"Z" is a card-carrying member of the badass vampire league, and a steadfast proponent of all things Team Damon. When she shows up in Mystic Falls with a host of secrets and a wealth of information about the events of the coming months, she will shake things up in spectacular fashion and give Team Stelena a kick in the pants. Starts S1
Nadezhda

Drawn by the flickering light of a campfire, I tread on silent feet through the eerie shadows of the trees about the cemetery. Delicately, I balance my weight on the platform balls of my spike-heel boots, as hyper-aware of every crunch of dry grass beneath my cautious step as the predator before me. The menacing stillness of the air about me tells me all I need to know of the lethal nature of the monster across the clearing, and I have no desire to alert him to my presence just yet. His savagery needs little introduction, but the scene at my feet leaves little unsaid.

Pale, limp bodies are strewn about the forest floor in a gruesome tableau. This seems the aftermath of a moment of vicious brutality that would set a human heart to racing in mortal terror, or the squeamish to expelling bodily fluid from every orifice. Still, it’s neither the sight of mutilated corpses nor the distinct smell of burning flesh that so captures my attention, but rather the leather clad shoulders of the single live body among them.

Awakened to my approach by the snap of a careless twig upon a single deliberate step, the killer turns with lethal quickness to glare at my sudden intrusion over a hunched shoulder. The black veins writhing beneath the pallid skin of his face and the blood red lips which part to reveal two perfect gleaming fangs dripping with the blood of his recent victims remind me that this man is first and foremost a hunter. And, creeping silently and unannounced, I am a threat.

So quickly that his body seems to blur about the edges, he strikes. I am forcibly flung through the air with inhuman strength, my back crashing into the tree behind me with such velocity that I swear I hear the crack of my ribs under the onslaught. Rather than meet the earth beneath however, I feel the vice-like grip of a clenched fist around my bare throat and the twin daggers of ice-cold eyes pin me in place.

I stare impassively back as I watch his anger fade to confusion and, finally, a sort of startled recognition across his handsome face.
"Z?"

I smile.

Sliding gracefully to the ground from his slackening grip, I feel a smirk tugging at the corner of my mouth as I cast an amused glance at the gory evidence of his recent activity. Clapping a hand on his upper arm, I respond, "You've really out done yourself this time haven't you, D?"

From the slack look of shock still describing his face, this seems not to be the reaction he expected, though why he should think anything else is beyond me. Has he met me? Then again, I suppose he may still be reeling from the surprise of my sudden appearance. I decide to take this as a compliment. He's clearly so blown away by the delight of my presence that he simply hasn't remembered to be properly excited.

Closing his mouth with the click of clenched teeth, he seems finally to find his voice again. "What are you doing here?" he asks.

I bristle in mock offense, "What? I can't just decide to visit an old friend if not for some nefarious purpose?" He simply stares at me in frank and unabashed disbelief. That's offensive. I'm offended. Really. "I was bored," I say and offer him a flirtatious smile. "I missed you."

"Uh huh," he agrees sarcastically. "And I might actually believe that if at any point in the last hundred years, you had done a single damn thing without an ulterior motive."

I just bat my eyelashes in that comic way he claims to abhor—though I've seen him use it a time or two himself—and smile wistfully up at him. "Yes. We share that," I concede.

He chuckles sardonically, but I can recognize an admission of defeat when I hear it. "You gonna tell me about this diabolical plan of yours or am I going to have to torture it out of you? 'Cause, you know, I've kinda got some plans of my own here and I can't have you screwing it up for me."

I smirk, smug. "Quid pro quo, Clarice."

He sighs and rolls his eyes, but the expression is far more fond than irritated and I know I've won this round. He slings an arm around my thin shoulders and says, "Come on, Hannibal. If we're gonna do this, we're gonna do it right."

"Mystic Falls, here we come."

"Where are you Stefan? I'm trapped at the house. I'm getting really bored and really impatient and I don't do bored and impatient. Now bring me my ring!" Damon growls before snapping the phone shut. Apparently I have missed quite the show since the Salvatore's return. These boys take sibling rivalry to a whole new level.

After liberally dousing the bodies with alcohol—either found on scene or from his own stash, I hadn't bothered to ask—and dragging them into the already roaring fire, Damon had set about haranguing Stefan for his latest failure and making violent threats of murder and mayhem into a stolen cell phone. And that was before we found Damon's fun new toy.

Apparently, one of the teenagers he'd attacked was a prior victim of his and the apparent tenacity with which she clung to life sparked his ever present curiosity just enough to take her home. I am vaguely annoyed at the addition of an unwelcome third party on our little reunion scene, but to love
Damon is to love his impulsivity—even if it is more trouble than it's worth most of the time. It’s usually better to just go along for the ride.

Damon and I have been friends for the better part of the last century, but, as vampires are wont to do, we can hardly have been considered constant companions. We are both rather private and lonely by design, but we trust each other more than most.

The whole thing is very Anne Rice actually, minus the whole moping about hating-my-eternal-existence-thing. No, we'll leave that one to Damon's brother. From what D tells me, Stefan's even more annoying now that he's a bunny snacking Puritan with semi-regularity than he was when he was the Ripper of Monterey. And, believe me, that is saying something.

I've never really known Stefan outside of the—as Damon would say—"cocky Ripper douche" that I met in the twenties, but apparently he's picked up some kind of personality disorder in the last several decades and is now back to being the sanctimonious little prick his brother has complained about for as long as I've known him.

Admittedly, I was a bit surprised at first that Damon hadn't killed him yet with all the yammering on he did about him, but then I realized the one simple truth at the heart of all that is Damon Salvatore: he loves his little brother.

Honestly, loyalty and devotion are two of the most essential traits that make up this vampire I consider to be my best friend. His list of special people may be about 3 names long, but I have no doubt he would kill, torture, or die for every one of them. I like to believe I make that list.

"So, let me get this straight. Stefan's playing High School sweethearts with some boring ex-cheerleader, blaming you for every new and varied drama of his "I'm the good brother" routine, stealing your ring, and locking you in a basement cell to rot, all because you won't get on board with the I-hate-myself-cause-I'm-an-evil-monster-from-hell-see-look-at-the-brooding-forehead-pity party?"

"Pretty much."

"Ugh. What an asshole!" I exclaim, quietly seething at the younger vampire’s treasonous prioritizing of human life over that of his own kind—over his brother no less. Bitch better hope he never meets me alone. "Who does he think he is? Angel?"

He chuckles, no doubt reading the protective rage in my eyes, and hands me a glass of amber liquid.

"So, you gonna tell me what you're doing here in the vortex of all evil or are you going to make me guess?" I ask him pointedly, taking an appreciative sip of Damon's best bourbon. "Because you and I both know screwing with Stefan's never been your endgame."

We are sitting in the leather arm chair to the right of the wet bar, Damon on the seat and me perched on the arm, waiting for the bleeding body on the sofa to do something interesting. Or just stain his precious couch with all that blood still running into the towel around her neck. Not sure which at this point.

"Just wait till you meet the new and improved killjoy that is my baby bro. Then you can tell me torturing Saint Stefan's not worth the trouble," he says with that trademark smirk of his as he gets up to refill his drink.

"Riiiiight…And it has nothing whatsoever to do with the fact that this is your and Stefan's
birthplace—human and vampire—and that there just so happened to be a celestial event here about a month ago that this town hasn't seen since Katherine died?" I ask facetiously. "Come on, Damon. Who am I gonna tell?"

He purses his lips and taps his chin in mock thoughtfulness, "Let me think about it…No"

I sigh. "Fine. Be that way. You'll tell me eventually anyway." And I say this with every confidence.

"Sure," he says patronizingly. I feel my canine snag on the corner of my mouth as my smile turns wry, eyes falling flat as I gaze past his smugly perfect face when his eyes flick away. It's not that I don't understand his need for secrecy—his implicit lack of trust. And I don't mind. Not really. I'd be a hypocrite if I did. It's not as though I haven't come here with my own agenda after all. But still, I have to wonder, does he know?

A groan from the sofa breaks the moment. Looks like things are about to get interesting after all. This seems to call Damon's attention to the girl in question, and the unsatisfactory absorption rate of the towel. Someone should complain to HR: Fails to staunch profusely bleeding wounds.

"Oh, don't get blood on the couch!" he whines. "Please?" God, what a neat freak.

He lifts the cloth off her throat and takes a look at the nasty looking bite wound. "I gotcha good, didn't I?"

I snort.

Damon looks up at me at the sound. He seems a little disappointed. Guess he was hoping for more of a diversion than a nearly dead girl can provide. "Well, you're not gonna be any fun today," he says mimicking my thoughts as he glances back down at her.

It's then I see that telltale glint in his eye. The one that always signals that he's about to do something either extraordinarily entertaining or extraordinarily stupid. Sometimes both at once. Ah, the joys of reckless spontaneity.

With a roll of the eyes that seems to scream 'what the hell', he sighs. "I'm so gonna regret this." And before I can so much as blink, he has bitten into his wrist and brought it to the girl's mouth.

Huh, well that's one way to liven things up.

His eyes fall closed as he tips his head back to rest against the arch of the stairwell, and I watch with interest as the protective mask of sardonic cynicism slides from his face, expression relaxed and open for my perusal. Something about the ease of it fills my chest with uncharacteristic warmth and affection.

It's an honor to be one of the rare few—perhaps the only in fact—to inspire such confidence in the cold-as-ice, tough-as-nails Damon Salvatore. Sometimes I think I'm the only one to have ever seen the soul-consuming chasm of pain he hides beneath that skin-deep shield, all the grief and heartache in his eyes. It's a gift of trust so telling that it sends a sharp spike of guilt right through my duplicitous little heart. But this is one secret I just can't share. For his own safety.

Or so I tell myself.

Damon and I are sat across from each other at the foot of the main stairway with our backs to the
wall, waiting for our new playmate to come down and entertain us. D is really letting this whole 'trapped inside with nothing to do' thing get to him. Things are bound to get interesting.

"Oh, Man!" Vicki calls, clopping down the stairs in nothing but a tank and a pair of pink cotton underwear, long brown hair swinging in the air behind her—perfectly dry. "That shower was so great!"

Catching sight of herself in the mirror to the left, she seems to finally realize the weird in this situation as she strokes her now unmarred neck. Humans. Sigh.

"Hey, what did you give me?" she directs at Damon in slightly fearful confusion.

His eyes snap open, gaze instantly meeting mine with a bemused smile when he catches me staring. His head cocks to the side in a questioning angle, but his attention turns to the confused little human almost instantly as he internally rolls his eyes. Bored and not in the mood to placate her poor human sensibilities, he says, "Some blood. You loved it."

Brow furrowing in surprise, but barely a hint of suspicion, she wonders aloud, "I did?"

Oh, geez. Really, kid? Nothing about this scene seems sinister to you? Why aren't you screaming?

He nods easily, smirk back in full force as the mask reattaches itself to cover the vulnerability of his eyes.

"Wait, I'm confused. How did I get here?" she asks, looking between the two of us.

Damon hops up, all black leather and bad attitude, as he traps her against the wall to my left, bracketing her with his arms. He bores straight into her brain with those blue orbs of his. I can almost see the icy wind tearing through her soft human will. "We met in the woods," he compels irreverently. "You were drunk, I attacked you. Then I killed all of your friends and brought you here. Gave you some blood and you loved it. And now we're gonna party till the sun goes down."

Oh, great. Just what I always wanted! A human pet for a day! How does he always know?

"Ok!" she chirps. "But first, can I have another...hit? That blood was so good."

Great. A druggie. This should be interesting. Damon seems to think so too if the look on his face is any indication.

"Only if I can," his eyebrows say.

She promptly thrusts her wrist forward, followed by the wet crunch of fangs in flesh, and the scent of blood both human and vampire sings in the air. Great, now I'm hungry. In a flash I'm behind her, sweeping her hair over her shoulder. She doesn't even flinch as I sink my fangs into the soft skin of her so recently healed neck, letting the richly hot liquid slide down my suddenly parched throat. Let the games begin.

So, as usual, I was right. Vicki, the drug-addict that she is, has gotten high as fuck off Damon's blood and is presently running around on the floor, dancing like a spaz while telling two spectacularly indifferent vampires all about her pathetic love-life with jock-douche #2 while we sit on the couch making a truly heroic effort to achieve the white whale that is vampiric inebriation.
"I am so over Tyler!" she claims for the umpteenth time. She's told us all about the Greek tragedy that is her love life at least three times since she woke up. If I have to hear one more story about how Reggie Van Dough, Jr. is 'Oh so ashamed' to be with her, I swear I'm ripping out her tongue. "So over him! I mean, I knew from the beginning that I was just a piece of ass to him, but I thought that maybe if he got to know me he might see something more…but no!"

I exchange a look with Damon. Is he getting anything out of this? Can we just kill her already and put her out of our misery? Oh, wait. Vampire blood. Yeah, no thank you.

"Now, Jeremy…That's all he's ever seen in me is more."

And now she's rolling on the floor. Ok, then.

"And I like that…"

Something flickers in Damon's eyes. What was that about?

"Jeremy, huh? Elena's brother?" He asks, affecting a false tone of innocent curiosity.

Ah, I see. More brother torture.

He strolls toward her with a sudden pep in his step. The confident sway in those delicious abs seems to speak of all sorts of diabolical ideas.

"Yeah!" she answers happily. Glad for the attention, I suppose. "So Elena used to date my brother and they were always together, so Jeremy would always be hanging around and crushing on me and—Hey!" she stops mid-sentence as though something just occurred to her. "Why don't you have a girlfriend? You're like totally cool and so hot."

Yeah, he really needed that ego boost, I snort to myself.

"I know," he says, glancing at me with that knowing look in his eye. The eyebrows, the smirk, he's such a cocky son of a bitch. No wonder I love him.

Distracted by this new train of thought, Vicki looks between the two of us as though something truly troubling has just occurred to her. "Wait, are you two…?"

I laugh. It's all I can do.

I should probably explain the absurdity of this question. See, while I am certainly not immune to Damon's considerable talents in the art of seduction, this question hardly ever arises between us. Honestly, we're more like brother and sister—with the occasional incestuous twist—than we've ever been like lovers. We even look the part. Beyond the obvious signs of disparate genders, the only real difference is that my light blue eyes are a stormier hue than his with just a hint enough of grey that in certain lighting they seem almost lavender. Special friends? Sure. Romance? Never.

This seems to satisfy her for the moment. At least about me, anyway. "Don't you wanna be in love?" she asks him.

He takes her hand and swings her out into the parlor. "I've been in love. It's pointless, and painful, and overrated," he answers. I feel the pang of hurt in his voice as deeply as my own. Just one more thing we share. No measure of distance nor centuries’ stretch of time can soothe the burn of heartbreak from a vampire’s chest. It’s a pain we learn to carry as a badge of pride as spit-shined perfect as our inhuman hunger.
"Except, when it isn't," she argues breathlessly, but he's done with this line of questioning.

"Enough talking! Let's dance!" he croons and I turn the music up. He's right. What's the point of eternity if you can't enjoy it? Talking about it is overrated.

To the surprisingly enjoyable tune of Anberlin's "Enjoy the Silence"—I'm not usually a fan of covers, but I can admit when they're done well—the three of us set about wasting the day in drunken (and in Vicki's case 'drug'-induced) revelry. Although, with Damon dancing around in those low slung jeans, shirt open and a half empty bottle of bourbon in hand, this day may end far differently than planned.

We dip and grind our way up the stairs to the second floor. Damon seems to have something in mind as he leads us to what appears to me to be a very lived in bedroom. And from my experience of his tastes, it's definitely not Damon's.

"Jesus! Damon, you never told me your brother was such a packrat!" I shout when the mess that is Stefan's room is finally revealed. "Seriously, it's like an episode of 'Hoarders' in here!" I am rewarded with a genuine laugh from my companions.

He gives me a sly smirk as a no doubt wonderfully awful idea comes to mind. "What do you say we help him out a bit, then? Get rid of some excess garbage?"

"Oh like these?" I say, shoving books and papers off the cluttered desk top.

"Or this?" Vicki throws clothes on the floor.

"All of these?" I laugh as Damon throws an entire shelf of books on the floor.

Vicki giggles and jumps on the bed as Damon and I set to clearing every surface available onto the floor until the room sufficiently resembles an Oklahoman trailer park. Surveying the post-twister wreckage, Damon nods once in childish approval—an impish glint in his eye that brings an affectionate warmth to my own. Fondness floods my chest, followed swiftly by the pangs of future regret. Damn Slater and his meddlesome research skills straight to Hell. Why couldn’t that little twerp keep his discoveries to himself just this once?

As the song comes to a close, and the room fills with the soft timber of an alt-rock ballad, Damon’s attention shifts to the abruptly sullen teenager on his brother’s bed. With a kind smile much too perfect to be genuine, he takes Vicki by the hand, pulling her into a gentle slow dance at the center of the room. Probably noticed the waterworks coming. He may look all sweet and tender right now, but it's just a ploy for information. He may be a love-struck idiot 80% of the time, but you can't say my boy's not cunning.

Predictably, the embrace comforts her just enough to start spilling all about her deep seated emotional trauma. Joy. "My mom spends most of her time in Virginia Beach with Pete. He drives trucks. I don't remember my dad, but from what I gather he's not worth remembering."

"Your life is so pathetic," he says with mock sympathy. He's so ridiculously blunt sometimes, it's sort of amazing. She doesn’t seem to notice.

"Yeah. I mean, I'm the screwed up one. Matt's got it so easy. He's the golden boy. He's gonna get a football scholarship and marry Elena and...have a lawnmower and some babies and...when I think about my future, I just come up blank."

"You are so damaged."
"Yep."

"I think I know what can help you."

"What?"

"Death." Snap! Thunk!

Goddamn it Damon! Damn, your impulsivity!

"What did you do that for?" I cry over Vicki's inert corpse.

He shrugs.

I groan. "You know I'm not taking care of her right? And you sure as hell can't let the Bunny-Snatcher near her. You do have a plan here, right?" I ask though the look in his eye quells any hopes I may have had. You know, just once I wish he'd think this shit through before he acts. Just for a change of pace.

While I sit there in my misery, Damon saunters over to the desk and plucks what seems to be an old photo from the pile of papers. And I mean, like Damon old. I tap my foot impatiently, hoping he'll show me but knowing he won't unless I ask. He's an ass like that. Lost to my curiosity, I flash over to his side to have a look. The picture is labeled "Katherine, 1864", but that's Katerina Petrova.

Fuck.

It's hysterically stupid, but my first thought upon discovery of the incriminating photo is to hide the wretched thing from prying eyes. As though I don't know exactly what this means. Veles, I am such an idiot. What did I think exactly? Katherine just happened to look just like the Katerina of my memories out of some trick of the mind? 8 centuries of dream walking prior to the trip through Damon's mind should have taught me better than that. Then again, maybe that particular self-deception was as deliberate as it should have been obvious. Can I really say I didn't suspect this?

What exactly are the odds I discover the newly minted doppelganger's birthplace is this fucking town, and it has nothing at all to do with the infamously devious Katerina Petrova who just so happens to have a habit of cropping up in my walks through my best friend's mind? Jesus fuck, I'm a liar and a coward. He's going to hate me when this is through.

ADHD sadomasochist that he is, Damon wanders over to the slightly parted curtain with its thin stream of sunlight and decides to experiment with burning himself for a few minutes while he waits for stupid non-plan plan, part 2. Honestly, this guy.

And that groaning now emanating from the previously dead body on the floor signals the rising of our next little undead companion. Double fuck.

"What happened?" she asks. "We were dancing and then—"

"I killed you," he says with a slight smile.

"What?"

"I killed you. You're dead."

"I'm dead?"

"Mhmm" he answers unhelpfully.
"Damon!" I mean, not that I care if she wanders off and kills a bunch of people or—fingers crossed—burns up in the sunlight, but really dude?

"Yeah, well let's not make a big deal out of it. You drank my blood, I killed you, now you have to feed in order to complete the process."

Ugh. What am I even supposed to do with this?

"Look, Vicki, it'll all make sense in a little while. You just gotta hang with us a little longer."

She is disappointingly unconvinced.

"You're wasted," she mumbles and heads for the door.

"You don't wanna be out there all alone." He flashes forward to block her path.

And seeing as he can't go outside in the daylight without his ring, and I can't go—what with my utter lack of caring and all…

I sigh in surrender and cross my arms over my chest to watch the play by play from my vantage point atop Stefan's now thoroughly cleared desk.

"You're about to get really freaky." She seems momentarily confused by the vamp-speed, but like a good little druggie promptly disregards this as a product of her own intoxication and moves to walk around him.

"Look I had a really good time; I just really wanna go home."

Third time's the charm, "You're gonna start craving blood, and until you get it you're gonna feel very out of it. You have to be careful."

"Come on, move." She just pushes at his chest until he begrudgingly steps aside.

He smiles with a defeated shake of his head, but I can tell he's met his mental quota for Sire-responsibility by this point. He's not even trying anymore when he says, "See, you're already starting to fall apart."

"And I'm going home now."

"Ok, fine, I'm just warning you," he says with his hands held out in surrender.

Oh, there's that look again. I roll my eyes, but he's on his own on this one.

"Actually, you know what? You should go. In fact, if I were you, I'd stop by your boyfriend Jeremy's house," he suggests with that sly smirk of his.

"Yeah, whatever."

"Tell Elena I said hi. And if you see Stefan, tell him to call me!" he shouts as she descends the stairs. A few minutes later, the front door slams behind her.

Looking up from where I've been shaking my head in hopeless futility, all I can think to say to him is, "Damon, what the fuck?"

"You'll see," he sings in that mysterious way of his, and I'm ninety nine percent certain that I am going to regret every part of whatever the hell he plans to drag me into next. As certain as I am that
I'll enjoy every damn minute of it.

In the silence that follows Vicki's absence, I have time to fret over this troubling new discovery I've made about Damon's long lost love.

Of course, knowing him as I do, I know all about the Katherine-Salvatore debacle, but never once in over a century has Damon referred to her as anything other than Katherine Pierce and I—stupidly now I’m being honest with myself—never made the connection between the Katerina that had been missing and presumed dead for the better part of the last two centuries and the long-lost love of my woebegone companion.

I don't even know that he knows her real name and the world just got a whole lot smaller and a whole lot more dangerous.

A part of me—the part that really hates lying to Damon—wants to tell him all I know about the Petrova doppelganger and the Curse, the Originals, the werewolves, all of it, but if Katerina really died in that fire like we all thought, why bring it up?

Then again, this is the same girl that was cunning enough to escape the clutches of the single most powerful creature ever to walk the earth and elude him for centuries. With this new piece of information, the puzzle that is Katerina Petrova has become that much more decipherable and some of the idle musings I have entertained on the subject over the years seem disturbingly plausible.

"You've been awfully quiet." Damon's voice startles me from my reverie.

"Yeah, I was just thinking about how we were going to play this out."

"Play what out?" I just give him a look and wait. "Oh, you mean Stefan."

"Uh, yeah," I confirm. "I mean, the last time I saw him he was ripping through throats in Chicago. How am I even supposed to act around him?"

He shrugs. "You're with me," he says like it's obvious.

"Yeah, but I mean, what about your plan and all?"

"Plan?" Again, I just shoot him a look that says 'Really?'

He chuckles, but thankfully drops the act. "It doesn't have to be a big deal. You're my friend. You're here as my friend. That's it."

"And when you make your move…?"

"You back my play."

I smile. That's more like it. "Always."

The senseless urge to cough hits me full force as the strangling fist about my throat falls away, allowing my nearly crushed airway to heal and feeling to return to deadened flesh. I meet Damon’s eye where it dances above me with a smug smirk of my own, watching the long bleeding lines of my own assault as they fade slowly back to ivory white and patterned stains. Unconsciously my fingertips reach for my lips, tongue flicking out for the delicious iron taste of my friend’s lifeblood.
In a flash of vampspeed, I reverse our positions, pinning him flat to the bed beneath my smirking gaze. Damon leers with smoldering heat while I clean each nail in turn, and chase the faint residue up the length of his torso. His fingers tangle once again in my blue/black hair to pull me back to his lips, licking himself from my tongue. I shove him away, laughing, as I turn my attention to refastening the open front of my corset top. Damon growls under his breath, flopping back flat on the mattress and glaring at the ceiling.

I watch shrewdly as his eyes flutter closed and my smile fades away. This long awaited sexual reunion of ours may have been a marvelous distraction, but it's high time we get serious. Especially given what happened tonight.

Damon had left to track down Vicki as soon as the sun went down, but we both decided that it was best I stay out of sight until we came up with a cover story for the rest of the town. Apparently, this was a good move as Stefan almost got himself staked tonight by some Van Helsing wanna-be with a magic watch.

If Damon hadn't turned up when he did, the younger Salvatore would be grey and veiny toast right now. And, of course, since no onemesses with Stefan on his big brother's watch, Damon promptly tore Buffy's throat out, and Vicki completed her transition in his cooling blood. Delightful.

We managed to avoid mine and Stefan’s impending reunion, but that was more Damon's concern for my temper than anything else. My abject hatred of his brother is a well-established fact between us. I'm sure that Damon assumes it stems solely from some overzealous loyalty to our friendship, but this is only a partial truth. I have my own reasons for holding such a deeply personal grudge against the youngest Salvatore—not that I have any intention of correcting him.

For the time being at least, I think that best for all involved.

Still, we decided it would be better to keep such moments to a minimum or, at the very least, ensure there are witnesses. Besides, there are far more important concerns at the moment than scripting the meet-cute between me and Damon's bunny killing brother. For instance, the magic watch.

According to Damon, this means the Mystic Falls Founder's Council is back on the alert and, with a newbie vampire and a human girlfriend to worry about, this could spell trouble for us. All the more reason for a decent cover story, and I have just the thing.

"Absolutely not."

"Damon, you know this is a good idea. This way, I can get you access to the school and the whole Team Stefan gang without you digging up your obviously overworked scary voice."

"I don't want you exposed like that," he argues. "These people are seriously paranoid. They'll be immediately suspicious of an outsider."

"That's what compulsion's for, dumbass."

"The Council is about to renegotiate their vervain supply."

"But I thought you killed your uncle to stop him from supplying vervain. If we just wait a few weeks till it's out of their systems..." A truly horrific thought suddenly occurs to me. "Wait, renegotiate? Why would you give them vervain?"

He waits for me to work it out. "Oh!" I gasp excitedly, slapping his chest. "You're going to infiltrate the Council aren't you?" He winces a bit, but smiles smugly. "Man, I'm glad I'm on your
side," I say as I nudge his bare shoulder playfully.

"But that doesn't mean I'm not right about this. I can help you," I cajole.

The smile slides off his face and I can see the thinly veiled worry that hides behind his cold eyes.
"You could get hurt."

"Damon, sweetie, I'm an 895-year-old necromancer turned badass vampire. I think it's safe to say I'm the scariest thing they are ever going to meet."

He snorts, but that's not a denial. "Yeah, but can you imagine how inconvenient it would be to explain away the deaths of every pillar of the town? I know it's been awhile since you attempted to coexist with humans, but they do tend to notice things like that," he argues sardonically. "And then we have to compel ourselves a whole new Council to replace the old one and that's all just way more effort than it's worth."

"Fine," I shrug. "Then, we just tell them I'm your long-lost twin sister or something. God knows, we look the part."

He hangs his head and lets out a frustrated sigh. Looking back at me, I see the genuine concern in his eyes when he pleads, "Just wait till we get the Council off our backs, and then we can talk about it. Ok?"

"Alright," I mutter begrudgingly. I'm such a sucker for those eyes. Then, with renewed vigor and a sinister smile, I swear, "But if anyone so much as touches you in the meantime, I'll have them kneeling in a pool of their own blood before anyone can lift a finger to stop me."

He knows it's not the humans and their pathetic Council I mean. Memories of blood-curdling screams and a raging fire flash before both our eyes and a single hatefully familiar gaze of forest green. This time, when he smiles, it's the savage malice of 145-year vengeance that greets me and I couldn't be more proud.

Giving him a sharp grin of my own, I grab his face with both hands and pull him into a vicious, bruising kiss that is all tongues, and fangs, and bleeding lips that kick starts us into round 2 of the reunion tour and seals a vow I once swore never to make again.

This moment, this man, are mine to take and mine to keep and I promise myself here and now that no one and nothing will stand in my way.

A few hours later, I huff in frustration at my inability to sleep. After tossing and turning longer than my general impatience can tolerate, I decide to admit defeat and find an alternative solution to my insomnia. Leaving Damon dosing sated and smug in peaceful slumber, I sneak downstairs to the parlor wet bar as silently as I can, aware that in a house full of vampires the slightest disturbance can raise the alarm and I'm not really ready to be reunited with the less fun Salvatore right now.

It seems my luck is as bad as ever though when I approach the drinks' table to find said vampire reposing in a characteristic pique of moral indignation.

He is leaning forward, his chin propped on his interlaced fingers atop elbows digging into his thighs. His overly styled hair peeks over the back of the leather chair facing opposite and the fire casts his profile in sharp relief as he sits there perched like some self-righteous bird of prey. It
seems he was less understanding about the Vicki situation than one might have hoped. Though, of course, that was the point.

I know the moment he senses my presence by the sudden tension I see in his already uptight shoulders, though it's clear by his stillness that he has yet to perceive me as a potential threat. I could take advantage of this oversight, but truthfully I am too tired to engage in such a petty squabble right now. It goes without saying that I'd kick his ass anyway. Instead, I simply sigh by way of greeting and continue my path toward the table and its medley of crystal decanters. If we're going to do this now, I think I deserve to be drunk first.

However, much to my surprise, when I round the corner and enter Stefan's line of sight as I stand before the wet-bar, it's not disdainful recognition that I see in his eyes. It's not recognition at all—at least, not of me.

As I raise my glass in a silent toast to my own confusion, I see nothing but irritation and a hint of self-contempt as if someone has simply confirmed his worst expectations and he is cursing his own stupidity for hoping otherwise. It's a look I've come to recognize over my centuries of life as the look an overly critical father gives his eternal disappointment of a son and I know exactly where this boy learned it.

I realize suddenly that Stefan has no idea who I am and thusly the picture I must seem to him in my borrowed v-neck and Damon's little-used boxers, the blood still cooling on my neck from an earlier love-bite. He thinks I'm one of his brother's compelled happy-meals and has decided to take this latest offense as further proof of Damon's continued depravity. I'm not sure whether to be offended at the apparent ease with which he has forgotten me, or enraged at his complete lack of faith in his brother.

There is no 'good brother' in this scenario. We're all killers here—Stefan no less than the rest of us—and the sooner he accepts that, the sooner he may open his eyes to the truth about his brother and maybe the truth about himself as well. There's nothing I hate so much as a hypocrite, and with a decided clank I drop the glass to the table.

He seems surprised by my outburst and finally looks up to meet my glare, apparently startled by the anger I have no doubt is seething behind my eyes. I close my eyes and take a deep soothing breath, consciously cooling my ire as I decide how to play this. If Stefan doesn't remember me, there may be a valid reason, and I can't risk showing my cards just yet. There was a lot going on in Chicago back then, and I can think of several scenarios in which those memories may have been lost—none of them pleasant.

I force a friendly smile to my face, but can feel the bite in it and know Stefan is not likely to be convinced by the false cheer in my voice when I say, "You must be Stefan."

As expected, he seems rather disturbed by my attitude as well as my knowledge of him, but to his credit he hides it well. "I'm sorry. Have we met?" he asks politely.

"No," I smile. "But your brother's told me all about you." This time the threatening bite of my smile is impossible to miss and again he is appalled.

It occurs to me that I have been presented with a golden opportunity here. I may not yet have a cover story for the town mob, but I can still take a leaf out of the Katherine Pierce 'Handbook to Preserving Your Secret Identity'. With a flick of my eyes toward the staircase, I say, "Call me Natalia. Lia, if you're feeling particularly adventurous." I pause as I reconsider this statement. "Though I wouldn't advise it."
It's not so far off the mark. With the exception of Damon, most of my friends call me Nadia or sometimes Dia anyway. It's certainly less of a mouthful than Nadezhda.

He clears his throat. "You're a friend of Damon's, then?"

In the moment between the exhale of this question and his next breath, I have collected my drink and reappeared reclining in a casual, feline grace along the couch adjacent to him. I take a generous swallow, allowing the slight burn of good bourbon to settle warm and familiar in my gut and give him another barbed grin that is all fang. The veins beneath my eyes stir just beneath the surface in a silent and unmistakable threat as I respond lightly, "A very good friend."
A/N: This is the first chapter where alternate character pov's come in to play. There will probably be a lot more in the future, so hopefully they feel accurate. Let me know what you think

(Reference: 1x07 "Haunted")

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Nadezhda

After Stefan and Damon pulled our new friend off Jock-Douche #2, Stefan decided it would be best for all involved—by which he really meant 'all the potential Vampire Happy Meals'—if Vicki were kept in the boarding house under lock and key.

The four of us were presently cozied up in Stefan's attic room—still a mess, though the deliberate sort of mess that suggests this is his version of 'clean'—while Stefan gives Vicki the newbie vampire speech by his authority as the only resident member of the "Vegetarian Vampires of America". You know, outside Forks, Washington. I shudder.

"I don't understand why I have to stay cooped up here. Why can't I go home?" she asks. The tears running down her face spark a twinge of sympathy long forgotten, but, really, her life did suck.

"Because you're changing, Vicki, and that's not something you want to do alone," Stefan answers in his typically patronizing tone. God, just the sound of his voice makes me want to punch him.

I look to Damon to see how he is taking this, but he is far too interested in his newspaper to offer me his sympathy.

"There's nothing about that Logan guy I killed in here," he complains. "Not a word."

"Fame-whore," I snicker. He just glares at me petulantly, all but sticking out his tongue.

"Someone's covering it up," he mutters as he toys with the watch.

Vicki catches sight of the gold where the limited sunlight sets it to shine.

"What is that?" she asks.

Throwing a look my way and directing my attention to the willfully naïve hypocrite in the room, he answers, "It's a very special, very old compass. So what was Logan Fell doing with it? Aren't you curious?"

"Well, if you're so worried that somebody's on to you, why don't you just leave town, Damon?" Stefan replies in that snotty little voice of his. Looking right at me as though just reminded of my unwelcome presence, he adds, "And why don't you take Lia here too?"

"It's Natalia to you, asshole," I growl. Maybe a slight overreaction on my part, but, hey, I did warn
him. "And seriously, Stefan, how dumb are you?"

"We should all be worried," Damon clarifies.

Tactful for once in her short life, Vicki breaks the growing tension with a less dramatic question. "Hey, I'm hungry. Do you have anything to eat?" Vampire sensei lets out a sigh that sounds suspiciously like exasperation. Job you are not, young Stefan.

He snags what looks to be the remainder of this morning's breakfast in the shape of a half-empty coffee mug from beside his computer. "Here," he says as he hands it to her.

I can't help the look of distaste that crosses my face at the thought of what no doubt fills that mug, and I nearly laugh when I see it echoed on Vicki's. Girl's got a brain after all.

"What is it?"

"It's what you're craving," Stefan answers. I almost choke. Again.

"Don't lie to the girl," Damon scoffs, echoing my own thoughts.

"It's so not what you're craving," I assure her.

"But it'll do in a pinch," he continues. "Right, Stef?"

He has that pointed look on his face that suggests I am missing part of this conversation.

"What is it?" Vicki asks, somewhat alarmed by the turn in conversation.

"Yeah, what is it? Is it skunk, Saint Bernard, Bambi?"

Oh gross. And oddly sad. Poor Bambi.

Ignoring us Stefan prompts Vicki to try his disgusting leftovers, "Go ahead. Give it a try."

Fed up with his brother's stupidity as she takes a sip of the squirrel juice, Damon urges, "She's new. She needs people blood. She can't sustain on that stuff."

"Yeah, why can't I have people blood?" Vicki asks, sounding excited by the prospect.

"Yeah," Damon encourages.

"Because it's wrong to prey on innocent people, Vicki," Stefan answers.

"Ahal by djadja, na sebja gljadja*," I spit in irritation.

Catching my drift and neatly side-stepping it, Damon clarifies, "You don't have to kill to feed. Just find someone really tasty and then erase their memory afterwards. It's so easy."

Vicki giggles in reply.

Stefan, getting desperate now, retorts "No, no, no. There's no guarantee that you could control yourself. Ok? It takes years to learn that. You could easily kill somebody, and then you have to carry that with you for the rest of your life which, if I haven't made clear, is eternity."

"Oh God, Stefan, cut the crap!" I snap, fed up with his idiocy. "Everybody kills. Every predator, including humans, kills their prey. It's the natural order. We're top of the food chain, man, and we
don't have to kill. Get over it."

"Don't listen to him. He walks on a moral plane way out of our eye line. I say snatch, eat, erase."
Damon's particular charm seems to be working for her if the smile she throws him is any indication. I nod my head to him in adamant support.

"Hey, look at me," Stefan says, leaning forward to claim her attention. "We choose our own path. Our values and our actions, they define who we are."

I sigh in frustration at his obstinacy. "Oh, kinda like you're letting her make her own choices right now?" I give him a sharp look, hoping to clue her in to the manipulation afoot.

"Ok, Count Deepak," Damon breaks the moment with his usual sarcasm.

I snort. Damon lacks even my limited patience apparently because the next thing we hear is his heavy boots hitting the floor before he announces to the room, "I am out of here," as he strolls out the door.

I almost follow him, but, despite my earlier determination to stay out of the newbie vampire boot-camp, I think I'm needed more here at the moment.

"Can I have some more?" Vicki asks, holding her coffee mug out to his Holiness. He takes it from her.

"Stefan, you can't seriously think this is going to end well?" I ask before he can leave to meet her request.

"Don't you have to trail after my brother or something?" he glares.

I barely contain the urge to throw him on his ass, but that's not going to get me anywhere right now. "No, Stefan, I think I'm exactly where I need to be."

I turn to Vicki, hoping to foster some better judgment in her than what Sir Broods-A-Lot is likely to impart in our absence.

"Vicki, human blood is your natural food source. There is nothing wrong with that. You want to live your immortal life with a modicum of human decency? Whatever, that's your call. But don't let this pompous hypocrite over here make you feel like it's wrong to follow your natural instincts. You want to learn control? You want to learn how to live an almost human life without killing anyone? You have to learn how to use, and control your thirst for human blood. Avoiding the issue all together will only have the opposite effect," I rant.

"Ask Stefan here what it means to be a ripper."

Looking now at Stefan's angry face, I realize something Damon must have several minutes ago. This is a complete waste of my time. Stefan's going to do and say whatever he wants, and at the rate he's going, he's going to burn out in a truly spectacular blaze.

Vicki's never going to make it as a vampire. Not because she doesn't have it in her, but because the only vampire here willing to further waste his energy on lengthy, self-aggrandizing speeches won't let her.

With a bad taste in my mouth that stinks like bitter disappointment and impotent frustration, I move to follow my friend. At the top of the stairs I turn to leave this final parting shot over my left shoulder, "Abstinence is not control."
I'm not sure which of them needs it more.

I heard Damon leave a few moments ago, but I also hear the rhythmic thumping of a human heart in his place. I heard the murmur of voices earlier but was too distracted by the village idiot and his new toy to pay them any attention. Hmm, I wonder if this is the famous Elena.

I flash down the stairs faster than her human eye can see. I can tell she sensed me with the way she spins on the spot, looking for invisible monsters.

I'm actually rather excited to meet this little human that has the Salvatore's so captivated. And, yes, that was plural. Damon tries to hide it whenever he mentions her, but I know. He said she was spunky, but the I—Oh Holy Doppelgangers!

Elena gasps aloud while I try to restart my heart. Jesus, this little human Petrova almost scared me to death. Admittedly, I probably should have seen this coming from the moment I discovered Katherine's true identity, but still the sudden reappearance of that familiar face manages to take me by surprise.

I school my features to an impassive smile while she stares in shock and not a little fear. "You must be Elena."

She nods and tries to put a brave face on her racing heart. I can respect that. "Yes," she says simply, but I know she's dying to ask.

"My name's Natalia, but you can call me Lia. I'm a friend of Damon's."

Yeah, probably not the right name to drop if I want to set her at ease, judging by the spike of fear I smell. Good thing that wasn't my intention.

