the safety of her clan, but she passed on what information she had to me, along with a warning 'to L'impératrice Chinoise Jiang Shi'."

"Well?" the woman replied, her voice crystalline and sinister. "Read the message." The boy nodded and unfolded the parchment, clearing his throat and holding himself more like a man of thirty as he translated the French dispatch. As he read, her brows furrowed together, her cheeks heating into a rosy red as her little mouth twisted into a fierce snarl.

"French sow! How dare she try to command I, the longest empress to ever hold power over China!?
When I am empress of all vampires, I shall make her pay dearly for such insolence against me." She grabbed the paper and read it through again, her face drawing as her anger became something cunning and thoughtful. Finally she rolled up the paper and stuck it inside her sleeve. "It changes nothing. I still make my way to England, so that I claim my rightful place as empress when the king falls."

"I pray for your pleasure only," her servant responded with a bow. "If England shall bring you closer to it, than by all means go. Do not listen to vanity-bleeding vampires who live beneath the earth like worms." The woman's face turned in a sneer and she held out a hand.

"Come, my servant. Our race awaits its new leader." She stepped back and let the youth step into her litter before climbing in herself, trodding on a Ghoul's frostbitten toes in the process and closing the silken curtain.

"Kāishî!"

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A villa outside of Rome, Italy

"It grows worse with each passing week." The man sitting in the posh chair said nothing, scratching his goatee and allowing a female servant to pour him another glass of wine. His wife sat at his feet, one pale hand on his knee as she looked up at him with large, worried eyes. "Signore Gaspare," Another man near the door spoke again, twisting his tie between two hands. "Surely you have something to say to the Council. Won't you come and hold a conf—"

"I follow the orders of His Majesty the king, not the Council," Signore Gaspare interrupted quietly, taking a sip of wine. "If they wish for some command, tell them to get on bended knee and pray for salvation when He returns, for you know as well as I that He'll destroy anyone who ever showed doubt in His ability."

"Signore, you're being irresponsible!" The man seemed at his wit's end.

"Leave me now. Go do as you will. As for me and my house, we will do nothing but wait for news of His Majesty and the new Lady's victory over those who would crush them." There was a quiet pause, and then the sound of footsteps entering the main hall and leaving through the door. He drained his glass and waved the servant away when she came forward to fill it again. "Fools," he muttered after a moment. "They won't be forgiven for this lack of faith."

"Is it really as bad as they say?" the Signora asked him softly, her hand stroking his knee. "Is it truly a battle for the end of our civilization?"

"The Council exaggerates many things. But the truth, Dolcezza mia? The truth is that I do not know." She frowned up at him. "But don't fret. Our lord has reigned for centuries without fail. Báthory… will not win."

"But I've heard rumors." A blush spread across her face, as if she were embarrassed to be speaking of rumors at all. "I've heard that Báthory has tapped into a magic that mortals have not dared to tamper with for eons."

"As have I. I hope to God that they aren't true, but knowing Erzsébet Báthory, I can only guess at what evil she had uncovered. She is a woman that will not rest until her thirst for power destroys her." He swirled his empty glass thoughtfully. "Perhaps that is the difference between His Majesty and her; He knew when enough power was enough, though he may have learned that lesson too
late to save the Three from being swallowed up by Van Helsing's occult crusade."

"The Two, dear husband," his wife reminded gently. He nodded.

"Yes… even if she's become more demon than mortal now, I've seen the magic His Majesty can wield. It is power beyond power itself." The human servants listened on in awe; many of them were used to hearing such tales from their parents and grandparents as well as their immortal master and mistress, but never before seeing this 'king' themselves.

"Mâna lui Dumnezeu," his wife whispered reverently. He closed his eyes, leaning back in his chair before exhaling softly.

"Mâna lui Dumnezeu," he answered in turn, speaking the words like a magic spell all their own.

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Somewhere in the Eastern Carpathians

A castle, the part above ground having been burned out some hundred-odd years before. Rain and weather had beaten what little stone still stood until a ruined heap was all that was left of what was once a great palace that had struck fear into the hearts of all miles around. It was a place of sorrow and bitter memories, a place that had been left forgotten… or so they thought.

In the basement, a shrine. Upon it, a sword. A magnificent blade, the hilt decorated with a fierce dragon, each scale carved in the utmost detail. Sharpened and shined, it had stayed safe from the raids on the castle. No one knew of its existence besides those old enough to remember the years that it wreaked its righteous vengeance on the lands. The blade had seen the formation and destruction of empires; it had cut down enemy after enemy on blood-soaked battlefields. It was rumored that there was magic in the blade, magic handed down from the holiest of sources to mankind in order to purge the land when taken up under Papal orders.

This sword belonged to a man never quite forgotten by time, but whose memory was skewed and presented to the world in a mirror that grew more and more cloudy each time it was peered into. No human remembered the sword—no human had seen it and lived to tell the tale; the truth, like most of history's canonical story, was more guesswork and the imagination of ancient scholars. It was a blade that had once belonged to a voivode, a powerful warrior and stern ruler. A protector of his people, until the desire to defeat his enemies overpowered the desire to do what was right by his country.

A blade that should have been with him as he set out for a battle that would stand as a turning point in the history of Eastern Europe. A blade that was being repaired in Hungary, where the magical properties could be preserved without being tainted by the accursed battlegrounds of the Ottomans. A blade that was betrayed as a warrior prince laughed in the face of his naysayers, calling it nothing but a 'fine tool' and stating that he preferred to win wars by his own prowess, not by the imaginary luck that came with a 'magicked' weapon.

He'd lost.

His country was torn, his proud body put in the stockades; he was beaten bloody, tortured as he'd tortured others. The only creature he had left in the world was a lone female, a former palace servant who adored him as a pet dog reveres and worships his master. It was her who rushed over the borders in the cover of night to recover the magic blade. It was her who boldly ran to the battlefield to bring her ruler his trusted weapon. It was her who was cut down by Ottoman swords, left to die in a pool of blood, her own mixing with her countrymen's as they were slain left and
right. It was her whose willpower went beyond that of a mortal, praying to her God that she would serve her ruler with everything she had, even if it meant going beyond the realm of humanity.

She had no idea what she had become. But it was too late at that time. She watched in horror as they drug him to the chopping block like a common war criminal, their merciless faces glaring down on his nearly naked body. She saw the bruising and lacerations, the years of scars covered in dried blood, the tangled hair hiding the face she knew so well. She saw them cut off his head, and she saw him rise again in a sea of black shadow.

She was afraid. While she had promised God her efforts, he had clearly chosen his own path. But she _had_ promised, and still went to meet him as he maimed and murdered every last one of his would-be captors. She knelt before him, presenting him the sword and explaining in a trembling voice about how she managed to make it this far to be at his side. The entire time, he stood above her, staring down with eyes the same shade as the blood that coated the ground at his feet.

He'd rewarded her well for her efforts. She'd been given a new status in the palace that they rebuilt together. They soon learned what they were, and what they must do to survive. That's where they branched: she'd never turned her back on God, while he wholeheartedly blamed God for his misfortunes. Yet they still managed to live peacefully, and as years turned to decades, and decades to centuries, she became more than just servant and master, joining the highest ranks of his camarilla.

Others joined the ranks of the undead, and he presided over them as their King. A No-Life King that still held the sword at his side, using it to slice down anyone who dared stand up against him. She blamed the sword's usefulness on the holy power embedded inside; he still called it luck and prowess, though sometimes he did secretly wonder if there was some magic to the metal. As his growing empire called him from home more and more, he left the sword in her care; she was the only one he trusted with such a large burden, knowing that she was more than capable of handling it. After all, hadn't she given her life for it?

He left it with her as he sailed for England on some business that she didn't expect him to return from until the coming of the new millennia. After all, he'd set off for new worlds to explore. But he returned quickly, claiming to be followed by an occult madman and a hodgepodge of equally-insane hunters.

Those men, those _horrid_ men, came right up to the doors of the palace. And madmen they were, proclaiming her—a God-fearing woman who prayed every day and never ceased to worship the Holiest of Holies during her time on Earth—as a harlot and a "bride of Dracula". She did what she must to protect the sword, hiding it away in the underground shrine and fighting the killers off with all her might to protect her king.

They killed two of the High Three, the three oldest and strongest vampires aside from the king himself. She was all that was left. She managed to stab the American with his own knife, throwing herself at the men in a desperate bid for time so that the king might escape. She didn't last long, and was killed… or so they thought. Just as her king had made that cocky mistake on the battlefield 400 years ago, so did the hunters as they left her without finishing the job. She would _never_ die before His Majesty; she'd promised God that she would serve him until the end of his days as best she could.

But once again, she was too late. By the time she'd regathered her strength and ran off to find her king, the palace was on fire and he was nowhere to be found. He was gone, stolen away from their lands and their government to this 'England' where he was little more than a slave. She mourned; her king was gone, the High Three was now a High One. With the Council taking over the politics
of the vampire world until their king could be recovered, she had nothing to do but continue her standing orders: protect the sword of swords, the Mâna lui Dumnezeu: The Hand of God.

His Majesty was gone, but the link was still there. Every so often, birds would come with messages: this time a pigeon, this time an owl, this time a bluebird, and the next a lark. Each one had been filled with orders for the Council, demands to save what she could of his possessions, even sometimes ordering an execution or a reward. The last one had been new orders that she'd read eagerly and set out at once to obey. She would strive to follow them to the letter, even at the cost of her life.

She now knelt before the alter that held the blade, hands clasped in prayer. Her dark hair tumbled down her shoulders and back, hidden partially by the hood of her traveling cloak. Her crimson eyes closed, pale face drawn in solemnity as she prayed.

"Tatăl Ceresc," she prayed with the zealosity of a Cardinal, "Bless my journey from this place. Bless my far-off king. Bless those who look upon him with righteousness, and bless those who strive to aid his hand. Bless me also, my Lord, that I may fulfill my orders with as much vigor as the promise I made to you over 500 years ago. I do all my work in Your Holy name. Amen."

She stood now, taking the blade from its proper place on the alter and holding it with both arms, setting out of the ruined castle and down the rugged, overgrown mountain path with the parchment and the ten words written on it in a familiar, flowing hand:

*Bring my sword to me. I have need of it.*

He roamed the house for ages, listening to the echoes of his footsteps in the empty halls. Without the multitude of soldiers there to fill up the rafters with their noise, the manor had a creepy, depressing air. Even with the more peaceful aura surrounding the place as of late, there was still the sense of hidden secrets and bitter memories holed up behind the wainscoting. It was always there, hanging over the place like a miasma, but it only became noticeable after taking out all the sounds of boisterous everyday life. Without the laughter of soldiers and servants, it became something darker.

He eventually found her in the library—or one of the libraries, as this lived-in labyrinth of rooms and needless clutter had a library for each cardinal direction on a compass. He noticed the difference the moment he walked into it; this room wasn't like the rest of the house. There was a gentler calm there, as if a spell kept the haze of pent-up rage and melancholy from flowing in through the door. Knowing the family that had inhabited this place for generations, it was entirely plausible that there was a spell on it. It would be easy to hide an enchantment in a room like this; perhaps painted underneath the carpet, or written out on the foundations behind the wallpaper.

The entire room was red, or variations of it. Gold and red everywhere, and he knew without asking that nearly all of it was custom ordered and probably worth far more than a year of his regular pay. This house was well near being about as ornate as the Apostolic Palace; all it needed was a few ceiling frescos, in his opinion. He had never been one for lavishness; he had no idea whether the painting over the crackling fireplace was an original or a copy, or even who had painted it. All he knew is that it was a very nice panting of a village square. The jewels in the case by the window held no significance to him, nor did the preserved furniture or even the fact that half the books on the shelves were first editions.

He had grown up in a confined space his entire life; he'd lived in the loft of a cottage until he was grown, then his entire world had shrunk down to the size of a trench (or a cot, if he was lucky), then expanded back into a small room in the back of an orphanage that had once been an unusually
large supply closet before being refitted for his purposes. Now the place he called home was a three story behemoth of a house with more money put into the foyer mirrors than his father and mother could have even imagined off the top of their heads. They'd been happy to get one mirror, much less eight full sized, silver gilded pieces of glass that shone with the polished brilliance of Heaven's gates.

As such, he was hesitant to even step on the crimson carpet, lest he accidentally leave a mark by walking against the grain. She hadn't noticed him yet, her nose in a book as she sat in the corner of one of the spacious couches crowded around a fancy glass table. She was turned so that the title of the book was facing away from him, but it seemed to be holding her interest. He stared down at the carpet for a moment before huffing and striding over to sit on the couch in one smooth motion.

The shower had helped to push back the despondence that his failure had brought on, and now it crouched and trembled at the back of his mind, ready to pop up at the slightest reference to peaceful introspection. It was much better for him to let her keep him occupied until it faded back into an indiscernible murmur, biding its time until something happened to dredge it from the slough of his subconscious.

But, of course, she couldn't give him a handicap on anything. She'd looked up as he sat down, her book falling a few centimeters as she gave him the once-over and seemed satisfied that he'd cleaned himself up properly.

"So… since you're back, that means you succeeded in rescuing that man?" He just stared at her, unwilling to voice the truth. The thing in the back of his mind stirred, raising its head and tapping sharp fingernails against his skull, ready to come back and drown his soul in irrational anger and guilt all over again. She met his eyes, her own darkening behind her glasses. "So you didn't, then." She smoothed the open page with her hand, rubbing out a crinkle in the corner with a firm, yet meticulous touch.

"I'm not in the mood to talk about it." His voice was rough enough to draw her attention from the page, her gaze piercing. Finally she turned back to the book again, but from the movement of her eyes it was clear that she wasn't reading.

"It doesn't do to spend so much time analyzing your own actions," she said suddenly. It shouldn't have taken him by surprise the way it did; any fool could have put the clues together to see what it was that was bothering him. "Nor does it do to dwell on mistakes that were probably never yours to make." He opened his mouth to respond, but she cut him off. "And even if they were your mistakes, there's nothing you can do to change them now. It's best to take what you need from them and then press on." She pulled the book closer to her chest. "It's all just unnecessary baggage."

"Well, it's just tha' easy, then?" he snapped mockingly. He couldn't help it; he was exhausted and his patience had been left at the bottom of the Caribbean seas. A part of him was always this way, coming out when he was too weary to care and fighting with Siobhan whenever she came to drag him out of his silent office and make him go back to field work. He'd just replaced one obstinate woman with another one. "If only everything was resolved so quietly as it is with yer problems." It would have been impossible to miss the blatant sarcasm in his tone.

Her book shut with a loud crack and he saw her fingers twitch, her mouth pressing into a thin line. Then only her head turned and she sent him a piercing glare that was clearly meant to warn him about what sort of territory he was willingly stumbling into. He honestly didn't care; arguing with Maxwell and shouting down the Iscariot building when they all managed to screw up at once usually helped his mood. Who cared if the relief was temporary and he felt bad about it later? That's what Confession was for.
Deep down he knew that this wasn't right, and that a man of God wasn't supposed to act this way. This was the man he was before getting into the church, rearing his head as if to make the subtle statement that he still existed. He could see him in his mind's eye, reclined against a bar, boots tapping out a tune as he flicked ashes to the floor. Eyes flashing, a smooth, Devil-may-care smile twisting the lips as he tilted his head and chuckled darkly. *Ye cannae get rid of me, no matter how many times ye push me back. I'm always here. Always.*

_Demon. Vile filth._ He forced his mind back to the here and now, staring intently at the cross-shaped clasp just beneath her neck until he got his thoughts back under control. *Keep yer silence and get out of my head._ He glanced up to see her eyes still boring a hole in the side of his head, her lips turned down in the small frown of disapproval he already knew so well.

"Forget it," he demanded coldly, preparing to stand. He might as well leave now; he had a midnight mass to get to in a few hours, and it wouldn't do to step into the church with fresh anger. "Forget I said anything. It's nothing."

"I'm not going to just forget it," she argued, twisting on the cushion. He bit his tongue, taking in a deep breath.

"I said that I didn't want to talk about it."

"You don't _have_ to talk about it; just lis—"

"I told ye to forget it! Now, would ye jus—"

"Would you just _listen to me!?!_" she shouted, cutting him off as her voice echoed through the silence of the room. She slammed her book on the cushion between them and it fell to the floor, title-side up. *Alchemy and Occult Knowledge for Home and Hearth, by Abraham van Helsing._ He stared at it questioningly before she nudged it to the side impatiently with her foot, leaning over to grab a handful of his shirt and dragging him down so that they were eye-to-eye.

"What?!" he spat in reply. The only thing that stopped him from yanking her wrist away was the very real fear that he might crush her hand by accident in his ire. Her icy gaze narrowed even further.

"Get your act together," she hissed. "Stop beating yourself up over something you never had control over. If you," her voice faltered, but then picked up stronger than ever, "if you spend every moment of your life analyzing everything that ever went wrong, then you're never going to look up and see what was done right, don't you get that?! If you stay in the past long enough, you'll end up _just like Alucard!_" she exclaimed hotly. "Stuck forever in that loop and unable to pull yourself out of it long enough to remember who you used to be, and who you still are! Do you _want_ to be like that, Alexander?"

She released him as he stood, the fabric of his shirt sliding through her fingers as she watched him walk away. She stood as well, but didn't pursue him. When he reached the door, the selfish need to have the last word washed over him and he turned on his heel.

"I never said I wanted to be _anything._ But if ye think I'm going to end up like yer goddamned pet monster, then ye can just shoot me now!" In the span of what seemed like a blink, he was staring at the ceiling, flat on his back. *That little—he sat up, the bullet falling out of his skull and onto the soft carpeting without a sound. Picking it up, he stood and walked back towards her. She seemed to have surprised herself, handgun dangling in her grasp though the shock hadn't dispersed the storminess still swimming in her eyes. Nor was she too affected to find her voice.*
"There. Did I shoot some sense into you?" she asked indignantly. He didn't say a word, grabbing her free hand where it hung at her side. He put the misshapen bullet on the center of her palm before closing her fingers around it firmly.

"I've got Mass to prepare for," he announced, keeping his voice as even as possible.

"So do I," she replied. He let go of her hand and turned back for the door. She didn't speak again until his hand was on the knob. "So that's all you're going to say." He pressed on without answering; saying that he didn't know sounded too superficial.

He wasn't the only exhausted one at the vigil. The extra assignments handed down to them by the Pope had stretched Section XIII thin, and gathered together it was easy to see that the last three months had taken its toll. Without their sunglasses to hide the damage, they had the collective look of a captured hoard of Ghouls as they trudged to their assigned seats for the Christmas Eve ceremonies. There were bags under their eyes, their skin was pale and sickly, their arms dangling limply as they looked ahead with the thousand-yard stare of someone who'd forgotten what a good night's sleep meant. Even Maxwell had looked unwell lately, his usually bright hair dulled with stress.

The other Special Agency Sections avoided them, casting wary glances over their shoulders as though stressful work was a catching sickness. Only those who had spouses in section looked on with sympathy, knowing firsthand how hard they were being worked to keep the errant vampire activity as low as it could possibly be.

Anderson was first row, first chair this year, since Adams was killed in combat in June. They were grouped by alphabetical columns, so this year Oliver Jensen ended up beside him heading the next row. The man had shaved his mustache/beard combo, the effect making him look at least a decade younger. He was already half-asleep, his eyelashes barely fluttering as he made an attempt to sit up in the most uncomfortable way possible.

"Wha's with ye?" Anderson whispered, his lips barely moving. They technically weren't supposed to speak while waiting, but it was one of those rules that were usually overlooked as long as you didn't do it openly. It wasn't as if they could be heard over the loud buzz of conversation coming from the tourists that flocked to hear His Holiness at the Basilica, anyway.

"Just got back from a seventy-two hour expedition to Madagascar," he replied in the same way, leaning over just enough so that the paladin didn't have to strain to hear him. "I've gotten a half-hour's worth of sleep in three days, but I can't just miss this. Maxwell would—" he stifled a yawn. "Maxwell would murder me."

"He'll murder ye for falling off yer seat, too." Oliver just shook his head and rolled his shoulders, trying to sit up even straighter.

"Gotta take that chance." They sat quietly for a moment.

"Tha' woman over there is trying to get yer attention, I think." Oliver looked up and then grinned. "Like keeping schoolchildren in line, he thought wryly before hazarding
a glance over his shoulder. The Iscariots were keeping quieter than normal, but he could still see
snatches of quiet conversation happening between the rows. A few were even boldly twisting in
their chairs to speak with someone behind them.

The silver trumpets sounded and all murmurs ceased as the Pope entered, preceded by the cross.
Standing up with everyone else, he easily picked Maxwell out of the rest of the bishops, looking
drained and grave. He took his place along with the other bishops, archbishops, and cardinals as
the Pope made his way to the front. Oliver seemed to have roused himself enough to plaster on the
look of quiet reverence considered appropriate for the occasion.

The entire ceremony went normally enough. They managed to get through the two hours without
anyone falling asleep, though by the end more than one person was propping themselves discreetly
on the edge of their chairs. The image of the Christ child made it to the throne unscathed, no one
knocked anything over—even the microphone, a source of constant frustration, didn't dare squeal
once.

Later, after the Pope had said his piece and everyone had trickled back out again, he began to make
his way down the streets to the office. Christmas was a free day, but the offices were open anyway.
Sometimes those who were behind and had no family to spend the holidays with caught up on
work. More often than not they pretended to work for a while before joining the others watching
movies on the computers and talking loudly, enjoying a day where they hadn't any restrictions
(within reason).

"Are you going to work?" He half-turned to see Siobhan emerging from an alley, no doubt taking
an alternate route around the swarm of bodies crushing their way through to the station. "If you
are, I'll walk with you. I have to finish up my report on Madagascar before I go to bed." She smiled.
"If I don't, I'll never get up and it'll end up late on Bishop Maxwell's desk. I'd rather not face his
anger, as busy as he's been."

"We're all short-tempered at the moment, aren't we?" He obediently paused to give her time to
catch up. Without her hood, her vibrant curls were all over the place and it was easier to see how
far they cascaded down her back. Her eyes shimmered in the pale light of pre-dawn, the flickering
streetlights casting her small face into shadow.

As she drew close, the hairs on the back of his neck rose. He forced the feeling back as she stood
beside him; he never could understand why he felt so jumpy around her. She was a human…well,
as far as he knew. He'd worked with her for years, and she had all the tendencies: she needed to
sleep and eat, she could walk in both sunlight and darkness, she stood for the ceremonies and heard
the prayers without a problem, and when wounded she was sometimes out of commission for a few
weeks.

Still, sometimes he looked at her and saw… something. She was a mystery, and she took great
pains to make sure no one was given a clue to solve it. She never applied for a spouse, she had no
close friends though she was pleasant and sociable to everyone she met, and she lived alone instead
of in the barracks with the other unmarried women. Twice a year she vanished, only to come back
in a week's time denying that she'd used her sick days but refusing to say where she'd been. But she
and the Pope had some sort of agreement, and he while he didn't always obey authority, he'd never
question anything that came from His Holiness's mouth.

"The next group of trainees won't be ready until May, but I daresay it'll all be over by then," she
confessed. He frowned; she always seemed to know something more than everyone else. It only
heightened the mystery. But maybe he was only hyper-sensitive to these sorts of things. After all,
she clearly wasn't a vampire, or a werewolf, or a mermaid. Nymphs were always, always blonde,
and she was too hardy to be an Elf. She might have been a leannan sìth waiting for someone to proposition her, but that was probably just his mother's stories talking. Besides, what would the daoine sìth be doing in Italy in the first place? More likely than not she was a normal human with a special set of circumstances and enough coincidences to make the paranoid wonder.

"After all, we're always slow in the spring months," she clarified, as if picking up on his confusion. He brushed it aside and nodded; she wasn't wrong. Spring was werewolf mating season, and the nights still weren't long enough for vampires to do much. "However… I would have thought you were caught up. To be fair, though, I thought I wouldn't see you here at all tonight."

"And why is tha'?" She glanced at him quickly, but made no move to hide her face.

"Well, usually when Maxwell makes an example out of your team, I end up having to pull you out of the office myself. I thought you'd be holed up in an English office somewhere that I couldn't get to you," she pointed out with her usual bluntness. They waited to cross the street with a crowd of tourists that looked at them strangely, but he didn't reply until they were mostly alone again.

"And yer point?"

"Point? No, I just wondered who managed to draw you out of yourself this time." He stopped as they cut through another alleyway, and she turned to look back at him questioningly.

"Yer making no sense." She pivoted gracefully, walking back towards him with her hair floating ethereally in the breeze between the buildings.

"You hate office work. But every time your team fails their mission, no one can keep up with you. You throw yourself into your work like a madman. Tell me," she asked, stepping closer. He braced himself; it was the same question she asked every time she pulled him out of the office and made him face reality. "What are you hiding from, Father Anderson?" As always, he didn't answer. Eventually she turned away.

"I won't be the one to answer that question for you, but maybe you've found someone who already has. Is that why you've left your hiding place early?" She paused, one hand touching the concrete blocks making up the wall of the building beside her. A cat leaped out of a trash can a few yards away and went running as a car alarm started in the distance. "Come on. It'll be dawn by the time we get there if we don't pick up the pace."
"Happy Christmas, Master."

"Seras, why are you not asleep?" Alucard sighed. "It's past dawn." He felt her turn over beside him, bedclothes rustling.

"Why aren't you asleep then?" she retorted calmly. He frowned.

"I've been watching over my master," he replied matter-of-factly. "An enemy will not hesitate to strike merely because she was in a so-called House of God."

"That's true," she murmured. "But you could have gone with her, if you were so worried."

"Why? It's much easier to go there if she needs me and stay here if she doesn't." He rolled his shoulders in a shrug. "Besides, I despise stepping into places like those. The holy stench of incense makes me want to retch."

"They don't use incense in every church," she argued, but he didn't take her up on the proffered bickering. "And anyway, Walter was with her." She heard him shift and felt his eyes on her; still, he took a moment before answering.

"Walter is old, Seras. He won't be able to watch after her for much longer, despite his desire to. The stoutest of minds cannot overcome an aged body, no matter what humans may think."

"Well…." Seras was silent for a moment, her breathing calm and reflective. "So Sir Integra's home in bed, then."

"Home, yes. In bed, no. She's used to keeping odd hours." He paused. "Still, she is tired. Most likely she'll retire soon."

"I was just making conversation; I didn't want a play-by-play," Seras sighed, rubbing one eye sleepily. "She'll probably sleep until this afternoon, if not later… we have time to sleep too, then." She leaned on his arm, chin digging into his bicep. "Don't you think?"

"Perhaps." He seemed preoccupied by something.

"What's the matter? Thinking about 'private matters' again?" she teased. He shook his head almost imperceptibly.

"My master is… multitasking with her thoughts." She arched a brow, silently prompting him to elaborate. "She is concerned over four or five matters, and thinking of all of them at once."

"And that bothers you?" Seras asked, this time confused. "I do that all the time." Alucard sniffed derisively.
"It clouds my mind more than hers. Just when you can't possibly imagine that she'd find something else to think about, she does. When you both are at it, I might as well give up for the night." She laughed at that, shoulders shaking.

"Aren't you just put out," she snickered, leaning up to kiss his jaw. "Poor Master, plagued by two women."

"And both of them completely ignorant of the other while they do it," he finished in a conceding tone. His head tilted as he gave her better access to his neck, the shadows in the coffin closing in on them. She felt him try to twist around, hands reaching for her nightshirt, and gripped his wrist firmly.

"No," she ordered sternly, pushing his hand away from her bare skin. "Not tonight, I'm not in the mood for that."

"Seras—" he growled, eyes flashing in the dim light. She shook her head, unafraid as she wrapped her arms around his neck.

"No, listen… just kiss me." Her voice softened into a plea. "Don't rush it. Only kisses." She punctuated her sentences with soft kisses on his cheek, moving down to his neck and resting her forehead against his jaw. "See?"

"What's the point in that?" he argued, visibly irritated. She grinned as she buried her face in the crook of his neck.

"Because it feels good?" she replied mentally, snuggling closer to him. He stiffened momentarily, but didn't push her away. Because I really, really love it, she added confidently. Because I love you. He harrumphed, lips tightening into a thin line. "Pointless," he repeated, but the bite was gone.

"Just try it." She turned his face back to her, her lips brushing over his temptingly. He returned her caresses eagerly enough, but every time he tried to go further she stopped him, making him pause while she pretended to catch her breath. The fourth time she did this, his fist slammed into the coffin wall. She heard the metal groan and pursed her lips, knowing that there'd be a visible dent if she opened it up to check.

"Teasing little seductress!" he snarled, eyes narrowed. She inhaled, trying to keep her own impatience under control. Baby steps, Seras. She could almost hear Harry's voice in the back of her mind, his words echoing from a crisp fall night, though it seemed ages ago. His last missus was over 200 years ago. He's a bit rusty, is all. She wrinkled her nose; rusted all the way through, more like.

"That's the point, isn't it?" she protested, running her fingers gently down his chest as she set her thoughts aside for another time. "You don't get off on it; it's just to feel good. Theoretically, we were supposed to be doing this before I let you sleep with me," she explained. "It's part of lovemaking."

"I don't do that sort of thing." She blinked once, then twice, running the phrase over in her mind.

"We sleep together," she said slowly, daring him to argue. He looked her over once before meeting her gaze, eyes hard. "What do you think that's called? What do we do?"

"We fuck." She glared incredulously at him for a long moment, waiting for him to add anything else. When he only stared back defiantly, she sniffed and yanked the blanket up over her head from where it was lying demurely across her knees.
"Not with that attitude, we don't." She heard him huff, but he still didn't say a word. "Besides," she growled, poking her head back out and fisting the blanket until it was a mess of tight wrinkles, "We don't fuck. We sleep together, or we have sex. We don't do that word." She wasn't about to let him get away with using such a lewd term in the same sentence as a respectable person like her. Why, if the soldiers caught wind that he was saying things of that nature they'd start hinting about dominant and submissive positions, and she'd never get them to do their jobs! And the way he said it, as though it were just another task on his nightly to-do list... it did more than just rub her the wrong way. It actually hurt a little.

"Prude," he scoffed, crossing his arms.

"No, I'm not," she snapped back. "You may just do it to get off, but I happen to do it because I care for you, bloody bastard." She slapped his chest as hard as she dared and turned her back to him, her nose pressed against the wall of the coffin so that she could be as far from him as possible. "If you really feel that way, just go back to your own damn coffin and fuck yourself."

"Such cheek," he said, his tone icy and warning. "You best tread carefully, Police Girl."

"Oh, so it's Police Girl again, is it?" She pushed the blanket up to her nose and buried her face in it. "Great. I've been demoted." Her voice was muffled, but she knew that he heard her.

"Seras."

"I can't be both Seras and Police Girl. You have to choose one or the other." His breath came in a hiss as he fought to keep his temper. A growl rumbled in his chest as he yanked her up to his side, blanket and all.

"Such a troublesome creature," he grumbled, "so demanding."

"Demanding!?!" she questioned furiously, pushing him away as best she could. He didn't let her budge an inch; it only added fuel to her growing anger. "Of what, exactly?!"

"My patience," he replied simply.

"All I wanted to do was kiss you, jerk." She gave up on pushing him and instead crossed her arms, shutting herself off from him as best she could. He could keep her there, but he couldn't make her happy about it. "You could have at least humored me."

"Humored?" His tone was borderline scathing now. "I refuse to do that, Police Girl, for both our sakes. Indulgence leads to nothing but trouble."

"Whatever. Make an excuse, if it helps you to feel better about yourself." She rolled around in his arms, effectively wrapping herself up in the blanket like a protective cocoon from his caresses. "Go to sleep. We'll discuss this later."

"There's not a damn thing to discuss."

"We'll discuss this later," she repeated in a harsher voice, leaving no doubts between them that there was something to discuss. "Go. To. Sleep." His arm squeezed punishingly around her body, but she didn't allow him the satisfaction of hearing her pain. She tightened her lips, muffling the squeak trying to worm its way up her throat. I am utterly fed up of this! You'd think he'd treat the woman he wants to have sex with better!