"Stefan!" I call. I can hear you ignoring me, you little shit. "Elena's here!" That did it. It's seconds before he appears at the landing to save his Katherine-clone from the big bad vampire. And my work here is done.

I decide to grab myself a drink while I wait for the next round of good cop/bad cop tag team. I would text Damon, but I have a feeling whatever he's up to could do without the tag-a-long.

Besides, it's becoming increasingly clear to me that I am going to have to share a lot of secrets I would have rather kept hidden in the coming days. I fully expect he'll return the favor in due time.

"Where's Vicki?" I hear from my spot on the couch.

"She's upstairs." I lay back against the arm of the chair, the cold glass held carefully in my hand.

If I close my eyes, I can almost see the scene playing out.

"What happens now? Because my brother is out there searching for her with the rest of the town. What do I tell him?" Elena sounds angry. Interesting. I don't know whether to call her brave or stupid for talking to a vampire like that. She's got the disapproving mom voice down pat.

"I'm working with her, but it's gonna take time. She's a very volatile and impulsive personality. She's a drug user. I mean, all of that's going to play a part in how she responds to this."

"So she's a vampire with issues?" she asks sarcastically. Suddenly I think I know what Damon sees in her. "What am I supposed to do because I am lying to everyone that I care about? What's gonna happen to her?"
"I'm going to keep her here with me until I know that she's safe."

You mean till you know she's safe from our influence and the village people from the underfed newbie. Where exactly does her well-being come to play in all this?

"How long is that?" calls Vicki. Oh, she figured out vamp hearing. Good girl. And she sounds irritated. Better and better.

Stefan stutters, surprised no doubt by her resourcefulness. "We can talk about that later."

"Hey, Vicki, how are you?" Elena asks like she's speaking to some aging grandmother in a hospital bed. Or, come to think of it, a two year old.

"How am I?" Vicki echoes sardonically. "You're kidding, right?"

Hot damn, I think I'm starting to like this girl. My appreciative snicker must confirm our mutual sympathy for a moment later I have a newbie vampire sat happily beside me on my couch. I hand her my drink and hop up to fetch a new one. This is going to be a long day.

"Caffeine is our friend. It circulates through our veins, and warms our body so we're not so cold to the touch," Stefan lectures. Is he always this patronizing?

By the look Vicki is shooting him, she can't believe it either. She keeps glancing over his shoulder at me as though to say, 'Is this guy for real?' Yes, Vicki. Unfortunately, that Holier-Than-Thou attitude is one hundred percent genuine.

"Well, what if I want to drink human blood?" I make a loud gesture of encouragement at this question, earning a glare from both our resident morality sponsors. I just cheer her on.

"You're gonna have to learn to live with that urge and fight it on a daily basis one day at a time."

"Ugh. Oh, God, don't start with that whole 12 steps thing. School counselor has been down that road, it doesn't work for me."

"It can work. It's your choice Vicki—"

"By which he obviously means, it's his choice" I groan in irritation. Stefan cuts me off with another of those forehead-wrinkling glares of his, but Vicki catches my drift.

There's a cunning glint in her eye I haven't seen before when she accuses, "So, you've never tasted human blood?"

"Of course he has, Vick," I answer for him. "Remember that conversation we had upstairs about abstinence and control?" I hint.

She smiles at his silence.

"Not in a long time," he finally answers, but she's got his number now.

"How long?"

"Years and years," he squirms under her pitiless gaze. Elena's looking rather curious herself now.
"Hmm, that's specific," I snort.

"I'm not proud of my past behavior," he attempts to regain the upper hand.

"I'll say. Hence, the abstinence part," I sneer. To Vicki I say, "You want to sit at the vampire kiddie table for the rest of eternity? Take his advice." She looks thoughtful for a moment, but in typical Vicki-form, she breaks the tension with a sudden burst of spastic irrelevance.

"Ugh. Does this sketchy feeling ever go away?" she asks me, clutching her head. "It's like I have a massive hangover. This daylight thing is a bitch. I need more blood. Where's your bathroom? I have to pee. Why do I have to pee? I thought I was dead!"

By the end of this tirade, I am laughing so hard I'm afraid my drink will come out my nose. She stomps off, presumably to find the nearest bathroom, while I try to get a handle on myself.

The broody twins are predictably not amused. How do they live like that?

Stefan glances once at me in disapproval, before turning back to his equally serious girlfriend. "I'm gonna get her some more," he tells her. She nods and he gives me a look that seems to say 'Behave' before walking off in the pursuit of more squirrel juice. "Alright, I'll be quick."

Please. Me, behave? Who does he think he's talking to?

Nervous, Elena finally braves the silence of the parlor to speak to me outside the protective gaze of her white knight. "So, how do you know Damon?"

I smile nostalgically. I can't not smile when I think about him. "I've known Damon a long time. He's basically my favorite person ever. Maybe one day, if you're lucky, you'll get the whole story."

She seems surprised by this declaration, but is kind enough not to say so.

Vicki reappears, stomping in her usual cartoonish fashion. "False alarm," she informs both of us. "My body's feeling really funky. It's a good funk, but it's weird."

I can tell by the look of determined nonchalance on Elena's face that she is stubbornly refusing to admit to herself just how badly she wants to freak the ever loving fuck out right now. This changes to frantic curiosity when Vicki picks up her phone.

"Who are you calling?"

"Jeremy," Vicki answers obviously.

Worst suspicions confirmed, Elena closes in. "Vicki, you can't see Jeremy anymore." Oh no. Humans never learn.

"Oh, come on, don't you start. I'm gonna see whoever I want to see." She says it casually, but I hear the undercurrent of threat there.

Elena is unfazed. "Even though you could hurt him?" she challenges, taking a step closer like a lioness closing in on her prey. Does she seriously not see what she's doing? Forget vampires. What teenager responds well to this attitude?

"I would never hurt Jeremy," Vicki assures her.

Target set and locked, Elena goes in for the kill. I'm staying out of this one. Girl's gotta learn sometime. "I know you think that," she scolds. "But I can't take that risk. You're gonna have to let
Jeremy go now."

I groan internally. Here we go.

Predictably enraged, Vicki pounces. "Oh, really?" she says. "And how long have you been preparing the 'You're not good enough speech'? I'm assuming it predates the whole vampire thing."

Again, is Elena brave or stupid? I'm leaning towards the latter. "All I'm saying is that Jeremy is not getting involved in any of this."

Jesus, to hear her speak, you'd think the kid was still in diapers. She does realize she's not his mother right? And if I'm irritated, what does she think Vicki's going to do?

"I mean it, Vicki."

Vicki chuckles, "Or what?"

Elena only looks mildly lost for words, as though she just realizes that she's painted herself into a corner, but she's still not backing down.

In a flash Vicki has the girl pressed to the wall beside the fireplace with a hand to her throat while Elena gasps and kicks at the air, finally aware of the danger she's in.

"Let's get one thing straight you perky little bitch," Vicki snarls. "You had my brother whipped for fifteen years. Fifteen years! And then you dumped him. When I look at you that is all I see, just so you know. And I'm gonna see Jeremy whenever I want to see Jeremy because I have some fun new toys to play with and I won't think twice about ripping your little head off. You got it?"

And with a clench and jerk for good measure, she drops Elena to the floor before storming off.

Coughing and gasping to catch her breath, Elena casts me an accusatory look. What, she thought I was going to help her?

Throwing my hands up in the classic sign of surrender, I reply "Hey, you're the one threatening a vampire. She's a lion. You're a presumptuous antelope. You didn't really think she was going to listen to you, did you?"

But the look on her face says that's exactly what she expected. "I just can't let her hurt Jeremy," she pleads.

I sigh. "Ok, look. If she has any real feelings for Jeremy—and, judging by that display, I'd say she does—she's not going to want to do anything to hurt him. As long as we refuse to give her a chance to learn to control herself around him, she'll never stand a chance." I hear Stefan's footfalls in the hall before she does. "Go talk to your boyfriend. I'll deal with Vicki."

When I reach the landing, I find her curled up in the same chair with fresh tear tracks down her face. I'm not usually good at the whole sympathy thing, but something about this girl is getting to me. "Could I really hurt him?" she asks me brokenly.

"If you don't learn to control the bloodlust, yeah. But don't worry. I'm not going to let Stefan screw this up for you. I'm going to help you. Damon is going to help you. I promise you, you will get through this."
I text Damon to steal us some blood bags on his way back. I know he hates that cold, packaged stuff, but I figure we should at least feed her properly before we take her out. I know she wants to go to the Halloween carnival tonight, but I managed to convince her to stay home if I let her call Jeremy later.

What Stefan doesn't know won't hurt him.

We are lounging on one of the guest beds when Damon finally gets home. The sounds of breaking glass and splintered wood alert me to the inevitable fall out. I tell Vicki to wait here while I deal with the boys. She seems content to listen for now.

When I reach the landing, the room is in exactly the condition I expected. There is a small pile of blood bags dropped carelessly on the foyer floor and the idiot twins are going at it in the living room.

I watch for a few moments while they struggle against each other, but there was never any doubt how this was going to end.

"They're people, Damon!" one voice scolds.

"They're food, Stefan!" the other mocks.

When I round the corner at the end of the stairwell, I see the younger brother huddled wearily against the back wall after a particularly vicious blow. His left side is bloodied and broken for the moment it takes to heal.

"I won't let you turn her into you," Stefan groans.

"So your solution is not to teach her at all?!" Damon questions disbelievingly into the brief stillness.

"Newsflash, Stefan: The Bunny Diet doesn't work!" he yells. "And what are you going to tell your darling Elena when your little protégé up there gets done ripping her way through the townsfolk, huh?"

Growling, Stefan leaps quickly to his feet and lands a lucky right hook to Damon's jaw, the crack of bone signaling his own score.

"Leave Elena out of this!" he warns and, taking advantage of the momentary victory, he follows with a swift kick in the gut that sends his brother flying over the couch and into the dining room.

Casting about the remains of the table set, Damon returns with a chunk of chair leg which he casually thrusts into his brother's stomach.

"Just try and stop me, brother."

Stefan collapses with a groan.

Leaving him bloodied and defeated, trying to wrench the stake from his own gut, we take the opportunity to leave with our prize. Before we deal with Vicki, however, I have some ideas of my own to share. After storing our new stash in the basement fridge, I gesture that he follow my lead.

Damon knows my opinion on the implicit responsibility of the sire-childe bond, but I also know that my feelings on the subject alone are not sufficient incentive to engage in yet another fruitless power struggle with his brother.
The display I just witnessed downstairs is honestly more than I expected from him without additional motivation.

With this in mind, I motion silently towards Damon's room and flash quickly to his bathroom on the second floor. When he follows, I close and lock the door and turn on the shower to muffle our voices.

"You have to be the one to help Vicki," I whisper beneath the white noise of the water.

"What? Why? I thought St. Stefan was all over that one."

"He thinks he is, but you and I both know his way will never work with a newbie. Especially not that one. He's just going to end up killing her to protect his precious Elena."

"And your point is?"

"My point is, if she's going to die, then we might as well make sure it's beneficial to us when she does."

He motions for me to continue.

"Think about it. The Council knows about vampires. We need a scapegoat. We just so happen to have an extra vampire lying around…"

"Yeah, but she's a local. They'll know she's new."

"Sure, but you got here at the beginning of the school year, right? Well, maybe she met someone over the summer. Maybe her dealer's from out of town. I don't know. But all we really need, is a little compulsion, a few negligent adults…I mean, all her friends are dead anyway. Who's left to expose the lie?"

He looks thoughtful for a moment while he considers this. Finally, as I knew he would, he nods before shutting off the shower and exiting the room.

Approaching Vicki's room, where she remains sprawled atop the bed apparently lost in thought, he asks, "What are you doing?"

She looks up in brief surprise at the intrusion, but responds easily, "Just contemplating the next hundred years."

He replies only with a wry half smile as something that looks suspiciously like sympathy crosses his features. He goes to sit beside her on the bed as I prop a hip against the door frame, my arms coming up of their own accord to cross over my chest as I observe them with vague curiosity.

"Why'd you do it?" she asks. Loaded question.

He considers her for a moment before admitting honestly, "I was…bored."

"You did this to me out of boredom?" she accuses, but with surprisingly little reproach.

His eyebrows shrug, but he states simply, "It's one of the pitfalls of eternity."

I chuckle quietly to myself. Hey, it's true!

Vicki glances between us, but seems to accept his explanation as she rolls her eyes and sits back on her knees.
"Now I'm bored," she says. "And all I can think about is blood. I just want some more blood. I can't think about anything else. What is that about?"

He laughs knowingly. "That'll ease up," he says. "You've just been cooped up all day."

She nods with a slight pout—a child anticipating a treat.

"Let's go," he suggests with a toss of his head toward the door.

She smiles in her growing excitement, "Where?"

"Your life was pathetic," he says. "Your afterlife doesn't have to be."

I step back as he leads her by the hand out of the room. I'm pretty interested to see where this goes myself.

Of course, by the time we've reached the foyer Stefan has long since recovered from their last brotherly debate and is seemingly spoiling for another round.

"Where are you going?"

"She's been cooped up in your room all day. She's not Anne Frank," Damon smirks, opening the front door.

"No, no, no," Stefan argues, closing the door again firmly with one hand. "Hey, hey…now's not the time for this."

Damon sighs, irritated. "If you're gonna teach her, teach her," he says with a glance to Vicki who stands expectantly with the barely concealed energy of an excited puppy. "Show her what it's all about."

"She could hurt someone," Stefan argues.

"Relax, Stefan. I'm not taking her to Disney Land; we're going to the front yard," he retorts, wrenching the handle from his brother's grip. "Come on," he gestures to Vicki.

With a frustrated frown and an echoing groan, Stefan follows us. I'm still uncertain what Damon's game plan is exactly, but I meant what I said earlier.

I have no intention of letting this girl suffer because of some century's long rivalry between brothers that has nothing to do with her. She deserves at least the semblance of a chance, and I intend to see she gets it.

"Bad idea, Damon," Stefan warns.

"She's a vampire, Stefan. She should know the perks."

"Like what?" Vicki asks, that excited smile still pulling at her lips.

"Like…" Damon pauses, considering. With a burst of vamp-speed he vanishes from her sight to reappear at her back. She looks about wildly in surprise, turning to find him behind her by his tap on her bare shoulder.

"Whoa!" she exclaims. "How did you do that?"

I laugh at the open awe on her face. It's easy to forget the wonder of those early days.
Stefan looks on disapprovingly. What else is new?

Again he flashes behind her, this time whistling to get her attention. She laughs at his display, no doubt anticipating her own attempt. I tense as an unpleasant thought occurs to me.

Damon only smiles in encouragement, making a sweeping gesture to the open lawn. "Come on, Vicki. Live a little."

Fortunately for the boys, I am neither an idiot nor a newbie. Thus, when she predictably vamp-speeds away toward trees and mouth-watering human snacks, I meet her with a burst of speed unrivalled by anything these two chuckle heads have ever seen, aborting her headlong flight with the unexpected impact of my own body.

She falls back with an undignified squawk to sprawl haphazardly on her ass.

I give Damon an unimpressed raise of a solitary eyebrow when he responds with an unapologetic, "Oops."

I roll my eyes and return my attention to the fallen vampire at my feet. "Nice try, kid," I admit. "But you're gonna have to be faster than that to get the drop on me."

Stefan looks about at the three of us with that same patronizing look of parental disapproval, and I can't help rubbing it in a bit. I throw a smirk his way and say, "Besides, if you keep that up Daddy Stefan here is going to take away your outdoor privileges."

Vicki pouts. I roll my eyes. "Whatever," I say. "Why don't we take this inside? There's something else I want to show you anyway."

Once again inside, Stefan huffs in exaggerated annoyance and storms off undoubtedly to write away in his emo journal about what dastardly fiends we are, and I lead the way to this evening's initial entertainment.

Despite following easily, Vicki whines all the while about that stupid Halloween Festival she wanted to go to and how all her friends are going to be there. Why can't she just see Jeremy? She swears she won't hurt anyone.

I inwardly groan and cast my eyes back to check Damon's reaction only to find no one there. That asshole bailed on me! Whatever he's doing better damn well be important or he's getting the beat down of his life when he gets home.

Grumbling to myself but deciding to hold off on my resentment until the man in question reappears to witness my wrath, I return my attention to the still chattering baby vampire at my elbow.

Grabbing a single bag from the small pile along the bottom, I slam the freezer shut with a decided snap. Glaring at the girl in the brief and blessed silence that follows her broken tirade, I offer it to her.

She looks briefly puzzled, as though she can hardly comprehend the object in my hand. Frustrated, I rip open the straw-like plastic and wave the delicious fumes under her startled nose. "Take the damn juice box, Vicki," I say.

It takes no more encouragement than this, for the moment the smell hits her nostrils, the call of the blood overtakes her. She rips the bag from my hand and swallows greedily at the cold, metallic nectar. I wrinkle my nose a bit at the sight.
Not that I'm surprised she couldn't resist, but I usually like to warm these things first. Cuts a bit of that recycled plastic aftertaste. As if cold blood wasn't repulsive enough. Oh well.

She finishes her meal in record time, squeezing the plastic for the last dregs of the rich liquid, and looks hungrily at the closed ice chest behind me. I smile knowingly and place a sympathetic hand on her arm to guide her forcefully from the room.

"I know, I know," I soothe against her protestations. "But, trust me when I say gorging yourself is not the answer. They'll still be there in the morning."

On second thought, I grab one more bag from the fridge and lead her up the stairs. She makes a grab for it, but my greater strength and speed manage to easily evade her desperate attempts. "Ah, ah, ah," I scold. "Patience is a virtue."

Reaching the kitchen, I collect a coffee mug from the cabinet and pour the contents of the bag into painted ceramic, quietly bemoaning the lack of a blood warmer in this house.

Making a mental note to see about acquiring one in the near future—for Vicki's sake at least—I set it on the polished wood counter top at a cautious distance from the hungry vampire.

Holding my arm out in a defensive posture, I instruct, "Now, this time don't rush. Take your time and sip." Her fangs are fully extended and the veins beneath her eyes are writhing in her ravenous hunger. She hasn't heard a word I've said.

Throwing caution to the wind, I deliver a vicious slap across the flushed skin of her cheek. She growls and moves to lunge at me, but I easily bat her off while still keeping the mug out of her reach. Stunned, her face clears and she looks at me with undisguised reproach.

"What was that for?"

"I told you. You can't let the hunger get the best of you. If you let it, you'll soon be a slave to your bloodlust and then I will stop you. And you won't like how I do it. Got it?"

She swallows, hearing in my voice the sincerity of this threat. She nods in submission and holds her hands out for the mug. I hand it to her somewhat reluctantly and watch her bring it slowly to her lips.

"Careful," I say when she seems to gulp too quickly. "Remember sip."

Amazingly, she listens, and I watch with unconcealed satisfaction as she slows her desperate swallows to a gentle, appreciative, rhythm. "Good," I praise when she finishes.

"Now, remember that, because until you drink blood-flavored Capri-Sun without acting like a strung-out junkie, you're not going anywhere near the townsfolk," I warn. "And that includes Jeremy."

The next few days fly by in a blur. Damon was triumphant in having successfully infiltrated the Founder's Council—something to do with the Mayor's drunken wife and some vague cover story about his 'missing' uncle—and Vicki was starting to make some real headway learning to control her hunger.

Her habitual drug use and surrender to temptation did make things more difficult for her, but I felt
that between the three of us she might come out of this alright.

Best of all, Stefan was in such a fit of temper over our apparent success that he was spending more and more of his time away from the boarding house and our offensive lifestyle. Then again, maybe he was just too busy mooning over Elena to notice.

Regardless, I was of the opinion that the moment had come for her final test: the live feed. Leaving Vicki in the capable—if impulsive—hands of her maker, I ran into the next town over to see about snatching us dinner in the form of a helpful passerby.

This was one of Damon's favorite ploys, and one Katherine taught him while he was still human. Maybe it's a sentimental thing for him, but it is certainly effective regardless.

See, you just find some deserted back road with very little traffic in the middle of the night, and lie in wait for the first good Samaritan to present themselves.

It's great because, in small towns like these, someone is always 'passing through' and someone will always stop to help. Even if it's just to check if that body lying in the middle of the road is still breathing. Plus, you get to scare the fuck out these poor hicks and that's always good for a laugh.

I had been sure to make a few stops along the way for my own sake—one human to three vampires are not good odds if there is to be any chance of a feed making it out alive—and though I had been sorely tempted to drain them as was my habit, I was far too aware of my proximity to town to risk it.

Thus, the first few victims of the evening had escaped generally unscathed. I only now had to hope the same could be said of the next.

As predicted, it didn't take long for some beefy-looking farmer in a flannel button down to drive his pick-up right into my trap to help the poor damsel in distress strewn in the old dirt road.

Before he could so much as blink, I had him compelled into silent docility riding in the passenger seat while I drove this old dust monster straight back to Mystic Falls.

I pulled his truck off into the trees—resolving to deal with it later should that prove necessary—and lead my captive down the long drive to the boarding house.

Still a ways from the porch and human hearing, I can make out the rhythmic thump of bass-heavy rock music signaling what seems a reenactment of Vicki's first visit.

It occurs to me that, while certainly capable, Damon may not be the most responsible guardian to trust with a newbie vampire.

Smiling to myself in anticipation of whatever madness I am sure to discover inside, I lead the way up the steps and through the foyer. Unsurprisingly, I discover upon my entrance exactly the sort of chaos and disarray I should have expected from these two. Although I admit, I am a tad disappointed by the redundancy.

Inside, the sights and sounds of two scantily clad streaks of lunacy are particularly overpowering even to human senses, dancing and racing about to the unmistakable sounds of conventional rock with all the careless abandon of delighted children.

If they were the sort that would rip your throat out and revel in the taste, anyway.

"Larry", as I have decided to refer to him, blinks owlishly at the pair in that sort of dazed half-
fearful way the minimally compelled will when faced with the inevitability of their own demise.

It seems Damon had taken some semblance of caution from Vicki’s near escape the other night, and had consequently decided to conduct his vamp-speed lessons indoors rather than risk a second attempt.

In this, I commend him. If nothing else, it shows he's taken something from my constant naggings on responsibility and good judgment.

I snort. Who am I kidding? He's barely humoring me. Still, I feel honored.

No doubt catching the scent of fresh blood on the horizon, I turn from dialing down the stereo to find myself confronted with the eager smile of one Vicki Donovan.

I signal Larry to follow me to take a seat on the couch, knowing she will trail behind. Once I have him situated on the central cushion, I look to Damon to take over. He is her Sire after all.

He smirks and takes my place on the seat and turns the human to face Vicky, giving her an unobstructed view of tonight's proceedings. I move to stand between them.

I spare a moment to wish I'd caught a more appealing prize, but with Vicky's impatience and Damon's indifference I suppose it's unimportant.

With that eerily sharp gaze of his, he manages to wrest Vicki's attention from the barely concealed feast before her.

When her eyes meet his he says, "Now there's a right way and a wrong way to do this. The human body is made up of all these convenient little arteries that can make our job a whole lot easier, but it can also cause quite a mess if you get impatient."

Gesturing back to Larry, he brushes a finger along a faintly visible line along his neck sheltered by muscle and tissue.

"See this one here? That's the carotid artery. Popular choice. Chomp at the bit and you'll tear his head clean off, or at least rip his throat out. Hit this just right and don't get too greedy, and his heart will do all the work for you," he instructs. "Watch."

As Vicki watches, captivated, Damon lets his vampire face come forth and with a skilled precision of long practice and natural aptitude, he bites neatly into the man's flesh.

He really is beautiful like this. There aren't many as relatively young as he is that adjust to the life so easily, but Damon took to vampirism like a fish to water. I wonder if this is what Katherine saw in him.

When he releases after only a few generous swallows, there is nothing but the smallest trickle of blood to stain the pale skin which now holds his mark. His face clears and his fangs retract, but his lips are stained ruby red in the man's blood.

"There," he states. "Now you try."

I haven't compelled the man to be unafraid, and his heart now thumps with the fear of the pain to come. Damon's bite had no doubt been painful, but his had been unseen and thus unanticipated.

Vicki however, vampire face in full view, is very nearly salivating at the mere thought of all that fresh blood. His racing pulse is a siren song to the predator within and I worry for a moment that
she will be unable to restrain herself.

It seems Vicki has the same thought, however, as she clenches her fingers in fists held tightly to her sides in an effort to soothe the savage beast of her hunger.

Damon waits patiently, seemingly unconcerned, and a moment later with a deep breath she leans forward carefully to precisely align her fangs with the still present bite mark there before her.

"Easy, easy," Damon murmurs and her gulps slow. She seems to get the rhythm quickly, allowing the blood to pool of its own accord rather than chase after the taste. Though, it's clear the effort is costing her—her knuckles are white with the strength of her grip—she seems determined now to master herself.

Perhaps she took my earlier warning to heart; perhaps she simply wants to prove herself. The reason is uncertain. But, it is clear to me in this moment. She really can do this.

After compelling the pale and shaking Larry and sending him home with orders to hit a juice bar on the way—we had considered teaching Vicki the 'erase' part of the program, but decided that lesson could wait another day—Damon and I relax back into our seats to toast another glorious success before the warmth of the fire.

Flushed with her own victory, Vicki returns to her earlier activities of dancing and racing about the house in reckless abandon. The sounds of her chatter and laughter are only occasionally punctuated by the ominous crashes of breaking furniture.

All in all, it has been a good day. But it is far from over yet.

I'm still not certain how to broach the topic I must address now in our relative solitude, but alcohol seems as good a choice as any. I clear my throat, and Damon shoots me a look over his glass seeming to expect my break of the silence.

"So…," I hesitantly begin. "I met Elena."

He merely nods expectantly.

"Why didn't you tell me your brother was dating Katherine's twin?"

"Didn't matter."

"You don't think that's a little creepy?"

He shrugs. "She's not Katherine."

"Well, obviously."

He isn't making this easy for me.

"Do you know why?"

Setting his glass on the coffee table, he moves to face me fully with a hard glint in his eye. "No, but I gather from all the hand wringing over there that you're about to tell me."

I sigh. I should have known this wouldn't be easy. "Yeah, ok. So there's something you should know about Elena and…Katarina Petrova."
He freezes, and, while I know I could swat him like a fly should the mood take me, I feel a slight chill sweep over me at the stormy glare in those glacial eyes. "Where did you hear that name?"

I hold out my hands placatingly as I attempt to explain, "I've known for a while. Way before you were born, but I didn't put the pieces together till I saw that picture."

"What are you talking about?"

"Look, there's a lot you don't know about Katherine. A lot that I still can't tell you. But the short of it is, Katherine was running from someone back in 1864—someone she's been running from for over 500 years—and I think that's what she was doing back here all those years ago."

He seems to have settled down now. Perhaps he realizes I'm not some sleeper cell about to rise up in betrayal. I'm a little hurt by the implication if I'm being honest, though his defensiveness does answer some of the other questions I've been pondering this week.

"What does that have to do with Elena?" he asks somewhat to my surprise.

"Well, I guess you could say that Elena is in danger from the same someone that chased Katherine to Mystic Falls back in the 1800s. And if he finds out about her…"

"What are you talking about?"

I bite my lip, thinking. It's not that I don't want to tell Damon, but he's not the only one whose confidence I have to protect.

"It's her blood. She's related to Katherine."

"What?!" he yells. He jumps from his seat, incensed by the very suggestion. "But that makes no sense! Vampires can't have children. How is that even possible? And what do you mean 'Someone'? If you know who was after her, why wouldn't you tell me? Why won't you tell me?"

"Because I didn't know it mattered! And Katherine was dead."

All of a sudden, he stops. He turns to stare at me in the ringing silence, face still. "What do you mean 'was'?"

I sigh, sure this is the wrong time to admit my doubts regarding his lady love. "I know, Damon. I don't know how, but I know she's still out there. You wouldn't be back here 150 years later, just preceding a recurring celestial event if she weren't."

He stands perfectly still, waiting.

"I know you're back for her. I know you want to save her. And when you do, that 'someone' that I mentioned? He's gonna be back. And when he gets here…?" I breathe, genuinely scared for the first time in over 500 years. "He's going to kill them both."

CRASH!!!

The sound of breaking glass shatters the silence of the moment, and without comment we race to find the source. But it's not what we find when we get there that worries me, it's what we don't.

Vicki is gone.
These last few days have been a tangled mess of confusion, frustration, and reverent bliss starting and ending with the exotic beauty outside whose window I am presently perched.

On the one hand, the discovery of my darkest secret has been a relief of the crushing weight of my fear and guilt that has clouded the precious days I've spent with her, but I can't deny the dread I feel at the thought that she will never look at me again with quite the same light and adoration as she once did.

I love her. I love her compassion, her morality, her strength and kindness. I love that she is someone I can see by my side for always. Someone I would wish to grow old with were such a thing not impossible.

She is the light in my eternally dark world. When I'm with her, I feel almost human. I feel accepted and loved like I had never believed possible. When I'm with her, I don't feel like a monster.

For all these reasons, I can no longer imagine a life without her. But it's because of this that I have to respect her decision. I can hardly blame her for wanting distance from our world—for wanting nothing to do with it now that she knows of its existence—but if by some miracle she decides she does, I will never let her go.

I promised her this week that I would teach Vicki—that I would protect her brother and the people of this town from my brother's actions—but I worry that I may fail her in this regard.

I know that he only turned Vicki in revenge for what I'm sure he views as my betrayal, and I had depended upon his callous disregard for her beyond this fact to take charge of the situation and once again clean up my brother's mess, but I had not counted on his having a partner in crime.

I've never known my brother to befriend anyone—he is far too distrusting for that—but the obvious affection shared between him and Natalia is something that both surprises and worries me.

Ever since the petite vampire showed up in all her macabre glory, Damon has been more unreasonable than ever.

She supports his every dark and dangerous whim, and takes every available opportunity to make me out as the bad guy. As if my brother needed greater license to hate me, her open hostility upon our first meeting frankly terrifies me. There is no telling what Damon will do, or who he will hurt when he is set upon antagonizing me. He knows exactly how to hurt me.

Hence, the reason I am presently perched outside my girlfriend's bedroom window like that Edward guy from that vampire series Damon likes to taunt me with. Really, it's sort of disturbing sometimes the things he gets up to when he's bored. And he says I'm the weird one.

Distantly, I hear a door close and wonder who would be awake to wander about a sleeping home this late at night. I would be inclined to think it was only Jenna or Jeremy heading down for a midnight snack, but for the hushed voices I can hear through the boy's window.

Creeping closer along the extended roof to peek into the darkened bedroom, I catch sight of something which makes my heart freeze in my chest.

Vicki is here. Vicki is here and I smell blood.
Amid the agonized screams of a teenage boy I can only assume to be the famous Jeremy and the quiet sobbing of his sister on the floor, Damon manages to get the story from Stefan's stony lips. Apparently, our talk had lasted longer than either of us realized and while we knew exactly where to look the moment she went missing, we were too late for Vicki.

Stefan claims he was alerted from his self-appointed sentry-duty outside Elena's window by the distressed cries of her brother. He says he grew concerned, naturally, and went to investigate, but when he got there Vicki had latched herself to the youngest Gilbert's throat and would have sucked the life out of him if Stefan hadn't intervened. Thinking fast, he smashed a chair and tore a leg loose to drive through the rabid vampire's heart, killing her instantly.

The evidence is compelling, I'll give him that. What with the grey, veiny corpse, the broken chair, the bleeding teenager, how can we possibly contest? There is no denying that Vicki bit Jeremy. That much is obvious, but I can't help but wonder why?

Why would she do this when she was just beginning to get control of herself? Why would she risk it?

Stefan's theory is that she was riding the high of a successful feed and could no longer deny her desire for the boyfriend she had spent all week obsessing over, believing herself to be ready for it. I can't fault his logic, but the hunger should not have been greater in the aftermath of a live feed. Not after the control she had shown. She was no ripper.

No, the very idea of hurting Jeremy should have been enough to deter her from even thinking of her hunger again. Especially when already full from earlier this evening.

I just…don't understand. And it's more than my anger with Stefan for jumping the gun (or should I say the stake?). And I'm utterly indifferent to the boy's distress. No, what concerns me most is that I care at all.

Without so much as a parting glance in my direction, Damon mutters something about "taking care of this" and disappears with the corpse. Not long after, evidently unaware of my presence, Stefan leads the crying Elena from the room and I am left alone with the boy.

He looks up at me, snot and tears streaming down his face, with an expression that would break my heart if I had one. A slight twinge, not dissimilar to the one inspired by his vampiric girlfriend, stirs in me at the sight.

Before I can think better of it, I find myself crouched on the floor at his bedside.

"Why does everyone have to die on me?" he asks me brokenly. I'm not sure whether this was meant for my ears or whether it simply needed saying, but in this moment it doesn't seem to matter.

I don't know what's come over me in all of this. Maybe it's mutual sympathy for the loss of a fallen friend. Maybe all this drama is reawakening the heart I claim not to have. I don't know, but I find myself moved by this child's grief. I just wish I knew what to say.

I settle for gripping his hands in my own and simply allow him his moment with his sadness.
An interminable time later, the door opens to reveal a stoically determined Damon. His bright eyes meet mine, and I see my own emotions echoed there. Perhaps neither of us is as empty as we pretend to be.

With a rush of air, I leave him to his task. He's better suited to it than I.

Damon

The fire crackles in the huge stone hearth of the parlor, the light casting flickering patterns along the walls of the darkened room. I can feel the faint heat on my face as the bourbon in my hand warms my stomach, but all I can feel is the cold stone in my chest.

I can't get Z's blank stare out of my head. It's all I see when I close my eyes.

Damn Stefan. Damn him and his overzealously heroic tendencies. I don't know what went down between Vampire Junkie and Baby Gilbert, and I don't particularly care, but I do know that girl did not have to die. Not tonight.

I may have started all this because I was trying to get back at Stefan and I won't deny that Vicki never meant much more to me than that, but damn it Z cared. She cared, and I hate that he didn't.

I know that she's a big girl and she can handle it, but I hate that she's hurting at all and there's not a damn thing I can do about it.

For the casually bloodthirsty vampire that she is, she can be astoundingly fragile when it comes to losing people—vampires anyway. It's weird because she is usually so nonchalant about death—comes with the territory I guess—but with vampires she forgets not to get too attached. I mean, not always, but sometimes.

It's like she forgets that vampirism is not a guarantee of eternal invulnerability. If anything, a new vampire is more likely to die young than a human. Hell, most don't make it past the first year. But she just can't help herself.

Guess it goes along with all those archaic ideas of duty and honor in the long since defunct vampire political structure.

Speaking of, what was all that about earlier? Katherine on the run? Elena in danger? What the hell is she talking about?

What's more, why wouldn't she tell me? I mean, I know she liked her secrets and I've known for a long time that Katherine wasn't her real name but I thought we were closer than that. Didn't she know that she could trust me? I would have done anything for her. Hell, I died for her and I'd do it again in a heartbeat. I'd never let anyone touch her, so why wouldn't she tell me?

Chapter End Notes

*Transliteration from Cyrillic: Means "the uncle would better gasp looking at himself" in Russian. In other words, the English phrases "the devil is rebuking sin" or even "the pot calling the kettle black" come to mind
Lady Lazarus

Chapter Notes

A/N: A big thank you to everyone reading so far. This is the first long fic that I have attempted, and I would really love to know what you think.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

(Episode Reference: 1x08 "162 Candles")

Nadezhda

I wake up several hours later when I feel the bed beneath me give under the additional weight of another body. I can smell the bourbon on his breath and know at once it has nothing to do with Vicki's death.

Just as I knew they would, my earlier words have sparked some latent suspicion in my friend's fragile heart. I only wish there were some words of comfort I could offer him, but all I have to give is more questions.

From his reaction to my earlier bombshell, it is obvious to me that Damon has no idea the trouble Katherine is in. I doubt he knew she was on the run at all.

Although…he recognized her real name so he must have suspected something.

Was his love for her really so blind that the thought of her deceit had never occurred to him? No, I know him better than that. The truth is Katherine Pierce has been his reason for living for the last 150 years. I don't know if he knows how to let her go.

Still, it is clear that whatever plan Katarina had to put Klaus off her trail she never shared with her human lover. And as I find it highly unlikely that she would have allowed herself to be caught by her own trap, there is but one obvious conclusion. Katherine is still out there, free as a bird. And Damon has no idea.

He must have noted the change in my breathing upon his entrance for into the silence he mutters apropos of nothing, "There's a tomb under the old church. Emily sealed them in before the fire. I'm gonna get her out."

I lay quiet as I digest this new information. I can't say I'm surprised either by his resourcefulness as a human or his continued resolve as a vampire, but I wonder how now to confess my suspicions. Though I needn't have worried tonight it seems, for before I can breathe a word he is fast asleep.

x

Looking into his angelically peaceful face, I feel an unbidden surge of jealousy flood my chest. I wish, not for the first time, I were capable of quieting my thoughts so effectively, but even the ungodly amount of alcohol Damon has undoubtedly consumed tonight would be insufficient for my own peace of mind.

Giving up for the third time in as many nights, I rise quietly from the bed though I doubt an
earthquake would wake him from this drunken stupor. I snag my new satin knee-length robe from behind the bathroom door and secure it about my waist to clothe my nakedness, casting about for some sort of hair tie.

When I find one, I unwind a small wisp of hair that has become entangled in the many piercings along my left ear before smoothing my long hair back into a messy bun.

I loathe the uncomfortable bump of tied hair in my sleep despite the risk of bed-head almost as much as I hate sleeping in clothes, but both are necessary evils in the public eye and—amusing as it might be on another occasion—I have no wish tonight to scandalize Stefan with my customary state of undress.

I sense another presence before I hear a sound in confirmation. From the still burning fire in the parlor, I know that Damon has not been the only one cursed with insomnia this night, but it isn't Stefan I feel now.

I hear the distant laughter of a distinctly female voice, and the telltale rush of air that signals a foreign vampire presence. The creaking floorboards and clanging windows only confirm this. We are being stalked.

"Damon?" I hear Stefan call into the eerie silence.

I choose not to answer, knowing that it's not my intrusion he questions. Instead, I halt my progress down the stair and determine to catch this intruder before I make my presence known.

It occurs to me suddenly that if we are to be fending off attacks by unwelcome vampires in the future, we would do well to reinstall a human barrier. Too bad Damon killed the last one.

The briefest flash of long blonde hair stirs in my periphery and before the thought has fully formed in my mind, I have the interloper on the floor.

My hand about her throat in a grip that could strangle a human, I flash my fangs with a show of force and power behind my own inhumanly bright eyes.

"Who the hell are you?" I growl. She looks shockingly unafraid and only offers me an impassive stare with the briefest hint of surprise.

I suddenly realize how ridiculous I must look in my little dressing gown, my blue-black hair messily knotted behind my head. I know I'm rather bird-like in stature, and this girl would hardly be the first to underestimate me because of it. More fool her.

This sudden reminder enrages me for some unknown reason, but before I can make good on the implied threat Stefan is beside me with a disbelieving but unmistakably pleased smile of recognition.

"Lexi?" he addresses her.

"Hi," she smiles happily up at him and I reluctantly release my grip. I know that name.

"What are you doing here?"

She leaps up with an inhuman burst of speed and slings an arm around his shoulder. "How could you even ask that?" she questions.

He laughs, delighted, as he returns the embrace. Feeling decidedly uncomfortable for intruding on
their obviously intimate moment, I begin to slink away toward the library and my original destination. I have some calls to make. Their voices, however, follow in my wake.

"I've missed you," he admits into her shoulder.

"Happy Birthday."

"You were right. Hell, if I know how you do it, but you were right. Yeah, they are...She is. Wait, what? What are you—Yeah, I've heard those rumors. Not that I can tell, no. Of course I wouldn't lie to you. Who are you talking to? Yeah. Oh, and Slater? Remember what I said last time about jumping the gun on this shit...Sure, you too," I snap the phone shut with a roll of my eyes.

Slater's a useful friend to have on side but sometimes he can get a little overzealous with the digging. He's like one of those research scientists that decides to build a weapon of mass destruction because they can. I swear, the kid's going to get himself killed one day.