"Don't dare to order me, my dear." It was clear that he was working hard to keep his temper under control, muscles tensed against what she assumed was an instinctive urge to decimate her. "It won't
end well for you. This is one battle you're destined to lose." She didn't know exactly why that made her so angry, but the dam finally burst and she felt the strong need to punch him until his face didn't exist anymore. The only thing stopping her was the fact that she'd have to explain the messy sheets to Walter, who condoned such things on principle.

"You know what? You're right." She smacked the button and the coffin began to rise. "Might as well not even stay around and argue about it, since I'm clearly going to lose." He snarled in protest but she broke his arm cleanly, effectively loosening his grip long enough for her to yank the end of the blanket from beneath the mattress and clamber over his body, being sure to knee him in the stomach as hard as she possibly could in the process. She drew the blanket close, wrapping it around her as her bare feet hit the cool stone of her bedroom floor.

"Get back in this coffin," he growled, the gleam in his eyes telling her that he wouldn't take 'no' for an answer. She gathered her courage, her head held high as she pushed one hand out from underneath the blanket long enough to flip him off before using her strength to force the lid back down on his head, the gears screaming in protest.

"Sleep well, you bloody prick," she shouted at him, turning on her heel and stalking out the door, slamming it behind her. "I hope that snapped your damned neck," she added mentally before cutting her mind off from his. She stomped her way up the stairs and to the foyer, where the sun shone brightly through the windows. "Ow-ow-ooh-ouchie—" She hopped and skipped as fast as she could across the landing, the marble burning her feet like hot asphalt in summer.

"You shouldn't have done that," her inner voice said worriedly, concerned more with her self-preservation than anything else. There's nothing that's stopping him from hurting you, and badly. He's still your master. She stood straighter as she headed up the stairs, one hand steadying herself on the railing. I don't care, she decided once and for all. I don't even care anymore. Let him kill me; what's the use of sticking around if he's just going to treat me like trash? If it weren't for the debt I owe Sir Integra and Walter for taking me in, I'd leave tonight and never look back.

You're speaking from anger, the voice admonished. Take your own advice and get some sleep. This evening you can work on smoothing this over. We still have Christmas…

"He doesn't even deserve what I got him," she grumbled as she moved towards the direction of the spare bedrooms.

"Who doesn't, Agent Victoria?" She stopped on a dime, turning and trying to salute as best she could with the blanket still draped over her shoulders. Sir Integra looked tired, but still alert enough that she managed to seem as intimidating as ever. She tilted her head questioningly, looking at a nearby window where the sky was a brilliant blue over the manor's buttresses. "It's well past sunrise; shouldn't you be in bed?"

"I'm going to sleep in one of the guest bedrooms, with all due respect, Sir." She felt her cheeks color as she explained herself. "As long as that..." she turned over all the names she had for him in her mind, trying to choose the least offensive one in order to preserve some distinction between her employer and herself, "that gormless pillock is down there, I don't even want to be in the basement." To her surprise, Sir Integra gave a rare, genuine smile.

"Well, well," she murmured in amusement. "It looks as though Walter owes me 50 quid."

"S-Sir?" Seras laughed awkwardly. "I don't—"

"It's simple, Agent Victoria." Sir Integra walked past her, pausing to adjust an end table that was pressing its leg into the carpet. She tried to smooth out the indent with the edge of her boot, a faint
echo of the smile still tugging at her lips. "I bet him that with the way Alucard behaves, you'd be off speaking terms before the new year. Walter had a little more faith in his old war partner, I'm afraid. Now he owes me." She looked up, gauging her employee's expression. "You're surprised?"

"Only—Sir—that if you really made that bet, why didn't you ask for twice as much? After all, you were guaranteed to win." To her amazement, her boss actually laughed at that.

"If I did that every time I won a bet, poor Walter would be destitute." She gazed thoughtfully at Seras before jerking her head. "Come with me." Seras obeyed without question, pausing only when they reached a certain door. Integra opened it up, motioning her inside and arching a brow when the vampire didn't move. "Is something the matter?"

"It's just—that's the private quarters," Seras mumbled. "I thought no one was supposed to go there—even Walter doesn't go that way unless it's an emergency."

"Yes, but I'm giving you my permission this time," Sir Integra replied calmly. "Hurry it up; I'd like to get into bed before noon myself." Seras timidly stepped through the threshold, turning sideways to keep from hitting the older woman and catching the usual whiff of tobacco and human as she passed. She'd only been through it once before, to pack Sir Integra's bag the evening when she escaped—in her own way, at least—from prison. No one was supposed to enter the family quarters of the mansion.

Sir Integra led her down the hall; despite knowing that it wasn't true and that the entire manor was nearly deserted, Seras still felt like this hall was more silent than the rest of the house. Maybe it was just the way you could tell that there wasn't much traffic on the carpet, that the tables hadn't been bumped into accidentally and scratched, that guns hadn't scraped the wallpaper when unthinking men had turned too sharply. There was a sense of absence that made the hallway seem quiet and lonely.

"You may stay in here for today," Sir Integra said quietly, leading her to the door directly to the left of her room. She opened it to reveal a smaller, but luxuriously furnished bedroom. At Seras' questioning glance, she spoke. "This was my bedroom when I was a child. I usually keep it on hand for the highest-profile guests; you wouldn't want them being woken in the night by the soldiers during their usual revelries."

"I see." Seras stepped inside, running a hand over a small wooden vanity. It was polished, but clearly not used regularly. Someone gets paid to come in and clean a room that's barely used.... Somehow that seemed pointless to Seras, but she didn't comment on it. After all, she didn't want to seem ungrateful for the clear privilege the heiress was showing her. It was rare for anyone to be so far in Sir Integra's good graces that a debtless favor was warranted, even if she was fond of them. "Thank you, Sir," she said dutifully.

"Nonsense; it's no issue. This way if Alucard starts bothering you, I'll be able to hear it and you won't have to come screaming bloody murder through the house." She paused. "Do you want me to order him to stay away? I know all too well how cumbersome he can get."

"No, thanks," Seras answered uncomfortably, a polite smile freezing on her lips. "I'm grateful for the bedroom, but you probably shouldn't get in the middle of this—what's going on between us," she advised. "I'm sure you have enough to worry about," she added, remembering Alucard's earlier words.

"Well then." Integra turned and walked out, closing the door behind her. "Happy Christmas, Agent Victoria. Sleep well."
"Happy Christmas, Sir."

As if waking up wasn't hard enough on its own, waking up and feeling another's emotions in your head instead of your own was even more confusing.

Sometimes, when Alucard was truly feeling something—raw emotion instead of the shallower pseudo-emotion he put forth daily—Integra would feel it no matter how thick the barrier between their minds. It was a mental red flag to her, a warning that he was close to snapping. Alucard hardly felt anything hard enough on a normal night to be considered dangerous, but when he had the right cocktail brewing beneath his skin, it was time for the extra reinforcements.

Her eyes fluttered open, trying to make sense of the midday light reflected off the hardwood in shimmering patterns on the ceiling; she was hardly in her room at that hour, and the sight puzzled her until she awakened fully. Then, the emotions that had woken her up hit her like bricks to the forehead, rattling her brain until her temples throbbed with a deep-set ache. Anger. Irrational woman. Frustration. Will not listen. Confusion. What does she mean for me to do? Concern. Dead before sunset if I hadn't come.

Blinking rapidly, she processed each one with mounting bafflement. What on earth was he even doing awake at this hour? This was the time when vampires were dead to the world, hiding away from the sun in the dark, cramped confines of their pine box beds. Then she heard voices, muffled but clear enough that a few words made it through the brick and the silk wallpaper. The low tone, sharp and jagged with anger, she recognized as Alucard's. And Seras's was ebbing and flowing with her emotion, now loud in retort, now soft and barely noticeable with her unyielding argument.

She finally discerned that Alucard had come up in the middle of the day for Seras, ignoring her—albeit unspoken—ban about coming to her personal hall with the surefire intent of dragging the poor Draculina from her bed and back to the basement. Sighing to herself, she prepared to swing her legs out from underneath the blankets, one hand automatically reaching for her glasses on the nightstand.

Do I really have to babysit them as though they were a bunch of rowdy children? she grumbled internally, groping for the edge of the blankets in order to throw them off.

She'd just found her glasses when a firm hand caught her mid-swing and pressed her back down into the mattress, putting pressure on her sternum in a silent warning to stay put. She glanced over, flicking her wrist to open the frames and slip them on her nose. Anderson was sitting up in the bed, ear cocked towards the wall with a furrowed brow, a blade resting at the ready on his lap. When she stilled, his hand left her and returned to his side. He didn't glance at her, instead giving his head the slightest of shakes and leaning in closer to the wall as Seras cried out loud enough to be heard.

"It's none of your business where I sleep!" There was a pause as Alucard responded, his voice little more than a wordless growl, and then, "And you deserved it too, you bastard! Go back to the basement and—" Her voice lowered again, the high points of her voice breaking in her fury. Now Anderson lowered his eyes to her questioningly. She could hear his voice, if he had chanced to speak: Well? What do ye think o'this? Now it was her turn to shake her head dismissively, sinking back into the pillows and keeping her ears peeled for any sounds coming from the next room that would suggest Alucard had grown too impatient with his fledgling.

There was a shrill cry of outrage from Seras and an answering sound from her master, the walls of the manor groaning from the force of his power as his anger reached a new peak. Anderson's hand tightened around the bayonet, eyes narrowing as he turned his attention back to the escalating fight in the next room.

"It's Christmas, that's why!" Seras screeched, followed by a long streak of hisses that ended with
"and fucking!"

"That's what it is!" Alucard retorted just as loudly, and there was a muffled thump and the sound of something crashing to the ground with a followed tinkle of glass. Running a mental inventory of the room through her mind, Integra decided that he'd either slammed his fist into the wall, or onto the credenza. The former meant a picture of a wildflower field had fallen, the latter meant a very expensive crystal elephant had been shattered. She hoped he had been nowhere near the elephant. Still, if he was bordering collateral damage to her former bedroom, perhaps it was time to put an end to things.

"Alex..." she began, stopping to clear her throat. His eyes slid back from the wall to her face, but he didn't speak. She met his glance, a devious grin twisting her lips. "Do your wife a favor and get rid of those squeaking mice. They're ruining my sleep." The devilishness was infective; his expression mirrored hers as he stood.

"Of course," he purred with a sinister glee, twisting the blade expertly between his fingers as he walked to the bathroom, emerging moment later with the cassock thrown over his bedclothes like a bathrobe.

"And don't get any blood on the carpet. It's hard to find a good cleaning service willing to work holidays," she advised, yawning as she pulled the blankets up to her chin, closing her eyes. She heard him leave the room and enter the other without a word. Immediately Seras screamed, but it was a shriek of terror instead of pain. There was a loud banging about and then a prolonged scuffle punctuated by blows that sounded more like a good, old-fashioned fistfight. She let it go on for a few minutes, not denying either man the fun they were most likely having with beating the living daylights out of each other. Seras screamed again, though this time it was more of a battle cry; it was cut off prematurely with a very loud thud and a strangled sound. Integra let the tumult carry on for a few more minutes before crawling out of bed and slinging her dressing gown over her shoulders to block some of the cold winter's air.

Alucard... down, she ordered mentally just for spite, enjoying the returned snarl of rage and the loud thump that suggested he'd hit the floor hard. Good boy, she laughed. She walked over, stopping only to wave Walter's worried face away from where he'd stopped hesitantly at the entrance to the hall, listening to the entire ordeal while conflicted about whether or not to come into the private quarters. She then peered into the open doorway, arms crossed as she considered the scene before her.

Seras was dangling several inches above the floor, her pajama top pinned to the wall by two bayonets. If it weren't for the position of her arms clutching at the gaping fabric where her buttons were strained, she'd most likely have slipped right out of the baggy top and onto the floor. Her legs worked frantically, bare feet trying to find a purchase on the slippery wallpaper and coming short, skidding down one by one only to be placed farther up along the wall until she looked like an inverted crab. Alucard was flat on his back, runes glowing crimson as his eyes, which glowered with unbridled hate at the priest holding him down with one foot flush against his chest. From the subtle twitching of his fingers, he was clearly trying to fight the order and get back to his feet.

Glancing further around the room, she noted with a sense of relief that it was the vanity mirror that she had heard breaking. It was cracked from base to tip, half of it fallen away and littering the floor with half a dozen angles of the bedroom walls and ceiling. She stared for a moment at her own tight-lipped reflection echoed in broken shards, thin and waif-like as she hovered near the door.

"My master," he snapped viciously when he saw her out of the corner of his eye. He seemed to be unable to move from the floor at all. It appeared that the runes had taken her order to the letter: he
was as down as he could get without falling through the floor itself. There was a smear of blood along his cheekbone from where his nose had been broken and now sat at an odd angle; she could see as he leered that one of his front teeth was chipped, another had a fine crack running close to his gums.

"May I not have some peace on Christmas Day?" she asked him, entirely serious. He wrinkled his nose in reply, causing Anderson's heel to dig into his chest more firmly. She heard ribs cracking and sighed. "Go to bed, Alucard. Or at least to your room," she amended, thinking about him being forced into his coffin in some strange, contorted position. "Leave Seras alone. She's under my protection today."

"How convenient for her," he replied bitterly. He could have vanished into mist or even just disappeared, but deemed it more appropriate to disintegrate into thousands of spiders. Anderson jerked his foot back, smacking at them and cursing under his breath as they ran up his sock. Seras squealed in alarm, pulling her bare feet even farther from the floor as she looked down with wide eyes. Integra alone remained still and they swarmed around her toes, but didn't touch her as they scuttled into the nooks and crannies underneath the carpet and along the windowsill. She turned to Seras, who looked at her pitifully while still keeping an eye on the priest, who was staring her down intently.

"He still came and bothered me," she murmured accusingly. Her glance flitted between Integra and Anderson, as though she weren't sure which one deserved more of her attention.

"And you still fought him instead of coming to get me," Integra pointed out. "Why you put up with him, I'll never know."

"Well..." Seras trailed off, shrugging and slipping halfway out of her top. She struggled to keep it down, her bare stomach catching a patch of sun and making her yelp. "A—A little help, Sir?" she finally asked sheepishly, hanging on by one armpit while her other arm slipped from the sleeve and made itself useful by tugging the hem of the shirt down as far as it would go.

Integra looked pointedly at Anderson, who grunted, but obediently walked over and pulled the bayonets from the wall. The poor vampiress slid to the ground in a heap without a hint of grace, landing on her knee and wincing in pain as she rose back to her feet. She adjusted the pajama top back over her body until she was decent once more.

"Go back to your bed, Seras," Integra ordered calmly. "Alucard won't interrupt your sleep any longer. I plan on having a very personal chat with him; it seems he needs to remember what boundaries are." Seras nodded and then bid a hasty retreat, muttering a quick farewell as she passed by the heiress and putting as many floors as possible between her and the man who'd just stuck her on a wall like a cheap decoration. She watched her leave, a small vein of concern opening in her mind for the poor girl.

"Alucard," she queried, lips turning in a frown.

"Master." Ah, he was still angry—no longer was she Sir Integra, or even just Integra. When he was at his most furious, she was always master, the word filled with a loathing that spanned generations.

"Why on earth are you bothering the Police Girl at such an hour? Monsters like yourself need to be hidden from the sun. The two of you woke me from a dead sleep with your untimely shrieking. I keep vampires in my household, not banshees. For a moment, it seemed as though her mental chastisement would go unanswered. But then he spoke, the voice echoing more than usual in her head, as though he were eons away.

"You are absolutely right. It shouldn't surprise you then that I was bringing my own little monster back to her bed, where the afternoon sun wouldn't burn her to ashes in yours. There was a pause.
She didn't draw the curtains before she went to sleep, he added in a rare form of explanation.

And you couldn't have simply drawn them yourself, and then left her to her dreams? There was a start and she could see him in her mind's eye, bristling at the question. Ah, I've hit a nerve, she thought gleefully, but kept the thought from crossing their bond.

And allow her to run off scot-free when she was disobedient and disagreeable? Perhaps I don't want her dead—just yet, in any case—but I refuse to let her prideful manner usurp my judgment. I often wonder if you forget just who it is that you're talking too, my master.

Prideful manner… you mean she's finally absorbed that much of your personal habits, Alucard? I'm surprised. Still, she added thoughtfully, you're not answering my question. You could have kept the argument for when she woke up. It certainly would have lasted longer that way. And yet...

And yet? His tone was warning, but she blithely ignored that. What was it to her if he was growing tired of her questioning? Had he not just called her his master, and was it not a master's place to demand answers of her servant?

And yet, I'm beginning to wonder what it was that you fought about in the first place. Tell me, Alucard. What did you do to her? There was no answer. Do you even know? She added, only half-jokingly.

I did nothing. He was hiding now, his voice smooth, impeccable, silken. In the old days one might have called it female hysteria. It is pure human emotion, her obstinate soul refusing to let go of what little remains of her former life. The hint of a sneer surfaced in his tone. It matters little to me. She'll see it my way soon enough, when she tires of this nonsensical complaining.

Remember what happened the last time you tried to get her to 'see it your way', Integra replied, equally calm. Even if he didn't dwell on his past, it had only been a few weeks ago that they were both nearly driven insane. She nearly killed a man, and I had to separate the two of you. You wouldn't want me doing that again, she bluffed. Even if she didn't care one whit for Alucard's mental wellbeing—which was already shaky enough as it was—she had too much regard for the policewoman to put her through that again. Then again, Alucard didn't need to know that. I'll lock you in your room and her in the family mausoleum on the other side of London. Or I might just send her away for a while. After all, she's already trying to put an entire house between the two of you, since you refuse to let her be.

You'll have her go insane in pursuit of my punishment? He immediately countered, picking up on her meaning.

Why shouldn't I? After all, she's only a vampire, and you have such little regard for her. She laughed cruelly, only half-bluffing. It was true that she was fond of Seras in her own way, despite the differences in their character, but her family's deep-seated prejudice against the Nosferatu in general wouldn't rest just for fondness. "I don't want her dead just yet?" Those aren't the words of a man that cares for his lover's wellbeing, I'm afraid, she said easily, driving her point home. He made no sound, but she felt his mind start in shock. Take my advice, as a woman speaking on the behalf of another woman, she continued. I'd bet money that she was morally right in this argument. You'd do better to just go along with whatever she says.

"Go along with whatever she says"? His sounded both scathing and incredulous. I will not lie to her.

You won't lie with her, either, Integra replied, amused. He appeared to think over her play on words rather seriously, to her surprise. Go to sleep, vampire. I want to go back to sleep as well. I don't
really care what you two are fighting about. But when it begins to affect the rest of my house, I can’t let you keep on. Save it until the day I’m dead, if you must. She cut off the bond of communication, looking up only to turn around in confusion, finding herself alone in the room. Anderson was gone; then again, there wasn’t much reason for him to stay. She had been staring at the carpet for a good ten minutes by now, lost in mental conversation with her most unwilling servant and not paying attention to the world around her.

She looked around the small bedroom, avoiding the shards of glass as she took in the sight. Memories surfaced left and right, imprints from a past age where her current bedroom had belonged to her father instead. She took a moment to remake the bed, smoothing the coverlet until it was impeccable, the way she once did every morning as a child. She looked over at the vanity, a sudden memory resurfacing of Walter brushing her hair when she was small, his nimble fingers working the knots from her bangs as he made her ready for the day. She finished with the coverlet and set the pillows back into order, thinking about when she lay awake at night as an older girl, hearing her father's muffled voice from beyond the wall as he lay bedridden, but still holding meetings in the middle of the night and giving Walter and her treacherous uncle orders on how to act in his stead.

She hadn't had many toys as a child, and barely remembered a time when they would interest her, but her bookshelf still stood in the corner. Grimm's Fairytales, Gulliver's Travels, Hans Christian Anderson's stories, a few small novels… She wondered briefly why Walter had never taken these books to one of the libraries. They had copies of the same there, to be sure, but these books would only molder if left alone in the room. She certainly had a reason to never come in here anymore, except for rare occasions such as this.

Maybe he'd been loath to move them, gaining some elderly nostalgia from seeing them forever on the shelf, waiting for the child Integra that had died in a basement years prior and had been replaced with the adult version before her time. She never read fairy stories anymore; she hadn't the time, and even then she was always picking the truth from fiction until the story wasn't enjoyable anymore. Long past were the days that her sense of wonder and whimsy could allow her to feel sorry for the troubles of poor Snow White and Cinderella, or shake her head over the sad fate of the Little Mermaid. These, she had the sudden realization, were more for young ladies like Seras, who had somehow managed to keep the childlike wonder of their earlier years despite all hardships.

She walked out of the room, shutting the door behind her with a sigh. It was a strange portal to the past, but she no longer felt as though it were her room anymore. It was a room from a past life she could never go to again, so it was best to just put it from her mind. There was no reason for anyone to go back in there now, and the maid could clean up the glass when she came back from the holiday break with the other servants. Walter was up and about, but he shouldn't have to work on Christmas, and she wasn't about to get bloody fingers from cleaning glass off the ground.

She walked back to her bedroom after checking to make sure that Walter had gone from the door. He had, presumably taking her hint that all was well earlier. She wondered briefly what he thought of the whole situation. Knowing Alucard as long as he had, he was sure to have his own opinions about the little affair the vampire had gotten himself tangled up in. And she knew that he loved Seras too, though obviously not in the same way as Alucard; it had surprised her, how much of an interest he had taken in her. Did she remind him of someone from his past, or had his personality just connected with hers in a way that Integra hadn’t been able to see? She knew, or rather heard, that Seras and Walter had spent a great deal of time in each other's company while she was in prison—enough to make Alucard jealous. She might just be overthinking it….

Anderson already back in bed, his arm slung over his eyes and glasses dangling loosely from his fingers. He said nothing as she passed by, and though his breathing was even, she didn't think he
had fallen asleep again so quickly. Of course, he had been exhausted to the point of collapse the last time they'd spoken, hadn't he? She frowned, recalling the situation only a few hours before in the library. It was the first time in a while that they'd fought about anything, as well as an argument escalating to the point of physical retaliation. She hadn't meant to shoot him—not in the premeditated sense, at least. It had just happened, and before she could register what she'd done, the proverbial smoking gun had become something concrete.

The look in his eyes when he had picked himself up off the ground had strangely chilled her, making her feel bad for shooting him in a way that she'd never felt before with anyone. She was used to shooting Alucard down all the time, taking an almost perverse pleasure in watching the blood flow until it marred that sinister, sarcastic expression that remained on his face 24/7. But this hadn't felt the same at all; on the contrary, it had been the exact opposite. But she couldn't take it back, though he had returned the mangled bullet to her in a gesture that had only made her feel worse. It had been disconcerting, but deep down she knew that it was only her mind chastising her for letting her anger get the better of her and turn her into a hypocrite. And right after she'd shouted at him for letting his emotions rule over his soundness of mind, too….

Pausing by the closet door, she looked back at the bed with a grim expression. Even with his arm over his face, she could see the clear imprint of Alucard's knuckles in line with the curve of his jaw, discolored indigo bruises trying to form. She knew that they'd never see their full coloration, but just the sight of it was enough. Not to mention how pale he'd looked lately, and the bags that seemed to be a new permanent feature beneath his eyes. Shaking her head, she opened the closet door and studied her suits, wondering which she might choose to wear today. It was midday, so there was no use going back to bed. The Christmas speech would be soon enough, and then evening, so why spend the entire day lounging about like royalty? Even if Walter had wrung a halfhearted promise to abstain from working on Christmas from her, there were other, equally important things to do.

"What're ye doing?" She turned back again to see him watching her wearily from beneath his arm. There was still a dull glimmer in his eyes, proving that he hadn't had much sleep, if any. For all she knew, he could have been awake when Alucard and Seras had begun their argument. She'd been asleep long before he came back to the house.

"Nothing. There's no sense in staying in my gown, so I'm getting dressed." He made a sound in the back of his throat and rolled over, facing away from her. She heard him let out a muffled yawn before he spoke.

"I thought ye weren't to work today," he said bluntly. Her hand tightened on the knob as she bit back the sarcastic retort that lay on the edge of her tongue.

"There are plenty of other things that I can do besides work. I can go downstairs and practice my fencing, play chess, read a book… plenty of things," she repeated. He grunted, but otherwise didn't reply. She got the sneaking suspicion that she was supposed to say something, but she had no clue what it could be. She stood for a moment, lost in thought as she tried to discern what might be needed between them. She felt the same sense of frustration that she'd felt from Alucard earlier when her mind pulled up nothing but blanks. Then, an idea—or rather, a moral sense of obligation.

She closed the closet door, walking back to the bed and sitting down on 'his' side of it, her hip pressing against the small of his back. He jerked in shock and half twisted, regarding her quietly. She met his gaze before clearing her throat, lacing her fingers on her lap.

"Perhaps we should talk about what happened earlier this evening in the library," she began, treading carefully around the subject. His lips twitched, but he made a conscious and visible effort
to control his expression, turning his back to her again.

"Nothing to say," he muttered shortly.

"Yes, there is," she protested, keeping an even tone through sheer willpower alone. "First of all, shooting you was an entirely uncalled for action, and I shouldn't have done it." There was a poignant silence after her statement, where she was sure he was thinking over her words rather than ignoring her.

"There's yer apology, then."

"No, I'm not apologizing for it," she argued. "I'm simply stating that I shouldn't have done it in the first place. It was beneath me, and like I said, it was uncalled for."

"Alright." He settled further into the bed.

"I'm not finished!" she pointed out, voice rising in exasperation. He'd been fighting sleep for a day now; he couldn't stay awake five more minutes to listen to what she had to say? He sighed, nearly throwing her off the bed as he turned fully to face her, expression bordering sheer annoyance. They met in a stare-off until one of his brows arched imperiously, biding her silently to say whatever she meant to say. "I also shouldn't have compared you to Alucard. That was a low blow and… for that, I do apologize," she continued stiffly. She tried not to fidget as he continued to stare her down, until finally he relaxed against the pillow.

"Yer a strange woman," was all he said, but he offered her a warm smile. "A very strange woman."

"Why on earth do you say that?" He continued to smile, but didn't answer directly.

"It's Christmas, so I forgive ye for throwing me down to the vampire's level," he stated. "As for the other thing…" The smile faded. "Never do it again."

"I promise nothing of the sort," she answered stubbornly. To her surprise, he didn't seem to take offense to her refusal.

"There's me girl," he murmured instead, eyes drifting closed. Stunned, she had to work to unfreeze her limbs as she went back to the closet.

"I-I'm going downstairs," she announced, swallowing hard.

"Aye. Come and get me when there's a chance of food," he replied, flopping onto his stomach and burying his face in the pillow to escape the sun.

Chapter End Notes

Here felt like a good way to end this chapter. The rest of Christmas will be 46, and then… (evil laughter) Well, we all know what's coming, don't we? Chaos! Destruction! Closure! Epilogues! The End of an Era!

Next Episode: Fire Reigns Down! A Christmas To Remember? Be sure to Watch! (anime eye twinkle)
Crăciun II

Chapter Summary

Granny Juju has been writing this story for at least 3 years now. I'm an old woman. An old, twenty-three year old woman.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Oh meaningless, mindless fury! It was as though something in his mind had finally snapped, after all these centuries of burden after burden, of trial upon trial, and now all the rage against the world that he had forced back time and again came through the cracks like wet dough squished through a tight fist, squelching and oozing at every available opportunity until it covered him in a sticky, tiresome anger that went beyond words. Tighter went the fist of his anger, tighter squeezed the bonds of the Hellsing family on his boiling powers; the dough became a current of water that gushed through the cracks, widening them further until he was forced to tighten them again. An endless circle of anger worked through his mind as he paced his chambers—no, his cell.

He had never felt anything akin to true regret before, he realized. What he'd considered regret was, in actuality, shallow impatience and slight guilt. Regret was sorrowful and lasted longer than guilt, and accompanied with the anger it made for a perfect cocktail of misery. Oh, that he'd never even met that stupid, witless, infuriating girl! That'd he'd never had to go to that imbecilic village, had never stepped foot in that cathedral, had never stepped foot in that cathedral, had just left her to that moronic priest until she was nothing but a mindless, moaning Ghoul. She really wasn't much better than that now anyway, constantly nagging and repeating herself as though she didn't know more than a few sentences. I should have left her to bleed out on those stairs! I should have never—should've, would've, could've. That was regret, in its basest form.

He regretted ever setting his sights on her. Why couldn't he leave well enough alone? Why had he felt the urge to do what he'd never done before—acquire an apprentice, a protégé that would extend his bloodline, and then take her to his bosom? He hadn't been lonely, or worried about his bloodline dying. If anything, he'd done it out of boredom…. No, that wasn't right, he thought to himself as he paced. It had been greed, plain and simple. He'd seen the priest with something that he'd wanted, and like a child stealing one toy from another, he'd taken it for himself. But he'd made sure that no one else would be able to steal it back from him, placing his mark on her as his servant. Now it had come back to haunt him, since he couldn't get rid of her.

He wanted to destroy, to rip things apart, to shred and maul until this anger was out of his system. The malice was like an itch that could never be scratched, held in place by the bonds on his gloves. Long gone were the days where he could wipe out an entire countryside's worth of villages because he was in a bad mood. There was no other outlet except pacing, unless he wanted to destroy his furniture. That, he knew, would be a useless endeavor; his furniture would not be replaced if he were to rip it apart from anger, and he had so little of it as it was. He would be left with nothing, somehow less than he already had in this cramped, damp dungeon. No matter what anyone tried to call it, that's what it was—a dungeon. A place for prisoners like himself.

Even she had a room closer to the front, a reward for good behavior, a solemn reminder that despite
his position as her master, she was still held in higher regard. She wasn't considered a monster, not like himself. She wasn't despised, controlled, browbeaten into submission against her will, unless it was by his hand. She could keep her temper in check, though he'd seen enough now to know that her anger rivaled his own when stoked to its fullest. The only difference was that while he exploded in angry outbursts, her passion was channeled into cunning payback and logical arguments that roused him into… well, into accidentally breaking mirrors.

This has to stop, he realized as he continued to follow his trailing shadows around the room. But how…. He thought seriously as he paced, squeezing the anger into something more productive. He hated arguing with someone who was supposed to be subservient to him, he hated being forced back into his room like an errant babe by his so-called master, he hated even more that she had ordered him down, that damned priest gaining the upper hand only by the commands forced upon him. She'd forbidden him to bother Seras, forcing him again to stay his hand by waiting for her to come to him…. how, how, how?!

He rubbed his eyes wearily as he heard the antique sounds of the radio turning on above his head, static crackling before the listeners settled on cheery swing music. Ah, it was Walter and the cook, then. Integra didn't care much for that sort of music, but Walter and that loud fat woman liked to relive their youth, listening to the music that so many couples used to dance to on pointless human holidays such as Christmas. He wondered briefly if Walter might bring him something extra to eat, to stave off the headache beginning to pound at the back of his temples.

Hearing the music swell, he was half-expecting to hear the pounding of bare feet as Seras chose to join them, laid out on her stomach on the floor as the music would, eventually, give way into either a radio drama or news program. She often did, but it was usually on Thursdays; this was a Saturday morning, so there might not be a radio drama today. Something clicked in his mind and he turned, seeing the shadow of a past-Seras standing in the doorway, tears rolling down her cheeks. Please don't do this… The same look again, months later, standing on a leaf-strewn path and surrounded by spilled blood—I hate you! I hate you for turning me into this… this thing! That was it! That was the key. He had to make her hate him rather than love him. Then, it would be far easier to watch her from afar instead of having to argue in circles with her night in and night out.

Just as he came to this answer, there was the all-too-familiar rap of small, smooth knuckles on a rotting doorframe. There she stood, almost as though nothing had happened between them. Well, perhaps that wasn't giving her enough credit. There was a rip in her buttoned pajamas from where she'd been pinned to the wall, her hair was rumpled and frizzy, and the look in her eyes showed that she expected another fight, or at least the renewal of the earlier one. But he was bound and determined that he would never fight with her again. He'd just brush her off and go back to being her cold, ruthless master. She'd shed tears, but she'd get over it eventually. He didn't want or need her precious love. Her hate would do him better in the end. He could harness it for his own wellbeing; it was tangible and understandable, unlike that love, the paltriest of all the emotions that she spoke of.

When he didn't speak, her expression went from expectant to exasperated. She sighed and then motioned with the lump of something that she held in her hand. The light from the hallway was a backlight on her small frame, making it harder to see her features.

"Look, I know Sir Integra would be angry if she knew I was down here, and I know that you don't want anything to do with me right now," she began in a tone that commanded his attention, if not his compliance. "But it's still Christmas, and I… I wanted to say that I'm sorry that she stepped in the way she did. I told her not to interfere, but I guess since we woke her up—" She stopped abruptly, gathering her thoughts, while he finally worked out that she meant she was sorry for the humiliating way that Integra had ordered him, and in front of his nemesis at that. "I also came
down to give you your present," she added, holding out the lump, which he now saw to be a
clumsily wrapped package. "I mean, everyone ought to get at least one present, even if they've
acted as horrible as you do year-round. With that—Happy Christmas," she concluded in a
lackluster voice, arm wobbling as it held the package out at full length towards him. He sniffed,
turning up his nose at her 'peace offering'.

"Vampires don't celebrate Christian holidays, Police Girl," he snipped like a petty child. She
captured the emphasis on his lack of a proper name and heard her teeth grind together as she
fought to control her sharp tongue. He wanted her to fight with him—it would make his job easier.
She exhaled heavily though her nose, though her arm still wavered in the air. For a moment it
drooped, as though she was rethinking her position, and then it was thrust forward again
obstinately.

"What about other religions, then?" she asked sweetly, her voice tight with forced pleasantness.
"Are vampires only barred from Christian ones?" There was a challenge underneath the oh-so-
innocent questioning. "Happy Hanukah, then. Or Kwanzaa; you can have your pick, really." It was
his turn now to force back a sharp retort, not wanting to show that he was breaking beneath the
pressure of her feigned ignorance.

"Leave. Now," he snarled the order between clenched teeth. There was no fear in her gaze, only a
mixture of irritation and slight caution that only made him angrier. That sort of tone would have
made her tremble with terror when he'd first turned her into a vampire. It should still make her
tremble, but he'd given her too much power as of late, unable to help remembering her sullen
attitude that led to their forced separation by Integra, and the near mental breakdown that happened
afterwards to them both. She'd taken it harder than him—aftter all, he was already insane, according
to some—but in the end, he had suffered in the long term. He was still suffering now, through her
continued defiance.

"Not until you take this present," she insisted. He whirled around on his heel, sizing her up as he
loomed over her threateningly. She gazed back, looking smaller than usual in her baggy, worn-out
pajamas. He was always taken aback by how tiny she really was; her personality always made her
seem larger than life, but then he was brought back to reality when he caught a glimpse of her like
this. He could crush every bone in her hand between his thumb and forefinger, or so it seemed.
"I'm not stepping a foot out of this room until you do."

"I will not take anything from you. I don't want it," he hissed. His hands were clenching and
unclenching, fighting back the impulse to punch her, to pummel her until her nothing remained of
her stubborn expression. Any other person, save Integra, would have already been dead for daring
to speak to him in such a way. But of course he still somehow made concessions for her, no matter
how subconscious. It would be much easier to just beat her within an inch of her life, but his master
would hear and break them apart, probably punishing him if he tried to kill her completely.

"I don't care if you don't want it," she snapped. "You're going to take this bloody present, or I'll—"
Again she stopped herself from completing the threat, licking her lips and blinking rapidly as her
with each word and waving the package in front of his nose.

"Make me," he shot back in the same tone, resisting the urge to wrap his fingers around her slender
little neck and squeeze until her head popped off like a grape. He normally didn't act in such an
infantile matter, but she was forcing him to the end of his rope and he knew the words would rile
her further. He was right; her eyes bugged as though he were squeezing her, jaw working as her lips
pressed into a thin line. She was clearly reaching the end of her patience as well.
"Just take it!" she shouted suddenly, pushing it into his arms. "For God's sake! I don't care if you even open it or not, but just take it so that I can—just take it, please!?" She let go, and he didn't try to stop it's descent as the package dropped to the floor between them, bouncing once with a solid thump before lying on its side. "You're acting so childish!" she growled, fist raised. "I hate it when you get like this, do you not realize that?!" Yes, that's right. Hit me, punch me, hate me! Raise your hand against me so that I can fight you properly! But the hand fell and she stood there, forlorn against the backlight from the hallway lamps, expression cast into shadow.

"I don't want anything from you," he repeated, turning his head and pointedly looking away from her. He could sense the air change as she finally read between the lines and realized that they were talking about far more than a mere lumpy bit of wrapped paper. She bent down and picked up the gift from the ground, fingers holding it tightly and pressing more wrinkles into the already marred surface of the package.

He noticed her shoulders trembling and mentally sighed, preparing himself for an onslaught of unwanted tears that was sure to come pouring at any moment. The girl was so transparent, a true example of wearing one's heart on one's sleeve. But when she looked up, he was astonished to see that her eyes were dry, and she was shaking from anger and not anguish. The astonishment changed immediately to a gratified thrill and he barely hid the malicious grin from his face. Now things were starting to change for the better; there was a nice, thin line between anger that led over into detestation. If he could only prod her over that line, his mission would be complete.

"Why won't you take it?!" she snarled, expression twisted in barely restrained fury. "What's it going to hurt, your pride?! You've already been brought down once today; I can't imagine your ego taking much more than it already has—" This time it was he who cut her sentence short, palm slammed between her breasts in an effort to knock her down. She'd thrown a punch, but it hadn't been with her fists; rather, it had been her words, and it was a well-aimed blow at that. It had cut him to the core, which was no doubt her intention. She stumbled backwards, mouth opening as her arms flailed, trying to regain her balance. His boot followed where his hand had been, forcing her to the floor. She hit it hard, barely managing to hold her head high enough that it didn't crack like a melon on the hard stone.

"Why?!!" He voiced the question aloud this time. He raised his other fist, intending to go through with his earlier notion and pummel her until nothing was left but a wet, gory mark. If his heel couldn't do it, his palms were the next best thing. Perhaps he would have gone through with it, perhaps his fist would have been stuck in the air like his other limb had. But he never got the chance to find out.

The next thing he knew, her arm moved and something cracked against his skull. His head twisted
sideways, jarring his neck as his vision seared black. He closed his eyes and stars danced behind his lids, making him dizzy as they spun. It was a blow that would have caved a normal human's head in, but it only disoriented him for a moment. What on earth is in that package? A brick? was his only thought as he cautiously opened his eyes again, the world still spinning around him. He blinked down foolishly at her, seeing double that finally faded back into one fuming, entirely disapproving Draculina.

"Because I refuse to be pushed around by you, that's why," she finally answered. "I won't stand for it anymore. If you want me—"

"I don't. want. you." Her lip trembled, barely enough for him to notice.

"You don't mean that," she argued, but her voice wavered on the edge of a whimper. "You're only saying it because you're mad at me, and you want to hurt me."

"Look into my mind, Police Girl. See if you find any doubt at all." But it was her eyes that met his, rather than her mind delving deep within his own. She searched his face, looking for something with a persistent, imploring gaze. He worked hard to keep his expression stony. Her hand raised, fingers lightly brushing the spot where the present had struck home; the urge to lean into her hand arose, but he steeled himself and instead slapped it away coldly. Her eyes widened in hurt and she faltered, biting her cheek.

He moved to sit up and she leaped forward, arms wrapping around his neck and squeezing hard. He froze despite himself, shocked at the feeling of her tiny body pressed against his, her mind thrumming with something bold and secretive. He succeeded in sitting up but brought her with him, nails biting into his shoulders. He tried to separate them, but she clung like a leech.

"Damnit, Seras, get off!" he snarled, slipping and using her true name. It was only when he paused that she moved, shifting slowly against him. She spoke, her voice solemn in his ear.

"Do you really want me to go?" she whispered. Her nails eased their tight grip, arms relaxing until she was leaning against him rather than clinging for dear life. "I know what you're trying to do," she confessed gently, and one palm began to rub small circles on his back in a motion that was clearly supposed to be comforting. "I won't stop loving you. It's not as easy as that," she continued. "But if you really want me to leave you alone, I'll drink your blood and—" her voice broke, "and we can move on. You'll never have to talk to me again, or even acknowledge that I'm in the house. I'm sure Sir Integra will make a concession for us, since she already knew that we wouldn't last more than a week…" The rest of her sentence turned into soft sobs and she buried her nose into his coat. He felt her tears dampening the fabric, though she tried to muffle the sounds of her crying.

"Why are you fighting this?" he growled, but the bite was gone from his tone. It festered inside, gnawing at his innards instead of being directed towards her. He never did like crying females, wet and snotty and clinging. "Why do you not just go back upstairs and leave me alone like I say, intolerable girl?"

"Because I love you," she answered, voice muffled and barely comprehensible.

"Seras—" He sighed, the sound echoing hollowly in his ears. "I wish that you didn't love me." The words tumbled out of his mouth awkwardly in a rare burst of spontaneous speech. "Your loathing would have been far more acceptable. At least I could have understood it better." He had no answer for her question; he wanted her to leave of her own convictions, rather than have him be the catalyst that finally drove the wedge between their minds forever.

"I know," she half-sobbed, coming up for air enough to speak. Her arms tightened about him again.
"D-don't run away from me," she pleaded. "I'll fight for you for as long as it takes, but I can't if you run from me every time I say it. I don't want you to do this, but… if you feel like you have to, I won't stop you. If being apart is what will make you happiest—" She dissolved into tears again, but pushed away from him, wiping at her eyes and nose with her pajama sleeve. She looked a mess, kneeling on the floor in her baggy outfit with red-rimmed eyes and tears dripping from her chin; it was clear that she hadn't meant to start crying, and was trying her hardest to stop.

"It would break your heart," he noted hollowly. Had he not heard the same before, just days earlier? She nodded.

"Yes, but… if you're just as miserable when we're together, then what's the point?" she pointed out. "Why can't there be an option where we're both happy?" she laughed wetly, blinking a new wave of red tears from her eyes.

"Monsters that walk in the dark have no chance at anything as pure as happiness or love, Police Girl," he responded. Something weighed heavily within his breast, and he almost wanted to have something more to say to her, something less harsh. Something more hopeful than what little he had to offer.

"That's bloody s-stupid," she hiccupped, wiping her nose on the stained sleeve and sniffing. "We should have the same chance as everyone else, if not better." Her shoulders jerked and she blinked rapidly, still trying to stem the flow of tears. He tried to look away from her, to give her a measure of privacy to pull herself together with, but it was impossible to take his eyes off her sorrow. He knew that he was doing this to her, tearing her apart mentally. He didn't mean to do it, but it happened anyway.

A queer thing began to happen; it startled him. The regret came back, but instead of anger fueling the fire burning within his chest, it was… sad. He regretted making her feel this way, even if he couldn't help doing it in the first place. It was his nature to be cruel and merciless; she had never asked for it any more than he did. The thought from earlier entered into his mind again, but this time it wasn't quite as selfish.

I wish that I had never met her… for her sake, if nothing else.

He couldn't shake it; he felt bad. Was this how humans felt when they spoke of useless things such as guilt and remorse? It was a terrible feeling, and he didn't want to feel it any more than he wanted to feel any other strong emotion, but he couldn't make it go away. He could only sit there and watch her deal with her grief. Looking at her, he came to an astounding realization. She ought to hate him to the core; she knew it, and he knew it. But something deep down overrode the hate, burning it away and turning it into heartbreak. Was this… was this what love did to people?

Then, another thought hit him even harder than the lumpy package had. He hadn't been able to kill her the way he'd wanted in that split second before she hit him with the gift, when she taunted his ego; but, the runes on his gloves hadn't been what stopped him. Something else had, taking his anger and turning it into frustration and confusion. Was… did he also—he dug down into his mind, further than he had in a long time, searching for the answer. Surely that couldn't have been love. It hadn't felt anything like what Seras had showed him in her room on the night of the ball. It hadn't been all-consuming or giddy, or even ecstatic and joyous. But it had been there all the same, stopping him from doing what he knew that he would lament later, and… here it was even now, filling him with that unfathomable regret. Damn this girl, he grumbled to himself, unable to sort through his own jumbled thoughts. What's she done to me?

He looked down at the gift still on the ground between them, and his hand moved of its own accord to pick it up. Seras watched him silently, her cheeks glowing red as she allowed her arm, and the stained sleeve, to finally fall to her lap and rest with the other one. The corner was torn
where it had impacted with his skull, and he ran a gloved nail beneath the wrapping and tore it open.

"A—book?" he murmured, fingers resting on the hardback cover. He opened it and saw that the pages were creamy and blank. "What is this, Seras?" he demanded sharply. She shrugged one shoulder, looking down at her hands.

"I—I thought that your other one was getting full," she murmured, pointing behind him. He turned and saw that she was motioning to his memoirs, lying demurely on his cabinet space. He turned back to her, a question in his eyes. "I didn't know what to get you for Christmas, so I thought you might appreciate something that you could actually use, when you finished filling the other one up."

He honestly didn't know what to say. No one had ever given him anything quite like this. As the king, he'd been given castles, servants, entire countries as gifts, but no one had ever spent time thinking of something that he might actually have a need for. No one had cared enough. They had only been paying homage to their ruler, nothing more. Only this girl, with nothing to offer but a blank journal and her love. His fingers tightened on the books spine, trying to think of something that would equal it in his eyes. Jewels, a continent of her own to rule, the beasts of the earth as her handmaids? Somehow, he didn't think she'd appreciate it as much any other flippant vampiress who'd won his favor might have.

He stared down at the journal, shoulders relaxing as he tried to think of something to say that would convey the bewilderment running rampant inside his mind. Her thoughts were mingled with his too as her gates came down, her pain and sorrow clashing with the outpour of devotion that always shone behind her thoughts when he was at the forefront. He knew, or at least he'd been told all his existence, that when one found someone that loved, no matter what you've done in your past or in the present, one was supposed to hold on tight and never let go. He didn't want to let go, but at the same time, he knew that he couldn't hold on forever without any consequences. There was only one thing that he could think of to do….

"Drink my blood, Seras Victoria." She gasped, eyes widening before an agonized look crossed her face. "Drink my blood, and become strong." He reached for her, grabbing her hand as she made to get up. She couldn't run away; she had begged him to stop running, and now she too must stay until his piece was said. "Become strong enough to overpower anyone that would dare stand against you… even if that someone is myself."

"Yourself?" Her hand trembled in his. Such slight fingers, pressing back into his fervently, and yet frightened—not of him, but of what he was saying! He'd always found her a fascinating creature, even if she was infuriating. And she wasn't witless, no matter how much he wished that she were. He could have handled blissful ignorance over the intelligence shining behind her eyes, if only because her intelligence was another weapon to be used against him. She might be airheaded and overly optimistic at times, but she was hardly stupid. His passionate little one, seeking out the good in everything and everyone, even if it didn't exist. Had never existed.

"I am not kind or gentle," he said aloud, voicing his innermost thoughts. "I'll never be anything more than a monster. Anyone in this house can tell you that. I'm cruel and vicious." Her fingers tightened around his until he was sure that beneath the gloves, they were bloodless and white.

"You're cruel and vicious," she echoed, conceding with him without argument. Her head tilted. "But you're also strong, and courageous, and smart." She inched closer to him. "And confident, and you've got loads of conviction, and… and… and you're my master."

"That is precisely why you must drink." He shook his hand free, and she let it go without
complaint. He reached up, brushing back the frizzed bangs from her hair, rubbing away the remnants of her tears. "You must drink and break free, Seras Victoria. It is only when you're truly independent that you can make your choice with a free heart."

"I've made my choice!" she protested, shaking her head. "I chose you! That's why we ma— slept together," she corrected quickly, choking on her words.

"The bond between us clouds our judgment," he continued, ignoring her. She would listen to this, if she listened to anything that he told her. "As long as our minds are bridged so that one can always feel the thoughts of the other, neither of us will know what our own thoughts truly are." She was listening, her mouth going slack as she took in what he was saying. "If you still choose to remain by my side when there is nothing tying you there anymore, then we will discuss further matters. If not..." he felt his lips curl into a hint of a smile. "Well, then we'll know what to do."

"I'm—I'm going to miss the bond, though." She frowned, rubbing her arms. "If I drink the blood, you won't be my master anymore. There's no going back."

"You couldn't go back anyway, my dear. You're well and truly dead." She shook her head. "No, I mean there's no going back to this, where I can hear you and you can hear me, and you can come save me if I need it, or I can come save you if you needed; that sort of thing." He scoffed. "When have I needed saving? And do you not think that I would come to the ends of the earth for you, little weakling?" he chuckled. "I'd hear no end of it from my master, or from the butler, if I were to let you die on my watch. Servant or no servant, you're still partly my responsibility. No matter how many years pass between us after we've separated, no matter what path you decide to take; you are still part of the royal bloodline now. My kingdom is at your disposal, my servants are your servants, and my dwellings are your dwellings. It is the same for every vampire that ever walked the earth and created a Childe."

"Oh." She shifted uncomfortably on the ground. "I'll still miss it though. Seeing what you were thinking from time to time. Talking with you."

"I have no doubt that telepathy will stay one of your powers. Most highborn lineages are capable of it." He glanced up towards the first floor, where he could hear soft talking and the continuation of the radio. "Daylight is wasting, Seras. Go ahead: take hold of your own destiny from here." She gulped, but nodded.

"Yes sir... my master." She moved to kneel before him, staring at his neck tentatively. "Um..." She let her head fall to the side, hands wringing.

"What is it?" he asked, the humor of the situation not missing him as he arched a brow. "You've had your lips on the most intimate parts of my body, yet you're afraid of a simple bite? I'm surprised, Police Girl." She balked, face paling before flushing in mingled embarrassment and anger.

"That's not it!" she snapped, crossing her arms over her chest defensively. "I just—well, you're not making it any easier, leering at me like that!" she complained. "Close your eyes." He smirked, which seemed to fuel her fire. "Alucard!" she snarled, before clapping a hand over her mouth. "I mean master," she amended, voice muffled by her fingers.

"See? You're more than ready to break free and fly away from the nest you once knew, Police Girl. You don't even see fit to call me "master" anymore voluntarily, the way you used to." She only blushed harder, and he sighed before obliging her request to shut his eyes. He felt her hands
yanking away his collar, fingers barely brushing the skin of his throat above his pulse. In spite of everything that had already happened, even with the fighting and shouting, his body still reacted to her touch with a shiver down his spine. He still wanted her, more than he could say. He wasn't even sure if was purely lust anymore.

_Are you ready?_ She whispered into his mind, a soft caress: her farewell.

_I am, my Seras Victoria. Strike true,_ he returned, letting his head fall back to bare his neck. He was ready to release his claim on her; _she_ was ready. It was time. There was a pause, and he was keenly aware of everything around them: the icy stone floor beneath him, her warm breath on his neck, her body pressed against his in what rivaled the most intimate of lovers embraces, the silence that spoke volumes, the soft sounds of four sets of heartbeats upstairs, a rendition of "My Dream Christmas" spilling out from the radio speakers, and then—nothing. He felt the bite, quick as a bullet but with no more pain than an insect sting, and the world faded away into nothing at all. It hit him like a bus, sudden and with a blow that knocked him prostrate, all thoughts flying out of his head in the span of an instant. There wasn't even the buzz of his master's thoughts in his mind, nor Seras's. For a long, exhilarated moment, he rode the natural high that came with freely given blood. It was even stronger than he remembered. He was no longer himself—he simply _was._

He came back to earth slowly, senses taking their time before returning. He had no idea of how much time had passed; it could have been minutes, hours, or even months and he would have neither known nor cared. His hand was tangled in Seras's hair, but other than the weight of his arm he had no way of actually holding her still. His limbs didn't seem to want to work anymore, and if it hadn't been for her arms supporting him, he would have fallen back onto the floor in a melted heap. There was a curious thrumming in his ears that reminded him, oddly enough, of blood rushing. He comprehended that _that_ was what it used to sound like when he could hear his own heartbeat. He'd merely forgotten what it was. His body was twitching spasmodically; he wasn't sure he liked it, but a warm pleasure was brewing in his gut and it relaxed him. He could only lie in the leftover haze from their separation and feel… _carefree_, to be honest. There were no problems in the world that could reach him at the moment; it was almost eerie, but he couldn't be bothered with it.

Seras choked, and that was the sound that made him open one eye. The effort was monumental, but he managed it and blearily regarded her. He wanted to open his mouth and say something to her, perhaps tell an anecdote from his own transformation into true Nosferatu on the executioner's block, but his tongue was heavier than his will to speak. He went to speak into her head, only to find that the bridge between them was vanished, lost in the fog of the moments between consciousness. _Oh yes,_ he thought fuzzily, _that's what we were trying to accomplish, wasn't it?_  

_Seras bent over herself, arms wrapped around her form as she gasped for air, and then her fist slammed into the ground. She seemed to be making the effort to stay on her knees, dropping him as her eyes slid shut._

"N-no," she blabbered, along with a string of muttered nonsense that served no purpose other than to keep her talking. He knew that she had no idea that she was even speaking, her brain and body in overdrive as it made the final changes that would bring her into the realm of something entirely not human, something _so much more._ A stream of blood trickled from her mouth and she coughed, fine droplets of spittle flecking his cheek. He winced, inching his hand along the ground until he was able to put his fingers to the knee closest to him, brushing the skin between her sock and skirt in an effort to appease her fear. _Don't worry. No one's died from this yet, my dear._ Of course she couldn't hear now, but he was growing clearer by the minute. As soon as he could get back on his feet, he'd scoop her up in his arms and keep her safe until the pains and confusion passed.
Then, all at once, it was as though a bomb had exploded in the chamber. A massive surge of power ricocheted off the walls, cracking the foundation and bursting through one of the windows far above them with a shatter of glass. He felt the ground beneath his back rumble, the house rocking above him and the screech of the Cook as what must have felt like an earthquake shake about them all. Black shadows seared his body and clothing without truly burning them; he arched into the power, feeling it dance across his skin, through his pores, prolonging the post climax-esque euphoria that had him in its delicate grasp.

Amazing… fascinating, truly fascinating… he watched the shadows dance against the beams of his ceiling, cutting through the light and dust as they sought escape where there was none. I knew you were something to behold.

Integra hated losing. It was something that had been ingrained into her even before she could speak; one might have even said that genetics played a part, the iron will of her ancestors boiling her blood. Hellsings never lose, but if they did, they'd lose with grace. It was one of her father's favorite quotes, as well as Walter's.

Even if she did lose, there couldn't have been anything worse than losing at chess. It had always been one of her favorite games, something to occupy the boring afternoon hours when she was young and had no pressing matters to handle like she did these days. To lose at fencing, or at other physical sports, meant that the body was not properly trained. That there was someone out there that was faster, stronger, better than you; there was someone to work towards, to strive to beat. But losing at chess? Chess was a game of the mind, of strategy and planning. To lose at chess meant that one's opponent was far more tactical and, perhaps, intelligent by comparison.

As a child, her father had always bested her in what he referred to as 'practice games'. For since we're both Hellsings, we'd be stuck in a limbo of chess if this was a real game, Integra. After all, neither of us could lose, he'd say with a laugh as he set up the used those games to teach her different tactics, his patient hands guiding the pawns into position as he explained the rules over and over until she understood them as easily as if she'd known them all her life. He'd smile as he took her pieces and cornered her on the board, but it was always 'practice'. Her first technical victory, at the ripe age of nine, had been a triumphant spectacle—practice or not.

Her next hurdle was Walter, who was far more patient than her father. He would take his time setting up the perfect traps and moving his army across the board, but he was predictable in his movements. It only took a few years before she was able to beat him as well. And after that she went up against the infallible strategies of Sir Penwood who, she later learned, had never lost once against her father in their 'practice games'. But she eventually managed to best him, too.

Losing to them—in technicality, though no one ever really called it that—had been a natural part of growing up, learning, and bettering herself. When she thought of it that way, it was almost bearable. Almost. But losing to the man that sat so smugly across from her now? It was unacceptable, no matter which way she considered it. She had apparently married some sort of veritable physic, or else her own strategies were as transparent as the flimsy curtains that hung in the ballroom. Every time he foiled her plan of attack, she grew all the more irritated—not a good mindset to be in when playing a game that involved high levels of calm thought.

Perhaps he was only doing it to irritate her; she wouldn't put such a dirty tactic against him. Still, she refused to let him see how flustered she really was. She had an excellent poker face, the very picture of stoicism, and she was fighting with everything she had to keep it in place. She stared at the board until it swam before her eyes, foot tapping the soft carpet of the library as she thought about her next move. To leave her queen open for attack would be dangerous, but the other move
she could make had the possibility of him taking her last knight, which would prove catastrophic
later on. Still, would he take the knight if she did move with the intention of using it as a
distraction, or would he see past the bait and go after her queen anyway? Or would he still take the
knight, even while seeing through her plan? She resisted the urge to run her hands through her
bangs in frustration, settling on wetting her lips as her hand twitched subtly.

_Damnit… damnit, damnit, damnit!_ Was there any way to win at all!? She took a soft breath, urging
her heart to slow. Surely she was overthinking something. _Surely_ there had to be some move that
she wasn't seeing straight off; one that could save both her knight and the queen. She bit the inside
of her cheek and tilted her head the other direction, as if that would throw the board into a new
perspective. Her train of thought was broken when a throat cleared and she sighed, looking up with
a frown.

"Are ye planning to make a move before new year's, or can I go get more coffee?" he taunted,
fingers drumming an impatient tempo on the side of the table. She glared at him.

"Patience," she snapped, looking back down at the board. "You shouldn't have joined me if you
weren't willing to let me think about my moves," she admonished as her hand hovered above the
board before falling back to the table. "Besides, I didn't complain when you took ten minutes
deciding the fate of your rook earlier."

"Ten minutes!" he laughed ostentatiously, leaning back in his chair. "Ten minutes nothin'!"

"It was ten minutes," she argued pointedly. "I can tell time, you know." She pointed to her watch.
He scoffed, shaking his head.

"Move, woman," he ordered, motioning to the board. "Yer only delaying the inevitable. I'll take yer
surrender, though, if ye like."

"I will win this," she muttered, more to herself than him. She leaned further over the table, brow
furrowing as she thought. It really was down to the knight, or the queen. Perhaps she should go
ahead and give her poor knight a proper sendoff, considering it was about to be thrown away for
the sake of saving her better piece. If only—"Alex, would you stop shaking the table?!!" she
complained, looking up to see that he… wasn't shaking the table anymore. In fact, his arms were
crossed, so there was no way he could have been thumping it. But here the pieces were moving all
the same, vibrating along with the board. "What on earth?"

There was a loud rattling behind her and she turned to see the window panes shaking in the wooden
frame. The books on the shelves were affected too, the looser ones falling to the ground with
thumps and bouncing on the carpet. Her chair began to vibrate as the chess pieces danced wildly,
falling all over the place. Her king landed in her lap before rolling to the ground and she stood, legs
jelly beneath her as she tried to get her balance. Anderson jumped up with wide eyes and in the
same moment her heart leapt with a surge of power that spread throughout her body in an electric
current, feeling as though it ran through the manor as well. The floor swayed beneath her, the walls
groaned and shook, and she felt a panic at the thought that the house might just collapse under the
weight pushing it.

This sort of power… she usually only felt it when she authorized the release of Alucard's control art
restrictions. _Alucard, what's going on!?_ she shouted angrily, only to find with alarm that his mind
wasn't responsive. What on earth was happening? There was a loud screech of terror, which she
recognized as Cook. She moved towards the door, but Anderson easily overtook her. She knew
he'd be heading to the same place as she was—the foyer—and didn't bother to waste time calling
after him. She only hurried, determined to catch up to him before he could storm the basement and
potentially make matters worse. _I hope that Walter's already there to hold him up, if he can._
She made it to the foyer faster than she thought she could with the house rocking around her and saw that Walter was in fact there, and trying to stop Anderson from going down the stairs into the basement. Cook was there too, but out of the entire party she was the only one acting somewhat sensibly.

"I hate earthquakes!" she bemoaned to no one in particular, her flabby arm wrapped around an enormous (and expensive) vase and holding it upright as she kneeled on the ground. She reached out her leg and caught a glass knickknack expertly with the edge of her skirts as it rattled off the sideboard. The mirrors above her head were jittering on the wall, but seemed to be in no danger of falling. "Like we didn't have enough of this nonsense during the Blitz!" she added, her other leg coming out from under her. She slid to the ground, cheek pressed against the vase protectively as she tried desperately to smooth her hair with her other hand.

"Calm down, Gabby!" Walter shouted over to her, though she sounded more levelheaded than he at the moment. "It'll be over soon enough!" He squared his shoulders—or tried to—and pressed himself against the stairs of the basement. "Now, Paladin Anderson, I daresay I can handle whatever's going on; we don't even know that it is Alucard, or—Sir Integra!" he huffed in exasperation, staring at her as though she were an archangel come directly from Heaven to help him. "I can handle this," he repeated, half to her and half to Anderson. Integra began to walk towards them both, but the largest surge yet seemed to throw everyone backwards at the same time, and then as quickly as it began the chaos had ceased.

There was a long period of deafening silence. Cook blinked around rapidly, her ample chest heaving as she slowly unstuck herself from the vase and stood, dusting off her apron after replacing the glass knickknack. Walter clutched at the basement railing, still staring at Integra, who stared at Anderson, who hadn't taken his eyes off the basement door the entire time. Integra took a deep breath, striding across the foyer with all the false confidence that she could muster.

"That had to have been something Alucard was doing," she said to Walter. "It was out of nowhere. Surely a bombing or earthquake would have had some sort of warning before it. Of course, if we feel aftershocks, we'll know what happened," she added with forced nonchalance. "Still, Walter, go down to the basement and check on them. We should at least make sure nothing's caved in."

"Yes ma'am." Walter bowed, looked quickly at Anderson, and then turned on his heel and bounded down the stairs as best an old man could. Integra watched him until he was past the basement door and lost to the darkness within, grabbing the edge of Anderson's sleeve when he made to follow.

"You calm down," she ordered firmly. "Walter can handle it."

"Tha's no earthquake, ye know it," he growled. Fiery green eyes met hers defiantly.

"Walter can handle it," she repeated obstinately. She glanced quickly at Cook before stepping closer. "You've already had a shot at him today; let it alone." He made a sound of disgust and looked away, yanking his sleeve from her loose grasp. His eyes returned to the basement door, but he made no more efforts to go down the stairs. Seeing that it was a useless endeavor to get him calm, Integra turned her attention to the matriarchal head of the servants. Cook inched closer to the basement stairs, looking like a turtle peering from its shell as she tried to see over the railing without getting too close. After a moment she tutted, still patting her hair back into place.

"I hope everything's okay down there…" she said. "We used to get this time and again back in the day." Integra wasn't sure if she was referring to a troublemaking Alucard, or if she was still on about the Blitz. "But then again, Walter and I; we were both younger. It's hard to be startled like that when you're old and gray," she admitted with a frown, hand on her heart. "What a noise, what a mess." She clucked and shook her head, turning and walking in the direction of the kitchen. "Hope
me turkey wasn't caught up in all that."

She tried again to get Alucard to answer, to no avail. Something strange was blocking it, but what could it be? After a moment of hard thought, she realized that it wasn't that she couldn't reach it, but that was just there already. Usually he had so many mental barriers up that it was almost impossible not to feel them. They were all gone, now! This new awareness alarmed her much more than any display of power could've. Alucard, I demand that you tell me what's happened! Still no answer, but there was a spark of awareness that meant he'd heard her, at least. She shuddered; his mind was almost free-floating, content and untroubled. It was almost—she cringed to even think about it—an afterglow. Either he'd been... busy, or he'd finally snapped and had gone entirely insane.