Normally, I wouldn't risk the possibility of being overheard in a house full of vampires, but this was a call that couldn't wait. If I'd let Slater think for even a moment that he was right about this town, we'd have Originals on our asses in minutes.

Besides, I heard Stefan and Damon leave a while ago to pursue their separate projects in town. Lexi's the only one around to overhear and I doubt she has a clue what I'm talking about. Speak of the devil. "So, Stefan tells me you're a friend of Damon's," she announces, leaning against the doorframe.

"Yep," is my curt reply. I have nothing against Lexi really, but this situation is beyond awkward. Then again, I have no reason not to play nice here. Relenting with a sigh I say, "Name's Natalia. Lia, if you like."

"Lexi," she returns. "But then you knew that."

I smirk. She's obviously just as desperate for a distraction as I am and this has to be doubly awkward for her anyway considering how she no doubt feels about Damon. I decide at once to go easy on her. There's no reason we can't be friends.

"Stuck inside?" I ask with a knowing smile.

"God, yes!" she groans and I can't help the huff of laughter that escapes me at the sound. "Stupid Salvatore's and their stupid daylight rings."

"I know, right?" I agree, slyly rotating the lapis lazuli on my ring finger.

She gives me a mischievous smile that reminds me an awful lot of Damon's in one of his more playful moods though I doubt she's appreciate the comparison. "What do you say we find ourselves some trouble?"

By the time Damon arrives an hour later, we have progressed to semi-drunken storytelling on Stefan's bed, giggling like the little school girls we never were. She told me about daring Stefan to
dive naked in the Treves Fountain, and I told her about the time Damon had to compel his way onto the stage of Swan Lake at the New York Ballet.

Lexi was currently crying she was laughing so hard. I grin. I was hoping she'd enjoy that. "And that is why he'll never risk a bet with me again."

"God, that's amazing!" she laughs.

Damon saunters into the room in his usual cocky fashion, that panty-dropping smirk of his firmly in place. "You girls talking about me?" he asks suggestively.

Lexi sobers in an instant and, deadpan, delivers, "Yes, Damon. We were just discussing how utterly irresistible you would be in a fluffy pink tutu and ballet tights."

Unfazed, he responds with perfect seriousness, "Damn straight. I was a fucking sexy prima ballerina."

"You sure were, Damon," I assure him.

I smile as Lexi howls with laughter again. Damon gives me a small grin that looks almost like gratitude.

This right here is why I love Damon. His field of fucks is barren, and he knows how to laugh.

But, in the end, he's a stone cold killer and I wouldn't have it any other way.

"Hello, Lexi," he greets finally as he flops down onto the bed beside her. "What an unexpected surprise."

"Unexpected surprise?" she scoffed. "I think the wrong brother went back to high school."

"How long you here for?"

"Just for Stefan's B-Day."

"Aww," he whines. "You mean you didn't come all this way to see me?"

She laughs. "That's it, Damon. After a century I finally realized death means nothing without you," she simpers mockingly, stroking a finger under his chin. "Do me," she whispers.

He groans and rolls to his back as she sits up. "Why are you so mean to me?"

"Uh, have you met you?" she asks obviously. "You're not a nice person."

"Well...because I'm a vampire," he says as though this is the explanation for everything. Maybe it is.

"Yeah, but you're only the bad parts." Hmm. I think I remember now why we've never met.

"Teach me to be good," he teases as he leans into kissing range.

In a flash, she has him pinned to the bed by the throat—and not in the sexy way.

"I'm older than you, and that means stronger," she snarls.

"Sorry," he chokes. See, normally in this situation, I would help, but I happen to like Lexi. Well...
sort of anyway. Besides, she's entitled to her anger and he knows it. He just really sucks at apologies.

"Don't ruin my time with Stefan, 'cause I'll hurt you." She leans in to breathe her parting shot in his ear, "and you know I can do it."

"Yeah," he agrees and takes a deep gasping breath when she releases him and storms out of the room.

At the last moment, she turns back to flash me a friendly smile. "Nice to meet ya, Lia."

I smile in reply before looking back at the now silent Damon reproachfully.

"You know you totally deserved that, right?"

"Yep," he readily concedes, but it's the detached way he says it that's got me worried.

"So this Elena girl. She'll come around I'm sure of it," Lexi says with a coy smile. "Have you had sex yet?"

Finally bored waiting for Damon—he had yet another top secret mission to complete—I have given in to the only entertainment around: heckling Stefan.

We are currently scattered about the dining room in various states of repose. I dragged a few chairs together and now lay along them, legs crossed at the ankles, as I sip my drink.

"No," Stefan chuckles.

We still have a few blood bags left over from the Vicki disaster and Lord knows no one is going to drink them.

That reminds me though, I really need to feed tonight. For real this time. I can feel my power dimming with all this "laying low" business. If I'm going to be staying in this town much longer, I need a better solution.

"Sex always works," she assures him, coming to a seat in the hard backed dining chair beside him. "I mean, you'll rock her world so hard with your vamp sex, she'll be yours forever."

From the floor beneath her feet, Lexi pulls out what seems to be a laptop case of some sort. Color me confused.

"Oh God," I cry, bringing my hands to my face in mortification. "I did not need that visual."

Ignoring me, Stefan explains, "Yeah, but see this isn't about sex, or compulsion, or any of our other tricks—"

"Sex is a trick?" I ask myself. "I don't think your doin' it right, Stef."

Lexi unzips her laptop to reveal a stash of O pos. Ok, then. Vampy lunchbox: for the creature of darkness on the go.

"She has to want to be with me on her own terms."
Well, sure he sounds all romantic and shit now, but he's kinda rockin' the godfather pose at the moment. Didn't realize Italian roots meant a mafia connection, but whatever.

"Wow. That sounded all mature and grown up."

"Well, he can't be a teenager forever. Oh, wait."

"Ha. Ha." Stefan fake laughs at me. Whatever, he knows I'm hilarious.

Stabbing a straw deftly through the plastic of the blood bag, Lexi takes a sip while Stefan looks on with that vaguely constipated Edward look. God, I hate that movie.

Noticing his stare, Lexi shrugs in a completely unapologetic apologetic manner. Honestly the look on her face right now should be NC17 at least.

Again, need I point out the Damon-ness of this exchange? It's kind of a wonder they don't get on better. Well, besides that whole New York debacle.

"Want some?" she teases.

He stands abruptly, as though the very thought of such vile poison in his pure veins were too much to bear. The Devil shall take him before he sullies himself with this fruit of the damned. He has solemnly foresworn this temptation bent on the corruption of his very soul. God, the melodrama in this town.

"No. Thank you," he says as he turns his back to the orgasmic display.

"Relax, I didn't kill anyone for it. This phlebotomist I went out with a few times, he's my supplier," she explains, resting back in the seat.

Wow, Stefan really does a great impression of a disapproving father. No lie, he's got the whole wrinkled forehead, firm frown, crossed arm thing really working for him. You know, maybe he and Elena are meant to be.

"Oh don't judge, ok?" she says. Stefan shrugs but the brooding forehead is in full effect. "Listen, I tried the animal diet...lasted 3 weeks"

"Wow, I'm impressed actually," I say. I lean toward her conspiratorially. "No, but seriously that shit's nasty."

She agrees with an obvious gesture that seems to say, 'Yes. Thank you.'

With a nasty smile reserved only for the younger Salvatore I ask, "But really, Stefan. Enlighten me. How do you do it?" I know I tread on dangerous ground here, but I can't help but add, "Do you just enjoy that whole pale and sickly thing?"

He shoots me a sharp look. "Doesn't matter. 'Cause if I started again I just don't know if—"

"You could stop," she finishes, the sympathy clear on her face.

But, you know, if I'm being honest here? Lexi's a worse hypocrite than Stefan when it comes to this whole animal diet thing. I mean, she's the one that got him started in this zero-sum game in the first place. And she doesn't even follow it? How screwed up is that?

"Lexi, I'd never judge you," Stefan says, but if that's true then there are some serious double standards in the mix here.
"I'm just jealous of your restraint." She shrugs, smiling. "I have none. I delight in hedonism."

I hear the faintest whisper of air as the door closes in the distance, the stealthy tread of near silent feet too quiet for any ears but mine, and can't help but smile in anticipation. Damon and his dramatic entrances.

"Speaking of which," she continues. "What are we doing tonight?"

"Funny you should ask," Damon calls from the sitting room. Stefan and Lexi look up with identical expressions of annoyed surprise.

"Well, I wasn't asking you," Lexi sneers.

"There's a party at the grill," Damon continues, unfazed. "Banquettes, tacky wait staff, all of Stefan's friends." He comes to rest his hand along the back of Lexi's chair with a smirk, looking devilishly handsome in his all black attire.

"Yeah, I don't want a party," Stefan says.

"Well it's not for you," Damon shrugs. "It's a party-party. No one's gonna know it's your birthday."

Stefan just cocks his head, vaguely confused at this turn of events. I can admit, I'd be more than a little suspicious myself in his position. That is, if I didn't think I knew exactly what he's planning.

"Caroline's throwing it," he taunts in response to the question in his brother's eyes.

"Damon, stay away from Caroline," Stefan warns ineffectually. Between Lexi and me, it's like a tennis match in here watching them trade verbal blows back and forth.

"We're friends, it's cool," Damon says nonchalantly. "It's important for the town to see us out and about like normal folk," he urges seriously. "We need to blend."

Stefan glares, but Damon smiles knowing he's won this round. As if suddenly catching a whiff of something particularly off-putting, he grimaces down at the nest of bloody juice boxes in Lexi's lap.

"Ugh," he groans. "I prefer mine at 98.6." Not even bothering to spare a glance in my direction he calls, "You comin' Z?" as though it is a foregone conclusion that I will follow. Rolling my eyes, I do.

---

**Damon**

I glance across the cab at the girl riding shotgun in my Camaro, and have to admit she looks good there.

With her pale skin nearly translucent where it peeks through the loose black weave of her long-sleeved shirt—the deep blue streaks through her raven hair a rich glow amid the dark interior—it is easy to forget what she is. She has braided her hair in that edgy style she prefers, three tight half-cornrows exposing the spiked piercings along her left ear.

Between that and those sky high motorcycle boots, she looks like nothing so much as a goth pixie, but there is no disguising how fragile she looks.
It's ironic then, that she has to be one of the fiercest creatures the world has ever seen. And by fierce I mean 'Legions of the undead arise to do my bidding' kind of fierce.

And maybe it's her innate emotional vulnerability (despite her age and power, the girl is an insecure mess. But then, she'd have to be to consider me her best friend), or her violent and unpredictable mood swings (like her open and bizarre hostility toward my brother, the hero), but despite all that I can't help the surge of protectiveness that swells in my chest at the sight of her.

It makes all this that much harder though that I so desperately want to trust her. Girl threw me for a loop the other night with that shit about Katherine.

I still don't know what to do with it, but it's obvious that there is a hell of a lot more she's not saying. After a century and a half of trusting no one but myself, it astounds me how much that hurts.

"You're not fooling me, you know?" her voice breaks through the silence.

I spare her a questioning glance, not sure to what she's referring.

"The party?" she prompts.

I attempt to look oblivious to her implication, but she rolls her eyes, seeing right through me as always.

"I know you, Damon," she reminds me. "I know how you work."

I consider how to respond. She doesn't sound disapproving exactly, but there is a hint of irritation and—dare I say it?—concern in her voice.

I decide to throw caution to the wind and drop the charade. This is Z we're talking about here.

"He'll be better off without his vampire guru and her sadistic detox methods anyway," I say. "Who knows? Maybe next time he jumps off the wagon into a spray of blood we can do without the bondage portion of our rehabilitation program."

She raises an unimpressed eyebrow at me. "And who's going to teach him? The brother who's claimed to hate him for a century and a half or the guy who killed his best friend?"

Geez, cut to the chase why don't you? She reads the answer in my silence.

"Drop me off at the edge of town," she sighs, resigned. "I'll hoof it."

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**Nadezhda**

The bar I've found is one I passed on my way into Mystic Falls a few weeks ago. It's a real dive, resembling more of a backwoods shack with a gratuitous cache of cheap alcohol than anything remotely resembling a legitimate business.

Though the handful of rusted old pick-ups suggests some degree of success, there can't be much profit in it. Frankly, it's so isolated out here in the middle of nowhere that it's a wonder there's any clientele at all. Should be a ghost town. It's perfect.

Upon entering the building, I find that the dive does not fail to meet with my expectations and I am
pleased to find no more than a dozen people between the staff and minimal customers.

I allow myself a predatory smirk as I approach the run-down bar, dropping my bag of supplies carefully on the floor and perching myself on a stool directly before the single bartender.

He allows his eyes an appreciative stroke up and down my body with a lecherous smile. "What can I get ya, doll?" he asks.


He does as requested, breaking the seal on a bottle of Stoli before pouring my glass and sliding it to me. He rests his elbows on the bar and flashes me a lascivious smirk.

"On the house, baby."

Wow, no compulsion necessary. Probably thinks I'll be passed out drunk and vulnerable in the next half hour, all ready for the dashing rescue of my helpful bartender. What a creep.

Giving no hint to my thoughts, I smile gratefully and lift my glass to my lips. "'Nozdrovye*!" I toast with a smirk. If he only knew.

I cast an eye about the room as the burn of room temperature vodka leaves a scalding trail down my parched throat. The single door visible to me looks sturdy and dependable, a heavy sliding panel with a strong deadbolt like that of a barn door. An electric deadbolt, no less. Better and better.

Smiling flirtatiously, I lean forward over the bar toward him, offering him a generous view of my scooping neckline. When he manages to tear his eyes from my chest and return to mine, he is met with the piercing gaze of a hungry vampire.

"You the manager here tonight?" I compel.

"Yes," he answers tonelessly.

"You the only one with a key?"

"Yes."

"Are there any other exits besides the front door?"

"No."

"Great," I smile sharply. "Then here's what you're going to do. You're gonna take your key, walk over to that door, flip the switch to lock it, and bring it back to me. And you're not gonna make a sound, got it?"

I watch with barely contained excitement as he robotically follows my instructions to the letter, unbeknownst to the obviously dedicated patrons.

I can't say I'm overly thrilled by the prospect of vicarious drunkenness, but the promise of the feast of which I am about to partake is too much to resist. I'm practically salivating where I sit.

He returns promptly, and I slap a hand to the thick muscle of his shoulder in what looks to an outsider like a friendly thanks.

When the key is in my hand, I slide it into my pocket and run one hand coyly up the subtly
trembling arm of my helpful bartender while the other retains an inhumanly firm grip on his shoulder.

Looking up into his terrified eyes, I offer him a dangerous smile as I allow my true face to come forth outside the view of my upcoming victims. I lunge.

Unable to scream, unable to move, the rich nectar of his blood fills my mouth and I moan at the taste.

I hear the cries and screams of the men and women around me, the frantic pounding on the padlocked door as they try to escape the monster before them awakening the latent hunger of my own demon.

As his drained body hits the ground at my feet, his delicious blood dripping from my extended fangs and staining my own throat red in excess, I turn to greet them all with a smile.

"Who's next?"

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**Damon**

I saw the shock and surprise on her face as I drove the stake through her heart. These emotions I had anticipated, but it was the *betrayal* that did me in.

As though the every hurt and resentment we had piled up between us over the last century, New York hanging heavy over the silence of the years of animosity between us, never once added up in her mind to this final fatal end.

I was shocked by the weight of my own guilt—my remorse—even in that moment. Though I knew it logically to be a smart play, I could hardly bear the sharp pain like a knife in my gut at the anguish in my little brother's eyes.

I don't often make apologies—hell, I'm not sure I even remember how to—but it's only in moments like these that I wish there weren't such a chasm of hate and guilt and jealousy between us which renders our breach insurmountable without bloodshed.

There is nothing I could possibly say to cut that hurt from his eyes, but I can take whatever he brings to bear. He deserves that much.

Still, before the hatred in those usually warm green eyes, I cannot bring myself to voice whatever honest emotion I might have felt.

There's a wall between my head and my heart and it's all that either of us sees, so when I turn to find him glowering with such unadulterated loathing in his eyes, I find myself responding with a coldness I do not feel but know that he will hear.

"Told you I'd take care of it," I provoke with a half-hearted smirk under the weight of his anger.

And when he makes his move, I don't lift a finger to stop him.

I may not have liked Lexi...No, let's be honest, there were times I *hated* her... but I know how my brother felt about her. So if he needs to dole out some punishment, how should I deny him?
The beat down, I expect. It is the stake that throws me.

Yet, before the excruciating, blistering pain of the wood in my gut even registers, I feel the offending object just as quickly wrenched from my body and Stefan's hateful thrust by an avenging angel in the form of a tiny goth-pixie drenched in blood.

Yet, it isn't my brother to whom she turns those eerily purple eyes. No, it is me she looks to with such unbridled rage flashing in her eyes, reminding me forcefully of the sheer power this little vampire commands. If I thought the full force of Stefan's hatred was galling, Z is frankly terrifying.

"What the fuck?!!" she yelled. "You were just going to let him stake you?!!"

I wisely opt to plead the fifth on that one. She gives me a glare that indicates we are not done with this conversation before turning her wrath on Stefan. I admit, I am relieved by the momentary reprieve.

"And you?!" she screams. Unlike me, however, Stefan is not deterred by her livid expression. If anything, he is only spurred to greater anger. Can't say the kid's not ballsy.

"He killed Lexi!!"

This declaration rings out in an eternally echoing scream through the sudden stillness between us.

Then, quietly, she mutters into the din, "Lexi's not dead, Stefan."

Well, that was unexpected.

---

**Nadezhda**

(three hours ago)

Sated and ever so slightly drunk, I leave the bar ablaze behind me as I make my way back to town. Luckily for me, I happen across a raven on the roadside pecking away at a bloody animal carcass. Man, for someone with such appallingly bad luck ninety percent of the time, I am on fire tonight.

I confidently extend my mind to catch the thoughts of the familiar scavenger, and turn them to my own purposes. I send him on ahead of me to catch whatever dealings he may while I prepare for the coming ritual.

By the time I have found a suitable site and prepared the altar to my satisfaction, he has found her in due time to play her death scene behind my eyelids.

No matter what feelings I may have for Lexi in these final moments, it is the look in her killer's eyes that confirms the rightness of my decision. They swim with regret.

I watch as the sheriff waves him away with the promise to deal with the aftermath among her own highly incompetent compatriots and I resist the urge to roll my eyes as I observe their poor excuse for a plan.

Rather than disguise or incinerate the body as would undoubtedly be prudent, they opt to bury it along some ill-traveled forest path in a shallow grave.

I suppose they fear discovery by the mortician or funeral director, but for a town that is supposedly
on the take you would expect they had better methods of disposal. Still, I can't say I'm not grateful. It spares me the effort of body-snatching.

No, it's only the admirable task of grave-desecration for me.

I'll spare you the details of this task as they are relatively unimportant. Suffice it to say, I retrieved and delivered the desiccated form of my near-friend to the clearing I had previously reserved for her second birth.

Piercing the soft skin of my wrist with my own bloodied fangs, I allow a scant few drops to wet her dead lips as I wrench the stake from her body with the other.

Drawing my circle around the corpse in a mixture of salt and chalked symbols of power, I return to my altar to call forth her spirit from beyond the veil.

Lighting my previously laid candles from right to left—red, then white, then black—I burn the wormwood and horehound in their familiar fragrance as I feel the power of the lives I have taken this night and focus on the image of the laughing vampire in my memory.

Absentmindedly, I finger the pendant hung about my neck in a habitual manner long-since established in my human life.

Despite my Russian heritage, the Veles' inspired kolovrat is the only concession I make to my Slavic roots. Yet it is in these moments, my mother's craft is most on my mind.

In a tangled mixture of Latin, Greek, and Hebrew that I have found an efficient short-cut over my many years, I begin to chant.

"In the name of Hecate, I call upon thee. Colpriziana, offina alta nestra, fiara menut, to onoma mou, Alexia Branson o nekros pou zito. Alexia Branson, esy esai o nekros pou zito. Pou pnevma tou nekrou, boreite na prosengisete tora afiti tin pyli kai na appantisei pragmatika sto kalesma mou. Berald, Beroald, Balbin, Gab, Gabor, Agaba. Arise, I charge and call thee!"

Then, taking the now smoking herbs in hand, I enter the circle to draw an X in the air over the prone form. "Allay Fortission Fortissio Allynson Roa!" I call. The air cracks and thunders to my summons. No, not literally. Though, can you imagine? That would be so cool.

With a desperate gasp of air in empty lungs, the body lurches to a seated position, the shock evident on her pretty face as her skin flushes with renewed life.

"What the hell just happened?"

I chuckle softly. "Nice to see you too, Lexi."

She looks at me with a mixture of shock, confusion, and not a little fear. I know the moment when the last minutes of her life comes back to her, for that last turns instead decidedly to anger.

"I'll kill him," she growls, but this returns again to dismay when her awakening mind registers her surroundings. "Wait, what's going on? Am I dead?"

"Wow, I don't know how to tell you this, hon, but I'm pretty sure that ship sailed a long time ago," I respond teasingly.

She looks at me with reproach, no doubt rather less amused by my attempt at humor than I am.
"But Damon killed me…didn't he?"

I sigh, resigned. "Yeah, he did." I smile proudly, "but then I brought you back."

At her still blank look, I take a step back and make a sweeping gesture toward the evidence of my work. "Damon killed you, and I brought you back," I say. "You're alive—or, well, undead—again. Ta da!" Jazz hands.

"I'm…you…he..wha'?" she splutters.

I frown. "Do I really have to explain the whole process to you? It's kind of a long story."

Her brow furrows in thought while she attempts to reconcile this new information. "Did he know?"

I don't insult her by pretending to be unaware of the 'he' to which she refers. "He knows what I can do," I answer vaguely.

She nods once, mouth twisting in a grimace as she notices for the first time the state of my clothes. Gesturing to the deep red stains covering the fabric and my exposed neckline, she says, "What is that?" as though the answer isn't obvious.

"Strawberry milkshake," I deadpan.

She seems to take this for the evasion that it is. She knows that she is unlikely to receive a better one.

"Why?" she asks, somewhat to my surprise. I know this to be her final word to Damon as well when he plunged the stake into her heart, and I find myself unsure whether she poses the question in regards to her death or her resurrection. I decide to answer for myself.

"Because I couldn't let him live with that," I answer honestly.

The anger returns to her eyes as she snarls, "Didn't seem to bother him at the time."

I huff, exasperated and beyond done with this conversation. "Yeah, as fun as this little heart to heart isn't, I've got some actual shit to deal with like rescuing an impulsive friend from a grieving ex so adios compadre. It's been real."

"Oh!" I say in afterthought. "And whatever you do, don't tell Stefan."

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**Stefan**

(back to present)

"What?" I question stupidly.

"She's alive, Stefan," Lia repeats, suddenly far calmer than she was just a moment ago when she came flying to my brother's defense like some vengeful Fury.

I stumble back in shock. *Lexi's alive?*

Words can't express the joy I feel at this statement. I feel as though some darkly oppressive weight that had been crushing my chest since the moment I saw my friend's body turn grey and still has
been lifted, leaving a lightness in its wake of such relief that I can feel it pulling at my lips and setting my reeling mind to dizzying heights.

"You weren't supposed to tell him," my brother hisses, and it takes me longer than I care to admit to understand the words through the haze of my euphoria.

When I do, the meteoric rise of my heart comes to a grinding halt as I look on him with stunned reproach. "You weren't going to tell me?" I ask incredulously.

He gives himself a shake of irritation and leaps to his feet. Glaring once at Lia, he says to me, "No, we weren't because we knew you couldn't help yourself."

My confusion at this statement must show on my face, but he offers only a pointed look to my left hand which I realize now had unknowingly retrieved my cell phone in my daze. He wrenches it from my grip.

"You can't call her," he insists. "She's dead, and she has to stay dead, you get it?"

No, I really don't.

Lia must see the dismay in my eyes for she takes pity on me in a show of sympathy I would not have believed her capable of a day ago.

"The sheriff and all her deputies saw Damon kill her, remember? The Council thinks they've got their vampire. What do you think is going to happen if they find out she's still walking around?"

Oh. Oh. "But I can't even call her?"

"You really think that's all you're gonna do?"

When I fail to respond to this accusation, she offers me an assertive nod, takes my brother forcefully by the shirt sleeve, and drags him from the room.

*Lexi's alive.*

Chapter End Notes

*This is actually the transliteration of a Russian word that is commonly misquoted as a sort of 'Cheers', but is actually not a toast at all. Rather, it is more of a 'thanks for the drink' and is here used ironically as a promise of things to come (i.e. the 'drink' she's about to take from the bartender—literally)*
After seeing Z off to school in her new "adult" attire, I decide to check in on Stefan who has apparently blown this whole thing way out of proportion. I mean, Lexi’s not even dead, and he’s still moping around like the teenager he pretends to be. Boring.

"Rise and shine, Stefan!" I call as I enter his room, extending a mug full of Bambi-juice to him in offering. "You'll be late for school."

He sits up with a look of utter bewilderment on his face when he sees me.

"What are—you doing?" he asks.

I smirk, give him a little eyebrow action, and say, "Peace offering."

Predictably, he gives me the brush off. At least he gets out of bed to do it.

"Come one, you need it for blood circulation," I tease. "Does dead flesh good."

I drop the smile when all I receive for my efforts is a blank stare.

"Stefan, she's not even dead!" I reason.

"Yeah, no thanks to you," he retorts coldly.

"What makes you say that? Why are you so sure I didn't know?"

"That's not the point," he says, frustrated.

"Then what is?"

"You would have done it anyway!" he growls. After a beat of silence in which I internally acknowledge the truth of this statement he repeats, "You would have done it anyway, so it doesn't matter."

"Alright, I'm sorry," I say, only partially lying.

"Step aside, please," he says, still giving me the cold shoulder.

I can't help the twinge of guilt that hits me at the thought of the alternative if Z hadn't been here.

"I got the town off our back," I justify. "It was for the greater good, but I'm sorry."
"And to prove it, I'm not gonna feed on a human for at least a…week," I call as he leaves the room in a huff. "I'll adopt the Stefan-diet, only nothing with feathers." I take a sip of what may be the last human blood I partake in 7 horribly excruciating days.

Returning, Stefan jeers, "Cause I realize that killing your closest and oldest friend is beyond evil, but somehow, it's worthy of humor." He slings one of those horrible plaid button-downs of his over his lean shoulders as he walks toward me.

"Are you mimicking me?" Well, at least he's got some 'tude back.

"Yes, Stefan, now that the secret society of vampire haters is off our back, I can go back to my routine of 'How can I destroy Stefan's life this week?' ."

I smirk to myself.

"And I can go back to sulking, and Elena-longing, and forehead brooding. This is fun, I like this."

"And I," Stefan continues as he finally packs for school, "will finally reveal the ulterior motive behind my evil and diabolical return to Mystic Falls." Well, that escalated quickly.

"Yeah, I'm done."

"That's just like you, Damon," I mock on my way out. "Always have to have the last word."

There's only one person I'd trust with a secret like that, brother, and it ain't you.

Nadezhda

Compelling my way into a teaching position at the High School was surprisingly easy. Actually, it was rather anticlimactic really. I was vaguely disappointed. But, boring as this job will undoubtedly prove to be at least I'm the teacher in this scenario.

Once again, I am eternally grateful that I wasn't turned younger.

I mean, I know I'm small and could probably pass for younger—especially in a world where a thirty something man can play a teenager believably on screen—but I cannot even imagine how these immortal teenagers do it.

Adolescence was bad enough the first time around. At least, I never had to deal with high school. Ugh.

Turns out the history teacher Damon took out has already been replaced, so I have to settle for English instead. We just sent the previous teacher on an extended vacation of indeterminate length to some unheard of location on the other side of the world.

Or, you know, a shallow grave. But, don't worry, we have a plan for that too.

Actually, if I'm being honest, I might prefer this subject. Lord, knows I'm well-read enough for it.

The part that really sucks about all of this? My hair. I made the mistake of letting Damon dress me this morning as a sort-of/not really apology for dropping the Lexi-shaped bomb on Stefan yesterday.
Needless to say, the change is not to my liking.

See, sometime in the last few decades I developed something of a fondness for the punk-rocker look in my own style—I blame the 70s—and have taken to styling my hair in a variety of unconventional ways.

Lately, I have streaked my black tresses with subtle blue highlights and taken to braiding the hair on the left side of my head in a pseudo half faux-halk to showcase the 12 piercings all along my ear.

I know, I know, cliché. But what can I say? I like it. It's like hiding in plain sight.

Anyway, in the span of 15 minutes Damon had undone all my hard work at an edgy appearance and managed to make me look downright—ugh I can hardly say it—respectable. Shudder.

My hair lies in graceful waves to frame my face which is in turn clear of any but the lightest of make-up. He wouldn't even let me wear eye-liner, the jerk. And in place of my usual corset top and leather jacket, I wear a classy blue dress that looks alarmingly adult.

I hardly recognize myself.

But this was my idea and I will see it through. So, no more pity party. Put your big girl panties on, Nadezhda, and make it look real.

The bell rings to signal fourth period and I take a deep breath, paste on a friendly smile and turn to greet the host of upturned teenaged faces all focused on me.

Huh. What a small world, looks like Stefan's in my first class of the day. He's got that puppy-love, kinda dazed smile on his face as he looks at the brunette turned in her chair to face him. Poor kid's got it bad.

Uh, where was I? Oh, right.

"Good Morning, Class!"

"Good Morning!" they all chime back. I see Stefan staring at me with that dark look in his eye. Guess Damon didn't tell him I was here. Though, admittedly, he looks less constipated than I would have expected after last night's announcement. Oh, this is gonna be fun.

"My name is Ms. Salvatore, and I'll be subbing Ms. Wilkins…intermittently…while she's away." I smile cheerfully out at them as they all turn to my given namesake.

"But don't worry," I assure them all. "There will no special treatment for my little brother over there." Elena looks shocked. Stefan just glares.

Bet I know what you're thinking, Stefan. I see what Damon means about the forehead wrinkles. How does he do that?

"So, anybody want to tell me where your teacher left off?"

A gorgeous blond in a blue peasant top and a fake Barbie smile answers, "We were just about to start the Scarlet Letter."

Oh, great. Colonial American Literature. My favorite. "Yeah, we're not doing that. Why don't we do a creative exercise today? We can just breeze through main themes—I'll let your next sub field
that one—and I'll find us a book to study for next time that doesn't make me want to blow my brains out."

Amid the startled laughter and confusion, it occurs to me that I may have inadvisably just let my mouth run away with me again. Oh well. I studied that shit one semester in college and I am one hundred and twelve percent sure I don't want to ever again.

"Alright, how about this? How many of you little over achievers read the book over the summer like you were meant to?" Everyone raises their hand. Unsurprising. Whatever.

"Ok. I don't actually care if you did or not. We can still discuss the themes with or without the text. We all know the story, right? Girl named Hester has a baby out of wedlock. She's married, but her husband hasn't been around in a while. Everyone knows she cheated on him. The townsfolk make her wear a big red 'A' on all her clothes to mark her as an adulteress. Sound familiar?"

Some shaky head nods. Works for me.

"If you're really smart and book-wormy you know that Arthur Dimmesdale, the reverend, is the father and he feels so guilty about it that there's this whole disturbing scene in the second half where he flogs himself in the name of God like some crazed ascetic monk in the Dark Ages."

I seem to have their attention for the moment at least, so I clear my throat and continue.

"Most people think this book is about slut-shaming or the witch trials in Puritan New England, and yeah there's some truth to that, but the real theme here is a little deeper, a little more subversive.

"See, because, Hester broke the rules. She didn't conform and she was a social pariah because of it. But by the end of the book, you aren't judging her for her mistakes. You're not even really hating on the townspeople for how they treat her. No, you're looking at yourself and you see your own worst enemy.

"It's like Sartre says in 'No Exit'—the correct translation, not the popular one—"Hell is the Other". Hell fire and damnation, those are just ideas. They're concepts of a reality we can't reach from our side of life.

"But hell on earth? That's not something other people thrust upon us. It's not about how they see us. It's about how we think they see us, and consequently, how we see ourselves."

The silence that follows this speech seems to suggest I wasn't going to get anywhere talking to them today. I think I actually spooked myself there for a second.

"Ok!" I say with forced cheerfulness. "Looks like we've got about 35 minutes left till lunch. How about we spend the rest of the period just thinking about that theme? If you've read the book, great. I applaud you. If not, just write whatever comes to mind. There's no word count. Just write till it feels finished and you can turn it in to me at the end of class or tomorrow morning. Whatever."

The next half hour flies by in the hush of silent mouths and scratching pencils as I think about this new epiphany of mine.

Damon would be crushed if he heard my theories on his long lost love, and if this new doppelganger is anything like the last one I can't imagine he'd want the heat this is going to bring down on her either. I need to hear his side of the story.

It's time for a few more secrets to be revealed and I am not looking forward to it.
Unfortunately, it seems Stefan has no intention of letting me off the hook with this one at least. Ah well, it was going to happen sometime.

"Salvatore, huh?" he questions with a wry smile. "Something you and Damon want to tell me?"

"Yes, Stefan. Your brother and I are deeply in love—or lust—and we just couldn't wait to make it official," I joke, flashing my daylight ring. "See? He got me a ring and everything."

Stefan is unimpressed. Grr.

"Look, I needed an excuse to be here without raising suspicion so, for all intents and purposes, consider me Ms. Natalia Salvatore, your older brother's twin sister."

He frowns, but seems to understand and lets this pass without further comment.

"Listen," he says, all but wringing his hands in his sudden nervousness. "I just wanted to thank you for what you did for Lexi. I don't know what I would have done if—"

"You would have gut-staked your brother and spent the next few months railing at him in impotent rage because, despite everything, you still love him," I snap.

"So let's cut the crap, Stefan. What I did, I didn't do for you. I didn't even do it for her. I did it so your brother wouldn't have to shoulder the crushing weight of your grief, and so the three of us wouldn't get ourselves spotted by a bunch of paranoid wannabe slayers, ok?"

I turn to storm out of the room, irked, but when I reach the door I can't help but offer this final parting shot, "Think about that the next time you try to 'control' your brother."

Ugh. I need a drink. Wonder if any of these teachers have the backbone to help me out.

Ah. This job may be worth it after all, I think as I take a grateful swallow from my new friend's flask. Turns out the new history teacher's got some balls.

"Alaric 'Ric' Saltzman, you are my new best friend."

He chuckles knowingly, reclining back in the plastic chair of our teacher's lounge lunch table. "Who's your old one?"

"Oh, just this homicidal maniac with a heart of tarnished gold," I reply with a dismissive wave.

"Sounds like a catch."

"Oh, he is," I say seriously. "So, Ric, what's your story?"

He lifts an eyebrow at me. "Well, Lia, that's an invasive question, don't ya think?"

"Yep," I admit. "But you'll answer it."

He chuckles, but there's a wistful expression on his face that only further sparks my curiosity.

"What's with the face," I say, with a circular motion of my forefinger to the subject in question. He smiles sadly and wipes a hand over his scruffy features. "God, you just really remind me of
"Someone." 

"Someone good?" I ask with a purse of my lips. 

"Yeah...," he breathes, lost in his memory. 

"Someone you lost?"

He looks up sharply at my curious gaze and I back track with a passive hand gesture, raising them in surrender. "Sorry, sorry. Tactless."

He stares for a moment longer before sighing in defeat to my persistence. "No, it's ok. Just kind of recent, you know?"

"Right. Sorry I asked."

After a beat of silence, he breaks the tension with a change of topic. "So, Salvatore, huh? Like the founding family?"

I groan in what I hope is a believable affectation of exasperation under a familiar question. "Yep. Just like it."

"I think I have a Salvatore in one of my classes...Stefan? I think."

"Yeah, he's my brother."

"Brother? Really? And you teach at his school?"

I give him a somewhat irritated look through pinched eyes. "Now who's being invasive?"

He chuckles. Oh, he is such a dick. I like it.

He raises his coffee mug to his lips and I catch sight of a particularly gaudy ring. One I recognize. I'd know those symbols anywhere. I'm not a nearly 900 year old necromancer for nothing.

He catches me staring and correctly guesses the object of my thoughts. Not surprising.

"Uh, it's a family heirloom." Right. Sure. Let's go with that. "Kinda hideous, huh?"

I attempt to look merely amused. "Yeah, no kidding."

Looks like the new history teacher just became a hell of lot more interesting. Wonder what it means.

Packing up to leave the school at the end of the day, I hear the telltale buzzing of my phone signaling an incoming text message.

From "Sexy Beast": Meet me outside. Plan in motion. 

I roll my eyes at the moniker—Damon must have snuck into my phone—but it's the contents of the message that have me rushing to follow instruction.

We haven't spoken a word between us about what he said the other night and I had begun to worry
he was too drunk to remember or wish to, but if this is what I think it is, he may finally be ready to admit what I already suspected and I can return the favor.

At the edge of the car park, I see Damon's leather jacket hovering threateningly over a pretty dark-skinned teenager who looks suitably terrified at the interaction. I catch a glimpse of their conversation when I focus my inhumanly sharp ears across the way.

"….need my help," he's saying. "And you know why, you little witch, because you have stumbled into something you need to stumble out of."

So she's a witch. That explains why he's interested in her, but what is he on about? As I focus on the girl, I feel a cold shiver down my spine. It's a familiar feeling, an old friend even. I catch a glimpse of petticoats and old world posture in the corner of my eye. Now, why is this girl being haunted?

I move closer as they argue on, oblivious to my presence.

"Just leave me alone, or I swear I'll—" she attempts to sound threatening as she races for her car door. Before she even gets there, however, Damon has smoothly blocked her escape.

"Ooh," he chuckles, sliding into place. "Don't. No threats."

By this point I am almost upon them, looking over the top of the car beside the girl's into Damon's pale blue eyes. The witch notices the brief flicker of his gaze and looks to me with an expression that can only be described as helplessness. I meet her eyes, and shrug. Damon chuckles as her heart rate spikes even higher in her fear.

"Look," he starts again with a wagging finger and a mocking pout, "A: you hurt me last time, B: I wish you no harm. Believe it or not, Bonnie, I want to protect you."

His expression suddenly turns serious, and I immediately believe him. I don't know why yet, but he means it.

"Let me help get Emily off your back," he explains.

For a moment, the natural curiosity of a young witch overtakes her when she asks, "How do you know about her?"

"I know a lot of things," he says cryptically, taking a threatening step forward in a move that causes her to jump in renewed terror. She backs away until her back is pressed firmly against the same car upon which I have propped my elbows in my growing boredom.

"And I know more about that crystal than you do, and I know that she's using it to creep inside you," he brushes his hand almost lovingly along the tender skin of her cheeks.

"Ha! See how scared you are?" She jumps again. "And you should be, because I will get that crystal even if I have to wait for Emily to give it to me herself," he snarls.

"So, next time she comes out to play, you tell her" he chirps with false cheer as he opens her car door for her, "that a deal's a deal". He smiles and jerks his head to indicate her exit, waving facetiously as she peels out in a hurry.

I round the car I have been leaning upon, and come to stand at his side. "So, Bennet-witch I take it?" His smirk is all the answer I need.
"You wanna tell me what that was all about?"

"Not here," he says, cocking his head toward the blue Camaro I barely make out across the lot. "Come on."

"So, let me get this straight," I ask from the solitary confines of his precious car. "You made a deal with Emily to reopen the tomb she sealed with her amulet if you preserved her family line and now that self-same family, out of some deep-seated hatred for you, won't cooperate?"

"That's about the sum of it, yeah."

I sit back, against the leather seat, processing this new information while I stare at the 'Mystic Grille' bar and restaurant through the windshield. Apparently, Damon's "plan" tonight mainly consists of getting sloppy drunk in some local hangout after finally confessing the worst kept secret of all time.

"You'd think they'd have some sort of respect for the man that single-handedly guaranteed their continued existence," I grumble. "Or at least some gratitude."

"Yeah."

Without another word, he blurs through the door and strides across the parking lot toward the lit-up building and its alcoholic comforts.

I sigh, resigned, and follow.

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**Elena**

Bonnie is shaking. I know this whole witch thing is new to her—hell the whole 'vampires are real thing' is new to all of us—but I **hate** that it might be my fault she's so scared. I have no idea what Damon is up to, and frankly I don't want to know, but I know it can't be anything good.

I was shocked to see his 'friend' Lia turn up at our school today. Scared too, if I'm being honest. I know next to nothing about her, but if she's with Damon I'm not sure I want to.

From what Bonnie said, it seems a safe assumption that she's with him on whatever diabolical scheme he has going and, while a part of me wants absolutely nothing to do with whatever undoubtedly horrible thing it is, I can't shake this terror that my friends will suffer for it if I don't.

It's amazing to me that such a noble, sweet, gentle guy as Stefan can have such a monster for a brother. Then again, a couple weeks ago I could never have imagined "Stefan" and "vampire" in the same sentence, and now I can't think of him at all without seeing it.

It scares me that I can have such deep, tender feelings for a guy that could kill me without even trying—more, that might **want** to—but I can't deny that a part of me finds it oddly comforting.

It's like, I know that he has the ability to be this terrifying monster—there's no denying it, just look at Damon—but the fact that I somehow **know** he would die rather than hurt me, makes me feel safe with him in a way I haven't felt since my parents died.
When I first found out about them, I was frozen by the fear of what he could do to me if I stayed with him, but now the only thing scaring me is that he might leave.

I know he thinks that leaving will protect me from his world, but it's not him I need protection from. If there's one thing I know, it's that he'll always be there to rescue me. Even when the threat is his own brother.

Mind made up, I make the call.

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**Stefan**

I enter the Grill to find exactly the scene I both feared and expected when I left Elena's porch: two leather clad backs faced toward the bar, booze and blood hanging conspiratorially between them.

I can see Lia pointing toward Alaric Saltzman, Damon looking on suspiciously, and assume she must have met him when she ran like a bat out of hell from my attempted thank you this morning.

She shocked me this morning when she turned up unannounced in that school teacher persona, telling everyone she's my brother's twin sister.

What's funny is that it wasn't so much the cover story itself that surprised me, nor even her unsolicited presence at the high school of all places, but rather the ease with which she adapted to it.

No one can deny seeing these two together, that they have a bond that can only be matched by that formed *in utero*.

Honestly, in the short time I've known her she's managed to remind me more forcefully of my brother at any given turn than anyone I have ever met.

Based on what she did for Lexi and the concern she shows for Damon, it seems that the one fundamental difference between them is the compassionate heart she seems to carry within her chest. It gives me hope that she can find Damon's too.

Interrupting their furtive whispers, I wedge myself between them with my back toward the smaller of the two.

"So, Stefan," I say by way of greeting, gratified by the evident surprise on my brother's face, "I've been thinking, I think we should start over." Damon rolls his eyes, and I can hear Lia scoff behind me. "Give this brother thing another chance. We used to do it oh, so well once upon a time."

Recognizing the taunt in my tone for what it is, Lia chuckles under her breath as Damon responds lamely, "I don't, Damon." He wrinkles the skin between his eyebrows in what I assume is meant to be his version of what he has dubbed my "brooding forehead".

I can't help the slight smile that comes to my face at the attempt. "I can't trust you to be a nice guy. You—you kill everybody, and you're so mean. You're so mean, and…" he trails off and I shake my head in amused incredulity.

He gives up and admits with a smirk and an eye-roll, "You're really hard to imitate and then I have to go to that lesser place."
I snicker and turn to the bartender, "Can I get a coffee please?"

As I turn back to Damon, an arm snakes around me to snag the half-empty bottle on the bar in front of him. "Hey!" he protests without heat.

"You snooze, you lose, baby," Lia taunts. "And, I have a feeling I'm gonna need it for whatever little heart to heart Steffy-poo here is about to drag you into."

I pause in my reply to mouth 'Steffy-poo?' to my brother. He only rolls his eyes again, though this time affectionately.

Shaking my head, I acknowledge to myself that I am unlikely to understand a word between these two and resolve to return to my original agenda: getting Damon to open up.

"So what's with the bottle," I ask.

"Is that judgment I hear in your voice?" Lia mock gasps, bringing a hand to her mouth. "But this is a 'no judgment' zone, Stefan. You should be ashamed of yourself."

I rub my temple in mild irritation before directing my gaze yet again to my brother. He seems far more amused by Lia's continued interruptions than I am.

"I'm on edge. Crash diet. You know I'm trying to keep a low profile," he quips.

"Well, you're the one that had the brilliant idea to go all 'Invasion of the Bunny Snatchers' on me. I'm feeling outnumbered here," Lia complains.

"I told you, it was an olive branch," he argues, completely ignoring me. The level of exasperation in his voice leads me to believe this is not the first time they've had this debate. And they've only been together a few hours.

"Well, it was a stupid idea."

"I was trying to apologize."

"Yeah, 'cause we all know how great you are at those. Right, Stefan?"

I hum noncommittally rather than be dragged into their banter. I came here with a plan, and I aim to see it through.

"You could always leave," I say to Damon, but I'm directing it to both. "Find a new town to turn into your own personal gas 'n sip."

Lia just snickers in response. I guess she's conjuring the image in her mind.

"I'll manage," Damon replies.

The bartender sets a new bottle in front of him, having noticed the previous one's disappearance, and I wonder whether he's compelling the staff to get this kind of service.

Giving me a cynical look that is devoid of the playfulness from a mere moment ago, he says, "You know, you don't have to keep an eye on me."

"I'm not here to keep an eye on you," I assure.

"So why are you here?" challenges the girl on my right.
I shrug. "Why not?"

I take the bottle and make a break for it. After some quiet bickering behind me, they follow.

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**Nadezdha**

Boys are dumb. Boys are so dumb they don't even know how dumb they are. And these Salvatore boys are dumber than most. As if Damon can't tell *exactly* what Stefan's up to with this whole brother-bonding bullshit. Subtle he is not.

What's really stupid though, is that it probably won't even matter. Yeah, I bet you anything that by the end of the night Damon will have spilled his guilty little guts out of sheer frustration and some misguided attempt to make amends.

I mean, why he feels bad at all is beyond me. Lexi's not even dead, and he's still acting all mad at himself for killing her. I don't know what Stefan said to him, but from his attitude at school this morning I can guess.

It's sad that he doesn't seem to know his brother well enough to recognize this dismissive attitude of his for what it is—guilt.

Granted, Damon's probably the worst apologizer (is that even a word?) in the world, but that doesn't mean he never regrets anything, only that he *refuses* to dwell on it. It's a defense mechanism for the self-proclaimed monster to avoid the eternal pity party his brother seems to love so well.

It's also possible that I am the slightest bit drunk with all this introspection. I glance down at the bottle in my hand. It's the second of the night, and I think I'm starting to feel the effects. God bless vampire-metabolism.

I got tired of buffering the weird fraternal display before me a little while ago and have resorted to entertaining myself with a bottle of vodka—not like I can get sick mixing liquors anyway—ever since.

They're playing darts or some shit while they shoot the breeze and I got intensely bored intensely fast.

I noticed Alaric here earlier and made a point to direct Damon's attention to him and his magical ring, but I don't know how much really registered through his Katherine-addled brain. I suppose now's not a bad time to do a little recon.

Through the clamor of the crowd and all their mundane conversations—(seriously, I think the whole town is here, is there *anywhere* else to hang out?)—I can make out the sounds of flirty banter from across the room.

"...I'm a returnee," the strawberry blonde that I recognize as Jeremy's aunt is saying. "Left town for a while, now I'm back."

"Why'd you leave?" Ric asks, sounding genuinely interested. Oh, a budding romance for my favorite new history teacher. That's gonna spark some drama later.

"School," she answers, but I call bullshit. From the look on his face I'd say Ric agrees with me.
"And then there's the real reason…" she caves, taking a sheepish sip of her drink as she averts her eyes.

He chuckles.

"I was wronged," she admits. Ooh, details! Wait…why do I care about this again?

"Guy named Logan."

"What'd he do?" Is this really appropriate flirting material? Is this some weird new mating ritual I can't possibly understand? Because I don't think it is.

"Basics," she sighs. "Lied, cheated, lured me back in, left me again."

He nods, lips pursed.

"Your turn," she offers. "Any sad relationship stories?"

He clears his throat, a little uncomfortable. He has that same wistful look on his face I saw earlier. I squirm on my barstool, anxious for more of the story.

"Mmm, basics—fell in love, married young, my wife died." Ouch.

She looks at him with those big dewy eyes of hers, obviously sympathetic, and says simply, "Oh. Wow."

"Yeah, that's always a good conversation stopper."

No, no, but we were just getting to the good stuff.

"What happened?" she asks.

He huffs, "Well, you me and the, uh, North Carolina Police Department are all wondering the same thing," he says in what I assume is a sad tone, but the look is gone and his voice sounds almost detached. "It's, uh, it's what's known as a cold case." There's a new look in his eye.

The girl just looks shell shocked. I suppose this was a little heavy for flirty banter. See? What did I tell you?

"So why'd you move here?" she asks with a forced smile. Her attempt at salvaging the conversation, I assume.

"Oh, a change of pace, new scenery," he says tonelessly, the former warmth all but gone from his voice. "I like it here. It's got a lot of rich history."

Hmm, to say the least.

The girl, whose name is Jenna apparently, manages to steer the train-wreck of a conversation back to the safely mundane prattle of typical dating small talk and I decide to cut out while I'm ahead. I am officially interested in that man's back story, and I make a mental note to keep a close eye on him.

I decide to play with the boys a little while. Can't be more boring than Jenna's description of this town's staggeringly long list of social events. I take the final harsh swallow of my once full bottle of Stolichnaya, and hop off my stool to rejoin the Tweedles.
Can I just take a moment to say how absolutely mortifying it is that a creature of my age and strength, that should have this entire town fraught with pure terror, has to leap from a barstool like a toddler from his high chair? Ugh.

I return to Damon's side just soon enough to hear him telling Stefan all about reverse psychology and how he's never going to fall for it. Right…

"I mean, it's a little transparent, but I admire the effort."

"You prefer the brooding forehead?" Stefan teases.

I groan, "Guys, seriously. We're still doing this?"

Damon turns to look down at me, an insulting pout on his face, to taunt, "Oh, is my little Zee Zee getting cranky?"

I glower at him, unamused. "Oh, trust me Damon. When I'm cranky, you'll know about it."

"Ooh, what are you gonna do to me?" he smirks.

"To you? Probably nothing," I smile sweetly. "But the bar full of patrons behind me may have something to say about it when I start tearing throats."

Damon laughs, "Yeah, they probably would." He then leans his face real close to mine, his full lips puckered out in that same simpering pout from earlier, as he pinches my cheeks like a proud Papa. "You're so cute," he coos.

I slap his hands away so hard I hear his wrist crack and promptly stick out my tongue.

Stefan, long since forgotten, groans loudly. "Can we not do this?" he whines.

"Why, Stefan?" I ask, cocking my head. "Was there something you wanted to do?"

"Yeah, Stefan?" Damon echoes, suddenly serious. "Seriously, what game do you think you're playing?"

Stefan just stares, his face very close to his brother's and taunts, "That's a funny question, considering the fact that I have been asking you that for months."

Damon grumbles incoherently.

"Frustrating, isn't it?" Stefan prods.

"Touché," his eyebrows concede.

After another brief pause of tense silence, I can't take this anymore. "Ugh! Either kiss and make up or let's get the fuck out of here already!" I exclaim.

When this fails to meet with my impatient standards, I grab Damon's hand in a literally bone-crushing grip and offer him a sickly sweet smile. "Damey, I'm bored. Let's go." And without further adieu, I drag him from the building as Stefan trails behind.

By the time we've escaped any potential witnesses, I'm fairly certain I've ground Damon's hand to a bloody pulp. "God, you're so abusive," he whines.

"Oh, stop being a baby."
"Yeah, downside to my diet? Getting hurt actually hurts a little bit," Stefan offers helpfully, with a sympathetic look at Damon's soon to be club hand.

I sigh dramatically in exasperation, "Fine!" and release his hand which Damon then clutches protectively to his chest with a reproachful look in my direction.

I stride a few steps ahead of them, then spin around with my hands on my hips in a wide-spread stance as I ask, "So? Where are we going?"

"What, you're gonna let somebody else lead now?"

I shrug. "I guess."

Stefan opens his mouth to make a suggestion, but a brilliant idea has just occurred to me and I beat him to the punch. "Wait, wait! I know exactly where we should go!"

I make to grab for Damon's hand again, but he darts quickly out of my reach. Fraidy cat.

Stefan chuckles.

"Follow me!" I sing, and take off in a burst of vamp-speed in my chosen direction, taking Damon's bourbon with me for good measure. They have to follow me now. Hah!

A few moments later, they find me perched on a very large tombstone, perfectly at ease. It's one of those gigantic bible-holding angel things like from that one skeleton movie. You know, the one that sings?

"What took you guys so long?"

They look blankly at each other as though questioning my sanity.

"A cemetery?" Stefan asks. "Why are we in a cemetery?"

"Family bonding," I chirp. "Duh."

Damon guffaws and I feel better already. Stefan just gives me a look that screams 'There's something very seriously wrong with you' and I graciously choose not to take offense.

"You're drunk," Damon chuckles.

"Well, yeah, maybe a little," I admit as I take another gulp of bourbon before Damon steals it back. Not nice, thief!

It seems Stefan is not done with his very serious plan yet though because he proceeds to climb aboard the nearest headstone and wax nostalgic about the starry skies.

"Do you remember when we use to—" he begins.

"Yeah, ok. I get it," Damon snaps. "What do you want, Stefan?"

Stefan frowns, but looking into Damon's expectant gaze, surrenders the façade. "Wasn't real, Damon."

Damon just raises an eyebrow in the universal gesture for 'go on'.

"Our love for Katherine."
"Oh, God," Damon scoffs, rolling his eyes heavenward in search of patience as Stefan lectures on in that patronizing tone.

"She compelled us, we didn't have a choice. Took me years to sort that out, to truly understand what she did to us." I groan internally. I know this song, and it doesn't end well. Stefan really has no idea, does he?

"Oh, no, Stefan." Damon pats his knee as he lurches to his feet. "We are not taking that on tonight." He offers me a hand down from my perch, and I slide gracefully to my feet beside him, offering Stefan a pitying look as I trail along behind.

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**Damon**

Jesus, this is so not what I needed tonight. All I wanted was to spend a little time with my best friend, while I drink away my feelings in a room full of strangers. What's wrong with that?

Then Stefan shows up with all his fake brother-bonding bull shit, trying to get me to open up about my feelings or what the fuck ever. Still, that I could have handled. But, Katherine? He really wants to get into that with me?

At this point, Katherine and all her lies, her secrets, is the last thing I want to talk about. I love the woman. I've loved her fiercely and devotedly for 145 years—and if it's the last thing I do, I'm going to save her—but that doesn't mean for a second that I want to talk about it.

I stroll away, Z at my side with her little hand caught in mine, when I hear him call after me, "What do you want with Katherine's crystal?"

I freeze. Z's hand gives a jolt in mine, squeezing tightly.

"How do you know about that?" I ask.

"Come on. You knew Elena would tell me."

Sure, but that doesn't explain how he connected it to her from Emily. Not even Bonnie knew that.

"How did you know it was Katherine's?" I ask, a lingering suspicion stirring in the back of my mind. "Emily gave it to her on her last night. I was with her, you...weren't" I smirk, though the sentiment feels forced.

Z turns her face to look up at me with concern swimming clearly in her eyes. I look away.

He pauses, mouth open on a hesitant breath. Finally, he says, "I was the last one to see her, Damon."

What?! That can't be...That would mean...

In the eerie darkness of the cemetery, the moonlight casts long shadows across my brother's face. Every sharp edge darkened in an ominous mien—the face that stole my dreams. "Now what do you want with Katherine's crystal?"

I cock my head as I consider this question. This is why after all these years, I will be the one she chooses. I will be the one that proved his love for her, whose faithfulness stood the test of time.
What does he have to offer in comparison to that?

"She didn't tell you?" I ask, the hint of a smirk fighting its way to the surface.

"We had other things on our mind." I hear Z's gasp before I realize that I've even moved. I flash forward to stand toe to toe with my eternal rival—the man I've even called my mortal enemy—my little brother.

"I could rip your heart out and not even think twice about it," I snarl.

"Yeah, I've heard that before," he nods, unfazed.

I feel a hand grasp my sleeve, tugging me away with subtle insistence. "Damon..." she breathes. Something hard and cold clenched around my heart eases slightly at the sound. I offer Stefan a hard smile, and clap my free hand to his shoulder. "I have a bigger surprise, Stefan."

I allow Z's hand to pull me gently away, strolling backwards from the look of shock I put there. "I'm gonna bring her back."

This time when we walk away, I don't wait for him to stop me.

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Nadezhda

That was cruel. I have half a mind to kill Stefan myself after the way he spoke to Damon. He knew that was the worst way to hurt him. He knows his brother still loves her. What's more, Stefan believes that he never did.

There's a part of me that just wants to take this man beside me, wrap him up in my own unwavering affection, and never let another soul touch him with such hate in their heart. I hate that the world causes him such pain and that I am helpless to stop it.

If he'd let me, I'd whisk him away to the other end of the earth if it could bring him some relief, but he has unfinished business here and he'd never leave it undone. Not even now.

When the scuffling sounds of Stefan's footsteps are near enough behind us to be within even his pitiful hearing range, he abruptly says, "Before Katherine and the others were killed in the church, do you remember what it was like in this town?"

Stefan's sharp eyes are on me when he says, "Yeah, I remember the fear and the hysteria."

"The townspeople were killing vampires one by one. When they came for Katherine, I went straight to Emily, said 'I'll do anything. Name your price. Just protect her.' She did."

"How?" he asks, puzzled.

From the looks he's throwing my way, I think he has a strong suspicion. Not this time, Stefan.

Damon throws his arms out in a full-body shrug but says, "She did some kind of spell with the crystal," wiggling his fingers to sign 'witchy juju'.

"And while the church was burning and we thought Katherine was burning in it," he shakes his head, "she wasn't."
"But I—I saw her go inside…" Stefan stutters.

"There's a tomb underneath the church," Damon explains. "The spell sealed Katherine in that tomb, protecting her."

"Are you telling me Katherine is alive?" Stefan asks, appalled.

Damon shrugs. "Well, if that's what you want to call it. She's been trapped in a mystical holding cell for the last a century and a half, but you're the expert on starving a vampire, so how do you think she's doin', Stef?"

I have to admit, the prospect does not excite me.

Stefan only looks concerned, and not a little confused.

"Did you know that witches can use celestial events to draw energy to their magic?" Damon continues, smug in his recovery of the upper hand. "Pfft! Me either!" he taunts. "But to give the crystal its power, Emily used the comet that was passing overhead, and in order for that crystal to work again…"

"The comet had to return," Stefan mutters, finally putting it together.

"Downside—long time in between comets, and a couple of hiccups along the way with the crystal, but the comet passed, and I got the crystal," he declares with a smirk that quickly becomes a grimace. "And then Caroline got the crystal, and now Bonnie has the crystal, and here we are."

Stefan frowns, again at a loss. "Why would Emily—why would she do this for you?"

"Because she knew they were gonna come for her too, and she made me promise that her lineage would survive."

"I remember. You—you saved her children."

"Yeah, it's the only thing keeping me from ripping that little Bonnie girl's throat out to get my crystal back," he grumbles. Then, sighing, "Oh well. Deal's a deal. So…you wanna bond some more?"

Yet again we leave Stefan to brood and find ourselves a further ground to rest upon. I'm starting to think all this storming off is just for dramatic effect. We only seem to move about 5 feet at a time.

I want to offer my support, or at least my presence, but I know Damon too well to think he'll accept either in his present state. His vulnerable human self is buried deep within the sarcastic, cynical vampire at the moment, and not even I can coax him out.

A shrill ring in the silence of the night alerts Stefan to an incoming phone call from his lady love, causing him to pause in his slow trek toward us as we edge further and further away.

We eventually find a polished bench seat someone must have donated in memoriam, and lounge in wait for the conclusion of Stefan's oh so important phone call.

"What's wrong?" he says, by way of greeting.

The tinny sound of Elena's voice through the ear piece replies, "It's Bonnie."

"What happened?"
The girl's barely contained panic is clear as she explains Emily's sudden possession of her friend's body, and her cryptic warning.

"What did she say?"

All attention is on her response when she repeats, "She said, 'I won't let him have it. It must be destroyed,' and then she left."

"She left? Where do you think she went?"

"I don't know—I don't know...Fell's Church. That's where she took Bonnie in her dreams."

We're gone by the time Stefan turns around.

We hide in the shadow of the trees, the predatory gleam in our eyes a threatening glow in the darkness which lies over the ruins.

A young girl in a yellow peasant top emerges stony eyed and determined in the moonlight, the little pink flowers dotting her shirt a bright innocence in a moment preceding an inevitable violence.

Damon stalks toward her with a lethal feline grace, startling the inhuman coldness in her eyes to a flash of latent power and I know at once how this ends.

"Hello, Emily," he croons. "You look different."

She comes to a grinding halt in her journey, turning to face him with squared shoulders and a confidence unsuited to her young charge.

"I won't let you do it," she swears.

"We had a deal," he reminds her with a barely concealed rage. Damon's not one for moral indignation, but the honor of a binding contract is a principle even he will not breach.

"Things are different now. I need to protect my family."

"I protected your family," he growls. "You owe me."

"I know," she replies, eyes glistening in an unexpected sympathy. "I'm sorry."

"You're gonna have to be a lot more than that," he snarls, rushing her with a sudden burst of superhuman speed.

She raises a hand in defense as he approaches, sending a surge of power through him that propels him from her and is stopped only by a harsh collision. The tree branch stalling his headlong fall impales him through the chest. He shouts in pain.

"Damon!" I cry out in my fear. When I see that the wood has missed his heart, I attack.

"You bitch!" I yell as I rush her, attempting to breach the circle before she can command and seal the ritual site.

She repeats her defense from before, throwing sheer force and power at my speeding form. It is enough to halt my assault, but I only stumble back a few steps before I bat it off. I feel my fangs
elongate in my rage, and I smile. "You're gonna have to do a lot better than that, little girl."

I draw from the remnants of my last feed, their life-forces surging through my body in an explosion of incredible power and I call forth to the spirit within this little witch. She may have the magic of Nature on her side, but I am mistress of the dead.

"I am more powerful than you can imagine, Necromancer. Do not test me." Emily intones.

I growl, and with every drag of her staff through the dirt, I throw another surge of power through her fragile human body. I throw everything I have into the siren song that is the irresistible call of the necromancer to the spirit world, but I begin to think the dwindling force of the stolen lives within me are no match for this centuries’ old power.

They hover beyond her like a thousand whispering voices as they fill the field between us. The ghost of Emily Bennet is powerful enough, but she is not alone.

Dimly, I am aware of the sound of masculine voices raised in desperate argument. One frenzied, the other defensive.

'You saved everyone in the church?'
'They killed 27 people and they called it a war battle. They deserve whatever they get!"
"27 vampires, Damon. They were vampires."

My whole body screams in protest, my head pounding a sharp tattoo on my vulnerable mind. There is an intolerably high-pitched ringing in my ears and I feel as though my insides boil at the sound. Come to think of it, the last time I faced off against a spirit this resistant was when that witch Ayana corrupted our servants to do her bidding. Damn these Bennets.

I am beginning to suspect the full weight of her lineage between her time and this is behind her, yet even this would not explain the sheer power she brings to bear. It is old, and deep, and immense. I fear I am no match.

It is not until a blaze of pure heat erupts in a roaring fire inches from my undead flesh, that I realize the earsplitting scream in my ears has arisen from my own throat.

I feel myself wrapped in a familiar embrace, surrounded by cool leather and an enticing after-shave, and drawn gently to the ground beyond the flames’ reach.

"No, no please," he sobs into my ear though I know his pleas are not intended for me. I have failed him. I allow the darkness to overtake me.

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**Damon**

Having already disposed of the exsanguinated remains of my previous attempt at her revival, I hold her fragile body in my arms.

I watch the flickering grey veins of would-be true death under her skin and the cold of her flesh seeps into my own bones in my fear for her. She was a goddess tonight in her defense of me. I've never seen such power, nor such unbridled rage outside my own heart. If I lose her now, I don't
think I'll ever recover.

"Damon?" she croaks weakly, those dusky blue-purple eyes finally making an appearance. In the wake of Emily's betrayal, the relief I feel is transcendent.

"Hey," I greet softly, offering her a sad excuse for a smile.

"I'm sorry," she breathes.

"For what?" I ask, bewildered.

"I couldn't stop her," she explains. "I suck."

I somehow manage to find a huff of amusement for her choice of words, but assure her honestly, "Are you kidding? You were magnificent."

"Hmm," she hums, pleased. "Damon?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm hungry."

I laugh, my tongue salty from my tears.

Later, lying sated and alone beside a few unfortunate campers, we find the courage to break our long and bloody silence. She looks a little unreal reclining there in her school-teacher dress and her practical heels, blood drying where it coats her mouth and pours down her bare chest.

"What happened after I…?" she trails off uncertainly.

"Died?" I finish with a barely-there smirk. She glares and I answer, "Well, the crystal went 'Kaboom!' and I tore that little witch's throat open."

"Good," she says.

"She's not dead," I somehow feel the need to clarify.

"I know," she sighs.

I arch a brow at her, and she must see the question in my eyes for she continues, "You don't break deals. You just had to teach Emily a lesson."

I stare at her in wonder.

"What?" she asks, alarmed.

"You just…surprise me."

She grunts noncommittally and, with some difficulty, props herself up on her elbows to offer me a patented 'Nadezhda Ivanova Glare'. "You think because everyone else jumps to conclusions, that they're all so quick to think the worst, that it must be true. You should sue yourself for defamation of character."

I laugh with more genuine mirth than I would have thought possible after a night like this one. "God, I don't deserve you," I chuckle, not entirely joking.
She looks sad suddenly. "No, you don't. You deserve so much better."

"What are you talking about?"

"I've hidden things from you... so many times. I'm keeping all these secrets... God it took me two years to find you when... and now I can't even stop some stupid witch from destroying a necklace!" she cites, biting her lip guiltily. "I'm not a good enough friend to you."

I'm not even touching the Augustine mess. That's a guilt trip she most definitely does not need. Nor do I need to give her one for that matter. She has such a complex about that that even bringing it up is a tearjerker, but the lying...

"Well...," I say thoughtfully. "If you feel so bad for keeping secrets, why don't you just tell me?"

"Oh, I want to," she assures me. "Honest!"

She averts her gaze from mine. "I just don't know how..."

I hold my silence, knowing she will break it.

"Umm, the thing is that what I know and what I suspect are two vastly different things, and the things I know are kind of irrelevant at the moment."

"Ok," I narrow my eyes in thought. "You said something about Elena being in danger from the person hunting Kat—Katherine?"

She squeezes my arm sympathetically when my voice breaks on the name. Taking a deep breath for courage, I repeat the one revelation from that night that has haunted my waking thoughts ever since, "You said you knew she was alive before you knew about the tomb."

"Yeah," she squirms in discomfort. "That'd be one of those things I suspect, and you're not gonna like it. You're not gonna like it at all."

"What aren't you telling me?"

She swallows, nervous. "Umm, look, let's just say I've known your Katherine for a long time," she says.

I feel a twinge of pain at the name, but more at the statement. I'm not sure how to take that confession.

"Well, no, I guess it'd be more accurate to say I knew Katarina a long time ago," she amends. "I don't know much at all about Katherine."

"You know, I've actually been thinking about that," I say, my voice chill with a false calm. "You claim you didn’t know that Katherine and Katarina were the same person before this month, but I could swear you’ve been in my head enough times over the years to have seen her in my dreams. How do you explain that if you supposedly didn’t know what she looked like till you saw that picture in Stefan's room?"

She exhales through puffed cheeks, annoyed. "Come on, Damon. You and I both know that dream-walking's not exactly an exact science. How many times have you looked in on someone else's dream and accidently projected your own thoughts on the image?" she argues.

I frown, silently conceding the point. It certainly sounds plausible if not entirely satisfying.
"Besides, I taught you that and I have never been in your head without your permission since. If I ever saw Katherine in your dreams, I just assumed it was a fluke of an 800 year old mind imposing on a 50 year old newbie."

"But you’d described her to me and well…Katarina tended to be on my thoughts quite a lot back then though not as you knew her."

Growing a tad impatient with her reticence I prompt, "What are you trying to say?"

She fills her lungs with a gasp of unnecessary oxygen and on a single exhale releases, "I don't think Katherine's in the tomb!" into the air.

I blink. Minutes pass in silence.

"Say something!" she cries.

I leap to my feet. "What am I supposed to say to something like that?!!" I shout. "You tell me that the woman I have spent one hundred and forty five years attempting to rescue from a tomb, is out and about scott-free and hiding from me, and I'm just supposed to be ok with that?!!"

"No! Of course you're not supposed to be ok with it!" she assures me, flashing to her feet beside me. Then, calmer, she says, "I'm just saying that you should consider the possibility that Katarina is not who you think she is. She's spent five centuries running from the most powerful creature on the planet, and she didn't do it by being dumb enough to fall into her own trap."

"Trap?"

"Oh!" she gasps, a hand flying to her mouth. "I didn't mean to say that, I just—I have a theory that she planned to fake her death in 1864 and that's why, if she's out, she hasn't contacted you. She needed someone to tell her story."

"So you're saying that she settled in Mystic Falls—only possibly at random—seduced me and my brother, turned us into vampires, faked her death, and abandoned us, all so she'd have a couple love-struck immortal witnesses?!!"

I don't realize the dangerous tone I have adopted until I find myself towering over a weak and trembling Z as she fights the urge to cry.

"I'm sorry," she loses the battle to her tears. "I know you don't want to hear it. I don't even have any proof. I just thought you should know," she whispers.

As I turn to look at this woman—so pale, and small, and fragile without the usual presence of her dark power—I am reminded forcefully that I almost lost her tonight to my obsession.

She has only ever wanted to see me happy and, as angry as I am at the very idea that she could be right, I recognize that this is only her further attempt to do just this.

I squeeze my eyes tightly shut against the surge of unbidden emotion, releasing a few tears to trail beneath my normally cold eyes, and pull her into me. Come what may, this girl here in my arms is the finest prize I never won, and I intend to keep her.
Nadezhda

The sun shines down on a bright new morning in the small Virginia town of Mystic Falls, streaming through the exposed window between the heavy brocade of drawn curtains. It's a beautiful day, and I couldn't be less pleased.

"So, any idea where you'll go?" Stefan prompts, pacing like a caged animal. No doubt, he's terrified that Damon will find a reason to stay.


"You don't have any friends, Damon," Stefan scoffs.

Making my presence known as I stalk into the room, I cry, "What am I, chopped liver?"

More to the point, I can actually think of a reason to visit London sometime. I wonder how Enzo's doing lately…

Damon pulls away from his wistful posture against the glass, giving me a sad smile in response.

Stefan only looks vaguely apologetic when he assures, "You know what I mean."

"You're right, Stefan, I only have you," Damon agrees. "So, where are we going?"

"We're not going anywhere," Stefan smirks as Damon saunters toward us. "I'm gonna live my life as far away from you as possible."

"But we're a team," he taunts, slinging an arm around me to include me in his 'we'. "We could travel the world together. We could try out for 'The Amazing Race'."

Despite my irritation with this entire conversation, I chuckle.

"Mmm, that's funny," Stefan agrees with a slight smile. "Seriously, where are you going because we're not staying in this town?"

"Sure you're not, Stefan," I grumble.

"I mean it," he argues. "I promised Elena that she would have the vampire-free life she deserves. Nothing good can come of us staying here."

"Yeah, ok," I snort. "Let's just ignore the hypocrisy of that statement. Do what you want, but I for one, am not going anywhere."

"What?" he sputters. "What are you—?"
I smirk to myself as the sudden ringing of the antique doorbell cuts off what I am sure would have been a spectacular lecture. Perfect timing.

Confused, and not a little wary, Stefan strolls toward the parlor to investigate. I follow, curious myself. He opens the door to reveal none other than a scared and desperate looking Sheriff Liz Forbes.

Without ceremony, she informs him, "I'm here to see Damon." She shifts nervously between her feet as she faces him, glancing warily at me when I edge into her line of sight. I wonder what's got her all in a tizzy.

"Uh, sure, ok," Stefan answers, trying and failing for nonchalance, as the man in question comes into view.


Recognizing her stance for the nervousness it is, he affects a concerned expression. Ever the manipulator, however, he nods casually in my direction, "My sister, Lia." She offers me a small smile in greeting and I wave my own with a silently mouthed 'Hey'.

Smoothly, he again inserts himself between us and asks, "What can I do for you?"

She nods gratefully before answering with a mournful frown, "Sorry to bother you, but we need to talk."

He matches her expression with a worried frown of his own and nods, "Come in."

With a gentle hand to her shoulder, Damon guides her through the parlor and out to the porch, leaving Stefan and me to listen attentively indoors and out of sight.

"Um, I hope you understand the secrecy," he tells her, closing the door. "Stefan doesn't know about this yet and I'd like to keep it that way."

It occurs to me, that he has rather cleverly avoided mentioning my name in regards to his so-called secret. Does this mean he wants me with him on the Council?

"Of course, kids are too young to be brought into this."

Stefan frowns at that. I barely contain the urge to stick out my tongue.

"So, what do you need?" he sighs.

"There's been another attack," she states.

I cringe silently to myself. We weren't that careless, surely? We weren't even in town.

"A female victim, young, completely drained of blood. It fits the pattern."


"I-I'm sorry. I don't understand. I thought we solved that problem when I… staked the blonde one."

I glance at Stefan out of the corner of my eye, curious to see his reaction. The brooding forehead is in full effect but if he's disturbed by the reference, he doesn't show it. Not even a flinch. Good.

"I'm thinking she must have turned someone, or multiple someone's. I don't know," she babbles.
"The story for the town is another animal attack, but I'm not sure how long we can keep lying to them. The Council's in an uproar...We thought we were past this."

After a beat of silence, Damon mutters, "So, uh, what do we do?"

"You're the only one who's ever taken on a vampire," she admits with an undercurrent of hope and the faintest hint of admiration in her voice that brings a wry grin to my face.

"We were hoping you could tell us."

Stefan seems decidedly less amused by this turn of events than I am. I snort. He glares. It's becoming a familiar dance, and we do it so well.

He still has that suspicious frown wrinkling his forehead when Damon walks the Sheriff to the door a few minutes later as she requests his plans should he devise them and he assures her of his help.

The moment the door closes behind her, Stefan flashes from his seat to pin his brother to the wall of the entry way by the throat. I follow sedately behind at a human pace, unconcerned.

"What's wrong with you? You killed somebody?" Stefan snarls. Damon allows him a moment, before swatting him away like a fly

"Get off me," he mocks, shrugging him off and strolling toward me. "A—don't touch me. B—if I had, I wouldn't have been so obvious about it." He offers me a secret smile which I return.

My obvious—and evidently inappropriate—amusement does not go unnoticed by Stefan, but he seems more confused and hurt than angry. Whatever.

"You?" he asks.

"Vampire," I remind with a shrug. I wait a beat for the confusion to turn to disapproving shock before I laugh, relieving him. "No, but why is that such a surprise?" I ask, genuinely curious.

He just shakes his head wonderingly at me, before returning his attention to his brother.

"Obviously, there's another vampire in town," Damon continues.

"That's impossible," Stefan asserts. I look up at him, bewildered by his certainty.

"Obviously not," Damon retorts.

"Then who could it be?"

"Ah, what do we care?" Damon sighs. "We're leavin' anyway right?" He offers me a wink, back still turned toward his brother.

"No, I can't leave now and you know that," Stefan accuses. "How are we supposed to find this person?"

Damon slings an arm over my shoulder, pulling me down the stairs. "Let the adults handle this, Stefan," he taunts.

Looks like we're going hunting.
"You know, it's a good thing I only applied as a sub when I took this job. What with all this skipping school I've been doing," Z mutters.

"You called in sick," I reason, distractedly. We've been waiting in this car for over an hour while Blondie wanders all over town with that damn compass, detailing every painstaking step, and we're both feeling the strain. It's not easy getting old. It gets boring.

Beneath Blondie's constant chatter about the horrors of the warehouse district at the edge of town and how it's in such desperate need of her help as the President of the Mystic Falls Beautification Committee, I hear Z's bored ramblings.

"Yeah, but it's a waste of time as a cover story if I'm never there to...you know, cover..."

I squint one eye at her in a look of amused befuddlement. She purses her lips comically, and stares back out the window. I watch her for a moment in a silence, before she turns back to me, throwing her hands with an exasperated groan.

"Fine!" she cries. "I'm bored."

"Yep."

"Ok, it stopped!"

"Oh, thank God!" Z mutters fervently, leaping from the car in her relief.

I smirk and reply to Blondie in my clipped tone, "Wonderful."

"So what do I do now?"

"Just wait, I'll be there in a minute," I assure her as we speed toward her in a rush of wind.

"Can you hurry? I have things to do." She's doing that thing where she tries to sound annoyed at my demands, but I didn't even have to compel her before she leapt at the chance to help.

"You can give me that," I say, appearing behind her in a blink.

She gasps in surprise both at my sudden arrival and my companion.

"Ms. Salvatore? What are you doing here?"

Z arches a cynical eyebrow. "Helping my bro, here," she answers obviously. I don't know why that always makes me smile.

"The compass," I prompt, before Blondie can go on another of her endless tirades.

She sighs, handing it over.

"So why did you need me to do this?" she asks.

"Because I interfere with the signal."

"Can I go now?" God, yes. By all means. "This has blown like half my day," she complains. I roll

"Ok!" she chirps. "Bye now." And with a coy smile and a wave, I'm free.

I turn toward the old brick building, winding the long chain of the pocket watch in my hand before depositing it back in my pocket. Z follows in silence behind me as I make my way up the concrete stairway to the entrance.

The door is locked when I test it, but the old metal is no match for vampire strength and with a firm grind I force it open. I enter to find row upon row of discarded materials long since left to rot away in disuse, but no vampire in sight.

I hear the quiet scuff of a footstep before I find him, and the moment's surprise costs me the advantage. The unmistakable sounds of gun fire fill the building as I stare down the muzzle into a face I recognize: Logan Fell.

Nadezhda

The narrow pathways between the chain link shelves force me to tuck my small frame directly behind Damon's broader shoulders, and it is for this reason that he bears the brunt of the attack.

Distracted as he is by the first vampire in sight, he remains unaware of my presence, and in the seconds following his first round, I have used my greater speed and strength to disarm him.

Before he can so much as twitch his trigger finger in his defense, I have him hanging by throat in my grip as he claws and gasps for breath he no longer needs. Sigh. These young vampires never learn.

Demonic face in full effect, I hiss a promise of a long and painful end into his pleading eyes.

"Wait!" a voice warns. Through my rage and bloodlust, I dimly recall the familiar sound, but I have nowhere near the presence of mind to listen. I tense as though to lunge again—

"Wait, don't kill him!" There goes that voice again. How dare he?!

"Why?!!" I hiss. Watching my prey tremble and cry in my hand, I cock my head in question. I know that voice. I close my eyes, breathing deeply to calm my predatory instincts as I ask. "You alright there, D?"

"I was just turned into Swiss cheese by an Annie Oakley impersonator with a wood fetish," he answers sardonically. "What do you think?"

I clench my fist around the baby-vamp's throat at the reminder, but the frenzy is past. I even manage a smirk at Damon's glib humor.

"Point taken," I grant. "So why can't I kill him?"

I hear him grunt as he attempts to dig out the bullets with blunt fingers, but he only replies, "Because that's Logan Fell."

"Wait..." I furrow my brow in confusion.
"Yep."

Logan falls to the floor like a sack of potatoes.

**Damon**

Having finished performing minor surgery on myself, I rise warily to my feet and move to stand beside Z and her terrorized victim. There's something so hot about a woman in charge. Especially with fangs.

He cowers on the floor beneath us, pressing himself as far from our looming threat as the brick wall at his back will allow him. Which is to say, nowhere.