She waited for Walter to return with growing anxiety. When she finally heard his rapid footfalls on the stairs, she let out a breath she hadn't even known she was holding. He climbed the stairs more slowly than he'd gone down, no doubt worn out and with fading adrenaline. Still, when he looked up at her she could see the distress written across his brow.

"What is it, Walter? What's happened?" she asked him quietly, fearing the worst. Something had happened to the runes, something had failed and Alucard was free, or even worse—something had happened to incapacitate him and now they were all in danger. Walter paused on the top of the stairs, hand clutching the railing as he caught his breath. She waited with growing impatience as he pulled a handkerchief from his pocket to wipe the sweat beading on his forehead.

"It's Miss Victoria, ma'am," he finally managed to say. Her heart skipped a beat as the possibilities tumbled through her mind. He's killed her, he's maimed her beyond repair, he's driven her insane somehow... poor girl, what could he have done to her? I should have kept a closer watch on her, kept her near me instead of allowing her back into the basement with him, knowing what he is and what he'd do....

"What's happened?" She was almost afraid to hear. Walter fumbled with the handkerchief as he searched for his words.

"Well, you see—she's—the fact of the matter is—"

"Out with it!" This outburst was from Anderson, who had already reached the end of his proverbial rope sometime before. Walter scowled at the lack of tact, but didn't openly comment on it.

"Miss Victoria has... well, she has taken Alucard's blood of her own choosing. She's no longer his servant, according to her. That earthquake was caused by her, it seems, though she didn't mean it. She seemed rather surprised at herself, but there also seemed to be no further danger," he explained. Anderson's eyes narrowed and he frowned darkly, crossing his arms. Integra felt a welcome sense of relief; what she had imagined equaled out to be much worse than the truth.

"And what then?" she asked. "Agent Victoria is alright, isn't she?" Walter nodded.

"No worse for wear, I believe. Only a little shaken, but still in one piece."

"And Alucard?" she inquired next. Walter gave a sly smile, passing a hand over his mouth in an effort to quell his expression.

"He's found himself rather enervated by the lack of blood, but I believe he'll be fine as well. I've been told that giving blood to a vampire is quite the experience," he chuckled. "Someone long ago said that to me, but I never believed it until now. It does seem to be quite the experience indeed." From the state of Alucard's mind, she was sure that she didn't want to know the particulars.
"Well, I suppose that it's all settled for the evening." Both Walter and Anderson both looked at her as though she were insane. "What now?"

"Tha's it then?" Anderson asked in disbelief.

"Oh," she clicked her tongue in exasperation at her underground tenants, "For once I'm inclined to just let them sort it out for themselves. They're both grown adults, even if they don't act like it at times. I believe Agent Victoria to be both fully competent and in control of herself. Until she proves otherwise, there's no reason that everything can't go on as it was before. Don't you agree, Walter?"

"Ah, erm…" Surprised at being put on the spot, the butler paused for a moment. "As you like, Sir Integra," he replied neutrally. "With your permission, I will fetch Alucard a second ration to help him get back on his feet."

"That's fine. You're excused, Walter." He bowed and then hurried off in the direction of the kitchen, and its specialized freezer full of blood. She had no doubt that he would also retell the turn of events to Cook, and they would voice their opinions about it over the hearth to each other, even if they kept it secret from the rest of the house. "I can't even get a peaceful day on the holidays, can I?" she muttered, rubbing a tense muscle in her neck. "This place is a madhouse."

"Aye, and yer turning as mad as the rest." Anderson was still eyeing the basement; from the way he was working his jaw, she figured he was grinding his back teeth together as he thought.

"Seras is not half as bad as Alucard. There's no reason to restrict her powers."

"She's a monster, same as him." Integra shook her head wearily.

"Not exactly… she's not human," she added quickly, seeing the baleful way he glared at her. "But she's also not Alucard."

"Not yet. But she will be." He shifted his weight from one foot to the other. "The way ye speak, ye take pity on her. Tha's dangerous thinking."

"I do pity her, for what she has to put up with," Integra countered. "But don't dare stand there and think that I wouldn't have her killed if she threatened my men." She had very nearly had to make that choice, hadn't she? Only a moment's hesitation spelled out the difference between punishment and a death sentence. "I make allowances for her only because killing her thoughtlessly would send Alucard on a rampage that would cost me more than it does to keep her under my roof."

"I don' like this," he said after a moment's thought. "I just don'. It was bad enough with one under my feet all the time, but two?" He seemed to be talking more to himself than her, his fists clenching and unclenching nervously. "It's just not right." She could almost feel the restlessness radiating from him.

"Just ignore them. I've got it under control. Now, shall we go back and try to actually finish a game this time?" He made no move that he heard her, but his expression was morphing from angry to pensive. He was still thinking hard about what to do, his fingers twitching as though unconsciously summoning blades from his sleeves. She cleared her throat. "Alexander!" He blinked rapidly, eyeing her with more caution as he came back to earth.

"Wha' now?" She turned and motioned for him to follow her, heading for a separate corridor from the one that Walter and Cook had both taken.
"Come along. I've got an idea."

"Yer jokin'." Integra ignored him, still working with the numerous switches on the light panel until the florescent bulbs lighting the room were neither too bright nor too dim. "I know I called ye mad, but ye weren't to take it to heart." She finally turned to look him over, standing in the middle of the room with his hands hanging limply at his sides. On a normal night, the space of the sizeable Combat Room #3 would be filled wall to padded wall with soldiers; they spent hours training in hand to hand combat or exercising in groups in order to hone their bodies to the fullest potential. Once a week they practiced weaponry in the room as well. But since they were excused on their winter holiday, the only part of them still in the room was the faint underlying odor of male sweat and a sense of perseverance.

"I'm entirely serious." She walked past him to the door, shutting it with a deft clang before picking up her sword from where it leaned against the wall. Its familiar weight was a comfort in her hand. She shook back her hair, getting into position before nodding at him. "Alright, I want you to come at me with everything you've got." She allowed a smirk to pass across her face. "Don't kill me, of course, but you're more than welcome to nick me a time or two. I need the practice." He didn't reply, only staring at her as though she'd grown a second head. Finally he made an uncomfortable expression and shook his head.

"Are ye absolutely sure ye know what yer askin'?" he asked uncertainly, crossing his arms. "I could easily cut yer head off." She chuckled.

"I trust you to live above Sir Iron's expectations," she replied. "Besides, I need someone aside from Walter to practice with. He goes easy on me, and that's something I just don't like. I want an actual challenge. I can handle it," she assured him when he still hesitated. "Don't worry. It's not as though I could kill you."

"But I can kill ye, tha's the problem."

"Well then, I must ask you to please restrain yourself if you get the urge," she said with a smile. "Now, quit dallying and let's have at it."

"Let's have at it?" he repeated with a laugh, but summoned a blade from his sleeve and twirled it absently between his fingers before bending his knees. "Alright then, if ye really want a decent battle, I'll give one." She barely had time to react before he was in her face, blade swinging down as though he meant to slice her arm from her body.

She acted on instinct, falling to the side and twisting lithely out of the sharp blade's path before she could even think. She heard the scratchy rending of cloth and spared half a glance to see that the padding on the wall had taken the brunt of the blow, foam and white fluff spilling from the sliced covering. Anderson didn't pause, twisting the blade from the padding and spinning it between his fingers in order to slash at her, his foot sliding across the ground to maintain his balance as he leaned.

A bit of tricky footwork had her dodging this blow as well as the three that came in quick succession afterwards. Her heel slid with a squeak as she tried to evade the next swing, forcing her to parry as she regained her footing. This gave him an opening and she remained on the defensive for the next five minutes, until she was able to maintain a safe distance from him. She was ready the next time he swung, ducking beneath the blow and thrusting the point of her own blade towards his midsection. He blocked it effectively, taking a step back and letting out a low, impressed whistle. He kept away for a moment, head tilting from side to side as he cracked his neck.
"Stop going easy on me," she complained when he was done, though she had to work hard to hide the fact that she was starting to get short of breath. *I haven't practiced enough lately; I should have been able to last longer than this.* This was the exact reason why she hated Walter taking it easy on her, preferring her to work on form rather than practical toe to toe sparring. When it came down to it, she needed the physical stamina to last through an entire battle as well as swordsmanship skills. "You're barely making this a challenge; I haven't even broken a sweat," she taunted.

"Arrogant," he muttered under his breath, flicking his wrist and summoning a blade for his other hand. She only smirked in reply, eyes carefully cataloguing his every move. She saw him crouch a split-second before he blurred from existence and swung her sword straight up, dodging to the right. Despite this first small victory, punctuated by the ringing of metal against metal, it was much harder for her to keep track of both blades at once. It didn't help her pride to know that he was going slower than he would have against any other opponent, for her sake. If he fought at his full power, she'd have faced overwhelming defeat.

It grew more difficult for her to block every blow, her feet unable to keep up with the constant movement. Then, a bolt of pain—not worth anything more than a surprised gasp, but still pain nonetheless. Instinctively looking for the source, she saw a neat tear in her shirt and a fine red line running close to the tender skin where her neck met her shoulder. It seemed to be a small nick that had only broken the skin, but blood still beaded on the surface. She frowned at it, wiping it away with her thumb and licking it clean, not wanting to stain her clothes by wiping it on her pants.

"Is this better?" he called out, arching a brow as he let her inspect her new wound. "Or do ye still need something more?" She fought back a sharp-tongued retort, but her own haughtiness got the better of her and it slipped out anyway.

"Better, but you're still not meeting my expectations," she replied with a mocking laugh. "Perhaps I should just lower them, for your sake." There was a flash as the steel caught the overhead lights and she was against the wall, a blade no more than an ear's width from her skull. She twisted and felt the pull of hair as some of hers was sliced by the sharp edge, but before she could move away she was boxed in. Self-preservation kicked in and she swung a punch, fully expecting it to break her knuckles rather than cause real damage. But she was surprised; she heard a grunt and then she was free, ducking away and out towards the center of the room as she shook the sting out of her fingers. To be cornered against the wall was not a good position if you were aiming to win.

Finally looking back, she saw the last part of his stumble before he got his feet back under him. She gave herself a mental pat on the back for catching him off guard, watching him rub his chin with malicious, Alucard-esque delight. *That shows you.* He worked his jaw and then glared at her, eyes narrowed.

"So tha's the fight ye want," he growled. She raised her sword and stepped back into position.

"We're not in tournament, so I don't see any reason to—" The rest of her sentence was lost as she nearly bit her tongue in two, her feet suddenly above her instead of where they should have been as he swept them out from under her. Knowing what was coming a split-second before it came hurt far worse than the actual landing, which knocked the breath out of her and made her uncomfortably aware of her spinal cord. A boot landed just beneath her breasts, pressing gently into her diaphragm and she found herself in the same position her vampiric servant was earlier, a bayonet pointed two inches from her nose.

Coughing, she blinked up at him. The return of some of her haughtiness, playing in a smug grin on her opponent's face, made her blood boil. Her empty fist clenching, she swung her sword up; it wasn't with full power, but she still meant to stab him hard enough to get the point across. He
parried it easily, without moving any of his weight off the boot pressing her into the hard floor, the matting doing nothing to soften the concrete beneath. His grin widened, as though pleased to see her trapped so beneath him, and it only made her all the angrier.

Thankfully, she was limber and he would regenerate; she didn't have to worry about hurting him as she would Walter, or another human. She tossed her sword aside and swung her leg up, pushing her shoulders further into the ground as she pulled a move Lt. Walsh had shown her when she was a young girl. He twisted to the side, thinking that she was aiming for his crotch; it worked for her as his foot's pressure gave way, giving her time to roll and throw her full weight against the leg holding her down. She heard the satisfying crunch of bone as his center of gravity became upset and he finished the move for her, as well as a grunt of pain. He fell back, his leg sticking at an odd angle above his knee; she looked at it for a moment before getting to her feet, looking around for her sword.

He struggled into a seated position, examine his leg before taking both hands and snapping it back into place with a low hiss. A moment later, he flexed it and stood, as whole as before. She saw her sword, cursing her luck; when she rolled, she'd unthinkingly put him between her and her trusted blade. Looking around furtively, she saw that neither one of his bayonets were any nearer to her than her sword. She gathered her strength and pushed off from the mat, making a beeline for it and hoping that she could dodge him if he tried to catch her.

He caught her around the middle and threw her back; she felt from the force alone that he hadn't checked himself, and that it was going to hurt far worse than just having her legs knocked out from beneath her. She heard his shocked intake of breath as she hit the mat with her left hip, the sensation shooting up through her body like a bolt of lightning and an irrepressible shout of surprise and pain escaping her lips. She rolled twice and finally stopped on her back, the world spinning around her and her glasses biting into her nose as they sat crookedly on her face. Her eyes slid closed until the room decided to stop whirling, feeling her stomach protest. Her body throbbed, the pain centered in her hip, and she knew that it had bruised the bone at least. Oh damnit, she thought irritably, more angry with herself for being caught than with him for throwing her so hard. She felt Alucard's mind brush hers inquisitively, having realized that she was in more pain than any normal circumstance would provide; she shooed him away lest he decide to come up and pick a fight with Anderson simply on the grounds that he'd hurt her, no matter how unintentionally.

She was half aware of him running over, sliding to a stop beside her and, though not seeing it, she could feel his hands hovering above her as he tried to figure out what to do. She blearily opened one eye, checking to make sure everything in the room was properly stationary before opening both. She managed to pick her right arm up and adjust her glasses, but lay on the ground until she could gather the strength to pick the rest of herself up. She finally looked over to see that her previously stalwart opponent was now paler than Seras, looking at her as though she were lying on her deathbed rather than momentarily stunned.

"Are ye alright?" he sputtered when he saw her looking at him, leaning forward. "I told ye somethin' like this would happen!" he scolded, though his tone was guilt-ridden. "I told ye tha' ye'd get hurt! Is anything broken? Can ye feel yer legs?"

"All too well," she croaked, clearing her throat and trying to sit up. The room tilted and she promptly lay back again, not wanting to risk it. "Quit staring at me like that; I'm not dying, for God's sake. Just give me a moment and I'll be back on my feet."

"It was yer hip, aye?" His hands firmly felt the injured bone, checking to make sure everything was really alright. She bit her lip when he hit home and a jolt of pain ran down to her ankle and back again, smacking his hand away. "There?"
"Obviously," she hissed, forcing her knee up until her foot was flat on the ground. "Nothing's broken, just bruised. I told you, I can handle it," she insisted, pulling herself up when the ache ebbed. Her entire body protested, and she knew that she'd hate herself tomorrow, but she forced the last lingering remnants of pain back and climbed to her feet. "I know that you didn't mean to do it," she said, dusting herself off. The awkwardness of the confession hung in the air and she turned away, adjusting her shirt and tucking part of the hem back into her pants.

"But it happened anyway," he responded, albeit gently. "I knew the minute I threw ye I'd been too rough." She pushed her hair over her shoulders, turning to him with an air of confidence that was more for show and steadfastly ignoring the protesting ache in her hip at the quick action.

"Didn't I tell you once that I liked being rough?" she asked him, hiding the teasing remark behind a serious bravado. He huffed, face reddening even as his lips tightened disapprovingly. "Come on, let's start again."

"Again?!" Censure gave way to disbelief. "I don' think so!" She didn't answer, walking away from him. "What are ye even doing all this for?" he complained as she bent down and picked up her sword in one smooth movement.

"Because I want to," she replied easily, picking up one of his bayonets as well and tossing it to him. He caught it deftly, but didn't seem happy to see it. "Because we both need to expend some energy," she added. "Face it, Alex. Neither one of us are used to spending a full day doing nothing in particular."

"No," he agreed slowly, "but ye'll kill yerself, or I kill ye, if we keep at it." He was saved an argument as the intercom crackled with static before echoing through the room, as well as the house.

"Sir Integra," Walter's voice whistled over the line. "The Penwoods are on the phone, with the Madame in ecstasies over the new garden fountain that was delivered this morning. I suppose you ought to hear her gratitude out," he said rather hesitantly, as if wondering if it was even necessary at all. She let out a heartfelt sigh, but without the usual impatience that accompanied her innate reaction to her godparents.

"Thank you, Walter. I'll see to it," she promised, and the intercom crackled once more before silencing. She looked back at her unwilling sparring partner, arching a brow before shrugging. "I suppose I'm not dying today, it seems," she said mockingly. He scowled back at her.

"I hope she talks yer ear off," he swore. "Ye—" Not knowing exactly what to call her, he lapsed into a fretful silence that ended in a sound of disgust. She laughed, sword hanging loosely from her hand.

"At times like this, you ought to remember that you made me the offer of marriage," she noted wryly as she walked past him, head held high.

"And I regret it!" he yelled after her, but there was no bite of honesty in his voice. She stopped at the doorway, regarding him coolly.

"Well, you're always welcome to murder me, you know. 'Till death do us part'," she quoted. "Then again, I wonder how you'd feel, proving so many of my brainless, Protestant colleagues right." The remark seemed to hit a bullseye and his expression twisted in real anger. She turned to walk through the door and there was a loud, reverberating thud; a bayonet quivered in the doorframe, close enough to brush the edge of her nose. It was too quick for her to even flinch, and she stared at it with wide eyes for a moment before turning back to him. He was obviously waiting for some
smart remark, and for once she hated to disappoint. Tapping the steel with her knuckles, she smiled challengingly.

"You might want to work on your aim, love," she sneered, tacking on the false pet name just for spite. Without waiting for a reaction, she spun on her heel and strode confidentially from the room, heading to her office. Her hip let out another feeble protest, but she ignored it as easily as she might a bumped elbow or scraped knee. Now that the… festivities were over, she decided that she ought to go on into her office and get some unofficial 'work' done. Walter couldn't really fight with her over decorum, and there were still thank-you notes to address from the gala and all the Round Table families she sent presents to would be calling later on to thank her personally.

Everyone except the Irons', of course, but the more she could defer *that* conversation, the better off she would be.

"And are you well now, Agent Victoria?" Integra didn't have to turn to know that the blonde vampire was the one padding so quietly into the sitting room. Walter or Cook both would have greeted her as they entered; the silence was both poignant and telling. "You can come here, you know. I'm not angry," she added, a little embarrassed at feeling like a mother speaking to a fearful child afraid of having done some wrong, however erroneously. She resolved not to let it show on her face as she turned in her chair to see the younger woman standing sheepishly by the door, rubbing one arm. Her eyes were a deeper scarlet, shimmering with crystalline depth, but otherwise she seemed unchanged despite the morning's events.

"I—er, well—" A deep blush, more pronounced than she'd seen in a long time, fell across Seras's cheeks. She fidgeted, eyes flitting around the room as she inched her way further in. "I just came to give you… this." She twisted her wrist and produced a small package. "Happy Christmas."

"Oh, thank you," she replied, somewhat taken back. None of the soldiers bothered to give her gifts, and even though she had given Seras something more than the usual extra vacation time that was part of the Christmas bonus, she'd also done it more out of sympathy for the poor girl; she knew how difficult it was to put up with that vampire all the time, and was infinitely grateful that Seras coming to live at Hellsing had taken so much of Alucard's time that he didn't bother her as much anymore. She actually finished work with the blonde around to keep the male vampire out of her hair.

"It's nothing… I just thought you could use them," Seras mumbled, tugging at the hem of her pajamas. For some reason, she was still wearing them, even upstairs—well, at least she'd changed from the ones that had been cut open by bayonets. Integra opened the clumsily wrapped box to find cufflinks lying demurely against some wrapping paper stuffed into the bottom. They weren't the highest quality, but then again it was the thought that mattered, not the price. And they were stylish; she could see herself using them.

"Thank you, Agent Victoria," she repeated in a warmer tone. "It's a very thoughtful gift. I suppose Walter's already told you about the reservation?" Seras blushed even harder, but nodded.

"Yes, I don't know what to say," she sputtered with a mix of genuine bewilderment and gratitude. "I don't even know how you knew that's the spa I wanted to—thank you," she cut herself off, biting her lip. "It's one of the nicest Christmas gifts I've ever gotten from anyone."

"It pays to have a mental connection with Alucard at times," she admitted. "You mentioned to him in Liverpool, and somehow it ended up added to the memories he gave of your little street investigations. I took the liberty, as it were, to arrange things, considering that you would most likely still enjoy going." She looked at her watch. "Are you going to listen to the Queen with us,
Seras?" she asked, defaulting to her informal name for what appeared to be an informal occasion, pajamas and all.

"Oh, um… Well, I think I'll listen from downstairs," she replied hastily. "I wouldn't want to get in the way and I'm not really dressed for—" Without another word, she turned incorporeal and slipped through the carpet. Integra blinked in surprise and Seras was back in the time it took for her eyelids to open, her entire upper body a bright shade of crimson in her mortification. "I didn't mean to do that!" she squeaked. "I—I'll just go now," she whimpered, covering her face with one hand and scampering for the door. She didn't notice Walter, running right through him and causing the old man to shiver violently for a moment.

"It seems Miss Victoria still has some adjusting to do," he said weakly, taking the seat nearest the fire instead of his usual armchair. "That was quite a chill."

"She slipped quite literally through the floorboards a moment ago," Integra added with a chuckle. "She's got more than 'some'. I suppose that is quite the change, though."

"I'm sure it's hard on her, being stronger than she's used to. I wonder how much of Alucard's prowess will have rubbed off on her?" he mused, hand rubbing his chin. "We can, of course, rule out those powers given… unnaturally," he faltered, trying to find a proper word and falling short. "I suppose common vampiric ability will have to suffice for her."

"I don't plan on doing any occult experiments on her anytime soon, if that's what you're asking me," she teased. "As long as she's strong enough to hold her own against Alucard, that's all that matters to me. It gets tiring, having to step between them all the time."

"A good deal of that might vanish, now that he has no control over her as her master."

"I think I can safely say that as long as they both live in this house with free wills of their own, they'll clash." Integra shook her head. "They're opposites in so many ways. It's so odd… I'd never have expected him to actually make another vampire, much less someone like her. I just don't get it. Was it some sort of inconceivable joke on his part?"

"I'm as in the dark about it as you, Sir Integra." Walter matched her expression, his own head bobbing as he spoke. "I can't, for the life of me, figure out why he felt the need to. But I'm daily glad that he did. I am quite fond of the girl," he said with a soft smile. "Perhaps, in some strange way, he knew that he needed someone like her. She keeps him grounded, and—if I may be so bold to dare say—I think she keeps forcing a bit of humanity back into him every time they cross swords. He'd never admit to it, and I don't think it does a bit of good in the end, but you can't say she isn't trying."

"Who isn't trying?" Cook waddled in, looking at the pair of them questioningly. "Are you cold, Walter?" she asked. "You aren't going to sit in the chair?"

"Not today, Gabby. I feel winter in my bones," he joked as she slid next to him on the loveseat, taking up the rest of the cushion and some of her bulk spilling onto the arm. She didn't seem to notice, cozying up to both him and the fire before turning to Integra.

"I hope you've got a stomach for this evening, dearie. I've outdone myself this year, I do believe!" she said cheerfully. "Oh, and while I'm on it, thank you for the new pans. They're ever so lovely. Did you see them, Walter?"

"I saw them before they were wrapped up," he admitted. "I thought they were very fine."
"They're imported," Cook said reverently, hands in her lap as she nodded with importance. "Said so right on the box. 'Imported from Germany'." She laughed. "I'd never of imagined meself owning German pots and pans, but then again they're too fine to send back!" She hooted again as if she'd made a fine joke, shoulders shaking. After she quieted, she tilted her head with a small frown, still looking at Integra. "I've been thinking a lot of those times today, what with the shaking and all." Walter crossed one knee over the other, his bones cracking.

"Yes, I'm glad to have missed most of that. Worrying over the things in this house would have driven me mad," he confessed. "I was far better as a solider on the front lines than a butler in an air raid."

"Well, I remember them quite well." Cook settled further into the chair, her chin sinking down to the first folds of fat on her neck. "I remember when the master brought those vases in, to tell true. There were two of them at the time," she told Integra, who was surprised on her part to hear a story that she hadn't heard before.

"Two? Just alike?" she asked, and Cook nodded.

"Aye, so it was. The sirens were going, and I was just about to run to the basement—I was alone at the time, though I can't say why that was now—" She trailed off pensively, then shook her head. "Anyway, I was just passing over that middle square in the foyer, the one what looks like it's twisted a bit, and here comes the master through the front door, running like the Devil himself is on his heels and carrying one of them vases under each arm. And his hair was a mess, eyes bloodshot from lack of sleep, and he shouts to me, he says, "Come along, Gabriella! Can't get down the steps with this bloomin' fern holders, can I?" Only he said it with a lot more cursing, and louder on account of the sirens."

"I can see him doing the very thing," Walter sighed, shaking his head. "Surprised he wasn't trying to juggle two vases and a flask."

"Well, the flask was inside one of the vases, but I didn't know that until later," Cook explained. "I didn't know what to do, them vases was so big, but I grabbed the one out of his right hand and found it was light enough to carry easy enough, and I hated for it to be busted in the raid, so here I go down to the basement with this vase in both hands and in a half-squat at that, to keep it from bumping the sides of the wall, you see," she said, holding her arms out in a large circle in front of her for emphasis.

"And the master is pushing me with his foot, yelling at me to hurry it up before we both get our brains bashed out by the foundation, and when we make it to the labs he sits the vase down and—what do you know? The door slams back when one of the bombs goes off above us and knocks the thing down. It shatters right then and there, and now I'm afraid to let me own vase go, so I stood there like a downright fool and held it until it was time to carry back up the stairs again!" She ended her tale with another cackle of laughter, which was picked up by Walter as he no doubt imagined the younger Cook holding the vase.

"But where did Father get the vases?" Integra asked.

"Oh, he'd won 'em off some poor man in a card game. "The blighter didn't have any money left, so he told me to take his bloody vases. Since there's only one now, I guess we'll put it where the coat rack used to be," she huffed in a gravely imitation of what Integra recognized as her father. "The coat rack was gone because he'd used it that summer when fighting against Mr. Walsh… well, he's Lt. Walsh now, but at the time his father was still in office. It snapped clean in half and left nothing but two relatively good sized wooden stakes, which he then threatened that vampire with. I think we ultimately used it as kindling on Bonfire Night, didn't we?"
"I don't doubt it," Walter replied. "Those were some very interesting times."

"It sounds as though life were just one big party," Integra concluded dryly.

"I hate to say it, but most people are right when they call your father a wild man. He only sobered up when your mother came around, and stayed sober for your sake." Walter scratched his chin. "But he was a good man, if not a gentleman." He caught Integra's expression and smiled. "I told you how the prim and proper Lady Katherine knocked him unconscious."

"She did!" Cook confirmed with wide eyes. "Just one hit to the chin and he was flat on his back!" She shook her head, tsking. "I never did see such an angry woman before, or since. But the master did deserve it, talking so about her." Her concern turned into a giggle. "She stomped out the door in those heels and I think, in that moment, even Mrs. Irons was frightened of her. She wasn't Mrs. Irons though, was she? She was… oh, I forget her maiden name now." She looked through Integra, seeing something the other two in the room could not, and smiled widely. "Still, wasn't it something to see that young lady throw such a punch?"

Chapter End Notes

Afterword: I know Christmas was supposed to be one whole chapter, but after 30 pages…. Well, it was going to be too much. This story is becoming an epic.
"For the last time, Walter: I'm fine. Go enjoy your Christmas." Seras spoke without turning when she heard the knock, prepared to hear the butler's concerned voice. He was being extra nice to her this evening, checking on her frequently through the afternoon and evening in-between the quiet, familial festivities upstairs. She knew that she had frightened him with her little… display, and he was only worried about her well-being. It made her feel comforted, despite everything that had happened the past few hours; it was always nice to be reassured that someone truly cared.

Still, she was greeted not with Walter's pressing tones, but with a quiet, polite *ahem* and a whiff of cigar smoke. It prompted her to turn around much faster than she would have otherwise, cheeks glowing. Sir Integra stood in the door, pocketing her lighter and peering around the Draculina's room with an air of unaffected curiosity. Seras knew it was because Sir Integra hardly came to her room, preferring to send Walter or Alucard to fetch her rather than descend to the basement herself.

"S-Sir! I'm sorry, I thought you were—"

"Walter. Yes, I gathered as much." The older woman's mouth twitched in amusement. "I thought I ought to come down and check on you once more, seeing as you left the sitting room so quickly this afternoon. But I can see that Walter has beaten me to the punch. Many times, I might add."

"Yes, Sir." Seras fidgeted in her seat, unsure of what to say. Perhaps there was more than one human that cared for her after all… not counting her men.

"If I may?" Integra pointed to the empty chair at Seras's table.

"Oh, of course! Please, come right in!" She leaped from the vanity chair, stumbling over her own feet in her hurry to play good hostess and pull the vacant chair out from the table. She nearly crashed into the table, her hand coming out just in time to steady herself by leaning on the wood. It groaned beneath her weight but didn't crack, used to such abuse from Alucard's boots on a nightly basis. Integra's smile threatened to actually show teeth, her eyes lighting up in a rare vein of good humor as she stepped into the room and politely shut the door behind her before taking a seat. She crossed her legs beneath the table, fingers laced as she watched Seras carefully. The younger blonde turned a deeper shade of red as she grabbed the vanity chair and sat across from her, hands in her lap as she continued to wiggle uncomfortably.

"Well, Agent Victoria; how are you getting along? Any pressing concerns?"

"Um… no, nothing really." Seras scratched the side of her jaw, turning her eyes to the ceiling. She had been taking in their new color while brushing her hair in the vanity, unused to the striking scarlet irises. They had been more of a dull orangey color before, but now they stuck out like sore thumbs against her pale skin. Even Alucard's eyes weren't as bright as hers; she wasn't sure if she liked it or not. "I guess I really should apologize again for this afternoon."

"You mean slipping through the floorboards? Or running through Walter as though he were little more than a ghost?" Seras felt her heart sink before she caught sight of the telling curve of her boss's lips. She was being *teased*, not scolded. "Consider it water under the bridge, Police G—Agent Victoria," Integra checked herself. "After all, you did no lasting damage. Windows can be replaced."
"Thank you, Sir." It made her feel better to know that no one was taking her overdramatic transformation too seriously. She had been nervous about having her pay docked, though in reality it wouldn't have been a very damning punishment. But Sir Integra seemed to understand that she hadn't meant to do any of those things, the earthshaking or the broken window. It was as though her body had, temporarily, been under some foreign control and when she'd come back, she'd been changed. She still knew, somehow, that she had barely scraped the tip of the iceberg. She wasn't at all sure about what she had become.

"Still, it is something we should talk about." Integra took the cigar from her lips and looked around. Seras figured out what she wanted after a moment's thought and prepared to get it for her. Before she could rise, however, her shadows swirled elegantly from the corner of the room and slid along the floor in an opaque wave, bringing the bin from the corner. They held it up to table-height; the heiress seemed surprised, but obediently tapped her ashes into the bin. Seemingly satisfied, the shadows sat the bin on the floor next to her polished shoes before leaking through the stone.

"Sorry," Seras mumbled when Integra looked at her expectantly. "I haven't quite got the hang of them yet. They seem to know what I want before I even ask." It was as though her shadows had been pale imitations of shade before. Now they were semi-sentient things, extensions of her own arms and legs that acted both of their own accord and at her command. No, they acted of their own accord for her, fulfilling her needs without her having to lift a finger. She could see herself growing used to them.

"Interesting." Integra crossed her arms, tilting her head as she examined the young woman. "In a way, that's exactly what I'm here for.

"Sir?" Seras blinked owlishly, brow wrinkled in confusion. "I don't—" Integra continued as though she hadn't spoken at all, arms crossed.

"Seras Victoria, you are a danger to my men and my home."

"I—what?!" Seras couldn't help but shout, utterly baffled. "I never!"

"Let me rephrase." Integra tapped her ashes into the bin once more before speaking. "You now have the ability to be a danger." The light glinted off her glasses as she shifted in the chair, watching her over the rims in a startlingly Alucard-esque manner.