From the way he's trembling, it's obvious that even the threat of pain should be enough to let the floodgates run. Good. I'm really not in the mood for a long drawn out torture session.

I feel a twinge of blistering pain in my chest where a shard of wood burrowed too deep to pluck. Then again…

"Who turned you?" I snarl.

"How should I know?!" he cries, desperately. "Last thing I remember is I'm about to stake your brother, and then you grabbed me!"

I grab his shirt collar and haul him back to his feet, my fangs in his face. "I swear that's it! I swear!"

I drop him again, hoping the small mercy will open him up.

He gasps, calming himself as I back off a step.

"I woke up in the ground behind a used car dealership on highway 4. Somebody buried me."

I see Z shrug in the corner of my eye. "Happens," she says impassively.

He looks confused, staring at me. "You bit me," he argues. "You must have turned me."

"You have to have vampire blood in your system before you die," I explain, not sure why I'm playing along. "I didn't do that."

"Some other vampire must have found you, gave you their blood. Though I can't imagine why…" Z contributes.

"Who?" Logan wonders.

"That's what we wanna know," she replies.

Frustrated, he snaps acerbically, "It's not like the welcome wagon was waiting with a Bundt cake and a handbook. It's been a learn-as-you go process."

I smirk a bit at his sarcasm.

"One minute, I'm a small town on-the-rise news guy, and next thing I know, I can't get in my house
because my foot won't go through the door," he rants, finally too angry to be properly scared.

"You have to be invited in," I say with a slight smile.

"I know. I live alone."

"Ooh, that sucks," Z snorts.

"So, now, I'm at the Ramada watchin' pay-per-view all day, eating everything in sight, including housekeeping."

"It could be worse," I shrug.

"All I can think about is blood and killing people," he continues, veins making a brief appearance as the hunger reemerges. "I can't stop killing people. I keep killing and I like it. I'm conflicted."

"Welcome to the club," I sneer.

"Wait a minute," Z mutters. "The cops only found one body…"

"I left one. I was tired," he answers with a dismissive shrug. "But I've been hiding the rest of the bodies. They're right back there. They're just piling up." He gestures behind him to what I now see is a grotesque pile of drained corpses.

"Eww…" My thoughts exactly, Z.

"You've gotta be kidding me," I mutter under my breath.

Logan pauses, looking off into the distance. He looks up, his eyes flickering between the two of us with a forlorn expression. "Why am I so overly emotional? All I can—"

"Ok, no," Z snaps. "We're not doin' this."

She hauls him to his feet by the throat, as I had done earlier. I look on with some amusement and not a little arousal. She's worse than I am with this shit.

"Last chance," she warns indifferently, face clear. "Tell us what you know, and I won't rip your whiny little head off."

"Who turned you?" I ask.

"I don't know."

I watch heatedly as she plunges her hand into his chest, squeezing his beating heart in her bare hand. She smiles a bit as she does it. It's a heady feeling, literally holding life in your hand. I should know.

"Is that your final answer?" she asks, cocking her head.

He screams in agony. "Wait, wait, wait!," he begs. "I do know!"

"You're lying."

"You think you're the only one who wants to get in that tomb?" he asks me.

Z pauses, looking at me with a question clear in her dusky eyes.
"If you're lying to me I will end you."

"I am not lying. There's another way to break the spell," he groans.

"How?"

"We can help you."

Another yell signifies her tightening grip. "Names, Logan," Z taunts.

He whimpers, "I don't know."

She squeezes again and he screams. "Ben! Noah!" he cries desperately, tears spilling down his cheeks. "That's all I know. That's all I know."

Z looks to me for the go ahead. It's not much, but it's a start. Besides, I doubt we'll get anything more from him. I give a dismissive wave, and she snaps the wrist she has about his throat, breaking his neck. He slumps to the ground, effectively unconscious.

I cast about for some manner of weapon. When I find a sizable hunk of wood thrown carelessly in a corner, I hold it up for her inspection. She nods, stepping back and I wait for the hole to heal before I drive the stake through his heart.

Logan's body turns grey and stiff as the life drains from his undead flesh, the shock and pain frozen on his face.

Z smiles cheerfully at me, his dying blood dripping down her arm. "Well, that was fun," she chirps.

I'm not sure what it is, but something about her overtakes me in that moment. A sudden overwhelming tension fills the space between us.

The air is charged with it.

That wicked smirk, the bright gleam in her eye as the bloodlust rages within, her right arm wearing his blood like a glove to her elbow, I am helpless to resist.

I watch as her pupils expand in answer to the heat of my own gaze, and I lunge.

Grasping the back of her neck roughly in my hand, I pull her mouth to mine, tangling my fingers in her long hair as I bite at her lips.

She whimpers as my tongue invades her mouth, sliding sensuously over her bottom lip. I feel the prick of her fangs as they descend, cutting the wet muscle and releasing my own blood for her thirst. She sucks hard, chasing after the taste.

Her hands slip under the fabric of my shirt, clawing at my back with her nails, no doubt leaving streaks of blood in her wake. I walk her backwards to press her against the wall, lifting her to grind our hips together at an even height.

Obligingly, she wraps her legs around my waist, her lower body rolling forward in the search for friction.

Desperate, she rips my shirt open; buttons fly haphazardly about the room. The weight of my body holds her still and frees her arms to rake across my exposed torso.
She finds the still bleeding wound from the splinter in my chest. Looking up at me with eyes blown black with lust, she leans forward to close her lips over the hole, sucking blood and wood at once. She moans in earnest.

The pull of my blood into the fierce suction of her mouth goes straight to my dick and I throw my head back at the feel. "Fuck!" I groan.

By the grip I still retain in her hair, I wrench her face up and recapture her lips with mine, tasting my own blood on her tongue. I feel her pulse rate spike at the rough treatment, fingers clutching at my shoulders. I smirk into the kiss.

I nip and bite my way down the soft skin of her throat and she sighs, tilting her head in offering.

Allowing my own fangs to descend, I give only the briefest of warnings before plunging them down, biting into the tender flesh.

Her blood pools in my mouth and slides down my throat. The thrilling power which runs through her veins sets every cell in my body on fire and I am lost.

I pull away an interminable amount of time later to find us both collapsed in a boneless heap on the floor. Z straddles my lap, her arms wrapping around my shoulders as she breathes hot and heavy in my ear.

"Well, that was intense," she giggles.

I groan, pulling away slightly to look at the girl in my arms. "Tell me about it."

She moves to stand, and I tighten my arms around her waist. "No..." I pout.

She smiles. "Damon, you're adorable, but we really should get out of here." She gives the room around us a look of distaste. "There's like dead bodies and shit in here. Besides, don't you have a phone call to make?"

"Ugh. Don't remind me," I groan, refusing to release her. I was comfortable, damn it.

"Damon..." she huffs.

"Fine." I smile suggestively as another idea comes to mind. "We could always move the party elsewhere."

She arches an eyebrow at me, her eyes scanning my still bare chest. "Damon, if you don't take me home right now, I might just have to rip your clothes off right here. And then where would we be?"

I growl and scoop her to my chest as we speed away.

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Nadezhda

I emerge from Damon's magnificent bathroom, vigorously scrubbing at my wet hair with a towel. The ends drip cold water down the open collar of my robe. I find him propped half-naked against the headboard wearing a wistful expression on his face as he toys with the compass in his hands.
"Thinking about what Logan said?" I ask softly.

He looks up at me with crystalline eyes, wide and swimming with feeling. Of what, I'm not sure.

"Liz and her team found him. Wanted to thank us for our help."

I sigh, coming to lie beside him with my wet hair resting on his bare chest. "You told her I helped?"

I feel him shrug beneath me as he wraps his arms about my shoulders, combing his fingers through my damp locks.

"What did Stefan have to say about that?" I ask reproachfully, nuzzling my face into his warmth.

"Didn't tell him."

I snort.

"Besides, I'm pretty sure he's too busy with Elena right now to notice."

I roll my head to meet his eyes with my own. "Yeah. What's with that?" I ask. "He still set on leaving?"

He huffs. "Honestly? I have no idea. Last I heard he was at some career fair at the high school staging the final act of their tragic romance."

"Hmm. Well, maybe she'll convince him of their undying love and change his mind," I note.

"Yeah, maybe," he says, sounding indifferent.

"You know, we could always just tell him the truth…" I suggest.

"What that Elena's in some vague potential danger from a mystery villain and you're keeping secrets?" he asks sarcastically.

I refuse to be baited however, and simply respond with a nod into his shoulder.

He releases an irritated exhale and stands, dislodging me in the process. I watch patiently as he paces, his back turned to me in thought.

He seems to think I am unaware of the anger he still bears for me on this issue, but I know him too well to mistake his silence on the subject for indifference. He has decided in his mind to forgive me, but his heart still holds a grudge.

Seeming to come to a decision, he spins to face me, his eyes in tumult. "How would you feel about a road trip?"

"Umm," I pretend to consider. "Didn't we just discuss this?"

"I don't mean forever," he assures. "I just have to see a girl about a tomb."

I snicker. "Yeah, I seem to remember that intercourse as well."

I am rewarded with a surprised grin. "Get your mind out of the gutter, Dirty Girl."

He flops back down beside me and I run my fingers through his hair as I reply, "If you think it'll
help, sure. I could use a break from the Mystic Falls Horror Show."

I laugh as something else occurs to me. "They're so gonna fire my ass with all these sick days."

After a brief pause, Damon hops up to start packing and I head to the bathroom again to get dressed. Then poking my head around the door I ask, "Can we get someone to eat first? I'm hungry."

He rolls his eyes and groans.

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**Elena**

I settle comfortably into the firm chest beneath my back, my head resting in the crook of his neck, happy and sated. Stefan brushes his hand down the soft skin of my cheek. He presses a gentle kiss to the top of my head. I smile and nuzzle into him.

My body still tingles with the ghost of remembered pleasure.

It was never like this with Matt. He's always been a close friend, and I love him to death and back. I'll always love him. But it's like I told Stefan on that first night, there was no passion.

With Stefan, my whole body smiles when he touches me. I know it sounds corny, but it's what I've always imagined true love to be like. I can't get enough.

When he leaves to fetch me a glass of water, I can no longer restrain my curiosity. His room fascinates me.

The weight of all his happiest memories surrounds me. Somehow, it makes every picture, every book, every item of clothing a priceless gem. Even the simple button-down I wear over my bare flesh sets my heart aflutter.

The thought that 'we' as we came together tonight are numbered among them brings a happy smile to my face as I spin to face them all.

I brush my hands over book shelves, breathe in candles, thumb through—what? What is this?

I hold in my hand an old portrait dated "1864", but the woman it captures wears my face. She wears my face and her name is "Katherine".

I can't breathe. I feel as though all the air has been sucked from the room. The weight of Stefan's necklace around my throat suffocates me. I suddenly can't bear to have it touch me.

I tear it frantically from my neck, dropping it beside this single picture that has turned the night of my dreams to a waking nightmare.

I have to get out of here.

I feel sick, exposed, violated. As fast I can in my current state, I throw the shirt from me, ripping it in my haste.

I cast desperately about the room for my own clothing and, once dressed, race down the stairs as quickly as my shaking limbs can carry me.
I am in my car, pelting down the winding drive, before my vision swims with tears. The sobs wrack through my chest as I try to hold them back. I can hardly see the road in my distress, but I can't stop moving. The moment I stop running, it will catch up to me.

I flick my eyes up to check my rearview, half-expecting to see that haunting face reflected back at me, and when I look back there is a man in the road! Instinctively, I attempt to swerve around him, but I don't move fast enough.

The impact feels like driving headlong into a brick wall, the car flips end over end. I clutch my seatbelt, the door, the ceiling, anything I can reach in my terror, certain that I am about to die.

Eventually, the tumbling stills and I can find the air to breathe, but when I open my eyes it is to find my world turned upside down. Tears and shattered glass drip upwards from my eyes.

For a moment I have the absurd thought that the image is ironically suited.

The night my life flips over, so does the world.

Finding the courage to look outside, I see the body of the man I hit lying motionless on the ground.

Abruptly, it twitches. It jerks, and cracks, he comes to a stand.

God, he's a vampire. The crash may not have killed me, but he certainly will.

When he comes to a stand, he stalks toward me. I pull desperately at the seatbelt, but I am locked in, paralyzed besides. He reaches toward me, and I scream.
Damon

We are at the end of the road when we see the crash.

I turn the corner on an old dirt path to see a large SUV tripping over itself like a ball down the stairs, glass and painted metal glisten in the air as it turns, littering the ground with debris. It comes to a grinding halt on its back, the cab crushed under the weight, when I see the vampire come to a stand.

Briefly, I find myself amused by the similarity to my own hunting schemes.

Granted, mine rarely end with me the injured party. Amateur. But it is the familiarity of the voice raised in a desperate scream from the destroyed vehicle that brings me to a standstill.

The thought has hardly crossed my mind to intervene before I am out of the car and racing toward her would-be killer, snarling all the way.

It seems the half-wit does have a brain after all, for he runs before I can reach him. I am left to come face to face with his traumatized victim.

Kneeling beside the car, I peer up into her terrified face. Something I thought long since fled stirs painfully in my chest at the sight.

I feel the car shift as Z appears beside me, lifting to relieve the pressure gently from the top of the car. She makes no word or sound, but stares at me with a sympathy that I can't begin to place.

Elena stares at me in wide-eyed shock. The sheer weight of her relief at the sight of me wrings some unrecognizable note from my heart.

"Damon?" she breathes.

"You look stuck," I mutter. Between the two of us, Z and I manage to remove the door from the wreckage, giving us an unhindered view of the trembling girl inside.

"It's my seatbelt," she sobs.

I shush her, kneeling back to her side. "Let me get you out of here."

I take a firm hold on the belt trapping her. "I want you to put your hands on the roof," I instruct. "Just like that. You ready?"

When she nods, I count, "1, 2, 3," and I pull with all my strength to dislodge the belt from the seat. I catch her before her head meets the ground, lifting her from the car.

I stand with this frail human girl held gently in my arms, a feeling of protectiveness surging unbidden through me. "Are you ok?" I ask.

She doesn't answer but to clutch at my shoulder, her strength quickly failing her as the adrenaline leaves her body. "Can you stand? Is anything broken?"

She shakes her head weakly and I set her on her feet, keeping a supporting arm around her shoulder. In a moment, her knees buckle and I pull her back into the protective circle of my arms.
"Whoa, you are fading fast Elena." I take her chin in my fingers. "Elena, look at me. Focus. Look at me."

"Why do I look like her?" she mumbles. Her head lolls again, this time into unconsciousness.

Whoa, what?

Z breaks her long silence with a scoff. I glance at her sharply. I'd almost forgotten her presence entirely, so focused was I on Elena.

I curl the girl's weak and fragile body into me, coming to a stand.

"What do we do with her?" Z asks, not without concern.

I needn't think more than the briefest moment before I reply, "We'll take her with us," and make off toward our own discarded vehicle. Elena's weight rests safe and familiar in my arms.

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**Nadezhda**

We are an hour out of town before either of us says a word. After watching Damon look so softly on her, cradling her protectively—almost possessively—in his arms, this little human girl with the face of his long lost love, something seemed to click into place in my mind.

The Damon Salvatore I saw then was one I had met only in his memories. A Damon I thought long-since dead. I am convinced now that Elena will be the one to reach him. If only I can make them see it.

I lean forward to rest my hands on the console between the front seats, looking to Damon's profile. He had thought it best to strap Elena into the passenger seat rather than subject her to the abuse of lying across a cramped car in the back. I agreed. I'm rather regretting it now.

I'm not sure how to start the conversation I want to have. All the questions I need to ask. I want to know whether he's still so set on Katherine because he's formed an unbreakable habit or whether he's really still so certain of her love.

I want to tell him everything I know about the selfish manipulations, the prevailing priority of survival, all that I know about Katarina. All that I know that could break his heart.

I want to shove him before a mirror, show him the softness in his eyes when he looks on her doppelganger.

I'm certain Katherine's never been worthy of such affection. She'll destroy him if he lets her. I want to say all these things and a million more, but I have no idea where to start.

So, like the coward I am, I say instead, "You think Bree can really get you in that tomb?"

He shrugs; his own doubts clear. "Can't hurt at this point."

I hum noncommittally. Taking a deep breath for courage I start, "Damon, do you think—"

"Mmm," Elena grumbles, squirming in her seat. With a gasp she comes to.

She looks about in confusion. She isn't reassured by her discovery. "Where are we?"
"Georgia," Damon chimes.

I huff in surrender, sliding back in my seat.

Hearing me, Elena flicks her eyes toward the back seat. They widen at the sight of me.

"Lia?" she asks, wonderingly.

I smirk, giving her the patented 'Damon eyebrow wiggle'. "Hi."

"Wha—how—where—" she splutters, her eyes jumping back and forth between us before finally settling confused and irritated on the driver.

"No, seriously, Damon. Where are we?"

"Seriously, we're in Georgia," he quips. "How ya feeling?"

"I—"

"There's no broken bones. I checked."

Growing increasingly annoyed and bored by this conversation, I cross my arms over my chest and stare out the window. Grass, cows, wooden fences, more cows. Ugh.

"My car...there was a man. I hit a man," she muses, the fear and hysteria returning to her voice at the memory. "But then he got up and—who was that?"

"That's what I would like to know," he grumbles.

Distractedly, she pats herself down in search of something, growing frantic when she can't find it. "Where's my phone?" she says, her voice rising with her heart rate. "Ok, we really need to go back. No one knows where I am. Pull over."

I roll my eyes, grumbling to myself as I slump back in my seat.

When he fails to leap to her demands she shouts again, "I mean it, Damon. Pull over!"

He merely looks at her curiously, an amused smirk crossing his features.

"Stop the car!"

"Ugh," he whines. "You were so much more fun when you were asleep."

I can't say I disagree with the sentiment.

Recognizing, I suppose, that Elena will only grow more hysterical the longer he refuses her, he gives his head a slight shake and pulls the car off the grass to the side of the street.

The moment the car comes to a stop, she is out the door. I meet Damon's eyes in the rearview, sharing his irritation. He rolls his eyes before following, only to dash to the passenger side when he hears Elena's hiss of pain. He offers her an arm in support, genuine concern in his eyes.

Ignoring them for the moment, I shove Damon's seat forward to crawl out the driver-side door. This car may be a beautifully preserved classic, but that doesn't make it comfortable. Or dignified, for that matter.
I spare a moment to thank whatever deity might answer for my small frame, as I scramble from the vehicle.

"We have to go back," Elena asserts in that 'no nonsense' tone of hers. What is it with this girl and making demands? Does she really expect everyone to just trip over themselves to do her bidding?

"Oh, come on," Damon says dismissively, a hint of annoyance in his tone that I can match. "Look, we've already come this far." He smiles.

"Why are you doing this?" she asks, looking worried now as well as angry. "I can't be in Georgia —"

"Too late!" I chirp.

She glares at me, unappreciative of my levity. Eyes turning inward she argues, "I wrecked my car. I have to go home. This is kidnapping!"

"Phew! I can smell the temper tantrum from here!" I taunt. "Melodramatic, much?"

Damon grins at me. Wow, Elena's got the Stefan-glare down pat. Ok, it's official. We have got to get this girl away from the Brood-Master. One is more than enough, thank you.

She turns back to Damon, likely concluding that as the driver, he is the one to convince. That or she recognizes that I will be of absolutely no help at all in this matter.

"You can't do this," she orders petulantly, all but stamping her foot. "I am not going to Georgia."

Finally starting to lose patience, Damon answers, "Well you're in Georgia."

She turns away.

"Without you're magic little necklace, I might add," he notes.

She clutches at her bare neck, an indignant look coming over her face.

"I could very easily make you…agreeable."

Something like fear touches her voice when she asks, "What are you trying to prove?"

He looks slightly bothered by the sound.

From his pocket, a shrill ring pierces the air. His eyes flicker away with mock sheepishness.

"That's my phone," she accuses, her eyes glancing down.

He shrugs with a wry smile, removing the cell from the pocket of his jeans.

"Mmm, it's your boyfriend," he taunts, extending the phone to her. A look of disgust comes over her and she jerks her head in refusal.

"Ok," he shrugs. Bringing the phone to his ear, he chants, "Elena's phone."

Through the tiny speaker I hear Stefan respond worriedly, "Where is she? Why do you have her phone? Is she ok?"

"Elena?" he taunts, smirking flirtatiously at the girl in question. "She's right here. And, yes, she's…
fine."

"Where are you? Let me speak to her."

Damon chuckles, holding the phone out to her again. "He wants to talk to you."

As before, she shakes her head, "Uh uh."

"Yeah, I don't—I don't think she really wants to talk to you right now," he smirks.

"Damon, I swear to God, if you touch her—"

"You have a good day," he interrupts, still amused. "Mm hm. Bye, now."

I watch Elena shiver slightly, the cold winter chill sending a shock through her system. Her teeth clench as she tucks her hands deeply into the pocket of her long coat. The chill wind flushes her cheeks and brings a startling redness to her full lips.

God, she reminds me so much of Katarina. Not that that's surprising, obviously.

I feel my own skin freeze under the onslaught—both mental and physical. Fortunately, I'm dead.

The phone now safely devoid of bothersome soon-to-be ex's, she accepts the silent phone from Damon's hand, stewing in her anger.

He strides away a few paces, allowing her to gather herself before continuing the conversation.

I feel superfluous in this scenario and resolve for the moment to hold my own silence.

"Look, no one knows where I am," Elena argues. "Can we please just go back?"

"Because that little display with the phone looked so much like home-sickness," I quip.

Oh, who am I kidding? I'm incapable of keeping my mouth shut.

"Besides, we're almost there," Damon gripes.

"Where is there?!!"

"A little place right outside of Atlanta," he answers. "Oh, come on, Elena…You don't want to go back right now, do you?"

She looks this close to being persuaded.

"What's the rush? Time out," he presses, hands forming a 'T'. "Trust me, your problems are still gonna be there when you get home."

The look on her face says she's considering.

"Look. Step away from your life for five minutes," he drives it home, fingers spread. "Five minutes."

She sighs, bringing her hands to her mouth. "Am I gonna be safe with you?"

"Yes," Damon says adamantly.

"Will you promise not to do that…mind thing with me?"
"Yes," he repeats, gaze steady.

"Can I trust you?"

He blinks. "Get in the car."

I snicker, climbing back into my seat as they do so. The doors slam closed and we're off.

Now that she's awake and apparently in charge, Elena decides she would like some road tunes. She and Damon bicker over the radio for a few minutes, more playfully than I've seen either of them act lately.

"You were Romeo, I was a scarlet letter—"

"Ugh!" I yell. "No, no, no!"

"and my daddy said stay away from Juliet!"

I cover my ears in desperation. "Make it stop!"

Damon and Elena laugh delightedly at my antics. Bitches.

"you were everything I need—"

Before either of them can stop me, I lunge over the console and punch the button to silence the radio.

"What do you have against Taylor Swift?" Elena laughs.

Damon groans, "Don't even get her started."

"Shut up, Damon!" I snap. They both laugh.

"I mean, aside from the fact that her reference to 'The Scarlet Letter' is woefully inaccurate even by today's standards, Romeo and Juliet is a pathetic story about two hormonal teenagers who have known each other for three days and are so caught up in their own melodrama that they kill themselves and 4 other people for some delusional idea of 'true love'!" I rant, making air quotes with raised fingers.

"Not exactly my idea of a great romance."

Elena bites back a smile at my tirade, while Damon, significantly less polite, laughs at me.

"Add to that the fact that every single one of her songs is an exhaustive and redundant reenactment of the most pathetically insecure, moon-eyed, obnoxious teen romance imaginable, and the absolute worst part of country music as a pop genre. I mean, can you even think of an example that isn't about a break-up?"

I grumble to myself as Damon's mocking laughter fills the air. Even Elena allows herself a grin.

Wiping tears of mirth from his eyes, he turns the radio back on and switches to a new station. I smile as the opening guitar riff to AC/DC's "Back in Black" fills the car, relaxing back happily.

"Back in black! I hit the sack!—"

"Much better," I state.
Elena shakes her head at me, but says nothing. I suppose she's resigned to the futility of the fight.

"Yes I'm let loose from the noose!—"

"I'm an emo kid! Non-conforming as can be—" the sound of a certain vampire's special ringtone clashes with Johnson's vocals and two faces turn to stare at me. Damon merely casts me an amused smirk before shutting down the radio and turning back to the road, but Elena continues to stare at me curiously.

I resist the urge to laugh as I answer, "Stefan!"

The annoyance and indignation I expect to see on Elena's pretty face never come. Instead, she merely looks amused. I smile wider.

"This is an unsolicited and entirely unpleasant turn of events. What do you want?"

"Damon has Elena. I need to find her."

I blink at the phone. I half expect it to sprout antlers next.

"And you're calling me because…?"

"I need to find her!"

I press my fingers to my temples in a silent prayer for patience. I dare not even glance to the front seat.

"Yeah, see you seem to be laboring under the delusion that I give a rat's ass."

"Please!" he begs. "You're the only one who knows where he'd take her. You have to help me!"

"Same song, different verse," I scoff. "I have no interest in helping you. And more to the point, you don't need my help. Damon won't hurt her, and if you knew your brother half as well as you think you'd know that!"

I snap the phone shut before he can respond. I am beyond done with that conversation.

In response to Elena's blank stare I say only, "Your boyfriend's an ass."

Damon switches the radio on. Some upbeat alternative plays out. I shrug internally. I can deal with this.

"So where's my car?" she asks finally.

"I pulled it off to the side of the road while Damon played black night to your damsel in distress," I answer.

This seems to satisfy her for the moment as a more disturbing question comes to mind. "What about that man in the road?" she wonders, glancing between us.

"Was he a—"

"From what I could tell, yeah," Damon answers.

"You didn't know him?"
I snort, amused by the presumption.

"If I've never met him, I wouldn't know him," Damon scoffs. "It's not like we all hang out together at 'The Vamp Bar and Grill."

I scoot forward in my seat to pat Elena's arm comfortingly. "Don't worry, Elena," I say in what I hope is a reassuring tone. Flicking my eyes pointedly toward Damon, "You're safe with us."

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**Elena**

I stare out through the windshield, turning Lia's words over in my mind as they echo through my thoughts on constant repeat.

What she said to Stefan about Damon really got to me. It hasn't escaped my attention that the eldest Salvatore is more than he seems or that he surprises even his brother at times with his capacity for spontaneous kindness.

Most of the time he is selfish, homicidal, and borderline psychotic and that is all he ever seems to want to be. I know it's all that Stefan expects from him. But sometimes, just sometimes, he gets this look in his eye that makes me think maybe that's not the whole story.

The way he looks at me in certain moments with such tenderness sets my heart racing, my insides squirming in what I wish was disgust.

Like the way he looked at me when he pulled me from the car—hell, when he saved me from the car—or the way he just offered out of nowhere to help my brother after Vicki died. Even he looked surprised.

It's confusing and terrifying and it ties my insides in tangled knots, but there's no denying I care about this man. Far more than I should.

Damon pulls the car into a dusty-looking parking lot, cracked pavement off the beaten path. I read the sign above the building as the three of us climb from the car. *Bree's Bar*

"You brought me to a bar?" I question disbelievingly.

"Damon, I'm not old enough. They're not gonna let me in."

"Sure they will," is his easy reply.

Lia gives me a wink as she follows him across the lot, and I sigh in resignation. Slamming the door shut, I trail after them.

We enter to find a mostly empty room, only a smattering of patrons scattered about. Behind the bar, a gorgeous bartender of Amazonian proportions wipes at the wood with a cloth.

She looks up at the sound of our entrance, barely sparing me a glance before breaking into a delighted smile at the sight of the darkly handsome vampire beside me.

"No, no, it can't be…Damon?!!" she exclaims, leaping over the bar to saunter seductively toward him. "My honey pie..."

She pulls him into a scorching kiss and I gape, thrown. On my other side, I feel an elbow nudge my
frozen arm. "You're drooling a bit, dear," Lia chuckles.

I close my mouth with an audible snap as Damon and the bartender finally come up for air.

The woman finally turns to us, seeming to register our presence for the first time since she caught sight of Damon. She smiles widely when she spots Lia.

"Nadia," she greets, embracing her. I feel my brow furrow in confusion at the unfamiliar name.

"Hey, Bree," Lia returns with a grin.

"It's been a long time, honey," 'Bree' complains. "What are you doing with this clown?" She gestures with a wink to the man she was formerly smooching. So maybe I'm a little irritated. Sue me.

"Oh, you know. Murder, mayhem, the usual," Lia jokes. At least I hope she's joking.

Bree chuckles good naturedly at the response, however. I choose to take this as a good sign.

Still grinning, she hops back over the bar. Grabbing a bottle from the shelf, she commands the attention of the room. "Listen up everybody!" she calls, pouring it out into several shot glasses she has lined up in front of her.

"Here's to the man that broke my heart, crushed my soul, destroyed my life, and ruined any and all chances of happiness."

Bree's words are bitter, but she delivers them with a wry smile.

Glancing at Damon, I think I see a twinge of guilt in his eye.

She drops a glass down before each of us before lifting her own to her lips, toasting the room, "Drink up!" She downs it in a single easy swallow.

Damon and Lia take theirs at the same time, but I look doubtfully at my own. Thankfully, he sees this, and sneaks mine before Bree notices. I offer him a grateful half-smile.

Finally, settling in front of us, she smiles at me. "So, how'd he rope you in?"

I feel rather than see my companions' heads turn toward me at the question. Curious to see how I'll respond, I suppose. I'm not sure how myself really. I settle for the easy excuse, "I'm not roped in. Actually, I'm dating his—"

"Honey," she cuts me off. "If you're not roped, you're whipped. Either way, just enjoy the ride."
She and Lia both chuckle. I'm not sure whether or not to take offense.

"Ok," I say. "So how did you two meet?"

"College," she chuckles.

I turn to Damon, surprised. "You went to college?"

He gives me that shit-eating grin of his, taking another shot. "I've been on a college campus. Yes."

"About twenty years ago, when I was sweet young freshman, I met this beautiful man and I fell in love," she tells me with a wistful smile. I can’t help the curious gaze I cast toward him at that. If nothing else, I can certainly agree with the description.
"And then he told me about his little secret," she goes on. "Made me love him even more. Because, you see, I had a little secret of my own that I was dying to share with somebody."

"She's a witch," Lia whispers teasingly in my right ear. I look back at Bree, shocked.

Bree nods to Damon. "Changed my world you know," she admits.

"I rocked your world," he clarifies with a cocky grin.

She laughs. "He is good in the sack, isn't he?"

I splutter a bit in protest while Lia chuckles agreeably. Something I hear in it has me staring at her now. She just smirks back at me knowingly. Ok, then.

The smile falls from Bree's face as she sighs, "But mostly he's just a walk-a-way Joe."

She slams another empty shot glass on the bar, looking Damon in the eye. "So," she sighs, cutting to the chase. "What is it that you want?"

Rather than answer verbally, he cocks a head toward the corner booth. She nods, resigned, hopping over the bar and leading the way. To my surprise, Lia stays beside me rather than follow. I feel awkward suddenly at Damon's abandonment.

I'm not entirely sure why, but I feel decidedly ill at ease in her presence. I suppose it's only that I've never known her outside her relationship to Damon. Well, other than the occasional substitute lesson.

Then again, I know full well the falseness of that act so it's impossible for me to relax into it.

My only consolation is that she seems to be as uncomfortable as I am. It is this which finally gives me the courage to speak.

Fiddling with an abandoned shot glass, I attempt, "Stefan told me what you did for Lexi."

She shoots me an annoyed look, lips twisting in a grimace. "That's rich," she says. "The one time you actually want him to exercise that legendary capacity for deceit he can't keep his big mouth shut." She takes a shot, looking away.

If I didn't know any better, I'd say she's embarrassed. The thought gives me pause. This powerful vampire, capable of raising someone from the dead, is embarrassed to have done something nice? That's when her words hit me. In conjunction with her attitude in the car and the sentiments she's just revealed I realize something.

"Yeah, I'm starting to get that," I admit, resentfully.
In an attempt to steer clear of this particular issue, I ask, "How'd you do it?"

"Ugh," she groans, combing her hand through her blue-streaked hair. "You don't want to know. Trust me."

The certainty with which she makes this claim disturbs me. I feel sick to my stomach. "Did you kill someone?" I whisper.

She arches an eyebrow at me. Her heavily lined eyes look thoughtful as she asks, "Does it really surprise you that I would?"

The air leaves my lungs, my throat constricts. The casual way she says it answers more than the question I asked. It occurs to me, I've been naïve to think a single kindness cancels out habitual cruelty.

"It's just—what you did—how you are with Damon…," I stutter, searching for a harbor in the stormy blue-grey of her eyes. "I just didn't expect you'd do something so…vicious."

Her eyes are sharp and they bore into me. "The two aren't mutually exclusive, Elena."

She stares a moment longer before turning back to her drink, releasing me. I can finally breathe.

Calming myself I try, "You're good with him," thinking of the playful banter between these two dark-haired blue-eyed vampires. They may be monsters alone, but somehow together there's something almost—innocent about them. "He's different with you."

It's true, too. Now that I consider it, every time I can recall the elder Salvatore's smile—the real one, not the sharp one he wears like a shield—it has been with her. His limited kindnesses, so much more meaningful for their scarcity, have been all in her presence. Since she turned up, he's been so much softer—more human. I see flashes of the man he must have been once. The one I want to get to know like she does.

The angry *thunk* of glass on wood yanks me violently from my reverie. I turn to my right to see Lia glaring at me almost hatefully. I feel a spike of fear at the heat in it.

"No," she growls. "He's different with Stefan—Stefan, you, and everyone else that buys into that revisionist's history. He's *himself* with me. There's a difference."

She hops down from the stool, turning her back to me as though to storm away and I catch a glimpse of half-covered tattoos peaking out above the strapless top.

Before she can take another step I call out my final question. "You don't like me much, do you?"

Lia turns back to me, the bare white shoulders atop her blood red corset-top slumping in resignation.

"It has nothing to do with liking you, Elena," she admits. "Maybe I'm just tired of everyone thinking that the only good in Damon is what he performs at the end of a leash."

With that she walks away, and I am alone.

---

Damon
I watch as my little pixie stalks away, her leather jacket clutched in her hand, and have to physically restrain myself from chasing after her. Between the disappointment of Bree's uselessness, and the irritation of Elena's Stefan-brooding, the last thing I need is an angry undead necromancer with a grudge.

What the hell was all that? I know she gets protective of me sometimes, but she's not usually this antagonistic about it. Poor Elena looks like she's about to cry. And this after the Katherine bombshell.

This whole road trip may have started on a whim, but somewhere along the way I think it actually became necessary. Kid really does need a break. Last thing we need is another broody teen.

Mind made up, I follow Bree back to the bar.

"So," I say cheerfully, retaking my seat. "You hungry?"

She glares at me a moment before she relents with a sigh, energy draining out of her. "Yeah," she admits softly.

"Order what you like," I offer, gesturing toward the menu. "They have some really great burgers."

"I don't have any money on me, Damon," she says doubtfully.

"Eh," I shrug. "I figure I kidnap you, I might as well buy you lunch."

At her continued frown I say, "Relax, Elena. I got this."

She sighs, nodding. To Bree, she says, "Can I get a double cheeseburger?" I raise my eyebrows at her. "And a coke?"

Bree nods and turns to call in the order, and Elena pulls her cell phone from her pocket. Waving it at me, she cocks her head to the door in question. I nod, and she leaves to make her phone calls.

As I watch her leave the building, still within sight through the window thankfully, I feel the weight of a body press into me on the left.

Looking down, I find an aggrieved looking Z staring up at me. Her dusky eyes are wet beneath her dark make-up, long lashes sparkling with tears.

Before the night of Emily's betrayal, the last time I saw her cry was the night she ran through screams and fire to rescue me from a bunch of mad scientists.

Since then, this is the third time in all the years I've known her that I've seen her tears get the best of her. I try not to look too appalled by the sight. What is up with her?

"Can vampires get PMS?" I ask, only half joking.

She slaps my shoulder weakly. "Shut up."

---

**Elena**

"Hi, Jenna. I'm so sorry."
"Where are you? Why didn't you call?"

"I was so tired last night, I fell asleep at Bonnie's, and then this morning I just wanted to get to school." I swallow around the lie as it sticks in my throat.

"Are you ok?"

"You know, Stefan and stuff," I admit. It's the truth, anyway.

"Oh," Jenna replies, sympathy softening the anger in her voice. "Do you wanna talk about it?"

"Not really," I sigh.

"Well... you know you can if you want to, right?"

"Yeah, Jenna. I know that."

"Good. Call me when you leave. I'll see you at home."

"Yeah, I will. Love you."

"I love you, too."

I hang up. One down, one to go. Now for the hard part.

Scrolling through my contacts, my thumb rests over the name I least desire. Deep breath for courage, I press down.

He answers on the second ring. "Elena? Is that you?"

I swallow against a rising emotion, but this time it's not guilt I'm suppressing. "I'm here."

"Where are you?" he demands, sounding concerned, but I am so not in the mood to placate his petty jealousies. He doesn't get to be jealous and worried right now.

"You lied," I accuse.

"Not until I explain. Please?"

Hell, no. We are not playing that game.

"So, you didn't lie?" I ask, anger leaking in through sarcasm.

"Just tell me where you are so I can come get you."

Why would I do that? I don't want to be anywhere near you right now. I notice you still haven't answered my questions.

"How am I connected to Katherine, Stefan?" I ask, patience rapidly fading.

"I honestly don't know."

"And I'm supposed to believe that?" I scoff.

"It's the truth. I—" he stutters. "Listen—"

I hang up, sick to death of his excuses. I barely restrain the impulse to throw my phone across the
road. If I were a vampire, I'm fairly sure it would be ground into a pulp right now.

Pissed, I turn to go—I run straight into Damon.

"You, ok?" he asks, sounding concerned, but I am so not in the mood for these Salvatore's and their crap.

"Don't pretend to care," I snap, glaring up into his pale blue eyes. "I know you're gloating inside."

He just stares back at me, confused by the outburst. I soften a bit, as the concern in his eyes refuses to fade. Maybe, it's not fair to take my anger at Stefan out on his brother.

He offers me a sad half-smile and jerks his head back toward the bar. "Come on," he says. "Food's getting cold." I follow him in.

---

Nadezhda

Bree sets a plate of food down beside me. Burger and fries from the look of it. Must be Elena's. I glance outside to see Damon and Elena speaking quietly, standing toe to toe. You can feel the sexual tension from here. I smile, snatching a fry.

I'm really not sure what's come over me today. I'd love to blame the limitless supply of alcohol Bree keeps pouring me in these conveniently gulp-sized glasses, but I know that's a load of bull.

First off, I'm a supernaturally fast-healing undead creature and it takes a hell of a lot more than a few shots of tequila to make me more than mildly tipsy and second, I'm more what you'd call a… fun drunk than a weepy one.

No, that's really no excuse. I'm just a bundle of inappropriate mood swings today. Maybe I do have PMS.

I snort into my glass, downing the shot in one gulp. I squeeze my eyes against the burn.

No, if I'm being honest with myself, this has all been coming for a long while.

Between the heartbreak I know is in store for Damon, the guilt and empathetic pain I feel at that knowledge, the violent rage that overcomes me at the mere sight of Stefan, and the fear of what's to come when word inevitably gets out about the human doppelganger prancing around the oldest supernatural nexus in existence, I think I'm entitled to a few tears.

Not that I'll admit it.

Bree refills my glass again. I watch as she pours, puzzled. Looking up I ask, "You know, not that I'm not appreciative, but what's with all the free booze?"

She chuckles lightly, giving me a knowing smile, but says nothing.

I groan when I work it out. "Lexi?"

She laughs.

"Jesus, does no one know how to keep a secret anymore?"
"She's a friend," Bree admits. "Consider it a thank you more than earned."

I duck my head, uncomfortable. "Yeah, well... What does Damon get?"

A dark look flickers behind her usually warm smile. I feel a twinge of uneasiness at the coldness of it.

"Bree..." I reason. "He did know I'd bring her back. He didn't really kill her."

"Yeah," she says softly, and the moment passes.

The burst of cold air that brushes across my bare shoulders shivers down my spine, raising goose bumps on my skin, alerts me to the return of my companions. I straighten my back, grabbing tight hold of my usual calm and schooling my features to a look of quiet indifference.

Damon comes to sit beside me, biting back a smile as he slides the half empty plate away from me. I shrug, gesturing to Bree to bring us another serving of fries at the same time Damon requests his own and a beer. Weird.

On Damon's right, Elena takes a healthy bite of cheeseburger. Girl's got quite an appetite. Guess anger and fear will do that for you. She has had a long day.

From what she's said, I gather the Katherine-shaped bombshell has imploded on Stelena's cloud nine. Can't say I'm surprised. That was a long time in coming.

Having inhaled half her burger, Elena finally comes up for air to inform us, "I found a picture of Katherine." Anger seeps into her voice when she explains, "Stefan kept it all this time. He had it sitting out on his desk like some prized possession."

"It probably is," Damon mutters.

"Yeah, but we look exactly alike," she rants. "How is that even possible? And how could he not tell me?"

"Stefan's very good at keeping secrets," I say, thanking Bree for the new plate with a smile. Damon steals it from me. Jerk.

"I mean, am I like related to her or something?" she wonders aloud.

I share a look with Damon at that. "Could be," I offer noncommittally.

"Well," she straightens in her chair. "Let's just say I'm descended from Katherine, does that make me part vampire?"

Damon steals another fry. "Vampires can't procreate," he quips, shooting her the Damon-eye (You know when he does that weird eye-brow lift/smirk action that should be ridiculous, but just sort of makes your insides melt? Yes, I named it). "But we love to try."

If I were human and innocent, I'm pretty sure I'd be blushing right now. Instead, I snicker as I watch Elena do it. Good times,

"No," he shakes his head. "If you two are related, it would mean that Katherine had a child before she was turned." He sounds dismissive, and there is still a hint of disgust there at the thought, but not so much as there undoubtedly would have been had he not already heard the truth of it from me.
The residual anger is still evident in her voice when she asks, "Did Stefan think that he could use me to replace her?"

"Kinda creepy if you ask me," Damon says by way of answer.

"Understatement," I mumble.

She stares down at her plate, shaking her head in a mixture of anger and sadness. In typical Damon fashion, he lightens the moment with a snarky comment.

Snatching a pickle from her plate he says, "Come on, what? You don't like pickles? What's wrong with you?" earning him a brief smile.

Looking curious, "How can you even eat if technically you're supposed to be…?"

"Dead?" Damon and I stage whisper in concert.

"It's not such a bad word," he says. "As long as we keep a healthy diet of…(cue the mocking eye flash) blood in our system, our bodies function pretty normally." He punctuates the statement with another bite of food.

She chuckles a bit, cheeks slightly flushed. "This nice act?" she questions, "Is any of it real?"

"Mm hmm," he smirks.

She turns her eyes to me, offering a half smile. I assume she's recalling our earlier conversation. I don't mind the questions provided she resolves to get her own answers.

I wink in reassurance that there are no hard feelings.

Hopefully, she won't take my earlier tirade too harshly. I do actually like her when she's like this. Girl's got spunk.

"Here you go, honey," Bree says as she delivers our beers.

"Thank you," he says.

"I'll have one too," Elena pipes up, surprising us both.

To our questioning looks, she replies, "Time out, remember? For five minutes? Well…that five minutes is gonna need a beer."

Well, hot damn.

Bree smiles as she sets it in front of her, "There you go."

Damon toasts her bottle with his and she takes a single long gulp, squinting at the taste.

---

**Elena**

Man! I have missed this. I haven't had fun like this in way too long. And it's not just the drinking either. At least, I don't think. It's just the whole day.
It's been so great to just relax and enjoy myself without any of the other stuff creeping in and stressing me out. I'm not sure I really felt the weight of it all till Damon lifted it off with his "time out".

He was right. I did need a break.

I lift the shot glass, ready to kick some ass. "Ready…Go!" I throw my head back and shoot it back in a single gulp, the familiar burn lighting up my throat on the way down.


"Holy shit!" I hear in my right ear. Sometime in the mix of drinking and joking around, Lia snuck up on me. Or maybe it was the other way around.

Come to think of it, I think it might have been me that wrapped an arm around her shoulders when we were laughing it up earlier at something Damon said. I'm kind of an affectionate drunk.

Not that I'm drunk.

Obviously.

I see that Damon missed a bit of his drink with the last round. There's a bit of a wetness to his lip—chin. I mean chin.

"Oh, do you need a bib?" I tease. God, he looks yummy. No! Did I say yummy? I meant…yeah I got nothin'.

He wipes at the spillage, mock-frowning at me. "Sorry, I can't unhinge my jaw like a snake to consume alcohol," he gripes.

I snicker. "Whatever. Alright. Who's next?" I ask the crowd that's formed around us. "Another round, Bree?"

"Honey, you should be on the floor," chuckles a middle-aged blonde down the bar from me. From the way she's stumbling I think she's only a couple rounds from that herself.

"I am not even drunk," I argue. "My tolerance is like way up here!" I jump with my hand raised to indicate height.

Lia laughs and disentangles herself from me, trotting over to snuggle up to Damon. Guess I'm not the only "affectionate drunk" around here. He hooks an arm around her waist and I'm suddenly a bit jealous.

Not that I have any reason to be.

Obviously.

Still, I can just imagine the warmth of him pressed up against me. All firm muscle and smooth skin. He's so—Blegh no! Bad thoughts. Don't go there.

But he keeps looking at me with those bright blue eyes, biting his lip. Or he was anyway. Now, he's busy talking to Lia. Grr. No, wait! Nothing to see here.

I was not just thinking about my boyfriend's brother. No way, no how.

Is he my boyfriend though? I mean after—Blegh. Bad thoughts! Not going there tonight. Five
minutes and all that. We're doing happy fun times tonight.

Damon

God, she really does look tasty right now. I've never seen her like this. Where's that sad, broody, uptight little thing Stefan's been mooning over?

I mean, Blondie used to talk about how much fun she was before the accident, but I guess I had to see it to believe it. Even with Z's warm little body snuggled up against me, I can't take my eyes off her.

It's moments like this she reminds me of Katherine.

"Never knew she had it in her," Z remarks, obviously noticing my divided attention.

I'm not sure what I expected to see, but looking down into her upturned face, eyes bright with a secret smile, I know that's not it.

Elena's smile lights up the room. She looks so happy. Not to mention how tempting she is in that little camisole, those skin tight jeans hugging her in all the right places. Mm mm mm.

"Yeah," I offer distractedly.

"She's wasted on Stefan," Z says firmly. I glance down again in surprise at the certainty in her tone.

"What makes you say that?" I ask doubtfully.

Z gives me a disbelieving snort, as though she can't believe the stupidity of such a question.

"Just look at her," she says.

Oh, I am. Definitely.

"Stefan can't handle that kind of fire." I watch as Elena twirls about excitedly, drinking the entire bar under the table. I smile. "He'll just try to put it out," Z voice whispers in the background.

She's right. He would. There's no way my little brother keeps a girl like that. Not without turning her into him. Like hell, I'm gonna let that happen.

Nadezhda

And...my work here is done. I feel like Cupid. Go me. Watching these two crazy kids moon over each other is kind of hysterical. Well, no. Moon's not the right word. Mooning is what you do when you're in puppy love with your high school sweetheart. Like Stefan, for instance.

Well, Stelena as a unit really. Yes, I just used a ship name.

No, Damon and Elena are staring at each other like they want to devour each other when they think the other's not looking. It's pretty hot actually.
Of course, nothing's going to happen tonight. And it shouldn't. No matter how they're looking at each other. Elena's emotionally vulnerable after the Stefan drama, not to mention drunk. She'd just blame it on the alcohol in the morning.

Besides, Damon's still busy obsessing over Katherine.

No matter what doubts I've managed to plant over that two-faced survivalist, they haven't really had time to grow roots yet. They won't until I find incontrovertible proof of my suspicions. Even then, he'll be heartbroken and Elena would just be a rebound.

No, I'm not trying to start something tonight. I just want them to each consider the possibility. Maybe then when all this blows over, they'll find their way to each other.

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**Elena**

Ooh, they have pool tables here. I'm excited. I grew up playing pool at the Grill. Well, wanting to anyway. It's one of those bar games you just kind of pick up in Mystic Falls.

I mean, how wouldn't you? It's like the only place to hang out in town and when you aren't old enough for anything else in a bar, it’s sort of a given.

Also, I'm totally winning. I'm on fire tonight. Kicking ass and taking names and all that. Plus, this girl kinda sucks. Or maybe she's just drunk.

Hey, where'd Damon go anyway? He was right behind me a minute ago. Or was that at the bar? Ugh, I can't remember.

Oh well, guess he and Lia will wander over eventually. Hope they're not doing anything fun in my absence. God I hope they're not off making out or something. They better not be.

What's that ringing? Oh, that's *my* phone. Oh, shoot! Jenna! I was supposed to be home by now. Shit! I scramble to answer my phone before it goes to voicemail. She doesn't need *more* of a reason to be mad at me.

"Hey…Jenna," I answer, somewhat nervous.

"Where are you?"

"Hold on…It's loud in here," I say, pulling on my coat. Well, trying to anyway. I've got one arm half-way in a sleeve, and the other is holding the phone. I'm walking so I can't set it down.

"Where are you? Are you ok?"

"Huh?" I ask, struggling to shift the sleeve over my shoulder. "Yeah. No, I'm good."

Getting the one sleeve on, I shift the phone to my left hand. Now to get the other sleeve…

Jenna's still speaking, but her voice is too faint to make out. "Hold on, I can't hear you," I say, finally reaching the door.

I hip-check the door open, still pulling at my—Whoops!

I nearly face plant on the concrete, tripping over the railing outside. Ugh, I dropped my phone.
Where is it? Oh, there it is!

Jenna must have gotten tired of repeating herself. She's much louder now. In fact, I can kind of make out her yelling from here.

Hmm, I wonder how much trouble I'd be in if I just...Click. Yeah, I'll deal with that one tomorrow.

---

**Damon**

So, not that I'm complaining, but I'm beginning to think Z's had more than her fair share of shots tonight. She hasn't said so, but I gather from all the free refills that she's worked something out with Bree. Either way, girl's gettin' handsy.

With Elena over by the pool table keeping herself entertained, Z and I have been left to our own devices at the bar. Apparently, this means practically sitting in my lap while she guzzles alcohol like it's water and she's dying of thirst.

The leather jacket she wore this morning has been long since discarded and the strapless corset top she has on has only sunk lower with each passing hour. At this point, it leaves little to be desired. Or a lot. Take your pick.

"Where's your girl?" Bree asks suddenly.

I look around, confused. "She's right over..." She was just playing pool a minute ago. Where'd she get off to?

About to go look for her, I glance toward the door as I hear the *whoosh* of fresh air signaling someone's entrance. Oh! There she is. Crisis averted. It is getting late though. We should probably think about heading out soon.

"Damon?" Z whispers, too quiet for anyone but me to hear. "I'm hungry." God, she's insatiable.

I glance back at her, ready with a joke about her bottomless pit of a 'stomach', but the raw thirst in her eyes has me swallowing my words. Suddenly, my mouth feels dry, my pants too tight, and we need to get out of here.

---

**Nadezhda**

I manage to convince Damon to rent a motel room for the night rather than attempt to drive the whole way home in our current states. Not that it takes much convincing on his part.

Elena's the only one with any objection to this plan, and she's hardly in a position to argue anything right now.

We leave her passed out on one of the double beds in our room, and creep out the door for a little midnight snack.

One of the benefits of a small town motel is the lack of clientele and the relative indifference of the staff.
This makes it fairly easy to sneak about in search of a meal without raising suspicion. The air outside is frigid, but my skin hardly registers the chill through the to-feel-ya's fading influence.

Just down the hall from our room, we find a young couple tucked sound asleep together through the window. Damon forces the lock and we sneak inside.

They look so sweet and innocent lying there. Soft blonde hair, undoubtedly blue-eyed, the woman wears nothing but an oversized T-shirt—probably his—over smooth, bare skin. She's familiar in a subtle way.

A memory stirs like a large cat, sleek and hungry, and stretches gracefully awake from a long lazy slumber.

The man hugs her tightly curled into his chest, spooning her lovingly. His own hair rises wispy and thin in light brown curls.

They’re lovely. I want them.

I look up at Damon, a feral grin pulling at my lips. He returns it, gesturing me ahead with an old world grace and etiquette.

I choose the woman, treading softly to come to rest on my knees beside her, my eyes level with hers. Damon does the same on the other side, though he has to turn the man to face him first.

In sync with their partner, they awaken within seconds of each other, prepared to scream at the sight of the monsters before them. They haven't the space to breathe before we have caught their eyes, compelling each to silence.

Damon and his mark fade into the background as I stare hungrily at the fair-haired girl in front of me. She trembles in her terror. I smile widely, my fangs pricking my lip.

Gently, delicately, I pull her toward me, turning her face to grant me access to that beautifully elegant neck. With the patience and precision of long practice, I sink my teeth in her throat.

I very nearly moan at the taste.

I was right. She is perfect. Delicious. Delectable. Perfect.

The rich, warm liquid trails down my throat in a slow, thick slide. I take long, greedy pulls of her life's blood, feeling the power of her life force flow into mine with each swallow for long minutes on end.

So attuned am I to the ebb and flow of her, I feel it when her heart beat slows. I can stop now.

This is the moment—the turning point. The choice to feed and sustain, or devour and fulfill is upon me.

The prudent thing to do is to let go. I could heal her wound, compel her to forget, send her on her way. It's not what I want, but it may be what I should do.

Still, there is very little power in that, and I have little desire for restraint.

When her heart stops, I feel it. Not as the literal end of the feed, the silence of her heart beat, though those are present.

No, the feeling which drives me again and again to this moment is the surge of pure power that
floods through me. Her life force in full flows from her veins into mine. It is euphoric. Transcendent.

I release my grip on her throat, lifting my head to the sky. Blood still drips from my fangs as my eyes close, surrendering to the pleasure.

I hear a growl that is not my own and suddenly I find myself pinned to the wall, the hard press of lean muscles press into mine.

I feel a warm tingling between my thighs and I moan. I open my eyes to meet two icy pools of blue melting in the heat, darkened with desire.

He hooks a hand behind my knee, pulling my center to press firmly against his. The heat between us is staggering. I feel it pulsing where we connect.

He rolls his hips forward into mine and I suppress a whine. I bite my lip and feel my fangs slice through the tender skin there. I wrap my leg tightly around him, using all the strength I can bring to bear to force him closer still.

All the while, I stare unblinkingly into his eyes.

Keeping them there, I slip a hand between us, cupping his hardness over the rough denim. I give a firm squeeze and his gaze flickers, almost wavering from mine.

He bites back a groan. I can tell he wants to speak, but he started this game in silence and I intend to finish it the same way. I smirk.

In answer, he lifts me off my other foot and speeds us across the room. My back hits the bloody sheets at the foot of the bed before I register the movement. He makes quick work of both of our jeans, leaving me in nothing but my tightly laced top and barely there panties.

He brushes the lace aside, sliding a finger through my wetness. Though I try to swallow it, a whimper escapes my throat. It is his turn to smirk. His eyes still smolder into mine.

At some point he must have rid himself of his own underwear, because he doesn’t spare a moment for them. In the space of a single breath he has torn mine from me, the thin lace breaking easily, and he is inside me.

I wrap my legs around his back, my feet crossing at the ankles, as I urge him closer, harder, deeper. He hooks my knees over his elbows, opening me further to him. His hands clench bruisingly tight around my hips, his grip so strong I feel my bones protest.

Between the two of us, we find a savage rhythm—harsh and unrestrained at a breakneck vampiric speed.

With a burst of my own superior strength, I free my legs and roll to sit above him grinding downward under my own power while he jerks my body into his.

He thrusts in earnest, my hips buck of their own accord, matching his brutal pace. He hits that spot deep inside that brings sparks to my eyes.

I strain to keep them open as he stares down at me. I clutch at his shoulders, clenching my throat against a scream as he slips a hand between us, flicking his finger over my clit—too fast for a mere human.
At long last I can no longer contain it and I explode.

Elena

I wake to the too bright sun shooting sharp barbs of pain through my head. It feels like someone's driving an ice-pick through my skull. I groan and squirm beneath the covers, hiding my head under my pillow in an attempt to block the sunlight. No such luck.

"Rise and shine, Sleeping Beauty!" I hear a masculine voice chime in a horribly cheerful tone. For a moment, I am confused by it before I remember—

"Damon," I groan.

"In the flesh," he sings.

I think if someone offered me a stake right now, I could literally kill him for sounding so happy.

I feel the weight of another body bounce onto my bed before the pillow is ripped from my hands. Lia's smiling face greets me. In tandem with the blue-glittered flecks in her black eye-shadow, amusement sparkles in her eyes at my venomous glare.

"Oh, don't be like that," she teases. "We brought you breakfast."

Damon holds up a paper bag and a paper coffee cup in his hands. I roll my eyes. Ouch, unwise. I try to hide again, but Lia's having none of it. She tears the blankets from me, and yanks me to the end of the bed by my ankles, forcing me to stand or fall. I promptly sit back down.

"How are you two not dying right now?" I ask, clutching my head against the pain.

They both shrug. "We're already dead."

"I hate you," I grumble.

"Well, I'd offer to share my cure-all," Lia chuckles, "but I don’t think you'd accept."

She gestures to her wrist in explanation, an odd look in her eye. Ugh, gross. No, thank you.

Damon drops the bag of food in my lap. Hmm, muffins. I can live with that.

He waits for me to accept the coffee cup, before pulling me to my feet.

"Come on," Lia says, already halfway out the door. "Let's make like a baby—"

At my questioning stare, Damon grins."—and head out," he finishes as she leaves. When she turns her back to me, I finally catch a glimpse of the sweeping tattoos that cover her back.

Damon smirks at the joke, but before he can follow I stop him with a hand on his arm.

"Damon," I say, a bit hesitant but curious. "Why did you bring me with you?"

He smiles bemusedly at the question, cocking his head to the side. "Well, you're not the worst company in the world, Elena," he teases.
I glare back playfully, recognizing the deflection for what it is.

"You should give yourself more credit."

"Seriously?" I challenge, arching an eyebrow.

"You were in the road all damsel in distress-like, and I knew it would piss off Stefan. And...you're not the worst company in the world, Elena."

The look he gives me now, eyes flared, lips pulling into a seductive smirk, sends a happy buzz through my whole system and a low sort of fluttering I'm starting to get used to in his presence.

He winks at me, as though he knows exactly what he's doing, before leaving the room.

I smile in a way that feels almost surreal these days, the happy tinges on my skin still zinging, as I follow.

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Stefan

It's been over a day since she ran from my bed. A day and a half since she left me to ride shot-gun in my brother's Camaro. I don't blame her. She has every right to be angry with me. I can't imagine what it must have been like for her to find out that way. I don't like it, but I understand her need for space. Still, I feel if I could just explain—

No, what I hate is that it was my brother she went to. Not intentionally, I know. I have no illusions that she would not have been just as happy to avoid him as me in her pain.

Still, in a sense she chose to spend her day with him. She chose to remain with him rather than allow me to bring her home. That hurt more than I would have thought. More than that though, it scares me. I can only imagine what Damon's doing with this information.

I know him. He sees the slightest hint of weakness and he pounces on it. Anything to get a leg up. Anything to hurt me. And he knows Elena's his easiest pressure point. I just wish I could make her see that.

It's morning by the time she makes it home. My heart leaps in my chest when I hear the telltale crunch of gravel in the drive. I stand stock-still, staring at the open doorway to my bedroom as I hear her irate footsteps storm the stairway.

She marches angrily up the stairs and turns on her heel to face me, chest heaving in her still present rage. "Hi," is all she says.

"Hi," I echo.

"You could have told me," she says, hurt clear on her beautiful face. I ache to see it there.

"I wanted to tell you," I try to explain.

If anything, my attempt only angers her more. "You said no more lies, only the truth," she argues. "I can handle the truth, Stefan. As crazy as it is, I can handle the fact that you are a vampire, and you have a vampire brother, and that my best friend is a witch."

She breathes, the angry tears brimming in her eyes wetting my own. "I can accept the fact that the
world is a much more mysterious place than I ever thought possible, but this—this lie, I cannot take."

She stalks toward me, temper rising. I find myself retreating from the pain in her usually warm brown eyes.

"What am I to you?" she questions. "Who am I to you?"

"You are not Katherine," I say, finding the courage to voice the thoughts that have been churning in my mind from the moment I first saw her. "You are the opposite of everything that she was."

"And when did you figure that out?" she sneers. "Before you kissed me? Before we slept together?"

I hold my breath, the weight of her rage washing over me. "Before I met you," I admit softly.

"What?" she says, shocked.

"The first day of school, when we met," I feel the ghost of a smile twitch at the memory of that moment, but it fades in the wake of my confession, "it wasn't for the first time, Elena."

"Then when was it?"

"May 23, 2009."

"But that was—"

"That was the day your parents' car went off the bridge," I finish for her.

I watch as her eyes fill with tears, fresh grief mixed with residual anger. "You were there?"

"Every couple of years I come back here to see Zach and see my home," I tell her. "Last spring, I was out in the woods by Old Wickery Bridge and I heard the accident. All of it."

I see the heat of her anger fade at my words, replaced by welling tears of grief. They are echoed by my own. "I was fast getting there, but not fast enough. The car was already submerged. Your dad—he was still conscious. I was able to get to him, but he wouldn't let me help him until I helped you."

"Oh my god," she sobs, hand pressing to her quivering mouth. "When I woke up in the hospital, nobody could figure out how I got out of the car. They said it was a miracle."

"I went back for them, but it was too late. I couldn't—I couldn't save them," I continue. "When I pulled you out, I looked at your face. You looked like Katherine." Her eyes spark again with anger, but she waits with bated breath for the rest. "I couldn't believe the resemblance."

"After that, I spent months making sure that you weren't her. I watched you. I learned everything that I could about you and I saw that you were nothing like Katherine. And I wanted to leave to town, but, Elena, I couldn't—I couldn't leave without knowing you. I'm so sorry that I didn't tell you. I wanted to, but you were so sad…""

She takes this all in, but one thing remains. "Why do I look like her?"

This is the one question I don't want to answer. Not now. Not today. How can she bear this? How can I ask her to?

"Elena, you've been through so much—" I try.
"Why do I look like her, Stefan?" she insists. "What are you not telling me?"

I sigh inwardly, resigned, but I can't hold this back if she is determined to know. "It didn't make any sense to me," I tell her. "You were a Gilbert. She was a Pierce. But the resemblance was too similar. And then I learned the truth...You were adopted, Elena."

Her eyes widen in shock. After a brief moment spent in stunned silence, she breaks down in tears. Her grief, her anger, her hurt, all piling up. I guide her gently to the couch, settling a blanket over her knees as her sobs eventually subside.

Gathering herself together, she asks finally, "How do you know this?"

I rub a hand soothingly along her back as I explain what I learned. "Your birth certificate from the city records, it says 'Elena Gilbert: Mystic Falls General', but there was no record of your mother ever being admitted. There's no record of her ever being pregnant."

Moving toward the edge of the couch, she turns to face me directly, her eyes desperate. "What else do you know?" she begs.

"For me to go any further, I would have had to look into the Pierce family, and I couldn't do that. It's too much of a risk. If someone found out I was asking about Katherine—Listen to me, it doesn't matter. You are the woman that I love." I look deep into her eyes, willing her to believe me, "I love you."

She smiles at me gratefully, her own feeling pooling there in her eyes. She presses her lips to mine in a loving kiss, before tucking her head under my chin. I wrap my arms tightly around her, finally at home.

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**Alaric**

I am sitting alone at the bar, grading some horribly pathetic history assignments (Seriously, what was that ass-hat teaching these kids?), when I see him. Damon Salvatore: the man who killed my wife.

And there's little Lia, prattling on beside him like she hasn't a care in the world—like she has no idea what he can do. And maybe she doesn't. Maybe he has his family fooled as much as he does the rest of the town. Maybe she hasn't a clue what a monster her...cousin?...is.

I'd like to think she doesn't, at least. Truthfully, I enjoyed our conversation the other day. She was witty and charming, and I genuinely liked her. I'd hate to imagine she shares his...condition.

No, that makes it sound like some kind of disorder. Like he's somehow not responsible for the things he does. No, Damon Salvatore is a monster—plain and simple. He is a monster that must be stopped.

"Ric!" Lia greets cheerfully, breaking me from my thoughts. I don't realize how long I was staring until she does, but by then I am caught by two blazingly deep pools of ice blue.

Those eyes feel sharp and piercing in their intensity. I find myself drawn into them, compelled to meet his stare as they bore into me.

In the corner of my eye, I see Lia fairly skip down the bar to perch beside me, momentarily
obstructing my view and freeing me from his predator's gaze. She looks different, I notice. Very different from the attractively conservative school teacher I met the other day.

She's in a lacey dark blue blouse with a boat neck and an open back, segmented by a single translucent stream of lace, which exposes pale skin covered in an intricate lattice work of tattooed patterns like the wings of a raven. That and the motorcycle boots, she looks far younger—edgier—than she did before. It suits her.

"Whatcha doin' here, buddy?" she asks. Her heavily made up eyes blink up at me, blithely unaware of the stand-off she has interrupted. She glances down at the papers on the bar with disgust, and I can't resist a smile at her effervescent energy.

She purses her lips in mock-seriousness, furrowing her brow. She pats my shoulder and asks, "Do you always grade drunk, Ric?" fake concern in her voice. "I think you may have got that backwards somewhere along the way."

Noting my confusion, a second as-yet-unheard voice remarks, "You know what they say. Write drunk, edit sober." I find the face of my nightmares smirking playfully at me. It's not a look I would have placed on the homicidal beast that drained my Isobel and stole her from me. I think it only makes him more dangerous.

I force a laugh. "Well, you know. The teen mind just makes more sense while drinking."

Damon toasts me with his glass, while Lia giggles beside me. We fall into a companionable silence that sets my teeth on edge.

My hand is shaking in my barely concealed rage. Izzy's limp and bleeding body flashes behind my eyes. Without a backwards glance, I leave.
Nadezhda

I frown down at the two tubes of lip-gloss in my hands. 'Watermelon' or 'Lavender Rose'? My dress today is a sort of pale red/purplish-pink kind of color that I can't begin to name—the exact color of the blush in my cheeks were it possible for dead skin to blush.

Ugh. I can't decide.

I hear the unnecessarily loud thumps of Damon's footsteps in the hall before I see him bounding into the room behind me. Locking his gaze with mine in the mirror, he comes up behind me—his hands on my hips, his chin resting on my shoulder. He stares at me a moment, an unreadable expression on his handsome face.

He's the picture of masculine beauty in his usual designer jeans and dark blue button-down. He somehow manages to look both carefully put together and 'just rolled out of bed' sexy. I sort of want to stake him.

Glancing down at the gloss in my hands, his eyes flare dramatically before he releases me briefly to take them from me—removing them from my grasp like something unbelievably repulsive. I watch him rummage through my make-up bag with an arched brow. In a moment, he finds what he is looking for.

"This one," he says, placing a cranberry gloss I would never have considered on my now empty palm.

It's ridiculous. The color is too dark, too rich for what I need. I'm going for classy, not slutty. Sighing, I try it anyway. Sometimes, it's really just best to humor him.

Damn him. He's right. It's perfect. The subtle purple in the deep pink perfectly matches the undertones in the dress, filling the color in as though they were made for each other. Somehow the complementary pairing brings attention to my lightly accented eyes too, making the dusky tone of them really pop.

Now I really want to stake him. Why is he so much better at this than I am?

Smiling confidently—a 'There, see?' flitting casually across his face—he returns his chin to my shoulder.

"Any luck?" I ask, getting back on topic.

He shakes his head, refusing to be discouraged. "Not yet," he says, "but I'm sure to find something. Giuseppe was a paranoid bastard, but he was also a bit of a fetishist. He must have left a clue somewhere."
I am growing increasingly exasperated by my friend's continued determination to waste all time and energy on a fruitless obsession that will inevitably lead to his down fall. Or, at the very least, a pulverized heart.

When I woke this morning, it was to find Damon scouring book shelves in the library in the hunt for some small glimpse of a hope and a prayer for the success of his rescue mission. Apparently, Bree told him he needed Emily's grimoire if he wanted a chance in hell of working around the destroyed crystal. Gotta hand it to him. He's certainly dedicated.

"You're still bound and determined then." It's not a question.

He gives me a hard look in the mirror, cold eyes biting. "Until someone gives me a good reason not to be."

Ouch.

I just wish his object of affection was remotely worthy of it.

It's sad really, because I remember the Katarina of old—the frightened human girl running for her life—and she might have been. Once. But the years of running, the constant state of paralyzing terror, the macabre nightmare that awaited her at home, has turned her cold and hard. There was very little left of that girl by the time she escaped.

Her compassion was but the first casualty of her survival.

"Right," I say, swallowing hard.

Still I know that, unlike Stefan, it's not the human Katarina that Damon loved—loves. No, his love is Katherine Pierce, the cold, wicked, seductive shell of a centuries' old vampire. For him, that love is real. It burns bright, and deep, and long. But its object—it's focus—is devoid of these things. She is incapable of returning them.

When he realizes this, I fear it will shatter his devoted, loyal, fragile heart into a million tiny pieces. I don't know how to bring him back from that. Worse still, it's not as though this truth should surprise him. As unconditional as his love runs, he has to know the sort of person she is. In fact, I know that he does. Not just my suspicions, but his own should tell him this. Do tell him this. Yet still, he loves her. Still, he fights for her.

I am watching him plunge headfirst into the river Styx at the entrance to his own personal hell and I am powerless to stop him.

"See you later then?" he asks, ready to get back to his search.

I nod.

He trots out of the room, but from the hall I hear, "Keep an eye on the teacher for me!"

I stare into Damon's bathroom mirror, watching the hints of grey-purple flare dangerously in my eyes as I look with hate upon my own reflection. I feel worse than useless, torn a million ways between every vow of loyalty I've ever given, as only a single pair of glacial eyes swimming in pain invades my mind.

Sighing, I slide my hands down the soft cotton skirt of my dress and leave the room. I've got work to do.
Elena

My mind is still reeling from last night's confessions. Stefan's words are ringing in my ears. You were adopted Elena. The night of the accident, I was there. You looked like Katherine. I love you.

I can't begin to know what to do with this. How am I supposed to deal with this? I'm just a seventeen year old human girl. I just started learning how to let go. My parents just died.

In an accident my boyfriend apparently saved me from. I was drowning, and he saved me. He saved me only for me to be plunged into a world where things like vampires, and witches, and centuries' old ancestors that look exactly like you are normal and commonplace.

I feel like I'm going crazy. The one thing I'm sure of—that I feel I can hold onto—is that despite all that, I know I love him. He shouldn't have lied to me, and I wish he didn't think he had to protect me that way, but I love him. I do. I just have to believe that that's enough.

"Elena?" I hear my name through the whirlpool of my churning thoughts. I look up to find myself in an empty classroom. The last hour just passed me by.

Lia is standing at the front of the class, a hand on my shoulder that I barely felt. She's staring at me concernedly. She must have called my name more than once. When I meet her eyes, she nods once and turns to sit at the edge of her desk a few feet away.

My bag lies unopened at my feet. In my distraction, I never unpacked. I start to reach for it, but something in her expression makes me think she wants to talk. I glance to the door to find it already closed. Creepy.

"You doing alright?" she asks, sounding genuine. And maybe it's the fact that she doesn't know me that well. Or maybe that she knows about the Salvatore's without really being one. Hell, maybe I just need someone who's not obviously an oblivious member of Team Epic Love, but some part of me wants to speak to her. So I do.

"It's Stefan stuff, I guess," I admit. I look up at her doubtfully, not sure whether she really wants to hear this, but she nods encouragingly so I continue. Actually, I sort of rant.

"It's just, I went to talk to him yesterday. You know, about the Katherine thing? And he told me that he didn't want to burden me because I was still grieving, and he was just trying to protect me. And he said that he was there the night of the accident. That he saved me. That he's the reason I survived and they didn't. He pulled me from a drowning car. I mean, that's amazing right? But then he said that when he saw I looked like Katherine, he was just shocked. You know? And that he watched me for months just to make sure I wasn't her, and that somewhere in all of that he fell in love with me and he just had to meet me. Which should be romantic, I mean it is but...Anyway, then he tells me that he looked into it, trying to find out why I look like Katherine and he's still not sure, but he told me I'm adopted."

By the end of this speech I can barely breathe, but whether it's from the lack of air or the tears clogging my throat, I can't be sure.

Lia is by now crouched beside me, her hand on my arm in support. The sad half-smile she is giving me looks like sympathy, but there's something hidden in her eyes.

"What?" I whisper and I hope it doesn't sound too desperate. I need answers and she looks like she
Her eyes slide away from mine guiltily, but it just makes me want to know all the more.

"What?" I ask again. This time my innate stubbornness makes an appearance.

"It's just," she starts, almost regretfully. "I mean, that's sort of...creepy."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, the guy stalked you for months to what? 'Make sure the human girl isn't actually my dead vampire ex in disguise?' she says.

Ok, well when you put it like that...

"And, besides, how did he think that was going to go? Choreographing a meet-cute with the chick he's been watching from the bushes for months so he can insinuate himself into her life, only 'let's be sure we don't tell her about that crazy vampire story or the fact that she looks just like my ex-girlfriend'? 'Cause, you know, that's not skeevy at all."

"Well, he said that he fell in love with me from a distance and he just couldn't leave without knowing me. And that he didn't tell me all the other stuff because he was trying to protect me."

"Uh huh." She stares at me blankly, like she can't believe how stupid I'm being. The look makes me angry all of a sudden. I didn't ask for her biased commentary!

I stand abruptly, irrationally mad at her for voicing these thoughts. Her face doesn't so much as twitch as she watches me.

"You know what?" I shout. "I don't need this. If I wanted someone to hate on my boyfriend, I would have gone to Damon!"

"You're right," she says, still impassive. "Though, maybe if you had you would have known about your ancestry months ago."

That brings me to a halt as an idea niggles at me. "Wait, you knew?"

She smirks. "Elena, I've known since before I met you."

I stare at her in shock as she shrugs her shoulders and turns her back to me.

"You should probably get to lunch. It smells like you have some lucky charms to hand out."

My feet can't carry me fast enough.

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Alaric

"Property of Jonathon Gilbert: 1864," I read silently, opening the old leather journal. I'm not sure what I expect to find in this, but I wasn't lying when I told Jeremy that a first-hand account of the Civil War was like porn to a history teacher.

I just might not have meant the one between the Yankees and the Confederates.
"'Sup, Ric?" Lia greets, plopping herself down on the desk Jeremy so recently vacated.

The sack lunch in her hands sets my own stomach rumbling, and I remember there's more to this hour of the day than sneaking longing looks at an old journal. I give her a hesitant smile, bemused by the interruption.

Her eyes flit to my desk, and I curl my hand over the leather reflexively—protectively, almost. If she notices the move, she doesn't react. She merely asks, "What ya got there?"

"Uh, just this journal a student brought for an extra-credit essay," I say.

"Jeremy Gilbert?" she asks to my surprise. My heart jumps before I realize she probably just saw him on his way out the door.

"Yeah," I answer instead.

She offers me a wistful smile. "Those Gilbert kids are something else, aren't they?" she says mysteriously, taking a bite of her apple.

"Yeah," I clear my throat, nervous suddenly. "Uh, he found one of his ancestor's journals at home. Says it's full of all these old stories about vampires in this town in the 1800s. Apparently there were a lot of animal attacks back then, too."

I'm not entirely sure why I'm pushing so hard on this, but something about this whole scene is making me vaguely uncomfortable. I suddenly remember that odd plant I found in Izzy's research, tucked away in a desk drawer at home, and wish I had it on me.

"Conspiracy nuts," she laughs unconvincingly. The sound is almost sinister, actually, and there's a predatory gleam in her eye. "Always trying to explain the unexplainable."

I chuckle at that before I think better of it. "My late wife would agree with you. She was really into all this stuff. Think she actually started to believe her own press."

"Hmm," she hums. The sound is dismissive, but her eyes flick to my ring and my heart stops.

Just as quickly, however, she brings her eyes back to mine and they sparkle with amusement. The warmth and light I'd seen in her the moment I met her are back and the tension goes out of the room in a deep, relieved exhale.

"Fox Mulder fan, huh?" she smirks.

I smile, my heart slowing to normal. I'm lost in the memory of happier times and a similar conversation.

"Something like that."

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**Nadezhda**

I have one more stop to make on the Damon Salvatore Frientervention, and of the three this is the one I am least looking forward to.

The house is a bit ramshackle and unpresuming, but that's just a cover. A clever one in some ways, I'll admit. I know what waits inside. I only need knock the once before the door opens to reveal an
older woman with flyaway hair and powerful eyes.

"Sheila Bennet," I greet with a sharp smile. "We finally meet."

She looks wary, but hesitantly polite when she asks, "To whom do I owe the pleasure?"

"Oh!" I exclaim with a sarcastic smile. Be still my undead heart. "I'm sorry. How rude of me. Your granddaughter knows me as Natalia Salvatore, her occasional English teacher."

Even the feigned half-smile slips from her face and she looks on me with a mixture of anger and fear.

"I don't do favors for vampires," she states.

"Well," I chirp. "Then it's a good thing I'm not asking."

I take a threatening step forward, intending to press that advantage I saw in her eyes, and am met with more than the spike of adrenaline I aimed for. She glares hard at me, her eyes focused and strained, but all I feel is a slightly uncomfortable pressure in my skull. I smile dangerously, unsure whether to be angry or amused by this turn of events.

"Well, well, well," I chant. "Grandma's got spunk."

I know I'm channeling Damon right now, and that's not likely to get me anywhere, but I can't help it. She and her ungrateful back-stabber of an ancestor pissed me off.

She backs off into her house, further away from the very old, very powerful vampire on her porch.

"What do you want?" she asks.

"Nothing much," I shrug. "Just the answer to a simple question."

"What?" she eyes me warily.

"You wouldn't happen to be interested in the location of Emily Bennet's grimoire would you?" I watch her face carefully, waiting to see if shock, fear, or interest will win out. She picks interest. Good. That's all I needed to know.

"You want me to help you unleash a tomb full of vampires on this town?" she scoffs, but I still see the spark of curiosity and not a little want in her eyes. "You had to know my answer to that before you came here."

"Well, someone's well informed," I chuckle, unconcerned.

"Spirits talk and so does my granddaughter. I have no interest in helping you or your friend after what he's done." She mutters to herself, "If I would have helped him at all."

Ok, yeah. Now I'm mad. "Your ancestor, a woman whose good word he's been counting on to rescue his lover from an impenetrable prison, reneges on a deal that he has been faithfully upholding for one hundred and fifty years—a deal that appointed him your family's guardian devil for all that time, I might add—and you don't think he has the right to be a little upset?"

Gotta hand it to the old witch, she's no pushover. She still stands toe-to-toe with fire in her eyes when she argues, "My granddaughter has got nothin' to do with any o' that!"

"No," I concede, "but the ghost that was possessing her does, and since Emily is a bit beyond reach
what with her being...dead and all—" I gesture for her to continue that thought to its logical conclusion.

"He tried to kill her!" Sheila fumes.

"What?!" I scoff, smiling a little. "That wasn't a murder attempt, that was a 'Fuck you, Emily!' in spectacular Damon-fashion. If he really wanted to kill her, her jugular would have been across the ground before anyone so much as blinked."

She remains decidedly unmoved by my outburst and I've just...I've had it. Maybe if I didn't actually need her cooperation I'd be less inclined to these futile verbal assaults, but I do so for some reason I just can't seem to help myself.

Good, God. Mystic Falls is infecting me with its inherent melodrama. Someone call the CDC, I've been had!

"God, you people," I growl. "You know, we may be immortal parasites on your precious 'Natural Balance', but we are still people. There's still a person in there with feelings and desires and a heart that still beats even on borrowed blood. A heart that still breaks, if you judgmental bitches would get your heads out of your asses long enough to notice."