"From this point on, I'm putting my utmost faith in you to be a stellar example to both my soldiers and my staff. If you fail me...." She didn't finish, but Seras could tell that the consequences would be disastrous, to say the least. "I let you get away with a good deal before, because you were Alucard's problem. Now you're my problem, and you'll find that I'm hardly a better taskmaster than your old one was." Seras gulped, unable to think of a good reply.

"No more throwing men around like toys, no more stone-skipping contests in the mine fields—yes, I know about that, don't look so surprised—no more nightly gallivanting close to town with your powers out where anyone can see.... I expect you to have some measure of English dignity and accountability, Victoria. I implore you to behave responsibly and be a credit to yourself, or I'll have to take extra precautions." Reading between the lines, Seras got the message loud and clear. Behave, or you'll end up with runes on your gloves as well. You're getting the benefit of the doubt.

"Yes, Sir Integra. I'll be a credit to the Organization." When you're looking, anyway. She couldn't help but think this, although it sounded like a rambunctious child secretly getting back at a stern parent. Alucard would be proud, she thought with a sigh. She was happy that he couldn't hear her innermost thoughts now, knowing that he would take malicious delight in her mental act of
defiance to her 'new master'. New master in name only. I'm finally free. If you think you're going to put runes on me... you've got another thing coming. But she smiled and tried to meet the older woman's eyes. "Don't worry. I think I can live up to those expectations."

"See that you do," Integra replied offhandedly, finishing her cigar with a final smoky breath before depositing the glowing end in the bin. She stood, looking down her nose at the vampiress. "At least, I hope to find you an easier case than Alucard ever was, or will be." Seras couldn't help but laugh softly, trying to imagine a world where she was somehow worse than her master—my former master. Master no longer, though we'll see how long it takes him before he starts trying to get the upper hand on me again.

"While on the subject," Integra added conversationally, fingering the pocket where Seras knew her cigar case was kept. Two back to back? Is she somehow nervous about being the same room with me? No, that wasn't it. She was probably just uncomfortable; if she was about to ask what Seras thought she was about to ask, than the heiress most likely considered herself to be prying. If she did think herself to be too inquisitive, her face didn't show it as she continued to speak. "Have you solved whatever bad blood's between you with this?" She motioned to the air between her and Seras, as if able to sum up the entire day with one hand gesture. Seras was reminded that she very likely didn't know the half of it, despite being mentally bound to Alucard. If she thought it was that easy, she was only glancing at the surface of the water and not paying attention to the sharks beneath.

"I think so." In reality, she wasn't sure at all. His words still echoed over and over in her mind, speaking volumes while shrouded in mystery. It is only when you're truly independent that you can make your choice with a free heart. If you still choose to remain by my side when there is nothing tying you there anymore, then we will discuss further matters. What did it mean? It was geared more towards her feelings rather than his. What she needed to know was how he felt, but he either didn't know, or just didn't want to tell her. And so far, he hadn't seen her since she had taken his blood earlier in the afternoon. Now it was nearly 9:00, and he was still nowhere to be found. Did he not want to be around her? Was he just giving her space? "I hope so," she added with a confidence she didn't feel.

"I see." She gazed at her a moment longer before turning and walking towards the door. She looked over her shoulder as she opened it, preparing to cross the threshold. "Good night, Agent Victoria."

"Night, Sir." The door closed behind her and she slumped down onto one arm, breath blowing across the table and stirring a small splinter sticking out of the aged wood. What was that all about? She was nearly...

"She was threatening you, Police Girl. I must admit— I'm impressed." Speak of the Devil and here he comes, ready for his dues. Seras looked at the wall as Alucard slipped through like water, emerging head and shoulders. When she said nothing, he stepped through completely and ended up standing on her mattress, alighting to the floor with a sharp clack of his heels against the stone. He moved to the center of her room, eyeing her smugly. "I'm surprised at her, doing it so soon. I thought she might wait a week or two, give you a chance to cause some more havoc...."

"It was like her; she wouldn't be letting things get messy when she could put a stop to it beforehand." They fell silent and he turned his head, giving her a sidelong glance. He didn't act out of the norm, but she could feel the cautious hesitation in the tension of the room. He was waiting for her to say something. Something that would spark another argument, no doubt. His absence this evening? The blood? Their fighting? It was hard to say which one was on his mind.
"Maybe she did think I was overstepping my bounds," she stated in a voice louder than she had intended it to be. She stood and dragged her chair back to the vanity, taking a seat with her back facing him. Her shadows helpfully handed her the hairbrush and she pulled it through her blonde locks, methodically undoing the kinked tangles that seemed to magically appear. "After all, if you think about it, it's the first vampire transformation that she's seen, right?"

"You've got a point," he admitted with a savage grin. "I'd like to think that you scared even the Judas Priest, my dear." There was an instant silence after that, one that seemed more intent than a mere lapse in speech. She glanced at him in the mirror to see his lips pressed tightly together. Did he not mean to say that? she wondered with some amusement. It humored her to think that he had let the endearment slip without realizing until it was too late. Her fingers tightened around the hairbrush, hearing the crack of plastic as it bent compliantly. It was time to take the bull by the horns, if he wasn't willing to do it.

"Was it really wise of you to come in here tonight?" she asked softly. He looked at the mirror, and she wondered why he hadn't brought his glasses or even his hat to hide his face. However, being dressed in the same casual style she'd seen him in earlier, perhaps he had just not thought about the crimson outerwear. Their eyes met through the glass and he immediately looked away, staring instead at the wall.

"I considered that," he replied in a cold, emotionless tone. He's distancing himself again, she realized. Her shoulders slumped as he refused to look back at her, his eyes focused on the stone as though expecting something to come crashing through it. She placed the hairbrush back onto the vanity without a sound and stood, walking briskly to stand right in front of him. His eyes shifted one stone block higher to compensate, the corners of his mouth drawing tight.

"Look at me." She tried to keep frustration out of her voice. His eyes slid down to hers and she gazed imploringly into them, trying to see past the mask and failing. Whatever he was feeling, he didn't want her to know about it. "What do you want?"

"You." There was no hesitation, no reiteration of the earlier statements from his chambers. She had known that those were false accusations, but it had still hurt her to hear him say that he didn't want her, and would have been happier if she had never loved him. The last one did have a grain of truth to it, though; she knew that she was making it hard on him. But what could she do? She couldn't just go through her unlife pretending that they were nothing more than workmates, when they'd been so much more. If only she could get him to see it the way she did! "What do you want?" he asked in return, startling her out of her thoughts.

"You." Despite being smaller, she felt that her words had a much larger impact than his, ringing out confidently in the confines of her little room. His nose twisted, but he sought to control it and quickly had the mask in place once more.

"My love," he clarified bitterly. She let out a huff, wanting to shake him by the shoulders until he got it through his thick skull. How could she make him understand?!

"Ideally," she hissed between clenched teeth, trying not to raise her voice and start yet another fight. Two fights on Christmas were bad enough as it was. Three was just stupid. "But I doubt anything's changed in…" she checked her clock. "five hours."

"But you do want it." She stormed past him, stopping at her bed and running a hand through her hair. What was she supposed to say?! What did he want her to say?

"A part of me is always going to want love, yes, but—" She couldn't face him. "But I don't want it if it's going to make you miserable! Can't you get that? I don't want you to be unhappy; it's not
"Life's not fair." She did turn around now, sarcasm prompting her into speech.

"Doesn't matter, does it? You and I are dead." His lips spasmed as though he were fighting a smile.

"And yet here we are. Even your death wasn't quite fair, Police Girl. I can attest to that myself."

"Then why—" He cut her off.

"Because I wanted you. Even back then." He sounded almost disgusted with himself. "And you chose the night, Seras Victoria. Never forget that. You chose to say yes." Only because the alternative was still death, she wanted to yell, but that would only prove his point that life, and death, wasn't always fair. Yes, I chose the night, if you want to put it that way. I chose you. Something in her head clicked into place, something that seemed to hit or miss before, and she stopped in her tracks. Suddenly, she knew exactly how to phrase what she wanted from him. She knew how to make him understand.

"What?" he prompted, eyes narrowing. "What's that look for?"

"Alucard…please, listen." She forced herself to look right at his face, instead of at her feet the way she wanted to. "Please, just listen to me. Hear me out. Let me tell you… what it is that I want from you."

"I know what you want from me," he scowled, his emotion breaking through the icy façade once more.

"No, you don't," she insisted, hearing the beginning of tears in her voice. "If you did, you wouldn't have come to me. You wouldn't have asked me. You've just assumed that I only want one thing and if you can't give it then that's the end. It's not like that, I'm not—" I'm not that one-dimensional. I'm not like the others. She couldn't bring herself to say it; she only assumed enough herself to think it, and it would be best not to force up old memories if he didn't want them. Still, he seemed to know what she was aiming for.

"Calm yourself, Seras." She saw him soften, so miniscule a motion that an untrained eye wouldn't have noticed anything. It was in the relaxing of his brow, the slight widening of his eyes, the imperceptible untensing of muscles. "I will listen."

"All I want from you is a promise." He said nothing, but his unchanged expression bid her to continue. She used her quietest, most insistent tone, knowing that he'd hear her better for the lack of shouting. "Promise that you'll choose me." There was a nearly unbearable silence, and then—

"What?" He shifted, and the sound of his rustling clothes seemed louder than his own voice. "What do you mean?"

"Just promise that no matter what, you'll always choose me over everyone else." She stepped closer, holding out her hand in hopes that he would take it. "All I want is your fidelity. Choose me like I chose you. Say that you will. In return, I promise to love you no matter what, and to always choose you over everyone else too." She offered him her best smile, even if it was shaky and threatening to slip away at any moment. "I might not be able to have your love, but… if you choose me of your own free will, without anyone forcing your hand—I'll be the happiest girl in the world."

"Why?" He sounded uncertain, uncharacteristically so, and it took everything she had to keep her composure.
"Because..." she thought it through quickly, trying to best put it into words. "Because if you do that, you'll give me something that you've never given anyone else, not even Sir Integra." Your will is all you really have to offer... all that I want, anyway. She gave a watery laugh. "You know I couldn't care less for jewels and servants, but I'd very much like your loyalty. I know it may seem small, but—"

"Quiet." He silenced her and before she could blink, had fallen to one knee. She squeaked in shock, mind immediately going in the direction of proposals and how she wasn't quite ready for marriage and he was somehow ready to marry her though he'd never spoken of it before?! But she managed to get herself worked up over nothing as he slammed his fist down to the stone floor and bent his head. "Seras," he said, his voice rough. "You want my allegiance, my steadfast devotion. Is that not so?"

"Y-yes. I do." He lifted his head, staring at her through his bangs. "I can't force you into this... it'll be your choice." He let out a low chuckle, catching the echo of his own words from a time that seemed long past, though it was only a year or so ago.

"Then I choose to devote that loyalty to you, Seras Victoria, for as long as you continue to want it, and perhaps longer than even that. You are one of the few that truly deserves it."

"You do?" It was suddenly hard to swallow, and she felt her chest heaving with the effort. "You really mean it?"

"I pledge my word as king." He frowned. "What's this? You're crying again." It was true; she felt her face and realized that tears were streaking down her cheeks, her fingers staining a color only a shade or two deeper than her new eyes. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing, it's just—I'm so... happy." She rubbed at her face, ruining a perfectly good set of gloves. "For once, I'm so happy that I'm actually crying." She was astonished at herself. Her shadows pulled themselves around her, soaking the bloodstains from her gloves automatically and brushing them from her cheeks. She felt the urge to be spontaneous and jumped forward to wrap him in a tight embrace, half standing and half kneeling in an effort to bury her face against his neck.

"I'm yours," she whispered to him, feeling the soft wisps of the shadows as they twined around his limbs. His own crept up around her knees and looped over her elbows, and she wondered if his were like hers, reacting more to his present state of mind rather than an actual order. It would make her feel much better if they did, but she was too shy to ask. Maybe one day, when things were quieter and they were relaxing on the roof. Maybe next summer....

"I am yours," he affirmed, letting her lean against him. She sniffed, willing her tears to dry before pulling back to wipe her eyes once more. He bent as if to kiss her, but she leaned away.

"We're still going to fight about things, you know." There was still so much they didn't see eye to eye on, but somehow, she felt that things might be a bit easier from here on out. "I'll still get angry enough to storm out."

"You'll always be an obstinate little girl, no matter how many centuries pass," he grumbled. "I can see that already."

"And you'll still be a hopeless old man." She shifted and he brought his hands to her waist, not letting her move any farther away. "But I'll always come back after I've cooled off."

"I'll continue to hunt you down if you don't." She smiled again, this time a genuine one, if not a bit tired.
I'll count on it."

"No more waiting."

He looked up to see her at the window, staring down at the snow-laden courtyard. Sighing, he closed the book and turned away from the fire, the absence of warmth making him uncomfortable despite his undead nature.

"Whatever do you mean?" he replied apathetically. "You were going to wait until spring. Those beastly things downstairs won't move an inch in this weather."

"They'll move." Her voice seemed odd, out of sorts with her usual flowery speech. Where were the grandiose ideas? The exuberant hand motions? The calls for revenge, for war? They were missing, and had left something hollow and strange.

"What?" He took a step forward, only to recoil in horror at what he saw. She turned from the window and he noticed at once the fallowed lines in her face, the blackness in her eyes, the absence of a petulant expression. Instead, there was an empty, fanatical gleam to her gaze, zealous passion lurking in the upturned corners of her chapped lips. He realized, all at once, that she'd finally turned the corner and gone too far. She wasn't even herself anymore, giving the last of whatever she'd been to transform, to metamorphosize into something wholly not of this world.

"They'll move," she repeated in the same confident, yet lackluster tone. Her movements were disjointed as she walked towards him, her gait unfamiliar. He found himself afraid of her, afraid of what had taken the place of what she'd once been. Was it really still her at all, or had something taken her skin and slipped it on like a disguise, hiding the ugliness within? "They'll have no choice. I cannot wait."

"Why not?" He felt what had once been his heart quiver within his breast. She smiled, but it couldn't reach through the ebony that had sucked the red from her irises.

"I don't have that much time left, my love." Even now this foul creature still tried to endear him to her, though he wasn't sure if he wanted to be part of her. But how could he resist, with her new aura pressing him down to the carpet like a hand on the back of a dog's neck? How could he refuse her, seeing the lengths that she could and would go to? "If I want to act before they come for me, I must act fast. We move out now."

"But the sunlight—" A dark hand enfolded around him, blocking out the firelight. He saw nothing, but felt her nails run along his neck and down beneath his collar. He gulped, smelling the cloying fragrance of her perfume, so at odds with her new looks. Her lips pressed to his and he submitted obediently, no thought of pushing her off even entering into his mind.

"Follow me," she whispered, her breath wafting over his mouth. He caught the whiff of something rotten, well-hidden behind the roses and musk. "Serve me, and allow me to take care of all your needs." Her shadows closed in on him, yanking at his clothing and leaving him vulnerable to her hot mouth as they twisted and twirled over his limbs in a dark embrace.

He felt suspended in liquid like a specimen in a jar, his mind blank. The darkness swept all sensation from him other than touch, sapping his strength until he was a trembling twig in a monsoon. He cracked open his eyes and somehow, despite the lack of light, saw her face floating before his. She smiled, every tooth a sharp blade; he gasped in mingled fright and pleasure, his body responding to the sensual torment despite his vehement internal thought that this was not his wife. Her tongue licked over his neck and he shivered, only to let out a choked cry when those teeth
ripped through the skin over his pulse point. He gurgled, unable to moan as his hips bucked in
time with her greedy gulps of his blood. Then her skin was pressed against his mouth, her voice
echoing from a million different places around him as well as crooning directly into his ear.

"Drink, my love. Take it." He obeyed without thought, being far gentler with her than she had been
with him, barely leaving a mark on her skin. She writhed above him, little squeals of ecstasy
escaping her lips and urging her shadows on. Her blood was the same, despite her changed
appearance—it was still her blood. No matter what she'd done, she hadn't been able to change her
chemical makeup. His throat healed, strength flowing back into his body. It was enough for him to
throw his arms around her, holding her still and thrusting against her with nearly violent efforts
until he was spent.

His eyes slid shut and for a moment, he was human again, holding his beloved Erzsébet as she lay
panting in his grasp. Then she laughed and it wasn't the soft chuckle of his human wife, nor the
girlish giggle of his insane vampiric mate, but a low cackle that was both unnerving and nerve-
grating, belonging to the mouth of a foul, raunchy harlot rather than his own dear one. The
memory was gone and he found himself somehow still fully clothed, pressed against the door of the
room and facing her. Not a shred of the human woman he'd loved was left in her now, of that he
was certain. He felt disgusting and filthy.

"Come." She grabbed his wrist in a death grip and dragged him out of the room and down the hall.
They didn't stop until they reached the front doors and she swung them open with a wave of her
hand. Standing in the snow was an entire army of hellish fiends, answering her beck and call. The
Sirens seemed unhappy to be in the cold, their gnarled limbs frozen and perhaps even frostbitten—
he couldn't tell. But no spark of soul glinted behind their yellowed, animalistic eyes and they only
leered with gaping, shark-toothed maws that he shied away from. Before them were the Girls,
neglected and rotting away where they stood. They showed no sign of caring that their bare,
purple feet were completely buried in the snow; it sat on their heads and piled on their shoulders,
the pure white stained with the body fluids leaking from their eyes and hanging on the traces of
their limp hair.

He paled when he saw a lone figure step up to meet them. It was the boy, and on first glance he
was merely astounded that she had somehow cheated death a second time and brought him back
the way she said she would. But then he peered closer and saw the black irises that matched the
boy's mistress, and he looked deep within them. He felt his stomach turn, nausea building within
him and choking him off with a lump in his throat. The boy's eyes betrayed just how much the soul
within was suffering, pulled back from its eternal rest—or eternal torment—to suffer on earth once
again. His first impulse was to yank away whatever was keeping it inside the body so that it could
leave its mortal coils, not wanting to watch the agony it was in. The boy didn't speak; perhaps it
couldn't speak. But its face turned in a mockery of a smile as it bowed before them.

"Let us walk," she commanded, as though they were taking a stroll through the gardens. He was
powerless against her, her sheer power causing him to stumble alongside her without a hint of
resistance. How could he defect now, with her power? With the boy's trapped soul just behind
them, with the Girls behind him and the Sirens behind them? Her legions pushed him on, just as
her will pushed them on.

He didn't ask how they'd cross the sea. He didn't want to know.
Copious amounts of… romance in this chapter. The extra cheesy kind. Sorry to anyone that hates that sort of stuff. I just felt that it was needed after two chapters of bickering. Also the really creepy kind, in a different light, but not cheesy and creepy. It can only be one or the other. I think that shows really well in this chapter.

And, this is almost too short of a chapter compared to the last few, but it's exactly as long as need be. Trust me.
Crede-ma

Chapter Summary

I died trying to finish this chapter for over two months... that's all the summary you need.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

New Year’s passed. The days turned into weeks, rolling along like the pale flakes of snow borne on the fierce January winds. January itself melted into February along with the snow, and the soldiers were faced with an icy slush that clung to their boots and found its way inside no matter how hard Walter fought.

The soldiers themselves, returned from winter holiday and now faced with seven months of work, were sadly unable to settle into their usual routine. Now that the New Year festivities were over, it would only be a few scant weeks until the Sirens—and their leader—would be marching to their gates. Though most of them didn’t know the particulars, it was easy to surmise that unpreparedness spelled death. And with preparedness came work, work, work; enough work to keep them all on the brink of exhaustion. And it wasn’t only the low-ranking soldiers that had extra on their plate. Everyone in the manner was chipping in 110%.

Walter had obtained old records of the World War II RTC, and using their ideas and blueprints he had drawn up plans for fortifying the manor to withstand nearly anything that could be thrown at it. He had been banking on a full frontal attack, with the woods to their back being more of a nuisance to an advancing army than the wide-open front lanes. Between his usual nightly duties and gathering men for the fortification effort, he also had to keep himself at Sir Integra’s disposal; the man was running on fumes. For the first time in years, he was looking his age.

The first captains of all the troops, including Seras, met nightly to discuss battle formations and detail work. There were many factors to be agreed upon—medical teams, front line duty, battalion snipers—and besides that, they had agreed to prepare for every possible outcome. They spent hours working out battle plans, based on varying factors that Sir Integra would send them. What if the Sirens breach the south wall? The east? What is the protocol when half the men are down? A third? Any free time after that was spent drilling the soldiers endlessly until each and every troop was as near perfect as possible. It didn’t help that some of the troops were stretched thin, including Seras’s own; a terrible incident in the USA had caused a shutdown of all airports and several soldiers, including the newly recovered Roans, were stuck until the ban was lifted.

Sir Integra was working around the clock. Seras believed that she only slept when she passed out from excessive fatigue at her desk; sleep seemed to hold no meaning for the woman anymore. She was never seen without papers in her hands, skin pale and eyes dulled with stress. She smoked through her precious nicotine faster than Walter could order it, floating like a transparent waif from meetings to her office and wrapped up in her own world of planning and maneuvering. She was even bold enough to refuse meetings with any of the other Knights, much to Sir Irons’ chagrin, stating that any time she spent arguing about budgets could be better used on learning more about the enemy. This in itself wouldn’t have been bad, if she had just let her other workloads pile up
Instead of trying to finish them simultaneously.

Even Anderson, who somehow managed to distance himself from the clamor of the organization, was walking the fine line between sleep and excessive work. He pulled favors he gained over the years to be allowed access to the parts of the Vatican archives normally reserved for high-ranking members, and even managed to get copies of various documents that would serve well to help the members of Hellsing prepare. However, he often had to email them to the headquarters; all the Special Organizations were being worked hard, but the brunt of the work had fallen to Iscariot. They had twice the workload and less than half their usual manpower. Aside from the Pope’s orders to step up patrols in Vatican territory, they were also dealing with a sudden mass migration of vampires with ‘mysterious and dubious origin’, and the annual werewolf mating season was fast approaching. If he did manage to make it home, it was only after weeks of being MIA, stumbling through the door with grimy clothing and the blank expression of the truly weary.

At first, the well-oiled machine that was Hellsing was worked with efficiency, but as the weeks of overtime and little sleep piled up one after another, a larger problem became very, very apparent.

Seras threw her folder onto the table and took a seat, the first one in the room for the captains meeting. Leaning back in her chair, she tapped her foot in a rapid, irate rhythm on the plush carpet of the meeting room. The shadows in the room bent away from her, as if afraid of being noticed, and she found herself grinding her fangs together in a way that reminded her of Alucard.

She’d been incredibly frustrated all evening, and added to the fact that she’d been standing out in the sleet and her hair was frizzed as a result, she was very unhappy in general. Her men had been struggling for two days with a routine that ought to have been incredibly simple, and no matter how many ways she tried to explain it to them, they weren’t getting it through their thick heads. She’d gotten so angry that she’d thrown her folder into the slush and had to get a new one from Walter, who had been snappish and practically thrown her the papers without ceremony.

She’d even had a row with Stevenson, accusing him of being the catalyst for the rest of the men slipping up. It had surprised her; Stevenson, who was always bright and cheerful no matter what the circumstance, had shouted back at her and reminded her that a 12 person maneuver couldn’t possibly function if one of the men was an ocean away. They’d bickered back and forth until Seras had ordered them all out of her sight, demanding they take an early lunch and get their acts together. Now, as she fidgeted in the uncomfortable chair and waited for the other—late—captains to come in, she wondered what on earth was going wrong. She knew, knew that her men should be able to handle this sort of exercise, even if it was a bit tricky. Did they happen to leave their skills in the past year, or were they just out of form tonight?

Eventually (ten minutes past schedule, Seras thought irritably), the other captains made it in and to her surprise they were joined by Sir Integra, who sat in Captain Massey’s seat while he stood at the front of the table. No one else commented on her being there, and so Seras ignored her as well. The meeting began as usual, and as Captain Massey began to drone on about something insignificant she found her mind wandering. Her finger plotted her men’s movements on the table, trying to decide where they were going wrong.

“Therefore, while we—we—” Captain Massey paused, rubbing his temple. “Forgive me, I lost my train of thought,” he apologized, picking up his folder off the table and flipping through it. He stared at it a moment before trying again. “Therefore, if we study the layout of the northern and western wall, we can see that the defects are—” The deviation pulled Seras out of her reverie, and she looked closely at him with a scrutinizing eye. This was a man who never stumbled over his
words, who certainly never lost his train of thought….

She took in his unshaven face, the slightly rumpled uniform, trying to make light of the puzzle forming in the back of her mind. Massey never second-guessed himself, but here he was, standing up before the other captains and correcting mistakes in his own work as he came across them. She looked at her peers, their distant stares, slumped over on the table and propping themselves up as subtly as possible. This was… wrong! Wrong! As she watched, Captain Livingstone’s head nearly hit the table in a dead faint. He shook it off, shifting to an uncomfortable position in his seat in order to keep himself awake longer.

She took a good look at Sir Integra; she hadn’t seen the woman in nearly a week. She seemed alert, but there were dark bags beneath her eyes and her suit was loose and ill-fitted—she’d lost weight. Her mind whirled as she put the pieces together, putting the truth she knew into words that she could speak aloud. They were working themselves to death! She was faring a little better as a vampire, but she admitted to herself that she could also use a better day’s sleep instead of staying up well past dawn to study her meeting notes.

She brooded over her thoughts until the sound of scraping chairs and moving bodies signaled the end of the meeting. Standing up quickly, she pushed past the other slow-moving captains and caught up with Sir Integra.

“Sir, a moment in private, please.” The woman looked her over without really seeing her.

“Can’t it wait?” she asked, less formally than usual. Another sign of overwork, I bet, Seras thought.

“No, Sir.” She got an exasperated frown for her insistence, but was nodded towards the main office.

“Very well, but make it quick.” They reached the office and she was waved inside, the door shut behind them. Seras gawked at the piles of paper scattered on every surface, of the books stacked nearly head high in places, of scrolls propped up against the computer and notebooks hanging from the sides of the desk. Looking at some of the open pages, she found strange symbols and odd languages. Was Sir Integra researching the enemy, or was she trying to open a portal to another realm? “What?” she prompted, taking her seat behind the desk. The chairs that were usually empty now held an old tea tray and what looked suspiciously like scans of a secret codex, so Seras stood awkwardly at one corner of the desk.

“Sir, this has got to stop somewhere,” she murmured, still looking around the virtually unrecognizable room. Walter must have been so busy that he hadn’t had time to tidy up. She swallowed, gathering courage. She wasn’t sure if Sir Integra would take offense to what she was about to say, but… it has to be said, one way or the other. The rustling of papers, which had began since the woman sat, ceased and pale eyes gazed up questioningly. “This—look at this!” Seras exclaimed, holding out her arms as though she could gather up the room’s mess and show it off. “You’ve—we’ve—everyone has got to take a break and get some rest. This has gone on long enough.”

Sir Integra bristled, sleep deprivation shortening her temper.

“Are you ordering me around, vampire?” Seras sucked in a breath through her teeth, resisting the urge to yank out handfuls of her own hair as she sought to maintain a calm demeanor. Her boss was fatigued and temperamental; beating around the bush for politeness wouldn’t work in this situation, but neither would causing a scene.

“Yes, Sir: I am.” Her eyes glanced over the woman’s thinning frame again, this time not bothering
to hide any concern from her features. “You’re working yourself to death! Everyone is!” She cleared her throat, leaning forward and placing one hand gingerly on the nearest stack of paperwork. “If we keep this up, it’s only a matter of time before someone—or something—notices and takes advantage. I mean no offense, but we’re running around like headless chickens when we should be an army, Sir!”

“If you don’t approve of my methods, Police Girl, then you are more than welcome to take full responsibility of my men. Let them rest, but when they’re sleeping in their graves I expect no tears from you.” Her voice was stone, her expression drawn as she turned back to her computer, silently dismissing her. Seras bit her lip to keep from smarting off and potentially angering the woman further, knowing that if she gave up now, they were all as good as dead anyway. Still, it was clear that talking to Sir Integra was getting her nowhere fast.

“I can see that this isn’t going to work out,” she stated as casually as she could, taking deep, steady breaths to maintain composure. “Fine. If you won’t listen to me, I’ll go and find someone who will.” The threat was ignored, it seemed, as Sir Integra didn’t even look up from the computer screen. “Very well,” Seras added, turning on her heel and walking out of the office with her head held high. The shadows followed her to the door, bending in supplication. She ignored them, as did the woman at the desk.

It was only once the door was closed firmly behind her that she hung her head, wringing her hands in agitation. Was she the only one that saw what was happening, what would happen if everyone was allowed to follow this path? She shook her head, still gnawing on her lower lip as she thought. Who could she talk to now? She’d meant what she said, but Sir Integra was really the top of the food chain here. Walter answered to her, even though he could influence her at times. She doubted he could sway her, and would he even want to? He acted as though he wanted to run himself straight into an early grave as well. She shook her head again, muttering not-so-quietly under her breath as she trudged down the hall.

“She’s going to work until she has a heart attack!” She scowled down at her boots. “I bet she’d just shrug it off and keep working, even!” Still thinking about who she could go to about such behavior, and wondering if perhaps Alucard might know the number of someone who could give her boss the what-for, she rounded the corner and slammed into something solid and… stale? Muffling a cough, she staggered back and put a hand to her forehead, trying to keep from falling flat on her rear.

What’s with people in this house not bathing regularly all of a sudden? I mean, I know they’re men, but— Looking up with full intentions to lay into the offending soldier and give them a stern talking to in her best captain voice, she instead swallowed her words in shock and fright as she realized just who she’d ran into.

“O-oh!” she squeaked, taking a full step back. “Y-you!” Even with her shadows and newfound strength, she still doubted that she could take on Anderson. Perhaps teamed up with Alucard, but on her own? He still scared the daylights out of her, and she hadn’t forgotten the ease with which he’d pinned her to the wall only a few weeks ago. She expected him to grab for her, or even sneer at her and make some snide comment, but he only looked her over once before seemingly classifying her as a non-threat.

“Out o’ the way, lass,” he growled, but the words lacked their usual bite. This emboldened her somewhat, and rather than meekly move aside, she spoke back.

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“You smell like a swamp,” she noted rather bluntly.

“I’ve been in a swamp,” he replied curtly. “Move, before I pin ye to the floor.” She stepped to the left and let him pass, looking after him thoughtfully before calling after him.
“You need some sleep!” He paused and looked back at her, one brow arching.

“I know that.” Thinking furiously, she tentatively tried before he turned away.

“Do you know that Sir Integra is buried in a swamp of paperwork?” The pun was lost on him as he stared blankly. She blinked rapidly, waiting for something, anything to sink in.

“And?”

“Y-you know.” He didn’t. “Um…” She was gobsmacked that she had to lay it out so plainly. He really must be dead on his feet. “You should, um, make her get some rest as well.” She quickly pulled up what remained of her bravado. “Drag her out of the office if you have to! Just do it!” His gaze landed on her and she froze as he stared. The moments seemed to drag on as she wondered if he would pin her to the ground anyway for bothering him. Then, he half turned and spoke to her over his shoulder.

“I take no orders from monsters. This is her choice, in any case. If she wants to work longer hours, then I’m not going to stop her.”

“Please!” She would resort to begging, if she had to. It was already bad enough that her plan was not only backfiring, but slipping down a slope into unobtainable territory. “She won’t listen to me, and she’s working herself to death! She looks terrible!” She balled her fists at her sides, prepared for violent action from the exhausted paladin.

She knew she was pushing her luck, but if she was the only sane person in this manor, then she’d fight tooth and nail to get everyone else back on track. It was already because of her that this whole situation was even happening. Her picture was the catalyst that sent the fledgling Ambrose that caused the retaliation that prompted the vengeance—it was a macabre, bad-luck-beat-all version of The House that Seras Built, and she’d be damned if she let them walk to their graves like a bunch of slaughterhouse cattle because they were trying too hard to protect her.

“Please,” she tried again, softer this time. “Please, go check on her. Maybe she’ll listen to you.”