I groan, snarl a little, and abruptly storm away—well, speed away really. Whatever. I got what I came for, and this was still ultimately a fruitless exercise. Maybe I'll have more luck with the teacher. Still have that school dance to chaperone. Joy.

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**Elena**

Jenna's looking cute in her brightly pink and yellow 50's garb. I think she's all dressed up for Mr. Saltzman. He seems like a nice guy, I should be happy for her. I *am* happy for her. Part of me wants to tell her that. The rest of me is too pissed to listen.

"Spoke to the insurance company," she starts.

"Uh huh," I respond coldly, not giving an inch.

"Car's totaled." Her voice is short, clipped—an echo of mine. "You can keep using mine for now."

Guess she's still mad about the other day. Whatever. That makes two of us.

I busy myself at the table so I don't have to face her. "So, you're coming to the dance?"

"Alaric asked me to help chaperone."

I can hear the pleased smile in her voice, though it doesn't thaw the ice in mine. I wish it could.

I finally turn around. "Why didn't you tell me, Jenna?"

A sad, half-resigned, expression replaces the smile on her face. "Your mom was gonna do it eventually. I never thought I would have to."

"If my mom were here right now and I asked her, she would tell me the truth."

She takes a deep breath, eyes flicking away. She knows I'm right. "Your dad was about to leave the
office one night, when this girl showed up. She was 16, a runaway, and...about to give birth."

I've been trying to deal with the idea of my adoption from the moment Stefan told me. It's not like the idea of a teen pregnancy never occurred to me, but somehow the image of it seems surreal.

Jenna must see this in my eyes because she strides toward me, as though to offer her support as she tells me the rest. "He delivered her baby and he gave her a place to stay, but a few days later she disappeared. And there you were."

Her red lips smile warmly at the memory. I can almost see it. But then I think about my mom—the real one, the one that raised me. I remember all the years I had with her, all the treasured memories, and somehow it hurts to think of this other girl.

The mother that might have been.

"Your parents were trying so hard to have a baby. I—It just wasn't happening," she breathes. "All Miranda ever wanted was to be a mom."

"Well why were my parents' names on the birth certificate?" I ask, finding my voice.

Jenna looks amused by the question. "Your dad was a doctor, Elena. He took care of it."

I digest this information. It's odd, like a final hope being swept away. I breathe deeply, trying to keep calm.

"They didn't want to lose you, so they kept it quiet, told as few people as possible, but if anyone ever wanted proof they had documentation."

The mental image of that teenage girl—God, she was younger than I am—is still emblazoned in my mind. I have the sudden urge to know her. Know what might have been.

"What else do you know about her?" I ask Jenna. "The girl."

"Just her name," Jenna admits. "Isobel."

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**Damon**

I have no idea what Z is up to today, but I kind of wish she'd turn up at some point before I tear all my hair out in my frustration. I am well aware that she doesn't approve of my agenda here, but I could still use her help.

If only Emily hadn't destroyed that crystal. Or, hell, if that Bonnie girl she was possessing weren't still so upset about a little blood-drinking between friends, maybe I'd have it by now.

I've gone through what I could of the library with no success to date, when the idea takes hold. I can't get back in time to track the grimoire, but maybe someone else can. It's a well known fact that the paranoid, self-important Founders of this town were known for exhaustively detailing every mundane aspect of their pathetic little lives.

I wanted to find my father's as he was so well known for keeping his secrets—Stefan had to get that trait from somewhere—but in lieu of that, maybe one of the others will do. He may have told someone. If I can get my hands on those journals, maybe one of them can tell me what happened to
I'm forming the list when St. Stefan enters the room in all his smugly sanctimonious glory. I glance up to find his hair combed back in that 50's greaser hairstyle though the clothes look too modern for the era. I resist the urge to hit him.

That decade was a bit of a tough time for our fraternal bond. Not that he knows that.

"Well, you got the hair right," I say by way of greeting.

He's got something behind his back and, from that obnoxious little grin on his face, I guess it's something he thinks will get a rise out of me. Oh, how little you know me, Stef.

I am greeted by the thunk of leather on the desk. He brought me Giuseppe's journal. Huh.

"Why are you bringing me Dad's journal?" I ask, refusing to give him the satisfaction of showing interest.

"'Cause you were looking for it."

Why, Stefan that's so helpful. What's your game?

"And why would I want it?" I deflect.

"Gee, Damon, I don't know," he tries to play dumb, but the smug is leaking in. "Maybe you wanna do a little…posthumous bonding." Oh, so funny, Stefan. You really kill me. Not.

"Go ahead. Enjoy it. Read it. I have. Nowhere in there does it say anything about Katherine, or the tomb, or how to open it." Well, good thing that's not what I'm looking for then, huh?

"Not surprised," I drawl, thumbing through the pages. "Man could barely spell his own name."

"I'm really sorry," Stefan says, not sounding sorry in the least, "that it won't be any help with your…diabolical plan, the sequel." He tries so hard to be funny, but it really falls flat. The best I can offer is fake grin.

"You know I could help you," he offers. Why…?

"You, help me?" I ask sarcastically. "Aw, I don't know. Seems a little…unnatural."

"I'll do anything to get you out of this town," he assures. Away from Elena, you mean. Ok, really it's just getting funny now. Except…ouch. "Even release Katherine."

"What about the other 26 vampires?" I ask, not that I care particularly. Z would probably have me argue the sanctity of vampire loyalty, but I really just want my girl back.

"No, no, no they can't come. They have to stay put, but Katherine…" he says, sounding all overbearing and self-righteous. I don't know why he thinks he's in charge. "I would consider that."

Still, not for nothing am I the smarter, older brother. There's no way this is genuine. Stefan wouldn't help me unless he thought he had a reason to.

"What are you doing? Hmm? What's your angle?"

He shakes his head, attempting to look innocent while furrowing his brow at me condescendingly.
"Think about it," he says.

I would honestly love to believe that my brother would do something like this for me, but I know I can't. It's surprising to me how much that still hurts.

I affect a laugh, but it rings false in my ears. "Why would I trust you?"

"See that's your problem, Damon. You apply all of your shortcomings to everybody else," Stefan sneers.

Really, Stefan. We're doing this? I don't think you want to play that game, buddy. It only leads to blood, and heartache, a little reinvigorated feuding, and a town full of dismembered bodies with Stefan-shaped bite-marks labeled: "Cause of Death".

"If history's any indication, there's only one liar among us." Yeah, Stefan. And I'll give you a hint: It ain't me.

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**Elena**

I meet my own gaze in the bathroom mirror, curling brush in one hand, hairdryer in the other. It's the decade dance tonight—a first with Stefan—and I want to look perfect. Somehow focusing on that makes all the rest seem more manageable.

I wish I was the average teenage girl with no further concerns than a high school dance and looking good for her boyfriend—a boyfriend that wasn't around when these fashions were current. It's more than a little surreal knowing I'm not.

And I can't even blame him for it either. No matter what Lia says, it's not Stefan's fault that my parents' car went over the bridge, or that my birthmother was a teenage runaway, or even that I am an exact carbon copy of a centuries' old vampire. None of that is on him. So sue me if I'd like to be normal for his sake too.

I can just make out the corner of my bed in the mirror, Jeremy's pocket watch turned vampire compass resting unassumingly. As though the very fact of its presence if not its whole existence were not the consequence of my life's abnormality and the dangers therein.

This brings my mind right back to that insane vampire stalker I seem to have attracted. I can still remember how terrified I was the other night watching his boots stalk toward my wrecked car while I cowered and shook in my seat.

No, I refuse to be baited. I won't let him turn me into a quivering heap on the floor. I just won't. I will focus on my hair, my clothes, my make-up, and the dance that I am determined to enjoy with my perfect boyfriend. I will.

There. Hair straight, make-up done, I look good. Now where did I put that scarf…

I hear a sound sort of like the scuttling of a bug, like the wings of a locust. It's a sort of frantic whirring sound. Is someone else home? I head out to the hall. Maybe Jenna hasn't left yet.

"Jenna?" I call. No answer.

"Jenna? Jeremy?" No answer. That's weird…
I glance at the compass. It's turning with a frenzy I suddenly feel in my own chest. There's a vampire nearby. Maybe the one that's after me.

I run to my phone. Stefan. I need Stefan.

I press the speed dial for his number as I run down the stairs. Come on, Stefan. Pick up, pick up, pick up.

"Stefan's phone," a voice chimes on the other end of the line. A voice that is distinctly not Stefan.

I don't have the time or the patience for playing this game with him right now.

"Where is he?" I practically snarl, growing frantic. Damon's tough, he'll get over it.

"He's on his way to you," he answers, unaffected. "Forgot his phone."

"Oh, thank god. This compass was spinning," I sigh, relieved. "Stefan must be here. Thank you."

"Your welcome."

I smile as I hang up, the adrenaline fading.

Just as I begin to relax, someone grabs my shoulders, spinning me around. I release a scream as I come face to face with a demon, fangs snarling and about to descend. He lunges—

"Elena!" a voice shouts, equaling my fear. This time it is the voice I want.

Stefan grabs the vampire by both arms, hurling him across the room with a single burst of superhuman strength. He flies over the couch to the living room floor. So do I.

I don't see it from my own vantage, but I hear the foreign growl and hear the rush of wind that signals his escape. Stefan starts to follow, but the man is through the front door before he has moved more than a step. I stand and reach for him, holding him tightly as I press my face to his shoulder. He presses me close, stroking my hair. I finally feel safe.

For the moment.

I suddenly realize, I've seen that face before.

"Stefan. Stefan," I say, pulling back to look him in the eye. "I think I recognized him. He delivered a pizza last night."

Stefan's expression turns hard. He somehow looks both terrified and determined at once. He pats his pockets, and I see the moment he realizes he doesn't have what he's looking for. I grab my phone from the coffee table and hand it to him. Wordlessly, I make my way to the couch while he calls his brother.

I'm still sitting, shell-shocked, in the same place when Damon arrives, though sometime in the last few minutes Stefan came to sit beside me. He rubs soothing circles on my back.

Damon is significantly less nurturing. "How'd he get in?" he demands.

Stefan leans forward, his head lifting from his propped arm to inform him, "He posed as a pizza delivery guy last night."
I still can't believe I invited my own would-be murderer into the house. Or, rather we did. A house I live in with my family. The ease of it terrifies me.

Damon is unfazed. "Well, he gets points for that," he quips.

I can't even conjure up the energy to glare at him for it.

"Did he say what he wanted?"

"No, he was too busy trying to kill me!" I snap.

"And you have no idea who this is?" Stefan asks in a tone of suspicion.

"No," Damon scoffs, looking a bit offended by the implied accusation. "Don't look at me like that, I told you we had company."

Something about that sentence alarms me. "You think there's more than one?" I worry.

"We don't know," Damon shrugs, though it's more in his eyes than his shoulders.

"Damon," Stefan interjects, that hardness from before clear now in his voice. "He was invited in."

Damon nods his understanding. "Then we get him tonight," he says casually. Actually he sounds rather up for the excitement. He looks at me pointedly, his eyes willing me to hear him. "You up for that?"

And I do. "What do I have to do?" I ask, resolved. Whatever plan he is presently cooking up in that devious brain of his—tonight at least—I want in. I feel it in this moment; we are in this one together.

"Let your boyfriend take you to the dance," he says, eyes flicking to Stefan briefly. But somehow Stefan seems outside of this, like it's just the two of speaking and my boyfriend is waiting in the wings for instruction. "We'll see who shows up."

"It's a bad idea," Stefan rejects immediately.

Damon's shoulders slump in exasperation, and his next words convince me. "Till we get him this house isn't safe," he stresses, looking to me for my decision, "for anyone who lives in it." I glance at Stefan, the worry in his face is so clear but he's no longer disagreeing. "It's worth a shot."

I know he's right. It's not just me I need to worry about. That thought decides me.

"I'll do it," I breathe. I can't say I'm not scared, but something about the approval—maybe pride?—in Damon's eye reassures me.

The nod I give him then is for both of us. We are in agreement. Turning back to Stefan, I grasp his hand, trying to convey my determination and this sudden assuredness in my grip.

"I'll be with the two of you. I'll be safe," I tell him and I find I believe it.

As the three of us walk out the door I hear Damon on the phone.

"Hey, can you get me on the list to chaperone this thing? We're hunting a pizza guy."
Damon's call was cryptic to say the least, but I'm sure I'll get the story out of one of the three stooges by the end of the night. Whatever it is, I'm sure the boys can handle it. I have my own agenda.

She's over by the drinks table when I spot her. She's sort of the Sandy to my Rizzo tonight—or, I glance down at my costume, maybe preppy Sandy to my naughty Sandy. How appropriate.

In a calculated move, I 'bump' into her. "Oh! I'm so sorry," she says, as though it were her fault. "Clumsy."

I laugh good-naturedly. "No problem, really. That one was on me. Hey, you're Jenna, right? Jeremy and Elena's aunt?" She looks at me, surprised.

"I'm Natalia, Elena's…I guess substitute English teacher," I smile. "Full time anything's not really my scene."

She laughs, knowingly. "Yeah, I uh…I think I get that."

"That why you're chaperoning?" I joke.

"Uh, actually no," she admits with a coy smile. Girl's got it bad. "Alaric Saltzman asked me help out."

"Oh, Ric?!" I say, surprised to hear genuine affection in my tone. "Are you two together?"

She giggles. Literally giggles. Is she even old enough to parent two teenagers?

"No…" she trails off, blushing.

I grin at her, "but you want to be."

She glances away, embarrassed, and I see him. He's wearing an old letterman that looks straight out of Grease. Did I call it or did I call it?

"Speaking of, I think I see your honeybunch over there," I whisper, pointing him out. She smirks at me and I tease, "Go get him tiger." I watch as she heads over to him, blushing all the while. God, they're cute. Why are they so cute?

Alright, meet and greet with the pseudo-parental figure: check. Now that Ric's preoccupied…

"Lia?"

I turn abruptly at the sound of his voice, surprised to see the boy I was looking for…looking at me. To his knowledge, we've never met…right?

I conjure up a cheerful smile anyway, since apparently he knows me. Damon, what did you do?

"Little Gilbert!" I greet. "Who'd you piss off for punch duty?"

"My English teacher actually," he laughs.

"Oh, what a bitch," I wink. "But, in my defense, it is a part time job and my attendance record is spottier than yours."
He laughs.

"So, beyond the sadistic whims of your other English teachers…how ya doin'?" Again, I am surprised to find that I mean it. This town is definitely getting to me.

His smile slips a little, but holds. "Um, I'm ok actually. I'm starting to feel like myself again."

"That's good," I say. "Yeah, I heard Ric raving about some extra credit assignment he had you do. Real cheerleader that one."

"Yeah, I really like him. He's a cool guy."

"Your aunt seems to feel the same way," I say, nodding toward the couple in question, only to find that my favorite history teacher's attention has shifted.

"I'll uh—I'll catch you later, Gilbert," I mutter, waving goodbye. He twitches a hand, but his attention is elsewhere too.

Ric is standing next to Damon, and from the looks of it he's digging himself a six-foot hole in the ground. I roll my eyes as I walk sedately to the rescue.

Reaching them, I propel my body into D's leather sleeve with just enough force to make his arm tense to keep from stumbling. Not entirely sure why, but I feel a rush of giddiness wash over me at this little reunion.

"Twinsky!" I shout in greeting. Damon squints at me, vaguely irritated. Though whether it's me or Ric is anyone's guess.

He turns back to Alaric, shaking his hand. "Damon Salvatore," he introduces himself. "And I think you've already met Lia here."

"Oh!" he exclaims rather unconvincingly. "I didn't realize the two of you were related. So you must be related to Stefan, then?"

"Stefan's my little brother," Damon says.

Ric's eyes dance between us, his finger directing their movement. "So, you two…"

"Twins," I repeat. The smile that accompanies this declaration is a sharp one, because I think I know what that means to him.

"I'm his legal guardian," Damon explains further. "Hence, the chaperoning."

"But if you two are twins…"

"Well, Lia's not really up for that sort of thing," Damon says with a slight smirk in my direction.

I decide to one up him. "Right. That and I'm a bitch. I make Damon do all the work." I pout up at him tauntingly. "He's so much more nurturing."

He punches me in the arm—not hard enough to move me, but hard enough to smart a little. Guess that was payback for earlier.

Alaric smiles. "I hear he's very bright," he tells us, chuckling lightly. "Not that I've had a chance to see for myself."
Oh, right. You wouldn't have. We should probably work on that.

"Well, his attendance record's a little spotty," Damon deflects. "Family drama."

"No parents?" Ric probes further. What is this, 20 questions? What's with the interrogation?

"Mm it's just the 3 of us now," Damon remarks, growing suspicious himself.

"You live here your whole life?" Real subtle, this guy.

"…On and off," D answers. "Travel a bit."

"Really? Where?"

"Hey, Ric?" I interrupt, eyebrow arched. "Do you remember that time we discussed invasive small talk techniques?"

He looks uncomfortable, tries to laugh it off, but Damon and I are just sort of staring at him with what I expect are twin expressions of suspicious incredulity.

"Yeah, sorry," he chuckles. "Enjoy the rest of the dance."

I follow him with my eyes as he walks away and I finally see the face of the girl that had Jeremy so distracted.

Well that's an interesting turn of events. If she's here, there's only one thing she can be after, and I intend to get there first.

"Sorry, Damon," I say, patting his shoulder. "Got my own pizza to deliver."

"Pizza guy!" he calls, barely lifting his voice but projecting it all the same. "I said hunt a pizza guy."

"Whatever!"

I'm sitting on a desk with the book in my hand—having already found my passage, obviously—when she enters, racing through the door at top speed. I let her fumble around a bit before I announce myself.

"Hello, Anna." I wait for her shocked face to meet my gaze, showing her the journal in my hand. "Looking for this?"

Surprise turns to confusion and she asks, "Nadia? What are you doing here?"

"What do you think?" I scoff, giving her an unimpressed look.

She relaxes—marginally. "I don't care about her. I'm just here for my mother."

"Well that's a relief," I smile. "Wait, your mother? Pearl?"

We both hear the step at the end of the hall, signaling another presence, but only one of us runs.

I'm not worried. There are a grand total of 2 rent-a-room options in this town, and one of them is an inn run by an old matron named Ms. Flowers. No points for guessing which she'll choose. I settle
back on my seat, but I hide the journal behind me.

He comes in guns blazing—figuratively of course, though by the look he's giving me I wonder if he'd considered the alternative—and I smell vervaine. What is it with these humans lately? First Elena, now Ric? Someone's getting chatty.


I chuckle darkly, unconcerned. "I take it the secret's out, huh?"

"I know what you are," he warns, edging toward his desk. What, does he have an arsenal in there?

"I know what he is." Oh, so that's what he's on about. Guess I just found out who killed his wife. Can't say I'm overly surprised.

"Do you now?" I taunt. I don't move, but I don't have to. I can smell his fear from here.

"You can try to stop me, but he has to pay for what he did." I can see every line of pain etched into his features, but I can't spare a moment for sympathy.

"Relax," I say instead. "I'm not going to kill you."

"You're not gonna try to stop me from killing your brother?"

I scoff, waving a dismissive hand. "D can handle himself."

He stands frozen, blinking at me in a mixture of shock and confusion. I roll my eyes, getting annoyed with this whole conversation. "No, in a shocking twist, I'm not actually interested in the play by play of my brother's late conquests," I taunt. "No, I'm here to talk about that ring," I gesture to his hand. "Where'd you get it?"

I can see the wheels turning in his head, but it's obvious he doesn't know its value. He wouldn't be so quick to answer me otherwise. Hell, he wouldn't be so casual about the thing period.

"Isobel," he breathes, unsure of this sudden topic change. Glad I was right. Wait…

"Your wife, Isobel?" That's…interesting.

"Yeah…?" he seems confused by the sudden light in my eye.

"So your wife, the Paranormal Investigator—who was obsessive enough and apparently well connected enough to unite you with a Resurrection Stone (courtesy of the Gilbert Family crypt ala Godric's Hollow), probably spelled by Emily Bennet, the Self-Righteous Bitch of the East—just so happened to be killed by a vampire with rather distinct ties to the whole bloody affair, and none of this seems fishy to you?"

He gapes at me, mouth opening and closing much like the animal previously referenced, but I've gotten all I need from this conversation. He doesn't know anything. Seems like that's the theme of the day.

This thing about Pearl is sort of bothering me. I mean, Pearl's sort of a badass as far as they go. And she's very well connected. Not to mention, very in the know. I can't imagine why Katya would risk alienating someone like that.
Granted, it's been a long time since I could call her by that nickname—longer still since she'd let me.

Anna, though. She's always been such a self-sufficient little thing. Ruthless and practical, with just a side of preserved innocence to go with her body's age. Probably why I've always liked her so much.

So, while I knew well that Pearl had a daughter, and knew who she was when I met her, I guess I just never connected the absence as anything out of the ordinary. I mean, sure I knew they were close—Anna spoke about her often enough—but I just assumed they'd parted ways a while back. You know, like a normal family. Besides that, it isn't particularly common for vampires to stick together that long. At least, not habitually.

Still, I guess that tells me more than I needed to know about how determined she'll be to get her back. And what she'll be willing to do to save her. Whatever happens, it won't be pretty. I'm regretting it already.

Anna must have run off on a play-date with Jeremy or something, because I find my way to her room before she does. She should really learn to cover her tracks better. Or, you know, learn to use those nifty vampire senses. This is the second time in one night I've gotten the drop on her. Girl's spoiling me.

I wait for her face to register shock at the sight of me, before I break the silence. Casually, of course.

"She's in the tomb?" I ask, voicing my thoughts.

To give credit where it's due, she gets over it quickly. She sounds fairly nonchalant when she answers.

"Katherine couldn't help herself. She just had to toy with both of the Salvatore brothers. And when she got caught…" she trails off. I can see the hatred sparkling in her eyes. It's familiar.

"You know," I remark absentmindedly. "It's a wonder with the sheer number of enemies that girl's racked up over the years, no one's taken her down yet."

"Tell me about it," she snaps. Oops.

I can see she's realized her mistake when her eyes open comically wide at my smug grin.

"Don't worry Anna-Banana," I soothe, hopping down from my seat. "If you hadn't told me, I'd just have fished it out of your head myself. You never stood a chance."

She nods, recognizing the truth of this statement. "Yeah, I saw her in Chicago in '83. At a Bon Jovi concert of all places."

"God," I sigh, pressing my fingers to my temples. This is going to break his heart.

"What are you going to do?" she asks.

Gathering myself, I pull out all the snark and bravado I can muster and pray to Hell below I can make it out of this room without breaking.

"Me? Nothing. What do I care?" I toss her the book as I leave. "I'm just here to make sure no one makes off with my doppelganger or decides the Mystic Falls Winter Wonderland would be
Damon

Color me confused. This whole day has been one endless series of out of character revelations and frustrating discoveries.

First, there's the hunt for the grimoire. What should have been a fairly straightforward task becomes a wild goose chase between who told who what and where they hid it. And now apparently we're looking for the Gilbert journal which wouldn't be so bad if Elena's brother hadn't taken it to give it to the teacher to be stolen by dim-wit's puppet-master.

Then, there's Stefan looking all smug and self-righteous with the brooding forehead and that fake-as-fuck little frown telling me he wants to help me open the tomb. And this after spending the last few months blocking me at every turn before he knew my plan, and straight up stomping his morally indignant foot at me when he did.

It's absurd. I wouldn't even entertain the possibility that he means it if it weren't for the fact that he claims he wants to help so that I'll leave him and his precious cheerleader behind and alone. As it is, call me tentatively hopeful.

Third, we have Elena herself. Confusing as ever—that's not out of character—but call me crazy if I thought we made something of a breakthrough in Atlanta. I felt like we sort of... bonded I guess is the word.

It's nice to see her looking at me with something other than fear and disgust, yes, but that strength and fire in her eyes tonight, the courage she had to have to show up at that dance just in the hope of luring out the vampire that wants to kill her—that floored me.

I was half afraid when we got back that the spit-fire I met in Bree's bar would slink back into the shell of the girl Stefan's dating. And when she immediately hopped back into bed with him after he presumably cried and told her about all the stalking he did this summer, I thought I was right.

Then, there she is tonight. This girl. With her bright eyes and her determined little mouth, stabbing vampires with pencils, and snapping broomsticks in half... I think Z is right about her. With Stefan, I mean. He'll douse her fire in all his gentle showering of true puppy love under the snuggly blanket of denial, riding in on his white horse to save the damsel in distress from the terrifying monster of reality. But Elena is no damsel. I saw that tonight.

On top of all that, Z is running around town doing God knows what with no explanation and nothing but a passing comment as she races off to whatever secret missions she's hiding from me. I know I sound bitter, and it's not like I need her—I've done just fine on my own for most of my undead life, hell for my not-dead life—but I guess I was just kinda getting used to having her around. She's someone I think I can actually count on.

Speak of the devil. She's there on the couch before a fire she must have set for me, a glass of my bourbon in her hand, when I get home. Predictably, Stefan's off at Elena's and it's just the two of us in the house. From the look on her face, I'd say that's a good thing.

Playing it off casually—because she always tells me more than she should when I act disinterested—I make my way to the bar and my own glass of numbing agent before I speak.
"Hey there, Stranger," I call, avoiding her eyes. "What have you been up to all day?"

She doesn't move but to stare into her glass, swirling the liquid hypnotically. "Do you remember a vampire named Anna? Tiny thing, probably about 15 when she turned?"

I think back. Anna…

"Annabelle?" I ask. "Pearl's daughter?"

"Yeah," she says softly. "Um, turns out she's in town. She's trying to get her mom out of the tomb."

Oh, well that answers a lot of questions. No way that idiot, Noah, was working alone. That means…

"Did she mention anything about the Gilbert journal?"

Z looks up at me at that, obviously surprised I knew about it. Pretty much answers my question.

"I—uh—I got the journal, Damon. At least, I had it. Read it, anyway."

Then why is she being such a sad sack? Hop to it, woman!

"Did it say where to find the spell-book?" I prompt.

"Yeah, but that really doesn't matter now. There's more to it than that," she sounds hesitant now, walking toward me warily, but I didn't hear a word after 'yes'.

I take her elbow and start moving toward the door, "That's perfect, let's go!"

She digs her heels in, holding me back. "Damon—Damon, wait a minute. It's not that simple."

"What is it buried at the bottom of the ocean? We'll deal with it, come on!"

"No, Gilbert said something about giving it to your father to hide with all his secrets if that means anything, but listen—"

It takes me less than half a second to decode that statement. I know exactly where that crazy bastard would hide it.

"Great. Let's go!"

I start moving forward again, but this time she wraps an arm around mine and forcefully pulls me back. I take one look in her eyes and I know. I'm not gonna like this. I sigh, grabbing the glass I had discarded in my earlier haste, but I remain standing. I'd rather have a clear view of the door for this.

"Damon, there's something else." Yeah, I got that the first 20 times. Get to the point.

"Well, what is it?"

She takes a deep breath for courage and releases on the exhale, "She's not in the tomb, Damon."

I blink at her stupidly. No, that can't be right. I attempt a cocky grin and taunt, "We've talked about this. You're gonna have to do a lot better than vague suspicion on this one."

She won't meet my eyes. "I am. Anna told me she saw her in the 80s. She was in Chicago."

She doesn't have to say his name for me to hear it.
"No," I shake my head in denial. "No, you're lying."

She finally looks up, frank disbelief on her face at the insult. "Why would I lie to you about this? I may keep secrets on occasion, but I have never lied to you."

She's right. God damn it, but she's right. And the only secrets she keeps are open ones.

"Then Anna was lying," I mean to sound certain, but even to me it falls flat.

"Why would she do that, Damon?" she prompts sadly. "She didn't even want to tell me. In fact, she'd be pissed as hell if she knew I told you. I think she's counting on your help to save Pearl."

I hear all her arguments, all her logic, all the suspicions and doubts she's been planting and feeding in my brain, and I can't. I just can't. What this would mean—it would all have been for nothing. For nothing!

It would make Katherine a two-faced lying whore who pit two brothers against each other for her own amusement, trapped a town full of vampires in a magically-sealed tomb, led us to believe her life was in danger, got us killed in our attempt to rescue her, and then abandoned us. Abandoned us to blame and hate and rage at each other for a century and a half, all for a woman who never loved anyone but herself.

And if this weren't bad enough, she went to watch longingly over dear Stefan in Chicago, and never said a word.

No, No, No—the sound of breaking glass and the roar of the fire brings me back to the present. I don't realize I've been screaming aloud until I find myself holding Z by the throat to the living room wall, shattering the glass picture frame behind her.

"NO!!!"

My anger drains—just a little—at the calmly sad expression she grants me, but I can still feel the tension in my body and the savage rage simmering just beneath the surface.

"What are you gonna do, Damon?" she asks. "Yell, scream, throw shit around? Go ahead. Hell, break me if it'll make you feel better. But, don't stand there lying to yourself. You knew this was coming."

I stare at her, a white hot rage coming to a boil in my blood. I feel my hand clench around her throat, too harsh not to hurt, but she doesn't even flinch. In fact, where our bodies press tightly together from stomach to knee, I feel the growing heat of her. My own blood warms in response. I lean in closer, watching as her eyes darken at the increased pressure.

I tuck a lose curl behind her ear, my finger scraping along the sharp points of her earrings, as I turn my head to whisper coldly, "You're going to regret that offer." I feel it in my own chest as her nearly non-existent heartbeat spikes at the threat.

"Yeah?" she breathes shakily.

"Mm Hmm," I hum, stroking the ridge of her ear with a single finger as rage chills my blood.

"Well..." she sighs, and I feel her body ever so slightly roll into mine as her fingers sneak under my shirt. "What about this one?"

A single sharp, stabbing pain bites the muscle above my hipbone. I feel the blood pour from the
wound and I let loose a roar—far more anger than pain.

Well, if that's not a sign I don't know what is. Seems kitty wants to play, and it just so happens that I'm in the mood to accommodate.

With my hand around her throat, I throw her from the wall. She crashes to the coffee table, crushing it under her weight before launching herself up and over the wreckage. She lands neatly on her feet before the couch. I yank the thick shard of glass from my side, allowing the wound to close, and turn to snarl at the culprit.

We hiss at each other—fangs, and veins, and blood-filled eyes. We stare. As one, we flash upstairs.

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**Nadezhda**

We don't even make it to the bed the first time. The moment we pass the doorway to his bedroom, he throws my back against the wood to slam it shut. His hand is around my throat again, squeezing painfully, but I don't make a sound.

Looking into those bright eyes, the ice-blue in them blazing with a thousand untold emotions, I see the moment he chooses the one that will break me—as promised—the one that will save him: Hate.

Holding me a foot from the ground, he rips my leggings from me, pressing back in against my suddenly hot center. There's no denying the attraction as I wrap my legs around him, my hooked ankles pulling hard and desperate at him, wanting him closer. Wanting him even if it kills me.

I feel him there against me. Feel how hard he is. How much he needs this.

My nails claw at his shoulders as his free hand slips between us, fingers plunging into me mercilessly. It's too soon, too much and not enough all at once and I moan at the feel. The painful pleasure of it. The heat between us is scorching me from the inside out. He smirks, but it's cold.

Finally—Finally, when I feel I can no longer take the distance, he brings his mouth to mine.

His lips are brutal, hard, deep and penetrating. I feel his teeth clack against mine as I fight back as good as I get, our fangs descending at the blood spilled between us. The coppery taste of it—his? mine?—fills the space of our mouths, mixed together in a heady, powerful blaze.

No human can have this. No human can feel this. It burns, it hurts, it tears and scorches, but it feels so good.

I feel the anger in him, the tension in his body, and I want to tell him it's ok. I want to tell him that he can use me, break me, rip me to pieces, and I'll still love him. That he's still *worth* loving no matter what Katherine's done. That it changes nothing.

But he's not ready to hear it. And this is what he needs now.

Instead, I tangle my hand in his hair, raking my nails across his scalp, as I pull him closer still.

My tongue licks into his mouth, sliding recklessly over sharp teeth, nicking myself on them, filling his mouth with my blood. Then, sucking his bottom lip into my own, I bite down—*hard*. His blood spills down his chin and my own.
If it's blood he wants, he can have it.

He hisses slightly and, by the hand he keeps about my throat, shoves me back into the door. "Now, now, Kitten. Play nice," he chants, smiling cruelly.

I match his grin with blood-stained teeth. "Nice is overrated" I taunt, forgoing the steadying grip I have on his shoulder to rip his shirt from him, scoring my nails in deep gashes down his skin as I do.

He growls. "Do that again and you may not like how I answer."

I raise my chin defiantly—as high as I can while half-strangling—daring him with my eyes.

His fangs are in my neck before I blink. I cry out at the assault. This is no love-bite. This is a mauling plain and simple. If I were human, I'd be dead. He growls as his teeth rip and tear through muscle and sinew, blood spilling freely. His fingers are in me again, plunging savagely, while his thumb beats a rapid tattoo on my clit. The stimulation is almost too much.

I hear his belt buckle distantly, feel the cool air as the lace of my thong is ripped from my flesh, and in a moment those brutal fingers are replaced by something else.

"Fuck!" I scream as he enters me, my orgasm hitting me like a train. Lights explode behind my eyes, but he is far from finished.

When my vision clears, he is still pounding into me—deep, powerful, violently fast thrusts that would shatter a human pelvis. His hand slips slightly to grab harshly at the muscle between my neck and shoulder. I feel my body clench reflexively around his cock.

"Fuck, you're tight," he grunts, pressing me hard against the door, the heel of his palm shoving forcefully at my collarbone. My back scrapes upwards and my head knocks the wood with every thrust.

My eyes roll back, my toes curl, and my whole body tenses with the force of it.

I spare a moment in thought for the empty house which no doubt resonates with the sounds of the rhythmic thumping of our assault and the sounds of flesh on flesh, deep throaty groans echo each slap of skin.

"Oh god," I moan.

His hand has finally left my throat to clench painfully tight on my hips—the skin is pinched and white beneath his fingers. The friction we create with each scrape of his pubic bone against my clit sends sparks through my entire body. I wrap both arms around his shoulders, holding on for dear life as I come again—the pulsing, clenching rhythm of it setting off his own.

Somehow, my feet have found the floor and we lean heavily against each other and the wall, heaving.

As my vision clears and my unnecessary breath returns in the minutes that follow, my wounds close and the ache fades. It's moments like these I find myself wishing I could keep them, to remain marked by the experience.

I slip, boneless, to my knees, gazing up at him—the hatred still burns in his eyes. He's already half-hard and ready to go again.
Holding his stare, I take him in hand, leaning forward to find him with my mouth—suckling. I feel him harden further under my continued ministrations till he is firm as steel encased in velvet skin.

He groans at the sensation then tangles long, rough fingers in my carefully crafted curls, pulling them apart as he forces my head closer. His eyes flicker briefly in pleasure as I swallow him down.

"Fuck, yes. Take it," he growls as he forces himself deep and harsh, hitting the back of my throat with every thrust.

With his wrenching grip on my hair, he guides my movements, setting his own punishing rhythm. I relax my throat and allow him to abuse my mouth, my jaw aching with his renewed thrusts.

This only lasts a moment however before he yanks my hair to throw me back against the wall. I clench my thighs and roll the balls of my feet to keep balanced on my knees as my shoulders hit plaster.

He stares me down hard and cold, his eyes pinning me, as I feel him rip my shirt from me, fabric tearing loud and ominous in the suddenly silent room. Pulling me up by the arm, he spins me around with a force that sends me sprawling face-down on the bed.

The wooden drag of an opened drawer and the metallic flick of a blade set my insides squirming in anticipation. I inwardly groan as the wetness pools between my thighs. Lust sends a shockwave of heated excitement through my body at the familiar sound.

When I glance up at him, his smile is dangerous, flashing sharp and bright as the steel in his hand. Hell-fire burns in his eyes, but if this is Hell, I will gladly burn. He follows me down.
Stefan

The first thing I notice when I get home, having left Elena tucked soundly asleep in her bed, is the deathly silence. At first, I think it means I am alone in the house, but something about the weight of it tells me otherwise.

Crossing the foyer into the parlor I note in the distance the state of the living room. There are shards of glass before the fire and shattered beside the couch that suggest one of Damon's fits of rage. A picture on the wall facing away from me lies broken on the ground, shards of glass bloody and scattered, but this is not what concerns me most. The coffee table is a ruin. I wonder if we were attacked in my absence.

The silence is deafening.

"Stefan?" Lia's voice sounds softly from the balcony. I look up to catch her face, but she speeds to me rather than wait the walk. It is then I notice the state of her.

She wears nothing but one of Damon's ridiculously expensive shirts, though it is ripped and stained with blood. As is she. Her make-up is smeared and carelessly wiped at. Her carefully formed curls are a tangled mess, as though someone drew greedy, thoughtless fingers through them. I bet I know who.

I know I must be staring, but she hardly seems to notice.

"Come on, Stefan," she says, nodding toward the kitchen. "We need to talk."

Elena

"So Katherine was never even in there?" I ask, aghast. Poor Damon. How could anyone be so carelessly, selfishly cruel to someone that loved them so deeply? And he did, I realize now.

He's been ruthless and terrible, sadistic, psychotic, but everything he's done—everything he's done—he's done for love. For a lover that betrayed him.

Betrayed him like I did. Like I almost did. Like we almost did. Suddenly, the guilt that had only twitched in my heart before claims all of me. He may not know—God willing, he never will—but he was almost betrayed twice in a single night. Good thing we found out first.

I mentally berate myself for the thought. As though the fact we never got the chance to betray him cancels out intent. I'm disgusted with myself.
"How is he doing with all that?" I worry.

"He's...dealing" Stefan says hesitantly, "in his own way."

"What does that mean?" Images of blood, booze, and bimbos swim through my mind.

"Um..." he sort of mumbles. Well, that sounds comforting.

"Should we do something? Help him somehow?"

"Lia's with him. I think she'll have more luck with that than either of us will."

He's probably right, but that doesn't make me feel any better.

"What all did she tell you exactly?"

"Just that there's another vampire in town trying to open the tomb, and she has the Gilbert journal. Not that that will help her much. Apparently, the only clue Jonathon left about the location of the spell-book was a cryptic hint about my father that only Damon or I could hope to decipher."

I sigh, relieved at this news at least. If this other vampire can't find the book, then she can't open the tomb. At least now we can relax. There won't be a mob of vampires running through the town-square. Yippee.

Time for a subject change.

"So, Jenna finally told me about my birth-mother," I say. "It wasn't much, but I know her name now. Isobel, if that means anything."

"Of course it does," he assures me. "It's perfectly understandable you'd want to know anything you could about her."

"Yeah, I guess," I sigh. "It just—it feels surreal, you know? Like there's this big gaping hole in my past that I have no way to fill. I guess it just feels...changed or something."

"Elena, your parents are still your parents. You are still you. I love you. None of that changes. No matter who gave birth to you."

I try to take comfort in his words. I do. But somehow, I can't help but think the only way I can feel myself again is to really know her. To know where I came from. I just wish I knew where to start.

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**Damon**

I am waist deep in sorority girls and three bottles of bourbon by noon, bass-heavy rock blasting from the stereo. Z is reclined on the couch, feet kicked up, a mostly empty bottle of Grey Goose at her side, the chill sweat long since run off.

Her own snack writhes sensually in her lap as she bites into the femoral artery, moaning in benumbed pleasure. It's good to be me. Or so I keep telling myself.

The moaning and slurping noises coming from the couch cease for a moment when she comments, "I should warn you, Alaric Saltzman's out to get you. Turns out, he's yet another Van Helsing impersonator with a tragic back story after all."
This revelation doesn't really surprise me, but it's nice to put the question to rest. The girl I'm hugging to my chest giggles delightedly as I lick the blood from her neck, catching the slow trail as it trickles down her throat.

"What did I do?"

Her pale face peeks up again from between the blonde's legs to shrug casually at me. "Killed his wife. Some chick named Isobel."

Isobel, huh? Doesn't really ring a bell, but that's not surprising. Still, good to know and all for when he comes to collect. Not that I couldn't take him. Obviously.

"Oh!" she exclaims, shoving the squirming girl to the floor. "And don't forget he has a magic ring that will bring him back to life if you kill him. Just…don't kill him for realsies, K?"