“What makes ye think I hold power over her?” He sounded like just having this conversation was too much for him, but he obligingly turned around to face her once more. “She’s known ye, lass, longer than she has me. Think o’ that.”

“Yes, but…” Seras faltered, unsure of how to phrase it. “You’re… you.” His shoulders slumped the slightest bit further, and then he inhaled deeply before drawing himself up to full height. Seras half-expected him to throw a punch—or a blade—as his jaw tensed. She tensed as well, her shoulders twisting into a slight crouch as the shadows near her quivered in anticipation of a blow that thankfully never came.

“Aye. I suppose I am.” The weight of the world seemed to rest on his words as his green gaze slid towards the closed office door. The scar on his face shifted as the muscles in his jaw twitched, and she could almost see his brain whirring as he weighed his options. She heard the gritty sound of his tombstone-straight teeth grinding in aggravation at the situation, and kept her eyes trained on him as a precaution.

She knew that he wanted only to rest, but these were dire circumstances. Otherwise, she wouldn’t have bothered to ask. Sir Integra was just that bad. He glanced at her again out of his peripherals, and she knew he was debating how far she’d take this. She kept her face a solemn mask, knowing that she would follow at his heels like a frisking puppy, tripping him up on every corner if she had to in order to get the message across. Was it too much to ask for him to just pop in and see about
the stubborn woman?

She briefly—all too briefly—considered asking Alucard to come and offer a hand. Of course, by hand, he would take that to mean offering a friendly punch straight to the paladin’s nose, instigating a fight. Perhaps then Sir Integra would be forced to leave her office, just to separate the two? Taking in his haggard appearance, she reasoned that Anderson might not be in the best form for a supernatural fistfight. Calling Alucard may do more harm than good, and he most likely wouldn’t give two stones whether the humans living above his head were overworked and underfed.

He still didn't answer, seemingly torn between just walking away and obeying a "monster". She bit back a groan, pulling out her last ace in the hole. If seriousness and pleading didn't work, it was time to use something less human.

"Please," she asked again, this time putting a spin on it and injecting just enough of her vampiric ability to make him look directly at her. She smiled without showing her teeth, weaving a tight web of hypnotism though the air. She sometimes used it on her men for extra courage and motivation in bleak circumstances, but she’d never tested her full power and certainly not outside of an adrenaline fueled battle. Then again, she was much more powerful now... would it work? "I'll never ask you for anything ever again, you have my word on that." He squinted in irritation, thrusting a hand into his musty hair.

"Devil magic willnae work on me, vampire." He glared accusingly at her, and she thought it best to feign innocence, gracing him with a look of bewilderment. His mouth twisted into a grimace and he looked away rather than press the matter further. "If it’ll keep ye from hounding me to the ends o’ the earth, I’ll take a quick look. But ye cannae expect me to do anything about it. I’m not in the mood for picking fights tonight," he grunted in resignation.

"Thank you!" She called after him sweetly, as he sluggishly moved towards the door. "I’ll owe you." He muttered something under his breath and hunched his shoulders, leaving her in the hall to an admittedly beaten-to-death victory. She couldn’t help but smile, and when the shadows pulled up the wall she spoke brightly to them, acknowledging them for the first time that day. “Well, that went better than expected, don’t you think?” They trembled, as if to speak back, and then parted to show a familiar crop of messy hair.

“Trying to bewitch the priest, Police Girl?” He stepped from the wall and leaned against it, arms crossed. The amber lenses slid just enough down his nose for a glint of crimson to spark in the light from the lamps above his head. “And here I thought you were the innocent one and I the seducer.” Mockery laced his words and she was tempted to stick her tongue out at him, but settled for a smug grin.

“Seduced you, didn’t I?” she retorted plainly, prompting a bark of real laughter from him.

“Hmm. Perhaps.” He looked her over once more. “But now you’ve moved on to married men, which means your morals must be slipping. Am I that bad of an influence on you?” She laughed. “I don’t see you enough to be influenced!” The moment she said it, she realized just how true it was. She was busy enough, yes, but he hadn’t been around much either. Sometimes he didn’t come to bed until well after dawn, her brain fuzzily recognizing the movement of someone crawling onto the mattress next to her in the lapse between sleeping and waking, his hands brushing aside the papers she let fall when she finally dropped off. She’d seen him at a distance around the manor from time to time, but something told her he wasn’t staying within the grounds like Sir Integra would have expected him to. “Where’ve you been?”
“Taking care of things,” he replied cryptically, studying one hand. “Here and there.”

“Taking advantage of everyone being too busy to bother, more like.”

“If they’re both one and the same…” he deliberately trailed off. She tilted her head, waiting for him to continue. She realized that she’d missed his voice; even if they did see each other nearly every night, it had been days since she’d had a moment to actually hold a conversation with him. Her men had taken precedence over personal matters. The entirety of last month had been nonstop, hadn’t it? As if agreeing with her, a yawn threatened to crack her jaw and she stretched.

“You should take your own advice,” he murmured, stepping closer to her. “You speak of my master, but have you looked in the mirror?”

“I’m afraid to.” She rubbed one eye blearily with a sigh. “I know we’ve got to work hard, but—look, you ran an army once, didn’t you?” He didn’t answer. “Give me some advice.” She tugged him into the wall with her, allowing herself to float down easily. She felt his powers flare and let him guide her until she fell with a soft thump onto a plush cushion. Looking around, she found them in the deserted library, him standing at one of the shelves while she reclined on a divan. Huffing, she pulled herself to her feet despite wanting nothing more than to lay back and take a nap.

“Read.” A book was handed to her, one thin finger pointing at a passage. She looked at it, but before she got two words in he repeated, “Read. Aloud.” She frowned, but obediently read the passage.

“When a man or a prince is strong and powerful he can make peace as he wants to; but when he is weak, a stronger one will come and do what he wants to him.” She looked back at him. “Who said that?”

“I did.” He held out a hand and she gave the book back, trying to catch a glimpse of its spine. “In a letter I wrote once.” He put it back on the shelf, and she saw its spine was blank as its neighbors. How did he know—she had no time to ponder it, her tired brain trying to keep up with his words. “That is my advice to you. Do not be weak and let others do what they want.” He turned back to her from the shelf. “Be a peacemaker if you like, but make sure your enemy knows that it was never their decision.”

“I don’t want to make peace.” In the stillness of the library, her voice seemed uncommonly loud. “But I don’t want anyone to die for my sake, either.”

“Then they must not fight.”

“But they have to.” He looked at her and though his face was devoid of pity, there was something in his eyes that suggested he remembered the struggle she was facing.

“Then they will die.”

“There’s nothing we can do, then. That’s what you’re saying.” He let out a low breath, taking off his glasses and folding them before placing them in his coat. He regarded her with a serious, contemplative air.

“The man who wrote that letter would have told you that it’s only by the grace of God that men live or die. But that man no longer exists, and no matter if men believe in God, or don’t believe in God, they still die. Your men will die, Seras Victoria. It is up to you to decide if they die in battle under you, or on their own.”
“But you just said—” He grabbed her wrist, his fingers encircling it easily.

“I told you the truth. If you don’t want them to die for your sake, then they must not fight. Have you asked yourself, though, how many of them would consider such a death an honor?” She gaped at him, and he searched her face for a moment before smiling bitterly. “I, for one, would die for you, if I still could. And I would consider it the highest honor, higher than serving any paltry deity that can’t offer a smile of gratitude in return for all my efforts. What do you say to that?”

“I’d say…” She cleared her throat, trying not to cry. She wasn’t even sure exactly why the lump had appeared; of course he’d be the one to consider dying an honor in itself. But his words had struck a chord deep within her, one that she both understood and didn’t understand simultaneously. She understood what he meant by it: as the captain, she had to protect her men, and in return they gave their lives for her if it came to it. They had to trust in her to keep them alive, and she had to trust them to stay alive. If they didn’t want to fight for her, there was no reason to force them and she wouldn’t. But the parts that applied to him—they were the more confusing bits. It was like shining a light down into dark waters and seeing a glinting object on the seafloor, but unable to make out the shape or meaning of it. She took a stab at it anyway, trusting intuition.

“I’d say that the man who wrote that letter is the same one who’d die for my sake, if he could.” She shook his hand off her wrist and took it, squeezing his fingers. “And I am grateful, though I don’t want you to die for me anytime soon.”

“Hmm.” He didn’t deny her words, but instead he merely stated, “That woman is more of a monster than I am now. She won’t be the one to kill me; I doubt she has a single shred of a proper soul left in that husk of a shell.”

“Then… I pity her.”

“Don’t. She chose that path. She had plenty of opportunities to stop, even up until now. She can still choose to not come, but she won’t, and that’s how she’ll meet her death.” He drew her towards him, one hand reaching out to stroke her hair. “The Hand of God will strike her down.”

“Says the man who doesn’t believe in God.” He pulled back, looking down at her curiously.

“I believe in God,” he countered evenly, brow arching. “Forsaking something is not the opposite of believing in it. Besides, I meant it far more literally than you will know.”

“What did you mean, then?”

“You’ll see when the time comes.” He ran his fingers through her hair once more, making it frizzier than ever. “You should rest.”

“Later. If you do believe in God, than why did you—”

“Do you believe in God, Police Girl?” His tone was both impertinent and tired.

“I don’t know,” she responded honestly, a little taken aback. “I never thought about it much. Why?”

“Tell me: what did God do for me, that I should serve him?”

“Well…” she thought it over seriously, still squeezing his hand at intervals. “Allowed you to become a vampire, I guess.” He laughed, but this time it was cynical.

“Allowed?”
“Well, yeah!” she answered defensively, cheeks flushing. “I mean, I had to go to church in the orphanage; I know the Bible, or parts of it at least. God allowed the Devil to do all that stuff to Job, so I guess the same principle applies to vampires, although I don’t think I’m suddenly a Satanist just because I let you drink my blood.”

“Those who walk in the darkness forsake the light, Seras.”

“If drinking blood is the only thing I’ve done to be allowed a one-way ticket to Hell, then God is terribly old-fashioned.” He scowled down at her, though she couldn’t see why he’d be so upset at her words.

“That’s a discussion to have with the Judas priest.”

“I’ll be sure to bring it up the next time I’m seducing him.”

The Hellsing house was one of madness.

This was both literal and figurative, in Hugh Iron’s opinion. He was old enough to remember ‘old’ Abraham van Helsing, who was by then quite old indeed and already losing his mind to dementia. Van Helsing, who had stepped foot off the boat to England for good and settled in London to remain close to his faithful friends—in actuality, to take advantage of the pagan occult magic that still soaked in the very soil of the island. It was no secret that the man’s wife was an invalid lunatic, put in her last days under the care of the famed Dr. Seward. A harmless lunatic, driven that way by the death of her eldest at the hands of one of the Old World’s last great vampire barons. However, Sir Irons hadn’t been around for that part, nor had he been around for the first rumors that the madness lay in the blood, and therefore the bloodline.

The knighted and Anglicized Edward was the first Sir Hellsing, taking the Protestant mantle at the slight disapproval of his non-practicing Catholic father. Irons had been a very small child, just old enough to toddle out on the front lawn of his father’s manor home with the equally small Robert Walsh from next door while their mothers laughed beneath the willow. He knew little of Edward, only that he was the van Helsing’s younger son, and had grown up overseas before coming as a young adult to join his father in England. He had inherited nothing of his father’s ancestral Dutch looks other than the piercing blue eyes that seemed to see right into one’s very soul.

What sort of man the first Sir Hellsing had been, he didn’t remember. He barely remembered the death of Lady Hellsing, having been older, but still too small to care about his father’s business. He did, however, remember the regurgitated rumors of madness following the funeral. The husband withdrew further into the murky depths of the mansion, rarely making an appearance. He remembered the first time he’d ever seen him, at his very first social. The man’s eyes were ringed with dark circles, his face gaunt. He remembered the veins on his jaw, the blueness the only source of color on the otherwise corpse-like face.

Edward Hellsing, they said (though who they were, only his mother had known), had gone mad after his beloved’s demise. It was a Poe sort of madness, if madness it was, and it was fueled more by a thing that lurked in the dungeons of the Hellsing mansion. It was haunted, they said, by demons, by the headless specter of Edward’s wife, by the memories of pain and suffering that the Hellsing family had witnessed, perhaps even caused.

And Arthur, Edward’s elder son, had been mad in his own right. Sir Irons remembered the child that he’d known after becoming a teenager; Arthur was a few years younger than him, still in breeches while the former was graduating to suits. He’d always run about the neighborhood with Shelby Penwood, a yin and yang sort of situation. Arthur was wild, reckless in the absence of his
father, and in contrast ‘Shabby Shelby’ was quiet, a bookworm who went along with Arthur’s harebrained schemes for some secret reason of his own.

The adult was as reckless as the child, with a surprising lack of sense of his own mortality and *morality*. He drank, he smoke, he nearly got his head blown to pieces with a canon, he saw a multitude of women in the course of a single afternoon, he poured hard liquor into his tea, and he ate things of highly questionable quality. *The man is mad!* They all said it. Robert Walsh said it as they lounged together beneath the willow that bridged their mothers. Marjorie said it to little Marie and newly-arrived-from-the-front Katherine Bakersfield, who was ‘Kitty’ to all except Robert, who called her Kate. Penwood even said it, though in a slightly humored manner. And when they were all at Oxford together, he saw exactly what they meant.

He *was* mad, but there was method to the madness.

Irons expected him to die during the war like a supernova, a star collapsing in on itself through the weight of its actions. He had no sense of time, working weeks on end without a break, running on vodka and bread crusts before sleeping for 72 solid hours and throwing it all back up before reaching for the vodka again, calling one of his favorite women for some ‘early morning exercise’ before throwing himself back into his work. But some little shit named Walter that Arthur claimed was the butler, and the Cook—a back alley tart who cussed him out after being shortchanged on a piece of admittedly delicious pie and was hired in the same afternoon—managed to keep him from straying too far off the line between sanity and madness. They were the sole gravitational pull that kept Sir Hellsing’s stardust from rolling into an explosion and becoming a black hole.

Irons watched them during World War II, before the Shinigami Shit had been sent to Warsaw with *that thing*, which was neither ghost nor memory. The boy dodged Arthur’s drunken blows and tucked him into bed; the girl made him black coffee and dry toast when he woke up again. He kept the floors clean of glass shards and spilled documents; she allowed him to spin her around the foyer in a fit of happiness when they won a battle. He listened to him during the tough times when he wouldn’t get out of bed or even shower for days on end; she cussed and fussed and pulled him back to his feet, pushing him into his workroom with a croissant and an extra four letter word for good measure.

Irons watched, and he saw that those two children—for they were children, barely old enough to be called teenagers—were what he needed, to keep him grounded in the present time. To make sure that he went to bed at a decent time, that he didn’t drink enough that it was impossible to keep his food down, that he got out of the house and stood in the sun for five minutes, that he answered his phone calls promptly. They were the ones behind the scenes, cleaning up the workroom, ordering the servants in the master’s absence, turning away the women from the manor so that he could work without distraction.

However, after the war his madness reached its apex. Irons had no trouble figuring out why: there was nothing to keep his attention. The war had been his sole focus for years, taking up every moment of his days and nights. He’d focused all that pent-up lunatic energy on it, his wild eyes bloodshot as he led England to victory. But now, there was peace in the valley. He’d locked up *that thing*, putting him as far underground as he could. Walter had been packed up to Oxford for a proper English education. The Cook had softened up to him enough that he got a click of the tongue and a slap on the wrist rather than a heated cursing. Richard, the younger brother who’d lived—as they’d thought at the time—a normal life, had left for an extended tour of Europe and Asia that kept him away for years.

But it was more than that, too. Arthur Hellsing had looked up after World War II and found himself with no one and nothing. His father had died years before, during World War I. Van
Helsing was rotting properly in the ground, and had been for decades. Their friends had all hitched up together: Robert had willingly succumbed to the determined wiles of little Marie, Penwood had netted himself Katherine/Kitty/Kate—though why he’d wanted her was as much of a mystery as why she just as eagerly wanted him. Even he’d gotten married to that upstart Marjorie, who had somehow just seemed more tolerable after nearly getting himself killed with her during a blitz.

But Arthur… Arthur was alone.

He tried to fill the void with more booze, more smokes, more women. Walter came back from Oxford much less of a little bastard than he’d been, and there was always the Cook. Even Richard sent the odd postcard now and again, more for civility’s sake than any real brotherly affection. It was fine, but they weren’t good enough stand-ins for what he really wanted. Irons hadn’t ever been sure that Arthur knew what he wanted in the first place: otherwise, he might have procured it for himself. None of it was ever enough.

Not until that day.

Irons remembered it so clearly. He was there with Walter and the Cook, and Penwood. Arthur complaining that he had no use for a child, that it probably wasn’t even his, that the woman—Irons had never caught her name—was a liar and a cheat, that he didn’t want to be a father. Penwood sighing and mopping his forehead, Cook giving a nostalgic cussing that the child was his and he was going to take it, by God, or be in his grave before Christmas, Walter huffing in the corner. Katherine coming in with the bundle, Arthur protesting that they could have been lying about the dead mother. Katherine shoving the bundle in his arms, her eyes on fire with righteous indignation. Arthur never could stand up to her; even Penwood had him beaten at that.

The silence, louder than any noise could have ever been.

The moment Irons had clapped eyes on the baby, only a few weeks old, he’d known that it was a Hellsing before he’d even known the gender. It resembled the only picture he’d ever seen of Arthur’s mother, the doomed Lady Hellsing. But even more than that, the eyes were what did it. Those same piercing eyes, the eyes of the babe’s father, grandfather, great-grandfather, and probably back farther than that. The skin was dark, but the hair on its head was Arthur’s own light blonde.

“Your daughter,” Katherine announced with a soft hiss that spoke of her remaining anger.

“My daughter?” he’d echoed.

“We’ll take her, if you don’t—” Penwood hadn’t had to say any more. It was no secret: Arthur’s illness, a silent killer floating in his bloodstream, that would weaken and make him susceptible to the figure of Death hovering over his shoulder. Perhaps it would have been best, for the baby to have gone to Katherine’s plump arms. But Arthur had stared at the baby, and the baby had stared back just as quietly and solemnly as any adult might have.

“Walter?”

“Yes, sir.” Walter had stepped forward, his mouth pursed in disapproval at the ‘bastard thing’, as he’d taken to saying at the mere mention of this out-of-wedlock creation.

“Walter? I think…” Irons had watched the change slide over the madman’s face just as clearly as a bucket of water thrown over his head. “I think this is an integral moment in my life.” He’d been holding it at arm’s length, but he oh so carefully pulled the bundle to him, nestling it—the wrong way—in his arm. “I think… yes. Integra.”
“Integra?” That had been the Cook, her tone full of nearly hysterical incredulity.

“Integra Fairbrook—Walter, what was mother’s maiden name?” The entire time, his eyes hadn’t left the child’s serene face. “I forget.”

“Wingates, sir. But I don’t think that Int—”

“Integra Fairbrook Wingates Hellsing. That is her name.” He looked away then, his eyes zeroing in on Lady Penwood. “I know nothing about raising a child.” For the first time in Irons’s memory, Arthur Hellsing had looked frightened.

“Let me have her, Arthur.” The anger had been replaced by gentleness. “You’ll die before she’s grown. You can still be her father, but Shelby and I will raise her.”

“You’re… her godparents.” He had looked to Penwood for approval. “You’ll take care of her… but after I’m gone. Make sure nothing happens to her. And Walter will help you.” Walter hadn’t looked thrilled at the idea of helping.

“But, Arthur—.”

“No.” He’d pulled her tighter to him, out of reach of Katherine’s questing hands. “She’s mine; I—I’ll learn how to care for her.”

He had, and suddenly his madness had been focused first on raising her, and then on surviving for her, as long as he could. Irons had seen him one last time, after Penwood had called with Katherine crying at the sight of him—Irons hadn’t realized how much she’d loved him until that moment, even with all the boozing and carousing.

He’d gone to visit, and if the madness hadn’t still been shining out of those tired blue eyes, he’d have never known it was Arthur Hellsing.

“Kitty’s going to look after her. Penwood’s a damned fool if he tries to hold her back. I’m the damn fool for not letting her be more in her life.” Arthur was quiet, and that in itself had frightened Irons more than anything else, even the hospital equipment bunched around the bed. “I shouldn’t have asked her to stay away.” It was one of the few things Penwood had put his foot down on, Irons knew. He made Katherine obey Arthur’s wishes, even if the man regretted them now.

“Arthur….”

“I don’t want to go. I’m not ready to go.” He’d pointed weakly to a picture of the two of them. Irons picked it up for him, looking at the pretty young woman the baby had become. “She’s everything to me… who’s going to love her once I’m gone? Richard’s her legal guardian, but I know he doesn’t love her. Not the way I do.”

“Well—”

“I know Walter cares for her, much more than I ever expected him to. And Cook dotes on her like a little pet, but… Irons, she needs someone to love her. I can’t stand the thought of her living in a world where no one loves her. It’s… hard.” He wasn’t sure if Arthur meant the thought, or that he knew from personal experience how it felt to be alone. Both, probably.

“Kitty will do that, too.” He’d taken the frail hand in his own, feeling the cool fingers with an alarm that only came with impending death. “She’ll smother her in affection if she gets the slightest chance. And we’ll all watch out for her. I promise that as a Round Table Knight.”
“I know.” He gave a wheezing, coughing sort of laugh. “Promise me you’ll protect her, Irons. Promise me on my grave.”

“I promise you. I’ll protect her with everything I have.”

It was that promise that had him driving—or being driven, rather—to the Hellsing manor. Integra had been ignoring emails, phone calls, letters, and he was frankly sick of it. The one fault of her being raised by her madman of a father was that she adopted many of his mannerisms, avoidance being just one of them. But if a face to face meeting was what needed to be done, he’d do it.

The gala hadn’t been a proper place to discuss such topics. But now that everything had settled, he was once again ready to raise the discussion of this farce of a marriage she’d gotten herself into. Penwood had been too soft on her, from the looks of things. He’d said that he’d spoken to her about it, but Penwood still looked at her and saw the child he’d grown fond of after his best friend’s death. He loved her in his own way, and that was his downfall. Irons, however, held no such attachment. He felt no pain at crushing whatever asinine ideas she’d crafted for herself about such a match.

As he dismounted from the car with instructions to the driver, he looked around for Walter. Usually the man was already at the door, ready to greet. Slacking, it seems. That youngster shouldn’t be showing his age just yet. He walked up the stone steps, even stepping into the foyer without a proper greeting. My, my. So much for the Hellsing Organization being ran as a tight ship. He looked about at the men moving from corridor to corridor, his eyes narrowing on their blank stares, unshaven faces, wrinkled uniforms. They moved like zombies, each following the other in chains as captains with bloodshot eyes and loose skin moved their platoons. A ghost ship, more like. Is there an illness running through the ranks? He fished for a handkerchief, more than ready to clap it over his mouth at the first sign of disease.

“Sir Irons!” Ah, here he was, the negligent butler. He looked all the worse for wear, with his disheveled clothing and extra wrinkles. “A thousand apologies, sir. I had no idea you had scheduled a visit.” He bowed, his back cracking audibly.

“I haven’t scheduled one. Tuck your vest in, man,” he ordered sharply, motioning with his cane. “You look as bad as you ever did in Warsaw.” Walter looked down at his body as if seeing it for the first time.

“Again, I beg your pardon,” he said smoothly, fixing the vest. “I’m afraid Sir Hellsing isn’t expecting visitors, so I’ll go and——”

“No need, Walter. I’ve shown myself in, and I know good and well where the office is. I’ll show myself there while I’m at it. You can make yourself useful and prepare some tea.”

“Of course, right away.” He hurried off, his bones creaking and snapping until he turned the corner. Irons ignored it, walking up the stairs and down the hall to the main office. Rapping sharply on the door, he let himself in without waiting for an answer. It always did good to establish dominance with Integra early, so that she had neither time nor opening to gain an upper hand.

However, the words he planned to speak died on the tip of his tongue when he caught his first glimpse of the office. Standing in the threshold, his mind sought for an explanation and came up with the only solution: Hellsing blood really is mad.

He hadn’t seen this sort of carnage since Arthur’s heyday, when Walter was out fighting the Nazi forces and couldn’t be home to clean up after his lax master. On every surface, in every corner: stacks upon stacks upon stacks of paper. Arthur’s portrait hung at an angle, shifted to the side by a
mountain of books that had partially collapsed. The bookcase, by comparison, was relatively empty of volumes and instead held folders, their contents spilling haphazardly and fluttering with the central air. The two chairs—well, he remembered there being two chairs—were buried. One even held an old tea tray, the liquid covered in a disgusting film and the toast dried with the greased appearance of having been once buttered.

There was barely enough of a path to suggest that the desk’s occupant rose, even infrequently, and left the cavern of documents. The chair was immoveable, the space behind and to the sides filled with carts crammed to the brim with books and papers. If the computer had not been producing a dim, greenish glow, he’d have been unable to find it thanks to the long scans of maps and codes that were draped across the top of the CRT screen.

Sitting in front of the screen, hunched at an odd angle with spectacles falling down her nose, he found the woman he was searching for. He saw the telltale signs of sleepless nights in her face, the sharper cheekbones that suggested improper nourishment; he needn’t get a good look at her eyes to know they were bloodshot with strain. For a moment, he saw an overlaid image, like a photograph with double exposure: Arthur, staring not at a computer but at a propped-up book, a drink in one hand as he wrote with the other. He blinked and it was gone, just the daughter staring at the screen with her hands poised to type.

“Whatever it is, Walter, just leave it,” she muttered in a hoarse voice, eyes never leaving the screen as she let her fingers rest on the keys. “I’ll see to it later.”

“A-hem,” he cleared his throat, feeling as though it were needed; his irritation was sticking just behind his Adam’s apple… or was that bile rising at the faint stale odor from the tea tray? What else was buried beneath this hoard? He poked tentatively with his cane at the base of what he assumed was one of the chairs, moving papers about and fully expecting a rat to come scurrying out from beneath it. She acted as though she hadn’t heard either rustling or throat-clearing.

“Sir Integra,” he greeted in a louder tone, taking a step closer. His knees hit a pile of papers and they slid down across his shoes. “What on earth is the meaning of all this?”

“Sir Irons?” She seemed to doubt her own ears, looking up with the expression of a prairie dog peering out of its hole. A momentary bewilderment ran across her face and was quickly hidden by a mask of indifference, one hand leaving the keyboard and sliding into her breast pocket for her cigar case. “I… forgive me, but I don’t recall seeing your name on my appointment sheet.”

“Most likely because it’s hidden beneath this rubbish,” he replied snidely, kicking the papers off his left foot. They stirred and slid everywhere: beneath the desk, across the tile, under the bookshelf. “I came to ask what game you were playing at by avoiding my summons, but I see why you haven’t answered your phone. It would take you longer to find it than anyone would care to stay on the line.” She opened the cigar case, found it empty, stared a moment, and then returned it without a word. Once it was safely in her pocket again, she raised her eyes to him and looked him over twice before speaking.

“Well. As you can see, I’m quite busy,” she said coolly, turning once more to the computer and ignoring his blatant chastisement. “So if you don’t mind, please make an appointment and I’ll be sure to be properly prepared.”

“Will you?” he asked, tapping on the desk with his cane. She looked back up at the noise. “From what I’ve seen outside your office door, you won’t be prepared for much of anything. Even Walter is affected by this…” The word madness lay on the tip of his tongue and he pushed it back. It hit too close to home, and he’d rather wished that she be the one to break the cycle of insanity in the bloodline. “This lack of proper order,” he finished instead.
“I’ve sent the emails regarding the impending danger and what measures I’ve put in place to handle the threat,” she answered in a tight voice, tapping harder at the keyboard. “You had no objections to my order then.”

“I had no way of knowing how far you would carry it. This is something I’d expect more of your father,” he admitted imperiously. “But even your father had the sense to know that overworked men march straight into the grave.” There was a sharp intake of breath and she straightened, jaw working before she pressed her lips together in a tight line. “I had come with the hopes of making you see reason about this… union of yours. But I see there are worse troubles to be dealt with: each in its own time, as my father used to say.” The chair twisted, bumped against one of the carts, and jostled its occupant. She remained unruffled, resting her forearm on what little of the desk it would fit as she smiled impatiently up at him.

“And what will you do? Force me out of my office? Call Her Majesty to complain about my behavior? Or will you reach out to dear Aunt Kitty to shout at me over the phone in the hopes that I’ll tuck myself into bed like a good little girl?” He nearly lost his calm at the seething tone, but swallowed the anger and stood tall in the face of her derision.

“It’s true; I can do nothing to stop you personally. You can work yourself to death and I can do little but stand at the sidelines,” he admitted, before rapping his cane against the ground. It hit the tile with a dull thwack. “But I am still the leader of the Protestant Knights, and I can do something about the rest of this.”

“You—you wouldn’t dare,” she swore, standing and squaring off against him.

“The safety of Englishmen is my priority. Even if those Englishmen are the ones who work beneath you.” Their eyes met and he stared evenly into those same blue eyes he’d known nearly all his life. “I’m sorry to interfere this way, but you leave me with no choice.”

“Sir?” Walter stood in the threshold, the tea tray in his hands. His eyes widened at the state of the office, but if he thought anything in particular, he held his tongue. “Sir,” he began again, “what—”

“Excuse me, Walter.” Irons brushed past him and down to the foyer, his eyes scanning the walls and tables. He found what he was looking for hanging just inside an alcove that separated the foyer from the hallway. He took the receiver from the phone, clearing his throat again before dialing the same sequence of numbers he’d watched Sir Integra dial for years during Round Table meetings.

“Attention.” He heard his voice doubled and echoed out of every phone and intercom system on the grounds. “Due to unforeseen circumstances, the Organization is closing early and will remain closed for the duration of the weekend.” The men and staff in the foyer stopped, some of them still on the stairs or hanging onto the railing of the second story as they paused to hear. “You will be given paid leave by virtue of Her Majesty, but you have exactly one half hour to prepare to leave the premises. The Organization will recommence normal scheduling on Monday. Direct all inquiries to your immediate commanding officer. Have a pleasant weekend.”

Immediately the mumbling of men rose into a combined din as they questioned each other, obeying the orders and throwing questions at their captains, who were just as clueless. As he watched, the blonde vampire came up from below and consulted briefly with another captain before shrugging and issuing orders, pointing and directing men away from the main foyer.

“You don’t have that authority!” Sir Integra flew from the office faster than he’d ever seen her go before, eyes blazing as she hissed her words so that no one could hear. He stared calmly back, taking in her heaving breast and clenched teeth. She seemed ready to throttle him, and it was amusing enough that he had to force back the smile that threatened to cross his lips.
“I most certainly do,” he replied after a moment, arching a brow as Walter came to the edge of the alcove and waited with his fingers pressed to his mouth. A shadow fell across him as the Vatican dog came from seemingly nowhere to peer over the butler’s shoulder, looking inside with faint interest. “Two days of rest will only be beneficial for your men, and it will give you a chance to catch up and clean up, if you insist upon working.” The dog gave a slight cough at this, but wisely held his tongue. Irons glared at him, nostrils flared, and got a stoic, steady gaze in return.

“Insist upon working?!” Integra sputtered, puffing like an angry hen, “You saw my paperwork!” Her hands (trembling slightly he noticed: low blood sugar or stress?) gripped at the lower ends of her hair, tugging in a grounding sort of way. He saw her wince, only just, as her scalp protested. “What else would I bloody do with my time?” She glanced at the men, who were stuck between filing out the door and waiting for some further order or perhaps a command to belay anything they heard and get back to work before they were fired. “And you, the last person in the world who I’d expect to condemn a person doing their job!”

“Falling into disarray and dragging an entire company with you was never your job,” he countered evenly, taking a step closer so that he could lower his voice. “Need I remind you that little over a year ago, your misstep caused the death of nearly all your men and allowed two vampires to swarm the building with their Hoard of Ghouls?” Her tongue worked in her cheek, but she remained silent. “And think back even farther, if you can: one slight err of Walter’s nearly had you killed in this very house. Thank God you were able to fit in that air shaft in the first place; if you hadn’t…” he trailed off, hand gripping the head of the cane as he remembered how close he’d come to breaking his promise to Arthur.

“Sir Integra?” She turned as the blonde vampire called to her. For a moment, everything was still as she faced her men, who looked to her for the final orders. “Is everything—” She looked from one face to the other, her scarlet irises both weary and puzzled. Still, she faltered with a sideways glance at the men, her shoulders rolling back as she stood to attention. “Your orders, Sir.”

“The caretaking of soldiers falls to their leader,” he murmured to her. He’d said as much when he’d forced her to kill every last Ghoul those two vampires had created the day they stormed the manor. He thought the lesson would sink in if the tumultuous task were left up to her. Perhaps, however, she needed a refresher course. “It is your sworn duty to look after them.” She caught the reference, the muscles of her back tightening as she stiffened.

“This facility is still under your command. If you’d actually read your job description, you’d know that I have to present a case to the Table and Her Majesty before taking over another’s organization. You have the authority to prevent another situation and you will do so, or I will.” He looked past her shoulder to what she could see, what she had to see: platoons of beleaguered men who were committed to fighting beneath her, at the expense of their own health. Men who looked to her for guidance and protection with the unwavering loyalty of a child. Do not prove yourself incompetent once more, Integra. I expect better from you. “If they grow ill and die at the hands of the enemy, it will be entirely your fault.”

“Sir Irons,” Walter snapped, his fingers muffling the sound even as his eyes narrowed. “You go too f—”

“Walter.” He fell silent and turned to look at her. “Go and make sure the dayshift teams know to not come in tomorrow. After that, you’re relieved of your duties for the evening.”

“Sir?” She ignored him, addressing the room.

“Go home. You’ve worked hard enough for one week. We’re all tired and time is short… go enjoy your families.” She took a breath. “After all, we know not what tomorrow brings. Come back on
Monday evening prepared to put in double the effort.”

“Yes Sir!” The affirmation rang in his ears, echoing throughout the foyer.

“Dismissed.” She waved her hand and they filed out the door, their apprehensions eased, however temporarily. She turned and stood before him, looking him over once more before speaking directly to him.

“Sir Irons,” she began in a low voice, barely audible over the diminishing clomping of over 200 pairs of military boots. “Do not presume to stand in my house and overstep my authority again.”

“Sir—”

“I am not finished.” She took a step closer. “I have seen what they’re going to be up against, and even that is not the tip of the iceberg. Those were the lower ranks.” Her words were bemusing, and she must have caught the confusion in his eyes. “Sir Penwood has lied for me, Sir Irons. Go and ask him for the full story; tell him he may tell you on my authority.” She smirked. “And after this is all over, you may do as you like. Declare me inept, throw me back into prison, consign me to an asylum for all that I care. But as long as something is coming to my home, after one of my soldiers—I will be damned if I’m not at the forefront of the battle, leading my men to victory. Until that day has come and passed, you can take this organization from me once I’m dead and not a second before.”

“Sir Integra!” This was Walter, as equally astonished at her gall as he was at Irons for being so callous towards her.

“What you will not do is try to corner me with the threat that you will take over Hellsing. The last man to do that found himself drained of blood with a bullet in his heart.” Her left hand rose to grasp her right bicep, where he knew the scar from the ordeal still remained. “Do I make myself clear?”

“Perfectly so; now, allow me the chance to do the same.” He drew himself to full height. “I don’t wish to take control of this organization any more than you wish for me to take it. From the first day you were introduced to me, I knew that you were more than capable of handling the burden left behind by Arthur. But I will not stand by and allow you to make decisions that lead to injuries for more than just yourself. I was already too late to stop one.” He couldn’t help but look over at the mistake he was referencing.

“Again with the marriage?” she sighed, rubbing between her eyebrows before adjusting her glasses. “Sir Irons, if I may say: you can stand in this alcove until Judgment Day, but I’m not getting a divorce. You pressured me to be married, I married. You asked me to settle with someone, I’ve settled. The only thing you’ve asked for that I haven’t done is have a child, and that’s more a lack of proper timing than anything else.”

“I didn’t mean—”

“If you had someone in mind, you might have called out a name the day you brought it up and saved us both trouble. It wasn’t going to be Sir Penwood’s son; that much you ought to have known even before talking to me about it.” Her nose crinkled. “I’d rather marry a pond smelt as I would that flabby prick. No, I’ve married someone that—as insane as it sounds—I’m not unhappy with.” Here the dog’s brow creased and the shadow of a laugh crossed his stubbly face.

“Happiness is irrelevant—there’s still a breach of security and your own safety to worry about!” He noticed the blonde vampire hanging around the foyer, eavesdropping with a surprising lack of propriety. He wondered if she were listening in for that thing, which hadn’t surfaced yet. Putting it
out of his mind for the moment, he waited for her answer.

“He’s been here since the fall, Sir Irons.” She gestured vaguely in the air. “Where’s the security breach? There’s been more than enough time and chances. I’m not always at home, and my office is relatively easy for someone with his powers to infiltrate. Where are the Vatican forces? Certainly not knocking down the battlements.”

“Biding time.” He ignored the eyes boring into him.

“Ah. Well. No time like the present.” She turned to him. “Alexander… go ahead and kill me.”

“What?!” For the first time in nearly twenty-three years, Sir Irons choked on his own words.

“Might as well give him the golden opportunity, don’t you think?” she said mildly. *Lack of sleep has addled her brain!* Walter’s eyes were wide, but to Irons’s amazement he hadn’t immediately leaped forward to protect her. Was he just as shocked, just as addled, or… did he care? The blonde vampire looked bewildered, mouth hanging open slightly as she watched Integra back against the wall, hands slightly away from her sides. There was no way to reach for her gun without everyone seeing and having enough time to react.

“S-Sir Integra!”

“Go on,” she ordered, nodding at her behemoth of a husband, who was standing with an emotionless mask on his face. “Do it, if that’s what you’ve been planning.”

“Ye sure?”

“If I’ve misjudged that grossly, I deserve to die,” she replied with a smile. “Go on.”

“Aye.” There was a flash of metal and before Irons could move, the whistle and *thunk* of a blade meeting the wooden paneling of the wall. He was afraid to look, and yet his eyes automatically moved from the Scotsman to Integra. She stood without flinching or blinking, hands falling to her sides as the bayonet quivered just above her head, sitting neatly between the part of her hair and millimeters from her scalp. Irons couldn’t believe his good fortune.

“He missed!” Integra barely turned her head, regarding him out of the corner of her eye with a slight smile.

“He never misses,” she corrected, and he was shocked to hear the—pride?—in her tone. “As you can see, even Alucard didn’t bother showing up to deflect the blade. If he knows that I’m not in danger, why can’t you see it?” At the name, the blonde vampire slipped through the floor in a swirl of shadow and he wondered if she was going to search him out. He looked to Walter, who hadn’t moved from his spot.

“I made a promise to your father,” Irons muttered with a shake of his head, a last ditch effort to make him listen.

“To be fair, Sir Irons…” Her smile broadened. “I like to imagine that my father would been overjoyed in my choice of a husband. Don’t you think?” She turned her head fully and he saw the ghost of her father’s good humor shining in her eyes. “The worst I could do, in his eyes at least, is settle down fully.” He opened his mouth to argue, but in the back of his mind he heard his old friend’s hooting laughter, saw the transparent ghost of the man he’d been before growing infirm.

*What do you think, Irons? He keeps her on her toes, and I don’t doubt she does the same for him! He can shoulder his way through sheet metal; isn’t it grand!?* There was a familiar, pungent odor
of spirits and smoke that lumped in his throat, choking him, and for a few seconds he was absolutely sure that Arthur was standing behind him, preparing to clap him on the shoulder and shout in his ear.

“Sir Integra… there is a danger in deciding upon many of the things your father would have liked,” he said gingerly, picking his way on the thin line between respecting the dead and stating facts.

“I know.” She stepped away from the wall. “That’s why I only make the best decisions.” Words were lost to him, his mouth drying out and mind still tumbling over the bayonet, the order to kill, the state of her rooms and her men, the vampires and the memories of the past. He felt his years and twisted his top hat to sit more firmly on his head.

“I see arguments are lost on you,” he declared finally, working his jaw. “So I’ll say nothing more on it at present.” He moved between them all, using his cane to steady himself on the small step leading back from the alcove to the foyer.

“Sir Irons,” she started, but he put up a hand.

“I wish you all the luck in your upcoming endeavors. Any aid I can offer, you need only ask for it and it shall be given. And… for your sake, Sir Hellsing….” He turned back to her, seeing once more the superimposed shadow of her ancestors lying in layers over her face. “I do hope you’re right.”

Chapter End Notes

Afterword:
This chapter killed me. I’ve been writing it since… God knows how long, but I don’t. I feel like I repeated myself a lot, so please forgive me if that’s the way it looks. It was neat to write for Sir Irons though, and I wanted to make him—not more sympathetic, per say, but to have a better reasoning why he feels the way he feels, especially in regards to Integra. He’s not above putting his foot down, but he also chalks a lot of it up to the fact that ‘she’s a Hellsing’, and they’re a weird lot anyway.

I do feel like H: TD Arthur would have enjoyed seeing his daughter making waves in the RTC by marrying someone like Anderson. I can imagine him staying out of it and just laughing about the trouble it put everyone else in while he pours extra liquid into his tea and makes Walter bring him something to eat. Also, I couldn’t think of much else of a reason why he’d saddle the poor child with a name like Integra. Who does that?!
Chapter Summary

Horrors can come in all shapes or sizes, sometimes even across the sea.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

She ran.

There was nothing else she could do. She couldn't hide forever. Someone would get suspicious, hear a noise, see a scrap of blue skirt peeping from a grate, perhaps realize that industrial air ducts were the perfect size for a petite girl.

There was no way for her to dodge a bullet in such a narrow metal prison.

She stumbled through the halls, her shoes slipping on the dusty stones of the dark, dripping basement. She shouldn't know the way, but something like instinct aided her and she never paused for more than a single breath at the many intersections of the labyrinth that stretched on into the dark, thirty meters below the surface of the earth.

Anger festered in her breast, misguided anger directed at the ones she loved who had forsaken her. Who'd left her alone in the house with a man she'd only known a fortnight, if that, and his loyal cronies. The maturing, rational half of her brain protested that the separation was temporary, that no one would have willingly left her in any danger, that Walter and Cook would be back sooner rather than later from their grocery run and would stop her uncle in his tracks. But she was only twelve, small for her age and frightened of joining her father prematurely in eternal slumber.

Rational thought was beyond her at the moment.

Anger at him, too—a guilty, hurting anger that clawed heavily at her insides and made her scorn herself. Why had he allowed Walter to contact dear Uncle Richard in Berlin, and have him brought back here? Why had he assured her that she would be safe with him? Why had he left her all alone… when she still needed him…. Tears pricked her eyes and she swallowed them back, her hand pressed against the damp walls as she began to pick her way through semi-darkness. Fear tightened in her gut, her mind transforming the cool walls and endless hallways into the steps leading down into the bowels of Hell. Still, she had no choice but to move on. Death might await her ahead, but it surely awaited her behind.

How could the smartest man she knew, the smartest man in all the world, be so deceived? Was it because he was his younger brother? She knew, or at least Walter had told her, that her father hadn't spoken to his brother for nearly twenty years. Ever since he'd been picked as heir to the Hellsing title. She didn't understand the particulars, but somehow Richard had been angry because he'd been passed over, though her father had been both elder brother and rightful heir. But despite being aloof, he hadn't seemed altogether evil when she'd first been introduced to him. And yet here she was, and here he was, and hopefully they were far away from each other by this point.

And no marvel; for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light.
She recalled her father saying those same words, when he was still able to teach her and made her attend self-made classes like "Religious Studies". His voice, dulcet and smooth as he read over the same scriptures that the parson read on Sundays. But unlike the parson, his voice held a certain quality that kept her attention, rather than nearly force her mind to wander.

She was unable to sniff for fear of alerting someone to her presence, but she leaned back against the chilled brick and wiped the tears from her cheeks as silently as she could. The thought of his voice hurt her more deeply than a bullet could ever hope to go, but she was afraid that if she didn't remember what he sounded like, it would fade until he was lost to her forever.

There was a sound, a soft scuff of shoe against stone, a whisper that could have just as easily been a draft. She froze, and then forced herself to move again, away from the sound and further into the belly of the basement. Her palm scraped against the stone, cutting the tender flesh; she bit her lip until she tasted blood, tangy iron mixing with the salt of her tears. The unmistakable sound of a handgun cocked, echoing loudly. A death knell. Her knees shook beneath her.

*Integra, if the time should ever come... when all other hope is lost...*

Her father, in his illness, had been unable to move for nearly a week before his death. Surely he sensed the inevitable, even if everyone had kept a hopeful countenance around him. He'd lost some of his mind—no, that was untrue. He had always been as sane as ever, even after his wasting shell of a body had him bedridden. He'd lost his calm that last week, and had her called in at all hours of both day and night.

She realized now that he'd been trying to tell her everything he could think of, using up what breath he had left before it was taken from his body along with his soul. His words, once so stoic and reasonable, had sounded harried and insane. His face had been a mask of urgency, his eyes imploring her to take heed and soak in every syllable. She'd often leaned over the bed to hear him better, her trembling hands steadied by the firm mattress.

*If the time should ever come... when all other hope is lost...*

*The time is now, Father. I have no other hope. Nothing is coming to save me, unless you're allowed to come back. Please come back....*

*If you should find yourself surrounded, with your enemies closing in—*

She slipped on the stone, unable to catch herself in time. The sound rattled down the hallway, and the footsteps took on a newer, steadier beat. The scream rose in her throat, but stuck halfway.

*Go to the last cell of the deepest dungeon of the estate.*

She turned another corner, redoubled in her effort to be quiet. They could still take the wrong path. But it was highly doubtful at this point. She was sure he could smell her, somehow, or sense the disturbance in the musty air permeating every facet of the hall.

*There lies one of the Hellsing family's darkest legacies.*

Only one of the darkest legacies. She didn't want to know any others. She didn't want to know that there were dark legacies in her bloodline. Perhaps her uncle was one. Perhaps Hellsing blood was tainted, like a Hapsburg.

*It will be the instrument of your salvation.*

She smacked against the brick wall, face to face with stone and mold. Her hands searched, her eyes
seeing but not believing. There should have been a door. Where was the door? Turning, she pressed back against the bricks as footsteps grew closer. A body turned the corner after her, pausing as it looked her over. It was thrown in shadow, but she recognized the silhouette of the hair, the angle of the nose, the limbs and general features.

"Seras!" Something akin to relief bubbled within her, temporarily stopping the panic welling in her at the absence of something that should be but wasn't. "Agent Victoria, you have to help me!" She'd shunned her aid earlier, but now she wanted nothing more.

"I'm sorry." The words took her by surprise. "But I can't."

"What?" The question choked her. "Seras you—you have to. My uncle, he's—" She was interrupted.

"I can't." The figure stepped in light and she threw her hands over her mouth, muffling the sound that finally, \textit{finally} couldn't be held back. It was Seras, the Seras she knew, but where there should have been chest and skin and blue uniform there was a gaping hole. Seras took a few tottering steps towards her, and she could see the stringed remains of a heart, a collapsed mass that might have been a lung, bone and gristle and blood, too much blood, black in its quantity….\textit{S-Seras—}" Bile rose in her throat but her hands left her face, reaching out with her back still pushed as far against the wall as it could go in aversion to the mess in the young woman's chest, spilling down her white tights, splattering with sloppy sounds on the floor. "Let me help you, let—Seras, what—" The body slid sideways with a step, shoulder hitting the wall as scarlet eyes watched her without judgment, contempt, or accusation. She was dying, nothing could stop it, but she wasn't going to blame her for it. "Seras!"

"Sir." Suddenly she wasn't twelve, but three and twenty. Her uncle turned the corner, but it wasn't her uncle at all. It was Sir Irons, holding the handgun steadily with it aimed between her diaphragm and stomach.

"I'm sorry to interfere in this way," he said with his usual indifference. "But really, you leave me with no choice." Her eyes were torn between watching Seras slide further into a puddle of her own blood, or watch him cock his old fashioned gun and aim it at a place where she wouldn't die immediately if he shot her. The stones dug into her back and she stumbled forward, losing her last hold on where she was. Only her feet on the ground were solid; everything else wavered as if caught in a heat wave.

"Sir Irons, you don't have the authority!" The words left her mouth, but they were meaningless. You didn't need authority to shoot someone. Where was her uncle? Where was the door? Where was she at again? Seras's body hit the floor with a wet squelch and she sat, still watching the scene unfold passively as her life fluid gushed out of the sizeable hole.

"I most certainly do," he replied, his free hand reaching up to adjust the glasses on his nose until his blank blue gaze was hidden from her. She reached behind her for the wall, finding cloth instead. Turning, she saw a cross and her eyes traveled up the chain to see Anderson standing behind her.

"Alexander…" He took up most of the hallway, looking down at her with a silent sort of pity. Once, the thought of her pleading with him for anything would have been utterly shameful and too much to bear. But… notwithstanding this wavering world where she was unsure of everything, at some point between their first meeting at this moment, all that had changed. Now, now— "Alex, \textit{please…}"
"What should I do?" He ignored the other two bodies, staring only at her.

"I-I don't know. Something."

"Ye do know. Say it." There were two steps, in quick succession, as Irons moved forwards. She looked over her shoulder to see him stopped at the edge of where Seras's bloody trail began, re-aiming to a point on her back. She turned back to him, resisting the urge to twist her fingers in his clothing and shake him like a rag doll. She didn't want Irons to see her frustration, yet—did he not see what was going on?!

"Protect me, you git!" The words burst forth, ringing loudly in her ears. There was a smooth chuckle and then she gasped as the gun fired, her eardrums protesting. She waited for the split-second of numbness before the agony of the bullet, but there was nothing except immense warmth pressed against her back and cold stone to her front. Irons dropped the gun, a wound-down automaton.

She twisted and moved around to stand before him again, smiling triumphantly at Irons, who merely watched. Turning, she waited for the hole in his stomach to close. And waited. And doubted. And panicked.

"Alex?" He laughed again and the blood came heavier. "No, no, no..." No longer caring about who was watching, she pressed her hands against the wound, trying to staunch it. The liquid, as warm as the rest of him, flowed between her fingers and stained her gloves. "This isn't right, none of this is right... don't—stand up!"

He leaned back against the wall and she followed, glancing at his ashen face before trying to yank his shirt from his pants. If she could get to the wound itself, perhaps she'd have better luck. But his belt was too tight, or her hands too shaky and slippery with crimson, and he was slipping farther down the wall the harder she tried. Her heart hammered, tears again pricking her eyes—of helplessness this time.

There was another, softer chuckle in a different tone. She looked up to see not her husband, but her father.

"What did you expect, Integra?" he said kindly, his withered hands covering her own. "You can't save any of us, you know."

"But I'm trying!" she protested feebly, still pressing with all her might. "Father, I'm trying!"

"No matter how hard you try, you can't save us."

"No, no..." His hands grabbed her shoulders, shaking her. Or was she the one shaking?

"You can't save us. You can only watch us die."

"No!" Her own shriek startled her so badly that she tried to sit up, finding herself lying on her back. Something—no someone—was holding her to the mattress. Her left hand fished beneath the mass of pillows for her emergency handgun, her right pushing and clawing in an effort to escape the hold. For the quickest moment, her confused mind had her thinking that her captor was her uncle. "Let—let go!" she grunted.

Even before opening her eyes, she knew it had to have been a nightmare. As the blind panic passed and she came back to herself, she took stock of her surroundings. She was in her bedroom, where she'd retreated after Sir Irons's departure like a dog running to lick its wounds after a battle. The large hands that held her firmly, but obediently released her when she asked, were not the delicate
piano fingers of her uncle, but the broad, calloused ones of her husband.

Despite knowing this in one part of her brain, she couldn't put herself to any certain point in time and lay back on the bed, head spinning. She felt woozy and her stomach churned, bile rising in her throat as adrenaline pumped through her veins. She pushed him aside with more strength than she thought herself capable of possessing, stumbling out of bed and making a beeline for the washroom.

The room was steamy with his recent bath, and she avoided the puddles near the toilet, opting to lean over the sink instead while deciding whether the scant meals of the past few days were going to stay in their proper place. Her palms pressed against the sticky marble of the counter as she looked at her reflection in the fogged mirror, face white as though she were the one bleeding out.

A dream. It was only a dream. She swallowed, running a hand through her hair and shivering in the mix of shower-warmed washroom air and the cold creeping in from the airy bedroom. It didn't help that her hair was damp from her own shower not—she checked the misty clock—three hours ago. Her nightgown was twisted around on her body, and it took a few good tugs to yank it back into position.

*I was probably shouting and thrashing all over the place... damnit.* She felt her cheeks burn, grateful that the soldiers hadn't been around to hear. If she'd done that in her office... what humiliation....

Habitually, she reached out to Alucard's mind to make sure that he hadn't noticed enough to cause her problems. Often, she had nightmares that ran in accordance with his own, but it was early enough that he was still awake. Her cursory glance let her know he was out somewhere, talking with Seras. Their jittery, incomprehensible language was going at full force, his staccato at odds with the slight lilt of her quick responses. Together, it made a wild symphony of white noise. She wondered what they were discussing.

Taking a deep breath, she decided that she wasn't going to vomit after all. Suddenly, only the warmth of her bed seemed a proper comfort and she left the washroom, fingers automatically rising to flip the light switch as she passed the threshold.

"Well?" Anderson had been standing at the vanity, looking at his reflection in the taller mirror with a frown. His reflection eyed her before he turned, arms crossing.

"I had a dream." She walked back to the bed, pushing her hair off her shoulders. It always felt so heavy, even when it was merely damp. *I'll be glad when the weather warms up; it's so cold in here.* Or perhaps that was just because she was in a cold sweat."I'm fine now." It wasn't the full truth, but she was in her bedroom, safe, and that was the *fine* of it. "It's nothing."

"Was it?" She ignored him, crawling under the bedclothes and drawing them nearly to her chin. She relaxed against the pillows with a muffled sigh. He was quiet, so quiet that she was surprised to find him still in the same position when she opened her eyes.

"What?"

"Was it nothin'?"

"Yes." She closed her eyes obstinately. "I dreamt of my uncle, and he doesn't frighten me." This was also leaning more towards the side of untruth, but in such a way that she didn't consider it a lie. Her uncle wouldn't frighten her *now*, however much he terrorized her back when she was a child.

And in her dreams, he was only as harmful as she let him be. This was a fluke, a pure accident
borne of over exhaustion and lack of a good meal.

"Yer uncle." There was a creak and she nearly jumped; she hadn't heard him cross the room. Opening her eyes again, she watched him as he sat on the edge of the bed, elbows on his knees and fingers laced. She could imagine him in that same position while listening to confessions, or schooling the children of the orphanage. She sat up, slightly wary for reasons she didn't know. "He never… ah… hmm." His eyes cut to meet hers and she knew, without him saying, what he meant to ask.

"No. God, no." She felt a sudden revulsion. At least it wasn't that. Thank God it was never like that. "He only tried to kill me."

"I know the vampire killed him."

"No, I did." He turned his head to look fully at her, confusion drawing his brows together. "I shot him, but Alucard drank his blood afterwards. Waste not, want not, I suppose."

"How old were—?" She thought that he'd heard that story at least once before. But maybe it wasn't as well-known as she'd thought.

"Twelve. I would be thirteen in autumn." She looked down at his hands, clenched tightly together. He was… angry?

"Where was everyone!?" he demanded fiercely. She shook her head, and his forehead smoothed in response to her sad smile, eyes widening.

"There was no one else," she stated truthfully. "There was only me." Her right arm throbbed and she lifted her hand to it, feeling the outline of the raised scar through the sleeve of her gown. He shook his head. "If Alucard hadn't woken… it would have been too late." Another shake of the head, this time bitterly as his lips pressed together. "What?"

"It's hard to think o' that."

"Alucard actually being of use?" she laughed. "Yes, I think it was actually a mistake. If my uncle hadn't been overconfident—"

"No." She paused, surprised.

"What, then?"

"To think o' someone hurting y—a child."

"He wanted my title. I wasn't a child to him. I was another obstacle in his way." He didn't answer. "It might have been the first time I was in that position, but it certainly wasn't the last. Even now, that vampire is coming to my house and will destroy it, all in an effort to reach Seras."

"And what will ye do." His brow furrowed again, jaw working.

"I'll fight, of course. Seras is my employee. She has as much right to be safe within these walls as anyone else, so long as she obeys the rules." She paused, thinking. "And Alucard would fight, whether I ordered him to or not. Her own troupe as well. It's better that we fight together as an organization."

"Ye willnae fight."
"I'm not afraid of the front lines." She smiled. "If my duty calls me there, I'll go support my men as their commander."

"No."

"No?" To her surprise, he turned away with a huff.

"I meant… I meant yer men ought to be enough. Ye should stay in the back. If the leader is wiped out first, they'll lose their morale before the fight begins."

"Well, I agree to that." She lay back again. "I don't plan on leading the charge, if that's what you're worried about." His tongue worked in his jaw and then he stood, scratching at his stomach. Her eyes fell on it and the image of blood, pouring from a wound that could not be staunched, floated in her mind. "Come to bed," she insisted quickly, blinking until the image faded. "It's late, and you'll be getting up for work soon."

"Not goin' to work tomorrow." He rubbed at his wet hair. "Audit day."

"Audit… day?"

"Aye. Ye know… when they check yer records to make sure ye are no' spending the money for no good reason."

"Let me guess: your records aren't good enough?" He laughed dryly, climbing onto the opposite side of the bed and flopping onto his back. She felt her rear leave the mattress with the force of it.

"My records are… nonexistent." He met her inquisitive stare and grinned, somewhat sheepishly. "My secretary's been on maternity leave this quarter. Any receipts I had are long gone. I'm no’ stepping one foot on Italian soil until they give me the all-clear."

"The accountants?"

"The Iscariots."

"That's… actually rather pathetic." He shrugged. "We're never getting a joint account."

"Ye say that, and then spend the money on helicopters ye dinnae need."

"I never said I needed them. I just like them." He smiled, taking off his glasses and tossing them carelessly to the side table. They fell off and he grunted, nearly rolling off the bed to pick them up and place them more neatly. She watched him, her eyes following the trace of the large scar from his eye down towards his chin. It sat so unevenly over his jawbone… she wondered if he'd broken it at some point.

"How did you get that scar?" He opened one eye.

"Which scar?" He cleared his throat. "If ye've never noticed, I've several of them."

"You know which one."

"I thought we were goin' to bed."

"I just said to come to bed, that's all. Quit deflecting the question." He muffled a sigh through his nose, staring at the ceiling.

"When ye tell me yer nightmares, I'll tell ye mine," he answered gruffly.
"I told you; I dreamed of my uncle."

"Quit deflecting the question."

"You never asked one."

"Integra."

"Alexander."

"Fine, fine. Can ye tell me what yer uncle was doin' in yer dream?"

"He was trying to shoot me, of course. Before he turned into Sir Irons."

"From earlier."

"I suppose." She picked at the bedclothes, running her nail under a loose seam. "I've heard that dreams are the brain's way of picking through the day's memories and emotions."

"And then?"

"And then..." she paused, feeling strangely hesitant about admitting that he was in her dream. "And then he shot the people that... that I care about instead of me." She picked harder at the seam, undoing the threads stitch by stitch. "My father was there, for example. I woke up after that."

"Hmm." He shifted. "Nothin' else?"

"No." She didn't want any Freudian discussion about it. She already knew what the themes were. They were so blatant that she was almost disgusted at herself for dreaming something so blasé. Poor Integra Hellsing worried over her own inferiority, the little mortal. She didn't want him prying into it, either. "Now. Tell me where you picked up that scar."

"I gave it to myself."

"Clumsy."

"No." His voice was hard. "Not clumsy. But also... no' exactly intentional."

"I don't understand." He took a deep breath, bunching the shirt over his stomach in his fist.

"I killed myself. Or tried to. But I missed."

"You—how?" She stared at the scar. "When?"

"September 15, 1949." The date was familiar. She'd seen it somewhere. Wracking her brains, she could only see the vague outline of a document.

"But—" she stopped, not wanting to ask. He turned to face her, eyes daring her to speak the question in her mind. "Why?"

"I saw... a vampire. And his God-forsaken Ghouls. It was either become one o' those things, or die. I chose to die."

"But you're you!"

"Not back then." She stopped, pieces falling into place.
"You mean, when you were—"

"A human." She pursed her lips.

"I wasn't going to say that. You're still human."

"I'm a Regenerator."

"You're a man." She yanked the rest of the thread out, drawing up the fabric. She tried to smooth it down, but it wouldn't go back to the smooth puffiness it had been before. "I was going to say 'When you were a soldier'." He nodded.

"Aye."

"But suicide is a sin against God."

"I didn't give two fucks about God back then." She nearly flinched; to hear him say that—*him*—was almost as absurd as Walter jumping through the door with a Cockney accent. "Wha' had God ever done for me? God let Sean die. He let me starve on the street when there were no jobs. He gave me the pride that drove me away from my home." He laughed, the tone flavored with bitter remembrance. "My thoughts were far from being with God. They were with Ma. She was the only thing I felt regret towards at the time, because I didn't want to think o' her hearing tha' I'd gone and gotten meself killed in the damned war."

"Who… who was Sean?"

"He was my one friend." He shifted again. "We were always together, once I made it to Edinburgh. It was his idea to join the army, to make some extra money. We always wasted what little we made at the odd jobs we found. I was always good at cards; that was our rent money. Any extra went to drinks and cigarettes… women." He sighed. "He died in my arms. Scalped by a German shell. His helmet was the only thing holding his brains in, in the end." He saw the look on her face and winced. "Sorry."

"No. No, I want you to tell me." Now it was his turn to make a face. "I know I've told you things about Father, but you've never mentioned your…people. Your old friends, your parents. What they look like, what they were like." She thought a moment. "Well, you *did* say your father gave you the ring…." She turned it on her finger, staring down at the antique silver.

"What's to tell?"

"Your mother. What was she like?"

"She was like any other ma, I suppose." He shrugged again. "Worried, nagged… shouted until I did as she asked. Kept Da from running me into the ground when I was in a mood. Cooked, cleaned, and yelled at cheatin' peddlers. Cried when I came home, cried when she thought I were dead, cried some more when I came back again." He bit his lip. "She'd have liked ye," he added quickly, clearing his throat. "For doin' the things ye do."

"What do you mean? Running an organization?" A progressive woman in that age might have liked her, indeed. He shook his head.

"No, no. I mean yelling at me when no one else will. Tellin' me to get off my sorry ass and quit moping." He looked away. "Bringin' food and all o' that. She'd have liked knowing tha' someone out there was still making me do what needs to be done."
"Taking care of you." He looked back, brow creasing.

"Aye… I suppose." They sat in an awkward silence, until she flipped her hair over her shoulder with a short humph.

"You shouldn't get used to that. It was really Walter's job. I was doing him a favor, since Cook asked."

"Walter wouldn't have shot me in the head for acting like a fool." She tried to smile.

"No. He's better than that."

"It was needed." The silence grew again, until she finally lay against the pillows once more.

"Alex?"

"Hmm."

"Do you regret it?"

"The shooting? It's no' the first time someone's taken a bullet to my head, ye know."

"No, I mean the suicide." The bed sheets rustled as he turned over, facing her and worming his arm under one of the closer pillows.

"Sometimes. But if things had gone differently… I wouldnae be here. I'd have ended up a Ghoul." He touched his unmarred cheek thoughtfully. "If I could do it differently, I might have shaved first."

"I'm being serious!"

"So am I," he countered calmly. "But I would never take back becoming a Regenerator. It restored my faith."

"I'll accept that." She closed her eyes.

"Dream of pleasanter things." She felt something brush her face, but when her eyes opened it appeared as though he hadn't moved a muscle. "Goodnight."

"Don't get up early tomorrow, unless you plan on going to work. You need your rest, too."

"Yes, Ma."

"Pssh." He turned onto his back, preemptively kicking the blankets down past his hips before throwing an arm over his eyes in his normal sleeping position. She watched him another moment, feeling oddly… calm. "Goodnight."

"Mhmm."

"It's just that everyone worked so hard." Seras yanked the brush through her hair, glaring at her reflection. The shadows curled slowly up the walls, mingling so that she couldn't tell where Alucard's ended and her own began. She half-reasoned that his jumped just as quickly for her needs as hers, though there was no way it could be possible. He couldn't read her mind anymore, unless she let him. Maybe it was in much the same way that she just felt him, knew his needs and read his emotions even before he could act on them. It had never crossed her mind that she might be just as
easy, if not easier, for him to read.

Even now, he lay staring at the lid of her—their?—coffin. She had no way of knowing whether or not he was paying attention to her tirade, but that was nothing new. She was used to speaking to 'the air', as it were, and taking it for granted that he either was listening, or he wasn't.

"I don't know. It's not my place to say anything, because I wanted someone to interfere with what she was doing. Just not someone like that. I was hoping maybe Father Anderson could… y'know, preach her to sleep or something." She waved her hand in dismissive circles. "But either way… she's working too hard, right?"

"Police Girl." So he was listening, this time at least. "Practice what you preach. The sun's already risen; you've been talking for hours."

"I'm not tired."

"I can help with that."

"I'm serious!" She twisted the chair around to face the bed, resting her elbows on her knees, head in her hands. "What's wrong with me?"

"Where should I start?" She pursed her lips. "Seras: for a blonde, you enjoy over-thinking even the most mundane of things."

"Your master literally putting her head on the line was mundane?" She snorted. "Wow, I must have my head up my canon more than I thought; I'm missing out." His eyebrow twitched along with the corner of his mouth, the precursor to an actual, almost human smile.

"Come to bed, over-thinker. Give your brain a rest, so that I can concentrate." She scoffed.

"On what? The dents you've left in the lid?" She pointed to the dings and scratches gathered over the years from his long limbs. He rolled his eyes, an expression she was almost certain he'd picked up from her.

"I'm concentrating on the Hand of God, readying to cross the sea." She paused. Hand of God? Oh, he said that in the library too, didn't he?

"I didn't know you were in tune with the divine, Alucard." He smirked, sensing her joke but not taking the bait for the second time.

"It advances before the dark hoard, but just barely. Perhaps it will be of use, perhaps not. Depends on when it arrives."

"I can't believe it." He looked at her, arching one brow. "You do care."

"What are you talking about?" She stepped towards him, hands on her hips. If he knew where it was now, and where the enemy was, he must have been keeping tabs on them for some time. And here she'd been, thinking that he was entirely nonchalant about it. Of course an ulterior motive would be to anticipate the upcoming fight, but it was sweeter to think that he'd been watching Báthory just to make sure she was at the least advantage to hurt his lover. "I know that look," he growled after a moment. "Breathe one syllable about love and I'm going to hang you upside down from the highest battlement."

"You're not going to indulge me?" She stretched, cat-like, and crawled over him. "Even if there's something good in it for you? I thought you war types were all about opportunistic gain."
"Now where'd you hear a thing like that?" he muttered, passively allowing her to straddle him, hands tangling in his short hair and tilting his head to expose his neck. "You've been studying up on me? Don't try to nail me down as one type."

"Ooh, I'm enthralled in the mystery." She pinched his cheek and laughed when he frowned up at her in annoyance. "You're cute when you get all defensive."

"I'm not defensive at the moment, and while I've been described as plenty of things, cute is one of the rare few that I don't agree with."

"Well I think yo—" she broke off with a loud yawn right in his face. "You are."

"You're tired, Seras."

"I'm not!" She yawned again, barely muffled this time. "I mean, not terribly." To her surprise, he rolled her off of him, shadows branching out into the third dimension to switch off the light. She blinked in the sudden darkness, feeling him shift beside her as he placed one hand behind his head, the other finding her stomach in the dark and resting just beneath her pajama top.

"If I'm cute, you're tired. Sleep now."

"Telling me to sleep instead of ripping off my clothes?" She pressed both her hands on top of his, the lukewarm seeming to leak onto her skin even through the glove. "Who are you, and what have you done to Alucard?"

"Don't get used to it." He shifted again, a pensive, calculating note in his tone. "You'll need your full strength very soon. Fucking can wait until the enemy is vanquished."

"Hmm?"

"Police Girl, for the—" She felt his shadows jab her in the side, but she ignored their prickly irritation.

"Hmm!"

"Sex can wait, and the Devil take me for a fool the minute I decided to make you a vampire."

"He did, trust me."

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Chapter End Notes

Afterword:

Wow…. Another late update…. But we're really getting to the end now! It's been a many-years journey in progress, but the finish is in sight!
On the fifteenth day of March, Seras awoke early.

Moaning softly, she turned in place, sheets catching around her ankles. She kicked them off, rubbing her eyes. From her internal clock, she could guess that it was probably around two o'clock; she couldn't hear the loud rumble of the changing guard above her, a sign that the night crew hadn't arrived.

She lay quietly, gathering her faculties. The coffin was warm from their combined heat, miniscule as it was. The air was almost damp with it, sticking to her skin like perspiration. Beside her Alucard turned onto his side, shifting with a light snore as the veil between waking and sleep thinned. She pressed her forehead to his chest, resting her forehead over his motionless heart, and he stilled. For a long moment, all was calm.

At the back of her mind, an idea wriggled and plucked itself into being. All was not calm. She blinked, stretching her arms to the lid of the coffin as though she could push through the thirty meters of foundation to reach the foyer. Her mind did reach, powers branching up, up, up until they encompassed the whole mansion.

Despite her gut instinct, everything appeared to be peaceful. The men were either on their lunch break or at work, dull thuds echoing down the halls from the training facilities, heartbeats and words mingling with footsteps in her mind until they were indistinguishable from one another, a dull roar that signaled normality. Sir Integra was in her office, keyboard clacking as she typed. Walter was in the kitchens with the Cook. She'd felt the squeeze of holy power in the back of her mind when Anderson left in the morning; the absence of his heart, powerful enough to overshadow anyone he was near, let her know he hadn't made it home yet.

Why, then, was she feeling so queer? She rubbed at her face with her hands, and an idea clicked in her mind. Taking a deep, slow breath so as not to wake her bedmate, she reached even farther. She went beyond the four walls to the roof, where a bird settled down onto its nest, where a falcon soared overhead, large wings barely missing the south battlement before it headed towards the forest. Beyond the forest, where animals rustled through underbrush or dug beneath the dirt, heading through the old cemetery, dodging pine boxes and decaying bodies as they dug endless tunnels towards nowhere.

Beyond the city, where the never-ending bustle caused a headache unless she pointedly ignored it. Beyond the shore, where she could feel the sunlight shimmering over the soft, smooth waves, where the fishermen and dock workers stretched their meaty arms over their heads as they thought...
of coffee and work, of the sky and the sun and the surf all at once.

Beyond even the ocean, her mind stretching far, farther, farther, to the edges of her imagination and beyond, to places she'd only heard of in her lover's stories, in television documentaries, in the winding radio tales that she and Walter loved.

She reached, and she searched.

She didn't know what she was searching for, other than the vague idea of it. Her mind jumped from place to place, guided by others, other vampires: some on the move, heading for England. Some already there, thinking of home and somehow guiding her in a way she couldn't explain, but still understood as something vital, some power that she could tap into, but others could not. She'd asked Alucard if vampires had a hive mind, and he had understood her question, even if it was off the mark somewhat.

She stumbled upon a storm.

It was like a typhoon, a hurricane of emptiness that spread out and out. The vampires avoided its center, filtering along the edges and either slowing or picking up speed to get out of the way. No one seemed to want to venture into that slow, frequently-stopping, yet steadily moving mass. So she went. Well, her mind, anyway.

Her eyes flew open.

Evil. It wasn't run-of-the-mill evil. It wasn't the vampiric vicar who had killed her evil. It wasn't Alucard's 'I do as I please and damn the consequences' evil. It wasn't rogue vampires' immoral, malevolent evil. It wasn't Ambrose's iniquitous, vicious, insane evil. They paled in comparison: the vicar was a bothersome gnat, Ambrose a pitiable basket-case, Alucard a morally ambiguous gentleman.

It was so much worse.

She considered herself to be of at least average intelligence, enough to have a wide vocabulary. But she didn't have a word for what this was. No wonder 'immortals' avoided it like a plague. It made sense now; it was a void because where it went, there was a lack of life. She couldn't pick up individual human heartbeats from such a distance, nor hear the same quiet night/day sounds that she could closer to her home. But she could still feel their absence.

She thought of Ambrose, of the creatures he dared to call 'girls', as though they were something remotely human. She thought of Erzsébet, of the woman she'd seen on the path in those last dying days of autumn. It seemed too long, now, since she was walking the streets of Liverpool with Alucard, worried only about an unusual influx of Sirens in the area, and the future marriage of her master's master.

A lone, silent tear slid down her cheek.

Your men will die, Seras Victoria. It's up to you to decide if they die in battle under you, or on their own. Her hand fisted in the fitted sheet, fingers whiter than death against the pale cloth.

They will not die under me. I won't allow it.

Báthory was coming, and bringing an army of something worse than evil. The entire manor was in peril for their very souls: she was sure of it. Her men would fight for her. The soldiers of Hellsing would fight for her. Sir Integra, Walter and even Father Anderson would fight for her. Alucard would fight for her. They might fight, but they weren't going to die. Not for her. She felt a rush of
stubborn determination.

Come on, then. Come across the ocean and try to take my life. I dare you. I'm driving the stake through you myself, even if it takes me down with you. Even if it kills me.

Consigning oneself to die was an odd rush of emotions, both sad and happy. A relief that the fear of death was seemingly vanquished, grief that the world would move on without knowing what had taken place, anger that this was what it came to, and resilient indignation that forbade turning away from the basic facts of the matter.

She didn't want to die. But for them… she would.

"Alucard." Her lips moved against his skin, and she pulled back far enough to watch his face, expression softened as much as it would ever be by sleep. "Alucard." His eyes slid open, half-lidded and blinking once, twice before his chin dipped and he looked down at her.

"Seras, it's already morning," he murmured, an edge to his voice betraying his irritation at being roused. "Go back to sleep."

"They'll be here by midnight." He seemed uninterested in whatever she was saying, his eyes already sliding shut. She pressed a hand to his chest, unwilling to bother him further by poking a finger between his ribs like she normally would. Just the tips of her nails dug into his skin, a reminder to stay awake. "You should tell Sir Integra. They need time to prepare." He mumbled something under his breath, in a language she didn't know. "Alucard." His eyes opened fully this time, prompted by her louder voice.

"Police Girl, as much as I enjoy your screaming, now's not the time." Good, he was finally awake. Grumpy, but awake.

"They're coming," she said again. "They'll be here by midnight, if not before." He blinked again, but this time his gaze settled over her head, staring at nothing as he ventured forward the way she had, his mind sliding across oceans and forests to the far shores of Europe. She waited until he came back to her before speaking again. "You should warn—"

"I just have." His tone was crisp and brisk, ready for action. Seras pulled back, back, back from the ocean, the port, the city, the forest, all the way to Sir Integra's office, where the typing had stopped. A sudden flurry of activity sent Walter from the kitchen on a beeline to the second floor. "She's called Walter," he explained needlessly. "And the priest," he added after a moment. He paused, listening to something she couldn't hear. "She's thinking that the dayshift should sleep here, and the nightshift should come in early to set up preparations."

"That's a good idea. We planned for a night battle, but being prepared by sundown is really our best option, don't you think?" He didn't answer, stretching as best he could in the shallow space, arms tensing as his back arched from the bed. She hit the button and they rose into the light. When they had both blinked the dark spots from their eyes, squinting against the relatively dim light of the bedside lamp, he finally twisted around enough to sit up, propped on one elbow.

"You're calm, Seras." He looked her over. "What's new?"

"I've made my peace." She paused, not wanting to mention her thoughts. "With everything," she added, a broad enough generalization. "It's going to happen. I'm ready now. I wasn't before, but… I'm ready now," she repeated with a nod.

"Hmm." He stretched again as the coffin lid raised to its highest point, arms over his head. "It's
never a good idea to bring reservations to the battlefield. You do right by getting rid of them."

He made to stand up, but her hand was still on his chest and she pushed him back to the mattress. One brow arched and the beginning of a smirk began to twitch at his lips. "And here I thought you'd be the last person to—" She cut him off with her fingers, brushing over his mouth and quieting any smart remarks.

"Just let me." He frowned, tickling her fingertips.

"Hm?" She shook her head.

"Just… let me—I want—" She slid a leg over his hip, shifting them both slowly enough that he didn't notice, didn't protest when his back was flat to the mattress. She reached deep inside her, past her mind, her memories, deeper than their extinguished bond, than her own emotions, all the way down to the very core of her being, where her power flared and flickered, a darker flame diminished by the glowing blaze of her, of the—soul? essence?—that was Seras Victoria. She faltered, only a moment, before realizing that yes: she could do what she planned.

With a flick, not unlike a finger tapping a light switch, she doused the flame. It burned still, quiet embers smoldering and smoking, but the largest part of its glow was gone. She felt herself drop, somehow, out of the room, her shadows fading and perception dimming. She fancied that her eyes lessened, her senses dulled, and she knew that she was as human in that moment as she could ever hope to be again. A thrill of fright went through her at the thought of herself pale, alone, her warm shadows missing and her powers nearly nonexistent. She took a breath, reminding herself that it need not be this way forever, that she could just as easily rekindle the flame and bring it back to full blaze.

Alucard watched her silently, eyebrows jumping when he saw her shadows vanish, felt her power lessen and hide deep within her. Her face hovered over his, scarlet irises glowing not with vampiric ability, but with her own special light, staring down at him without a word. She leaned down, tracing the lines of his face with her fingers until she angled his chin, asking him with those expressive eyes to follow her, to do something she wasn't sure he'd ever tried to do before.

"Police Girl…" he breathed from barely parted lips, faint traces of confusion lingering around his eyes. She smiled at the moniker, touched her forehead to his, still silent even as her mind was awhirl with convictions. She knew, in that deep chamber that housed her, what she wanted to say to him. The emotions she wished to convey. But somewhere between that place and her mouth the meaning was lost, mangled until no words could properly give meaning to something that, in essence, should have been so simple.

She had resigned herself to die, while they lived. While he lived. Alucard was infinitely stronger than she, had more aces up his sleeve, would most likely not die from someone as twisted as Báthory. If she were to die, to leave him here in this world alone, without her….

I want you to feel it, just this once. I want to let me show you.

She could not die while he remained in doubt.

She kissed him softly, a bare movement across his lips, urging him with her aura alone to join her, to give up that last defense and meet her not just as a vampire, but as himself. She nearly cried with joy when she felt the change, the shiver of trepidation as the power she knew to be his, and had felt from her earliest days at Hellsing, blinked once and was—not gone, but barely noticeable. The body beneath her shifting, shadow and glamour and falseness falling away, leaving nothing behind but what had always been there.
She leaned back into her previous position, opening her eyes to stare at the change beneath her. He looked the same, for the most part—she expected this, and wasn't surprised—other than a weight to him that hadn't been there before. A new broadness to his shoulders, a thicker trunk, more taper towards his waist and less endless bone hidden beneath a red coat. He had muscles now; muscles made for hefting weapons, for doing intense labor, rougher skin, calloused fingers catching at her nightclothes.

His hair was longer now, but not the silken wave she'd known him to grow when he was feeling classy. It was thick and tangled, curling at the ends and along the ridges, a messy mop that seemed for the most part a more honest version of his short, wild mane. His chin was squarer, face filled and less bony—minute changes, but she knew him well enough to see them. And... a mustache? She blinked, not wanting to call attention to the changes lest he decide to go back. A mustache, as well as the beginning of a full beard scattered across his jaw. The eyes were the same, though; it was still him, only more of him, somehow. Something that he kept hidden, that he chose to do away with in order to have the thinner limbs, the slender face, and the soft, perfect hair. This wasn't the vampire Alucard.

This was... a man.

She couldn't help but smile down at him, feeling his arms reach up for her shoulders, pulling her down with not vampiric strength, but normal strength, a power she could resist—not that she wanted to. She wondered if he noticed the change, felt the barest hint of weakness in his very sinew; if he did, he said nothing of it. In fact, he said nothing at all.

She evaded his kiss, leaning down to rest the top of her head against his chest. His scent was the same; she liked that. She remained there for three breaths, three unnecessary breaths, but if she meant to do this, she was going to do it to the fullest. If love was a human emotion, she was going to dig deep enough to find what human remained in him. If she couldn't appeal to the man beneath her, the man hiding in—fear? bitterness?—behind the guise of a monster, then her love meant nothing.

Either way, she could die with a clear conscience, knowing that she tried.

His hands slid down to her waist, keeping her still as he sat up again. They stared at each other through the tangle of black bangs, and then he grunted as she wrapped him in a tight bear hug.

"Seras." She shivered at the sound of her name, partly garbled through an accent, and squeezed tighter. "What is this?" She spoke, her voice muffled.

"You tell me." He drew her away, his hands on her shoulders until he could look her in the eyes again.

"Sex will wait until after the enemy is vanquished," he reminded her with a surprisingly firm tone, considering his track record for trying to get her in bed. She felt her smile turn fragile, but managed to keep it in place as she pushed some of the wild hair behind his ear.

"This isn't sex," she argued softly, tracing the rough lines of his stubble. His hand caught hers and pressed it to his cheek, as though trying to soak up every bit of emotion from her fingers. When he spoke again, his voice was troubled.

"I cannot." She didn't have to ask what he meant; they both knew too well. Her first instinct was to sigh, but she swallowed it down and instead reached up to place a chaste kiss against his forehead.

"That's alright." She leaned back, still cupping his face in her hands as she studied him. "I love
you." She hoped he understood what she was trying to say; three words, despite being the norm, didn't seem like enough to carry the conviction of her feelings. His lips thinned from a frown into a less harsh neutral line.

"I know this."

"Do you?" She wanted to tell him what she knew. She wanted to look him dead in the eye and tell him that he loved her, too, even if he didn't think it. That he was capable of something more than empty anger, if he just sat down and thought about it. That she could see the fear keeping him from the realization, fear of—of what? What could he be afraid of?

It would do no good to tell him these things, though. It would only cause a row and then they'd be angry at each other, and then if she did die… well, her suffering would be up. But his would only be beginning.

So she simply laid her head against his shoulder, loosening her hold just enough that it didn't bother him, and said:

"Let's stay here for a while longer. Just until the nightshift arrives."

"Very well." She moved back just long enough to yank her nightshirt over her head. "What are you doing?" His sigh was exasperated, eye-rolling, human.

"Undressing."

"And why?" She didn't answer, freeing herself of the silken shirt and tossing it over the clock on her dresser, hiding the time and muffling the ticking. She draped herself back over him, both undressed from the waist up, and sighed against his neck. "You're trying to rouse my desire," he noted, with a hint of disapproval.

"You find me desirable?" she chuckled, tracing over his throat with her fingers. Not so long ago, she'd sunk her teeth into the skin there and gained her freedom. Now she felt no desire to mar the flesh, aside from a barely noticeable thirst in the back of her mind. She wanted to taste, but to taste without the iron tang of blood overwhelming the softer flavors.

"Very," he admitted. "But strength should be saved for the battlefield." She lifted her head, meeting his eyes with a smile.

"Then save your strength." She kissed him, unperturbed when he remained motionless beneath her. "Go slowly." Another kiss, this time to his prickled chin. "Or better yet, let me do all the work."

"You said that before." She hummed, and he closed his eyes, jaw working. "You will not give this up, will you? Not until you have had your way in the matter."

"I'm glad you understand." He shook his head, hair scratching roughly against the pillow.

"I do not understand," he muttered, "but I will indulge." She breathed a half-snort at his words, even as he turned them over and settled her beneath him. Still so stubborn.

"I could have been on top… don't want you straining and losing your strength," she murmured, running a hand through his hand and tugging on it when she had gathered a good amount. She liked his hair like this, she decided, not slippery like his usual long hair or too short to get a handful. It was thick and the curls tangled easily in her fingers, a new texture to associate him with.

"Hah." His mouth moved to her throat and she angled it, fully expecting him to bite down and more
shocked then not when he ghosted his lips over her skin. He nibbled when he reached the join of her neck and shoulder, but she noted the care he took to keep his canines out of the way. *Do you not want to taste blood either, then? That's a first.*

She slipped lazily down the bed, falling off the pillow and laughing when he tried to follow her without moving; he tugged her back into position with a small frown, brow creasing as he fingered the elastic of her pajama pants. She ran her hand down his chest, feeling new nicks that weren't usually there. Peering up at him, she wondered why on earth he would hide his scars. Cosmetic choice? Or did he not pay that much attention? *There's no way he didn't do it on purpose... he's vainer than he likes to admit.* The thought made her giggle again, and he let out a string of more unintelligible words on the breath of a sigh.

"What?" she asked, tracing a scar that nearly ran the entire length of his diaphragm.

"I said: of all the nights for you to decide upon this."

"I don't say 'no' that often."

"That is not what I mean." He raised his head to scowl, making sure that she saw the stern expression.

"What did you mean, then?" He actually rolled his eyes at her, burying his face back into the crook of her neck as his hands rose from her waist, fingers walking up her ribs to reach her breasts. *Trying to distract me? I'll allow it.* She let her breaths ease into sighs as he toyed with her, her hands covering his when he moved too fast and forcing him to slow down. She got a grunt for her efforts, but he seemed content to let her guide him, even when she pulled his right hand up to kiss the edges of his calloused fingers before running his palm over her cheek.

"What now?" she asked playfully, keeping her tone soft. He continued to look at her strangely, his fingers splaying across the left edge of her collarbone. His hand was warm against her skin, pressure heavy as he kept it there.

"I…" A tinge of frustration crept into his tone, immediately dulled with resignation. "I would like… I have the urge to…"

"What?" He grunted, rolling one shoulder. "It's alright. Tell me."

"It's idiotic." He hissed a sigh, accent pulling the syllables even more in his irritation. "I wish to… feel your heart." She blinked up at him, caught off-guard.

"What's so idiotic about that?" she inquired, raising her brows. Her hand fell on top of his, holding it over her motionless organ.

"It's idiotic because I'm the one who stopped it." He pulled his hand away, flexing his fingers as if he could fight the feeling itself. "Perhaps I shouldn't have. It was a lovely heart, with such a fluttering, frantic beat. It was like a little church mouse."

"Perhaps," she agreed dryly, smacking his chest. It echoed with a dull thump, stinging her palm. "But I let you, silly man."
"You let me?" She nodded.

"You asked me, don't you remember?" She made a face, speaking in her best Alucard-tone. ""Do you want to come with me?" And what did I say?"

"Yes." His brow furrowed. "Why?"

"Why what?" He leaned down, scowling into her face as his hair fell over his shoulders.

"Why did you say yes?" For a moment, she was stunned. Many had asked her that very question, but never him and never… like this. Most of the time, she either bullshitted an answer for their sake or just shrugged. Why did you let him? Why didn't you say no? Why did you agree to this life? Sometimes, she didn't know herself. But right now, staring up at his puzzled, angry face, she knew exactly why.

"I just…" She brushed his bangs out of the way, looking directly into his eyes. "I just knew that it was the right choice to make."

"The right—" He cut himself off, mouth twisting.

"You looked me in the eyes, remember? And I saw… I don't know what it was," she laughed. "But I sort of knew, then."

"Knew what."

"That… that you knew how it was. That if I went with you, neither of us would be alone." He still frowned, but it seemed unsure.

"You were alone," he repeated flatly. "Even with those policemen."

"You were alone?" she answered with her own question. "Even with these soldiers?" His eyes widened, and then narrowed as he took her words for teasing. "It doesn't matter now."

"Seras." She reached up, clinging to him and forcing him to steady himself against the mattress before collapsing on her with a growl. She smoothed the hair from his forehead before thumping him there in mock chastisement.

"It doesn't," she said again, more sternly. "What's done is done, and I would do it again if I had the choice. Even—" Even if it still spells my death. "Even if you were just as mean to me the second time."

"I was never mean to you. We're not children."

"You're childish, that counts."

"I am not the childish one."

"You are."

"I'm not."

"Are so."

"Seras Victoria."

"Alucard Dracula." His eyes went wide again before he let out an involuntary snort. The sound,
again so human, caught her by surprise and she grinned, trying to muffle her laughter. A moment later she let it loose, spurred on by the thought of the upcoming battle. If I'm going to die, I might as well laugh while I can.

"That is not my name."

"Dracu-cardigan."

"What?"

"Alu-Drac—uh..." she paused, trying to think. What was his real name? I don't remember.

"It's Alucard, Police Girl, and nothing else." She snapped her fingers.

"Vlad!" He stiffened in her arms, and for a moment she was afraid that she'd crossed an unmarked line. He rolled away from her, lying on his back. To her surprise, his face softened and he blew a breath towards the ceiling, the breeze stirring his bangs.

"Vlad," he corrected, using the proper pronunciation.

"Vlad." It was her turn to raise up on one elbow, peering intently at him. How long had it been since someone called him that? He glanced quickly at her before schooling his expression, his usual mask sliding into place.

"That man is dead," he said firmly.

"I know. I'm looking at him."

"That is not—" She pressed her palm to his lips, mustache scratching against her fingers.

"I want to ask you a question." She waited, but he was content to stay silent until she spoke. She moved her hand to his jaw, thumb brushing gently over the rise of his cheekbone. "What kind of man do you think you are?"

"I am not," he replied simply. She waited for further explanation, staring quietly at him until he sighed, the air tickling her wrist. "I am not a man."

"What are you?"

"Many see fit to call me a monster." He scoffed under his breath. "I suppose they're right."

"No." She wormed her other hand between his chin and the pillow, cupping his face and turning him towards her. "I'm going to tell you what you are, and you're going to listen."

"I will listen," he assured her. But not believe? She pushed the thought aside, catching his eyes and staring into their depths, the hue nearly black in the dim light.

"I don't care what anyone else says. I don't even care what you say. I don't have to listen to you," she reminded him. "I see you, and I know what you are. You?" She held his face tighter, demanding his full attention. "You... are a man." He smiled faintly.

"You would deem me as human, Seras Victoria, if you thought you could get by with it."


"We are—"
"We are vampires." She shook his face slightly, as if she could shake the thought right out of his ear and onto the pillow. "Stop defining us by human standards; it's really hypocritical, isn't it? I'm a vampire, you're a vampire. We're not monsters, not to each other. You just act like a bloody atrocity sometimes, but that's part of you being you."

"I…" He stopped himself, averting his eyes. He stared at the pillow between them, and she could see the argument he was posing to himself written across his face. She let him muse for as long as she could, but the pressing need to get up, to start preparing for battle, to move was beating at the back of her head and slowly becoming a migraine.

"You are a man," she repeated, leaning forward. She smoothed the lanky bangs from his broad forehead, and kissed it. Such an intelligent mind lay below her lips… a waste that he was too obstinate to use it sometimes. "The man I love."

"Would you love me even as a monster?" he asked suddenly, his hand catching the back of her neck and holding her close. She managed to smother her gasp of surprise, holding her breath as he drew nearer. "As a vampire's monster, not a human one." She pressed her forehead to his, laughing at the notion.

"That woman, that Báthory—she is a monster. If you were truly a monster—one hundred percent…." She shook her head. "There'd be nothing in you to love."

"Harry, you're supposed to be sleeping!" The commander turned, waving at her with a grin and clearly ignoring her anger.

"Why bother?" he asked, laughing. "There's too much going on to sleep."

"You're nightshift!" Seras protested, yanking him to the side. "I'm going to command if you don't—"

"Come and see what's been happening," he said, easily changing the subject and throwing an arm around her shoulders. "It's nearly set up."

"But—" Seeing that her protests fell on deaf ears, she sullenly let him march her to the front.

"There aren't any more nightshift out here, are there?"

"Only a few," he promised, pointing ahead. "So, you can see Wallace and Jemison at the gates, sort of? That's the first barrier. It's just like the finalized plans."

"I see them." She did, much better than his human eyes could. The sun was setting, but she barely noticed the prickling heat on her arms; in her eyes, the uncomfortable sting could have just as easily been from the thousands of bayonets being hammered into the grounds all around the house.

Three barriers; that was as much as the Paladin Anderson felt safe maintaining at once. He'd been the one to suggest it to Sir Integra, telling her about the tried and true method invented by his predecessor in the trenches of World War I. Of course, it had been wooden stakes instead of bayonets, but the best plans could always be improved upon by the newer generation.

"Explain it again, Harry. I want to know what you commanders were told." Her goal was fairly simple: kill Báthory with as few casualties as possible, even at the stake of her own life. As the officially unofficial ringleader of the troops, she needed to know that everyone had the same plan.

"Okay: so we're dealing with three barriers here, Mum. Barrier One is three meters out from the front gate on all sides. All the married men have been combined into eight troops that surround the
inner perimeter of B-One, forming a full circle of protection around the manor."

"I want designated check-ups. If one group is down, we need to know as quickly as possible."

"Gotcha. Now, B-One is the weakest barrier. Mostly containment: soldiers in, monsters out. You and the Big Guy are gonna be in the no man's land, right?"

"Right. Now, if the Sirens and the Girls make it past the first barrier?"

"If that happens, junior officers and under make a retreat to B-Two and fight from behind the walls. Snipers, wall units, all that good stuff. Commanders and Senior Officers stay in B-One and hold ground for as long as possible, before making a retreat.

"There's going to be a lot of them, Harry. They'll swarm you."

"If we can pick a good many off before they break the barrier, then—?" He shrugged. "We'll have the godman himself here too, after all."

"What?" Seras stared at him, not able to believe her ears. "I thought Father Anderson was just going to put up the barriers and—"

"No, he's staying. Sir Integra tried to argue with him, but…" He shrugged again. Seras wiggled out of his grasp, looking out at the men hammering down the bayonets as fast as they could go.

"But… why?" She remembered, then, what Alucard said. He alluded to 'the priest' fighting for her, but she had never paid them any real attention. "He doesn't even like me, he—"

"No offense, but I don't imagine he's doing it for you." They were silent a moment, and then Stevenson cleared his throat pointedly. "Anyhow—B-Two is our medium barrier. I'm sure Sir Integra's gonna be up with us in B-One, and we'll have to drag her kicking and cursing if we made the signal to retreat, but hey—better an angry boss than no boss at all, right?"

"Now, the unmarried and newest officers. There aren't that many; if we could fit them in somewhere, we did. But there are some, and they'll be handing out ammo and making convoy lines for the injured." He pointed to a white tent right beside the far corner of the manor. "The doctor and her nurse are there already, prepping for any… how did she say it? *Unfortunate circumstances.* He winced. "Ah, Cook'll be there too, helping out. Guess she did some kind of quick nursey-work in WWII, or somethin' along those lines."

"What if the second barrier gives too?"

"So, if that happens, we're kind of in a bind, but not dead in the water. The unmarried will help move the injured inside the manor, our last defense. We'll retreat to B-Three and hold our ground while barricades are being built inside. Then, we'll do our best to get in the manor and hold the fort. If B-Three fails…" He trailed off. "Well, it won't. That's the strongest barrier. I 'ent even magic and I swear the hair stands on the back of my neck whenever I get close to it."

"It's a lot of protection," she admitted softly. "But is it enough?"

"A'course it is!" Harry laughed. "Why, you and Alucard'll get that woman down in ten seconds flat, if you can get a good swing in!" She smiled, wishing she had even a fraction of his blind trust for herself. She took a deep breath, the scent of the night air cut with the metal of bayonets and static cling of holy magic, leaving an acrid taste on the back of her tongue.

It was going to be a long night.
Chapter End Notes

Afterword:
Bet you fuckers thought I was dead, huh?! (laughs loudly)
No, I was just biding my time until March 15 :3c
You know what they say… beware the tides of starch! Or was it slides of larch?

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