I shrug. "Not making any promises."

She glares playfully, but doesn't say anything. This time, when I look up, the blonde has been replaced by a redhead and Z's fangs are in her breast. She's really going for it today. Guess I really wore her out last night. It's been a long time since we took the game that far, but I won't deny it felt good.

The lights turn on.

"Oh, Buzz-kill Bob," I groan. Stefan alert! Mayday! Mayday!

He kills the radio. Ugh.

"Greetings," I slur. Z waves from the couch, looking over the redhead's chest.

I'm not sure who Stefan looks more disapproving toward, me or the girl whose face is buried in cleavage. He's really going for it today. Guess I really wore her out last night. It's been a long time since we took the game that far, but I won't deny it felt good.

"Can we talk?" he asks.

"Yeah."

"Without the Tri-Delts," he clarifies.

"Anything you have to say to me, you can say in front of them," I tell him. "They're really good at keeping secrets."

He doesn't even bother to respond. Well, fine then.

"You girls stay here," I whisper playfully, slurring a bit. "I gotta go talk to my baby bro for a second."

I follow him over to the other side of the room, Z trailing behind me. There's blood covering her mouth and dribbling down her chin. I kind of want to lick it off. Or bite it off.

At her affectionate chuckle, I realize I just did.Oops. Oh, well.

Stefan looks mildly disturbed by the PDA, but it's not like he and Elena don't take the cake for grossest high school romance ever so he can just shove it.

He glares at Z with displeasure, and I realize it was her he was giving the dad-face to earlier.
Weird.

"I thought you said you'd 'take care of him'.' Air quotes and everything. Nice.

"No," she argues, irritated. "I said I'd be there for him if he needed me. I never agreed to boss him around. He's a big boy, Stefan."

"And he can hear you," I frown.

Stefan looks a little shame-faced at that, so I press on. "You're worried about me. That's nice," the alcohol makes my words soft on the ends. "Don't be. There's no need. I'm fine. Why wouldn't I be? I spent the last 145 years with one goal—get in that tomb—and I almost succeeded. But then, Katherine isn't in there to be rescued, so why dwell?"

Stefan just gives me a sarcastic nod, not falling for my bull-shit. Z watches calmly.

"You know, it is so liberating not having a master plan, because I can do whatever the hell I want."

"That's kind of what I'm afraid of," Stefan says.

"Relax—I haven't killed anybody in…" I glance at Z; she raises her eyebrows at me. When was the last time we went hunting? "…too long."

Stefan looks around a little worriedly, but not as much as I'd expect if he really thought I'd do anything. "Those girls?" he checks.

"Will wake up in their dorm with headaches. Think they blacked out," I assure him, not overly excited by the prospect. "Business as usual."

Seeing the relief on his face at my reassurance, but the still present reticence in his eyes, I say, "Predictable you didn't pull me over here for a pep talk." My tongue cuts the 'k' crisply. I push the half-empty bottle to his chest, "Drink up. Spill it, brother."

"This isn't over yet," he presses. "You know that. Anna won't stop trying to open the tomb."

"You really want to have this conversation right now, Stefan? Seriously?" I mock.

Z takes pity on him, oddly enough. "Why does that bother you, Stefan? She's only after Pearl and you were willing to help Damon open it yesterday."

That's a good point actually. Something like suspicion tickles at my drink-hazed mind.

"Yeah, Stefan. Why the sudden change of heart?" My brother looks cornered, two equally mistrustful vampires caging him in. Though for Stefan, cornered comes out looking like forced nonchalance and a hint of condescension.

Whatever, I'm really not in the mood or frame of mind to deal with his weirdness right now.

I need a drink.

Z purses her lips, "Not that it matters much, but I don't think you have much to worry about with Anna. She won't know what the journal means, and even if she does find the spell-book, the Bennet's will never agree to help her. Win, win."

He seems to realize he's not getting anywhere with this line of reasoning by about the time Z launches over the railing to head back to our little compulsion-grown blood-orgy.
"Great chat," I say, patting him on the shoulder as I pass. "I have to go exploit some women in the name of grief. 'TTFN!' said the Tri-Delt!"

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**Stefan**

I remember belatedly that Lia told me she found the journal in the classroom of one Alaric Saltzman. She said it so briskly—so casually—that the thought never registered which, thinking back, was probably her intent.

It makes me wonder though…What does a history teacher want with a journal full of vampire stories? Granted, the first-hand account of historical events *could* be enough, but somehow it seems more than that. It wouldn't be half as suspicious if we weren't lately crawling with mysterious vampires clamoring for it.

The prudent thing to do would be to check this guy out; see what he's up to. This is the reason I am currently sneaking through the school halls on a weekend. This should give me the chance to investigate a bit without threat of discovery.

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**Alaric**

Where is it? Where is that damn journal? I've been scouring my classroom for ages—I've already torn through my desk drawers—but I can't find it anywhere. Who the hell—

Lia.

She must have stolen it when she was here last night. I didn't see her take it, but she's the only one who knew I had it besides Jeremy and *he* obviously didn't take it. What could she possibly want with it anyway? I'm not sure whether or not I should be afraid of the answer. She was certainly threatening enough yesterday. Though, she didn't seem overly upset about my desire to kill her homicidal brother so I suppose I could take comfort in that. Still, I'm not taking any chances.

There's a sudden whoosh of air past my door and a bone-chilling feeling like nails on a chalkboard in my throat. It tastes like fear.

I walk out into the empty hall, seeing no one.

"Hello?" I call out, not really expecting an answer.

"Is someone there?" The silence tells me more than they think.

With long, determined strides I make it to locker 42 and my secret stash. I pull out my stake-launcher. One of my own designs. I load it quickly, cocking it in preparation, and stalk back to my classroom—eye out for danger all the way.

I round the corner, without a second's hesitation, I have the stake launcher at my shoulder and my finger on the trigger. The moment his face is in view, I have pulled it. The stake propels forward, perfectly aimed for his heart.

He stops it an inch from his chest. Crap.
I reload as efficiently as I can, turning to put some distance between us—he is there. Halting me with his own body. He wrenches the launcher from my hand, throwing me across the room. I hear the unloaded stake skid across the floor as I fall with it, crashing through the first row of desks. The fear returns.

"You shouldn't have done that," he warns, eyes cold.

I hop to my feet quickly, using the desk behind me for support.

"Have a seat," he gestures.

I watch him warily as he inspects the weapon in his hands, a curious look on his face. "What is this, compressed air?" he asks as though this were a perfectly normal conversation.

"Did you make it yourself?" he toys with it a moment, before meeting my eyes and stalking toward me. "Who are you?" he asks.

He must see my fear because his next words are an attempt to reassure me, "I'm not going to hurt you," but I'm not buying it. Stefan's obviously a vampire just like his murderous brother, and I'm not taking anything for granted.

"...unless you try that again," he finishes, proving my internal point.

He hands me back the stake-launcher. I eye him warily, but I take it. No use in refusing the only weapon in the room, even if I don't trust him.

"Now..." he perches himself on the desk much like his sister had yesterday, and I suddenly realize why that interaction felt so off. It's the stance of a predator, pinning his prey with his eyes. "Who are you?"

"I'm a teacher," I hear myself answer, proud of the dryness in my tone.

His eyes faintly flicker with amusement before he resets his frown, but I've seen enough to no longer be afraid.

"We gonna have to do this the hard way?" he attempts to sound threatening.

"I'm also a historian," I tell him. "And while researching Virginia, I—made a few discoveries about your town."

"So you show up like Van Helsing?" he jokes, and suddenly he's just a kid. An admittedly dangerous, possibly homicidal kid, but still...

"Come on," he prompts. "Tell me the truth."

I sigh, knowing it's useless at this point. The secret's out anyway. "My wife was a parapsychologist. She spent her life researching paranormal activity in this area. It was her work that led me here."

"Where's your wife?"

"Dead," I say shortly, a subtle sneer in my voice. "A vampire killed her."

He blinks at this, but takes it in stride. "How long have you been aware of me?" he asks instead.

"I learned just recently," I admit, thinking of Lia and her cheerful smile masking cold eyes. "What about your brother?" He's the one I really want, anyway.
"You've met Damon." It's not a question.

I have to smirk at that, eyes dead. "Who do you think killed my wife?" I challenge.

He looks unfazed by the revelation. "You certain it was Damon?"

"I witnessed it." I can still see her body lying limp in his arms—blood dripping from twin punctures in alabaster skin.

"If you're here for revenge, this is going to end very badly for you," Stefan warns.

"I just want to find out what happened to my wife."

"I thought you just said that Damon—"

"Yeah," I sigh, gathering strength from my anger to fight my tears. "I saw him…draining the life out of her. He must have heard me coming. He just…disappeared." I look up into his eyes, suddenly full of concern. I wonder if it's real. "So did her body. They never found her."

He looks at me with those soft green eyes. I think I see genuine sympathy there. Too little, too late.

"Damon can never know why you're here," he says firmly. Oh, really?

"He'll kill you without blinking."

"I can handle myself," I assure him.

"No, you can't," he scoffs. "I can help you…if you let me."

The idea is appealing, but… "Why would you help me?"

"We're not all like my brother. Some of us are actually capable of caring about the lives we take."

I snort, darkly amused. "Your sister didn't seem too keen on the idea."

His brows furrow in confusion. "You told Lia?"

I let out a soft huff. "I wouldn't say I exactly told her, but yeah. She knows."

"How?" His frown seems somehow deeper, eyes sunken behind puckered skin.

"We were sort of…friends, I guess, before this. I happened to mention Isobel once or twice and she just filled in the rest," I explain, growing a bit worried by the mounting fear in his eyes.

"She didn't seem bothered by it…" I'm a bit puzzled myself by this need to reassure him, but for some reason I feel this needs to be said.

He turns that look sharply on me. "It's not that. It's just…if Lia knows," he starts hesitantly, worriedly, "…so does Damon."

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Nadezhda

We are in the middle of a rousing bout of angry sex in the library—me on my hands and knees on the couch, Damon buried deep inside me with his fangs in the back of my neck—when we hear the
front door open. It is a testament to Damon's god-like tolerance, given his present blood-alcohol level, that he can even stand, let alone grab his pants, before Elena strides blithely into the room.

Clad only in the nearest garment I could reach—Damon's mostly unbuttoned shirt—I watch with some amusement as she strains to keep her eyes above the waistline of his low-slung jeans. He notices if his cocky smirk is any indication.

She covers her eyes in surprise after a moment of guppy-like staring. "Oh, my God! I'm sorry. I thought you were Stefan."

Damon and I share a look. Riiiiight….


She glares half-heartedly, dropping her hand.

"Did you need something, Elena?" I prompt, throwing her a lifeline.

When her attention shifts to me, she stares in disgust and disapproval at the blood no doubt caking my throat. She tries to hide it, but she's a lousy liar. Nothing like Katherine. I take a moment to consider why I so often find myself cataloguing their differences like this while I wait for her response.

She turns to Damon then, concern clear in her eyes.

"How are you?"

"Great. Fine. Why wouldn't I be?"

"You look…"

"Dashing? Gorgeous? Irresistible?" his tongue curls seductively around the last word and I shiver.


She's not wrong. Just looking at the number of empty bottles and decanters in this room alone should tell you that, but that's not what she wants to say.

He looks unimpressed by her answer. "No reason why," he says sardonically.

She stares at him a moment, meeting that hard sarcastic shield with all the compassion she can muster in that warm brown gaze. His pain is reflected in the wet mirror of her eyes. Wordlessly, she runs across the space between them to throw herself in his arms, hugging him tightly. He catches her reflexively, but his back is tense.

"I'm sorry," she whispers. I hear him gulp. His head drops to her shoulder, and he sighs.

Well, maybe that's a start.

I slip from the room.
Anna

Damon hasn't left his house in over a day—the only action the front door has seen is a seemingly endless stream of compelled Barbie dolls conjured up from God knows where—and I am going to kill Nadia.

She and I have been friends for a while—at least, I'd like to think we are—but there's still quite a lot I don't know about her. I know she's one of the oldest vampires I've ever heard of, discounting Originals, and absurdly powerful for it. I also know that she has more secrets than anyone I am ever likely to meet. So what I do know of her is limited to rumor and careful observation. I know that she is strong, ruthless, very well connected, and above all fiercely loyal.

So when she tossed me the journal last night after telling me she didn't care about the tomb, I wanted to believe her. I wanted to believe that she valued my friendship at least enough not to stand in my way, but I'm beginning to think her game is subtler than that.

I have been through the Gilbert journal cover to cover, exhaustively studying every insane, rambling passage of Jonathon's lunacy, and so far it is beyond useless. Obviously, I need a new tactic.

I already have Ben set to reel the younger Bennet witch in. That will hopefully take care of the magic department when I finally get my hands on the grimoire. Witches are notoriously protective of their own, and I am willing to bet anything her grandmother is no exception. But how do I get the spell-book?

The only thing remotely worth noting in this damn journal is that he apparently gave the book to Giuseppe Salvatore, and it just so happens I have two Salvatore's conveniently in town to help me find it. The question is, now that Damon knows Katherine's not in the tomb, how do I ensure their help?

When there are three vampires, all with the same weak spot, what do you do for leverage?

Easy answer: Go for the heart

Elena

I lose track of how long we stand there in that room, the scent of blood and sex and booze fading far into the background, just clinging to each other. It feels alarmingly intimate, and there is a part of me that feels guilty for this stolen moment with my boyfriend's brother, but then I feel his shoulders tremble with barely contained sobs and I only hold him tighter.

His head is a heavy weight on my shoulder and I can feel the hot dampness of his breath on the bare skin at the base of my neck. My heart clenches painfully in my chest, something stirs low in my stomach, but I do not pull away.

Finally, his shaking stills and I feel the soft press of lips to my neck. I tense, not wanting to ruin this tender moment though prepared all the same, but he only pulls away. He touches his forehead to mine, palms cradling my face, and I have the sudden urge to kiss him. He watches me watching him, my eyes on his lips, and the heat fills between us. All the air seems to leave the room.
"Elena?" I leap back from him guiltily as Stefan enters the room, an odd look on his face.

Oh, no. Did he see that? Does he think I would? Would I have?

No. No, I love Stefan. I would never do something like that to him. I was just caught up in the moment. It was just a friendly hug. That's all it was. Comfort and a shoulder. That's it.

"Stefan!" I say, aiming for relief and probably failing miserably. Then again, maybe not. I see a flicker of something in Damon's eyes before it is quickly hidden again behind that wall of sarcasm and bravado. I wonder when it started to look so weak to me.

"Aw, twice in one day, Stef?" he flutters his eyelashes mockingly. "I feel…special."

Stefan nods, seemingly unbothered by the mess. "Nice of you to clean up after yourself this time."

This time? As opposed to what?

"Aw shucks," Damon slaps Stefan's shoulder on his way out, causing him to wince. "You're making me blush."

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**Damon**

I find her on my bed and fully dressed—the solitary electric blue feather hanging from her right ear beneath the heavy fall of her dark hair the only break in her all black attire—when I return.

I'm only mildly disappointed. At the moment, I still have thoughts of long chocolate hair and warm brown eyes swimming through my head. Add to that the fact that I just dry-sobbed like an overgrown child in her arms. Yeah, I am not touching that today.

"Going somewhere?" I ask Z instead.

"Mmm," she hums noncommittally, staring at the phone in her hands.

She looks relaxed and calm lounging there in her tight black skinny jeans, studded boots crossed at the ankles, but I can see a subtle twitch in her eye that says she's hiding something.

I know this game well. We're champions at it by now. I flop nonchalantly on the bed beside her, propping myself on an arm around her back and hooking my chin on the top of her left shoulder to gaze at the screen.

> From "Slater": Have 411 on KP. Call me.

"KP?" I read, a dangerous note in my voice. "As in Katherine Pierce?"

"As in Katarina Petrova," she corrects tonelessly. "Slater's been helping me keep an eye on things. I didn't know he even knew about Katherine."

I struggle to control my breathing, placing a kiss on the bare skin above her wide neckline to keep from biting it. My right hand squeezes tightly at her hip. Her eyes tighten a little at the pain, but she says nothing.

"You ever gonna tell me what you know, or are you just planning to keep those juicy secrets to yourself?" I ask icily.
She's still staring at the phone screen like it has all the answers, clenching it tightly in her hand.

Ironic. That's exactly how I feel.

"Yeah," she sighs, though I'm not sure which question she's agreeing to.

Seeming to come to a decision, she throws the phone against the wall. It shatters in a million tiny digital pieces, but I barely notice. She's turned herself in my grip to press a forceful kiss to my lips. I kiss back on instinct before I grab her by the elbows to hold her away at the end of my arms.

A determined set to her mouth she says, "I'll tell you, Damon. I'm ready to tell you everything."

Halle-fuckin'-lujah.

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**Jeremy**

I finally caved and agreed to that Fright Night with Anna. She's cute and all and I really like her, but she's so pushy sometimes. And after Vicki, well…

It's weird. Besides the dance, I haven't seen Lia since the night Vicki left, and I don't remember ever seeing her before, but for some reason every time I think about it, her face comes to mind. I just feel like…like I can trust her, I guess. Maybe I'll have to start going to English, after all.

"Ooh, did you see that?!" Anna asks excitedly, pointing at the TV screen where the bad-ass loner just took a bite out of the zombie trying to eat him.

We're watching this Norwegian zombie-movie that so far has managed to fairly successfully straddle the line between comedy and bloody, gory horror. The bad guys are literally the perfect cross between the single most cliché villains of all time: Nazis and Zombies. It's actually surprisingly awesome.

"That dude totally just ripped a zombie's throat out," she exclaims. "With his teeth."

"Pretty appropriate to the vampire theme, huh?"

Distantly, I hear the front door close as someone enters the house. And since Jenna's in the kitchen…

"What the hell are you watching?" Elena asks, sounding vaguely repulsed by the blood and guts playing across the screen. She had to walk in when the blonde chick was having her intestine's unraveled. Typical.

"Ded Sno," I answer, not looking away.

I hear her fake a gag, before muttering something about gross teenage boys and heading upstairs.

About the time the remaining college students accidentally set fire to their cabin with a poorly aimed molotov cocktail, Anna mutters a "be right back" and hops up. I shrug, intent on the final showdown. Probably just had to go to the bathroom, anyway.
Despite my recent declaration, I fall silent. Damon watches me expectant and impatiently waiting. I breathe deeply through my nose, letting the air fill my lungs to capacity, praying for strength.

It's not fear, exactly, that has kept me silent all this time. It's certainly not distrust either. I don't know exactly what he'll do with this information, but I don't fear his reaction. No, if I'm being honest, it's love. Love for him and the fear that this knowledge will put him in the line of fire are a given, but the love I'm talking about is something else—for someone else. And the fear that, one way or another, this is an end.

"Ok, um…where do I start…?"

"The beginning would be good," he snaps. God, I hate this.

"No, the beginnings too much. I guess, the beginning you want starts with a 17 year old Bulgarian girl in 1492," I start. "She was—"

"She's gone!"

Stefan comes crashing through the doorway, fear and panic blazing in his eyes.

"Who?" Damon asks, though the look on his face says he knows the answer.

"Elena," Stefan pants, frantic. "Elena's missing."

Damon's brow furrows in sympathy as well as his own apparent fear and opens his mouth to reply —

The broken ringing from the shattered wreckage of my phone sounds briefly, cuts out, and is replaced by that in Stefan's pocket.

He glances at the caller ID, forehead wrinkling in confusion, before answering.

He listens a moment, but I don't need to hear the voice on the other end to know who's there.

"Nadia?"

The familiar name on unfamiliar lips shocks us both. I feel Damon tense at the intrusion—both the implication of the name as well as the image before us. Stefan stands in the open doorway, phone in his hand. His expression is hard, cold, enraged, and terrified all at once, and he holds it out to me.

"It's for you."

I glance at Damon at that to see confusion warring with his own anger on his face. That's nice in a way. His anger is familiar.

I take the phone.

"Anna-Banana!" I greet with false cheer, my mouth twisting in an angry line. "Steal any doppelganger's lately?"
A/N: Alright, this one feels a little rushed, but there's just so much happening in here that I didn't have the time I would normally take for introspective character analyses.

(Episode References: 1x13 "Children of the Damned", 1x14 "Fool Me Once", and 1x15 "A Few Good Men")

Elena

I sit on the far bed, my back braced against the wall as I watch Anna's pretty face spasm with a million contrasting emotions as she listens to the voice at the other end of the phone. I can't make it out, but the reemergence of a familiar name tells me more than I need to know. I find myself distracted from the danger of my current situation by the thought. Who is this girl who has somehow managed to ingratiate herself into my life—through Damon, Stefan, even my school—without ever telling us her real name? And what in the world does she want with me?

"What can I say? I'm a sucker for a good hostage," Anna quips. She sounds bitingly sarcastic but there's a twinge of...fondness? Anger? Embarrassment, maybe?

There's a pause as the voice responds, and Anna's mouth twists with irritation.

"And what flaw would that be?"

She laughs mockingly at the answer. "What, you and the Salvatore's? Thanks, but I think I can handle myself just fine."

This time the pause is longer and for the first time, Anna looks genuinely scared—terrified even—but there's an undercurrent of reckless determination that says it doesn't matter.

"You'd be surprised what I'm willing to do to get my mother back." By the end of the sentence, her voice almost breaks with emotion. Almost. "That's all I want, Dia."

The nickname clues me in. They're friends.

Whatever Lia's saying though, it's not making a difference. If anything, she only looks more determined, the anger flooding in. That's when I make the connection. The emotion I saw before that I couldn't place? It was hurt.

"But you know where it is," Anna snaps. "At least, your boys do. And I have the witch. So one of you better meet me in the very public town square in three hours. That should give you plenty of time to get it. Then we can discuss how fun it's going to be to work together." She hangs up.

As much as I want to hate her—for tricking Jeremy, kidnapping Bonnie, kidnapping me—my heart goes out to Anna. She just wants her mother back. I can understand that perfectly well. I just wish her way of doing so didn't mean unleashing 26 murderous vampires on my hometown.
Stefan

After Lia—Nadia?—hangs up the phone, tossing it to the foot of the bed in front of me, she turns to my brother then to me with a look I would not recognize if I had not seen it for some 160 years on my brother's face: defiant embarrassment.

"So…on a scale of one to ten, how mad are you?" she asks me.

Mad? The word doesn't even begin to cover it. In the span of a single phone call, I discover that not only has my brother's best friend been lying about her name which I might have understood on some level, but it turns out she's been scheming behind our backs knowing why Elena looks the way she does, knowing what it means, and never bothering to tell us any of it!

Add to that, the fact that if she had just mentioned to one of us that Anna was seeing Jeremy, Elena wouldn't be missing right now!

I can still hear that phone call on constant replay in my mind.

"Revenge."

"What, you and the Salvatore's? Thanks, but I think I can handle myself just fine."

"Well, I'm flattered by the implication, but, no, I was actually referring to a certain big bad Original Vampire with daddy issues from here to the Pacific and a penchant for throwing mass-murdering tantrums when anybody messes with his magic blood bag. Remember Katarina?"

Somehow I know that if I could understand half of that sentence, I would have all the answers I could ever want to keep Elena safe. And she won't share them. I doubt she would have now if she'd had her way.

She didn't so much as hint that she knew anything more than we did until Anna blew the top off the whole conspiracy with a single word: Nadia.

I don't know how long I have been silent till the absurd laughter of my hysterical brother makes its presence known.

I must look confused because Damon offers as explanation through his uncontrollable giggles, "Your face!"

I really have no idea what he finds funny about this situation, but something about the sound of genuine mirth from my normally sardonic brother shocks me speechless. Nadia's lips twitch as she fights to hide her own smile.

"Ok, seriously. Now is not the time. Elena is in danger!"

That does it. Like ice water on a hot flame, his mirth is instantly quelled. The silence is thick, the tension oppressive, and we need to go.

I've got a girlfriend to save.
Damon

I just—I can't even—this whole thing is just utterly, exhaustively, unbelievably ridiculous. There's no way life works this way. No way, this is real. Even in a world where vampires, witches, necromancers, exist this can't possibly be real.

And I'm borderline psychotic at the best of times, but even to me this is insane. I feel like someone popped the lid off a can of those prank snake toys and just blasted the world to hell in Technicolor—like every one impossible shock rolls right into the next until we're drowning in a sea of impossible things so absurd I can hardly wrap my head around it. Somebody, throw me a life-preserver.

On top of that, I've known for months now that Z was keeping a tight lid on her own Pandora's box of spectacular fucking wonders with a death grip that would make a Titan proud, and we haven't even begun to sift through those.

Z would say, 'Bedá nikogdá ne prihódit odná': Trouble never comes alone.

And when I saw every one of the infinite spectrum of violent, vivid, emotions that I have felt one right after the other since I got to this town flit across Stefan's face, screaming incredulity all at once, I just…broke.

If someone had told me a year ago, I'd be sitting here right now with an immortal lock-box of a necromancer, and my sainted brother, discussing how to rescue a human cheerleader the spitting image of my back-stabbing psycho ex from an immortal preteen with severe mommy issues, after finding out said ex left me to obsess over rescuing her from a magically sealed prison for one hundred and forty five years that she was never in, I'd have ripped his heart out.

I'm just—I'm just so done.

"Damon?" I feel the press of her small hand in mine and I blink.

This is my life. Welcome to the Circus.

Nadezhda

I'm admittedly concerned about both these boys right now. I mean, Stefan's glaring daggers at me like I should be dropping dead on the spot while Damon just stares off at a wall into la la land. Cue the drama.

"Alright, Stefan," I instruct, "You and Damon both said you know where the grimoire is, right?" He gives me a tight nod. "Excellent, well why don't one or both of you go do that while I go talk to Anna?"

He's already shaking his head in adamant denial before I've even finished the question. "No, no. Absolutely not. She made it perfectly clear that we need to get the book, then meet with her. What if she takes it out on Elena when we don't listen? Huh? We don't even know where she is."

"Actually, Stefan, I do know. Besides, she won't hurt her. She took her more to scare us than anything," I assure him. "As long as we're acting in good faith, she wouldn't dare. It's way too risky."
He doesn't look convinced. "How can you possibly know that?"

"I'll explain later, but you were right. We need to move," I say.

Squeezing my hand reflexively—I doubt he knows it's there—Damon says, "I'll get the spell-book. Dad doesn't need two sons robbing his grave." The last he says for Stefan's benefit. I suppose it's his way of protecting his brother from bones he put in the ground.

"Actually," I say, as an idea occurs to me. "Stefan, you should go speak to Sheila. We're going to need her help to open the tomb, and I'm fairly certain she'd be more likely to do you a favor than either of us."

Though God knows why, I add silently.

"Why would she help?" Stefan scoffs. "If we manage to find and free Elena and Bonnie without giving up the book, why would she do that?"

"For Emily's book, of course," I answer.

"Why would we even want to?" Damon asks, voice rough. "There's nothing in there for us." And by 'we' he means 'me'.

"Just in case?" I shrug. "Not that I think it will come to that, but it would be nice to know we had the option. Besides, never hurts to have a witch owe you a favor."

I look at these two—my rag-tag team of doppelganger guardians—Stefan looks worried and…well more worried, and Damon's slipping that game-face back on like it never left though it's a little cracked. As one, we nod, and scatter. Divide and conquer, and all that.

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**Bonnie**

When Anna came to get me, I was relieved. If it was the only way to get out of that tiny bathroom with Ben, I'd take it. I was still equal parts terrified and mortified to have been so easily duped by him. Am I really that pathetically desperate for a guy to notice me that I was taken in by a vampire with a pretty face?

It's especially galling knowing that it took only the slightest touch to realize my mistake. What kind of a witch am I if I can't even recognize a vampire when I see one?

And now, Elena's in danger and it's all my fault. Ben said they only took her for leverage against me to get in that tomb. It's the last thing I want to do. There's no way I can do it. I can't knowingly unleash a tomb full of vampires on our town. But if it means keeping my best friend safe, I may not have a choice.

How I wish vampires had never come to this town. Things would be so much easier.

Even with the magic thing, life would be much simpler—more normal—if Stefan and his no good, evil brother had never come to Mystic Falls.

Elena wouldn't be in danger, I wouldn't have been possessed by my ghost ancestor from the 1800s
and had my throat ripped out for the trouble. I just wish things could go back to the way they used to be.

I wish we could go back to when people were what they looked like, and not some murderous, blood-thirsty monster in disguise.

Looking at Anna now in her little girl body and her innocent looking face, it's almost grotesque. The idea that someone that looks so sweet and innocent could be capable of this—could be hiding that demon's face full of blood and fangs behind a soft smile—is just...chilling. Ben is bad enough; Anna is horrifying.

There's a sharp rap on the motel door, and goes to answer while Ben leers at us in wait. I watch as Anna opens the door to reveal...Natalia Salvatore, our substitute English teacher, though I remember her as something else entirely.

I know from Elena that she has shown herself capable of kindness. She somehow, terrifyingly, brought a friend of Stefan's back to life, and for whatever reason seems to have made a positive impression on my best friend, but all that I know of her is what I have in my memories.

The night Emily destroyed the crystal using my body is vague and hazy at best—just flashes of the unbridled rage on her face flickering between flames—but I still remember the fear like ice in my blood at the utter disinterest on her face when I begged her for help.

Looking back, I can see that it was her loyalty to Damon that prompted it as well as whatever happened that night, but that is hardly a comforting thought. If anything, it only makes it worse.

I see that same lack of concern now as she stands there in her solid black attire broken only by the screaming blue feather in her right ear. The studs of her leather jacket highlight the silver line beneath her cold eyes. She glances between Elena and I held hostage in a skeevy motel by two homicidal, crazed vampires.

She gives us a brief once over, smirks, and then promptly forgets all about us.

"Anna Banana," she greets in what seems genuine cheer and affection. Did she have something to do with this? I look at Elena, incredulous, but she doesn't seem remotely surprised. Scared, but not surprised. Actually, I might even see relief there.

"Dia?" Anna returns warily.

'Dia' cocks her head toward the hall, still smiling smugly. "Can we talk?" she asks.

Anna tenses, sounding angry and firm again. "Do you have the grimoire?"

"The boys are getting it," 'Dia' shrugs. "I came to strike a deal." Deal? What is that supposed to mean?

I can't see Anna's face, but I watch her head tilt slightly. It looks like curiosity.

Rather than respond, Anna abruptly turns to face us. Glaring at Ben, she orders "I'm going out for a bit. Keep them buttoned down."

She grabs her coat as she says this, then, irritated, she reminds, "Compulsion won't work. Just use violence."

She brushes past 'Dia' on her way out the door, bumping her shoulder intentionally. The vampire
who up till now I've known as Natalia gives a secret smile when she notices my stare. She winks, and leaves.

We are so screwed.

---

**Nadezhda**

I follow Anna as she stalks determinedly through the frigid air of Virginia winter, seemingly headed for the town square she mentioned earlier.

I let her get ahead of me, trailing slowly behind to allow the distance between us to lengthen with each successive stride. No use speeding up the process.

I texted Damon the address as soon as I found them—wasn't hard—and now I only need to stall for time while he rushes dashingly to the rescue.

Might as well stop and enjoy the drama while I can. It's a good thing too because the space between us allows me to observe her conversation with one Jeremy Gilbert without being pulled into it.

I listen with amusement as she apologizes for running out on him—to kidnap his sister, I add silently—and agrees to meet him at some small-town underage kegger at the cemetery later.

It's adorable, really, because despite the fact that the location is convenient to her plans, I get the impression she would have happily said yes anyway. I think she honestly likes him.

See, this here is why I didn't tell Stefan or Elena about Anna's extracurricular activities with the youngest Gilbert. I knew they would judge and try to put a stop to it (because apparently neither of them are subject to their own high-handed rules) and end up making everyone miserable in the process.

Anna may be a few hundred years old and a vampire, but she's still a 15 year old girl with a crush in moments like this. Not to mention, she has far more self-control than a younger vampire would. She's less of a threat to Jeremy than Stefan is to Elena. I would have happily kept their secret if I could have.

She strolls away with a small smile and a flustered look before reaching the bench and glaring at me across the way. I sigh and appear beside her.

"You know, you two are really cute together," I say with a smile.

I am gratified by the slight flutter of pleasure in her eyes before she battens it down and gets down to business. "You wanna talk deal?" she asks, skeptical. "Talk."

"What, no small talk amongst friends?" She glares. "Guess that's a no…" I mutter.

"I don't have time for this, Nadia," she snaps. "Were you serious about wanting to help before, or is this just another stalling tactic?"

Can't it be both? "I was serious, Ann," I sigh. "I would genuinely love to help you get Pearl back, I'm just a little stumped on how to avoid the running and screaming that comes after."
She scoffs, "They've been locked in a tomb for 145 years. I don't think they'll be running anywhere."

I arch an unimpressed eyebrow. "You know that's not what I'm talking about," I say. "The moment that door comes unsealed, all Katherine's secrets will too. I'm not ready for that, are you?"

She looks unsure for a moment, but argues, "I just want my mother back. I don't care about anyone else."

I figured that, but that's not my only worry. "You think you can keep Pearl quiet?"

Anna looks offended, but I press on, "Look, we don't need the heat this is gonna bring if she starts screaming about Katarina's duplicity, ok? The last thing we need is an Original Vampire in town looking for revenge and our favorite doppelganger."

She nods. "You know it's going to come out eventually, though? One way or another."

"Maybe," I agree. "But why rush it?"

I stare out across the park. The cold air burns my cheeks, the bare skin of my chest pebbles beneath the slashed fabric of my scandalous neckline, and my fingers turn to ice while I pause in thought.

"Alright, Stefan's over at Sheila Bennet's negotiating her cooperation and Damon should have the book by now. When do you want to do this?"

She smiles in gratitude as she stands to leave. I can see my friend make a brief reappearance in the expression. "Tonight. After sundown. Meet at the church."

We’ll see, but I have a feeling Elena is the deciding factor.

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**Damon**

I'm cracking open my father's coffin with a shovel when I get the text. Seems there was more than one reason for sending Stefan to Grandma's House. I'm not entirely sure what Z's up to with all this stuff lately, but, if she's intent on playing matchmaker, I won't look a gift horse in the mouth.

The motel housing Elena and Sabrina is seedy and unassuming, broken-down in disrepair. I shudder to imagine the inspection rating. Not surprising, Mystic Falls is hardly an attractive vacation destination.

Frankly, this rescue mission is more than a little anticlimactic. The sun is high in the sky and the only moves required to incapacitate the moron Anna left on guard duty are some drape ripping theatrics.

"Damon?!", Elena sounds surprised to see me, but not entirely displeased. Bonnie, on the other hand, looks like she'd rather take her chances with the demon bartender. Well, that can be arranged.

I give Elena a quick once over with my eyes as I throw open the door. When I'm satisfied she's still in one piece I gesture them through, "Go on."

The smile she throws my way as she does is all the thanks I need. The hero thing's not so bad, after all.
Turning to the quivering mess of singed vampire on the floor, I feel a surprising twinge of disgust at the thought of killing him. He's just so pathetic already that it hardly seems worth the effort.

Eh, what are you gonna do? I pull the stake from my belt and shove it home. No use leaving minions lying around.

I catch up to them half-way up the sidewalk, link my arms with theirs, and walk them to the car.

Good times.

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**Stefan**

Sheila Bennet would make a formidable enemy. It's a thought I had the moment I first met her here in the sixties. I remember hearing her speak with such resonance, a quiet dignity and self-assurance about her that leant such strength, such meaning to her words. I was in awe.

That hasn't changed in 40 years and as I sit here now at her kitchen table, honored to have even been invited to it, I can't help the slightest twinge of shame for asking her to betray her principles which then and still now mean so much to us both.

"Please, I wouldn't ask this of you if I had any other choice. And, if Lia accomplishes what she set out to this morning, it won't be necessary. I just need to know that you are willing to help us if it comes to that."

I see my own fear and hesitation reflected on her face at this, but it is quickly replaced with the dawning light of a new idea and the confidence to see it through.

"Maybe it won't," she says, as she rummages through a stack of papers in the corner and emerges with a map of the town. "If Bonnie and Elena are together, I should be able to do a locator spell to find them both."

"Too late!" My brother's teasing voice precedes, by a scant few seconds, the incredible music of running footsteps on laminate floors. The sigh which escapes me at the sound slumps me forward in my chair as a weight lifts from my chest.

"Grams!" "Stefan!" The girls shout, equaling our own joy at the sight of them, as they wrap their respective loved ones in a warm embrace. My heart leaps at the feel of her in my arms again.

"Yeah, this is nice and all," Damon says with his usual cynicism, "but I'm getting kinda cold out here so if you don't mind…" he gestures pointedly at the threshold which bars his path.

Sheila scoffs. "You got some nerve asking a Bennet which for anything," she responds coldly.

Damon is unfazed by her ire. "Pretty please with a cherry on top?" he pouts, waving a very old leather bound book in his hand. "I come bearing gifts."

Elena looks up at me, something in her eyes that strikes a painful, burning chord in my gut. It looks like sympathy. "Stefan, he did just save us."

Damon bats his eyelashes from the doorway.

I glance at Sheila for her take on this. She looks aggrieved, but begrudgingly grateful.
With a tone of the deepest regret, she sighs, "Come in."

He smiles smugly as he enters the house.

As he walks toward me I ask, "What happened with Anna?"

He shrugs, looking unconcerned. "Z's dealing with it."

"And where is she…?"

"Out here!" sounds a distant yell from the front yard. The four of us, wary and a bit curious, crowd in the doorway.

Lia (or I guess, Nadia, now…though Damon calls her Z) strikes a proud pose beyond the porch, a huge flamethrower propped against her cocked hip and a high-heeled boot of studded leather, greeting us with a Cheshire cat grin.

"Look what I found, D!" she yells excitedly.

He hoots delightedly and trots forward to run a hand almost lovingly down the long nozzle of their new toy, though I notice he still has the spell book. The childish glee they each display at the mere thought of what they could accomplish with such a weapon makes me a little uneasy.

I can just imagine the two of them setting a town on fire for the hell of it then dancing naked on the ashes. I shudder at the image.

"What is that for?" Elena asks worriedly. Smart girl.

Z's manic giggling pauses for a moment when she answers, somewhat incredulous to the question, "Well, for the rest of the tomb vampires of course. You know, once we get Pearl out?"

The four of us on the porch exchange confused looks before turning back to her. She doesn't think we're still doing this, does she? We have everything we need. None of us have any reason to open the tomb.

Sheila voices my thoughts when she declares, "Now that my granddaughter and her friend are safe, we have no interest in opening that tomb. And I'll have that grimoire now." She extends a hand as though to receive it from Damon.

My brother doesn't look particularly bothered by the statement, but he looks concernedly at Lia anyway.

It's then I see the unbridled rage suddenly boiling in her grey-blue eyes. She snarls with the flickering of veins and the barest hint of fang before she lunges.

Seeing this, Sheila wraps an arm around Bonnie's shoulder and attempts to escape inside the house, but Lia is there before she can take a step.

Elena jumps and I attempt to intervene, but suddenly there is a firm grip on my arm that feels suspiciously like my brother's.

"Don't," he whispers under his breath and, somehow, it's reassuring.

"The hell you won't," Lia snarls and Sheila tenses. She pushes Bonnie protectively away from the angry vampire. I don't think I've ever actually seen her afraid until this moment.
"I gave a dear friend of mine my word that I would help her save her mother tonight, and I intend to do it. And unlike a certain witchy clan I could name, I don't break deals."

Sheila holds her ground and I prepare to fight in her defense when Elena's voice breaks the silence, shocking me to my core with her words. "She's right," she declares. All but Lia stare at her, dumb-founded. "Anna won't stop. We have to let her have her mother back."

The anger has left Lia's face to be replaced by a strangely proud smile and a softness in her eyes when she looks on Elena. She doesn't even look surprised.

"Besides, if we kill the rest than where's the harm. Anna and her mother will leave, and this will all be over," she presses. "It's the right thing to do."

Lia nods deferentially at this last. Her eyes are laughing.

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**Elena**

I don't know what came over me back there, siding with a vampire that looked two inches from ripping Bonnie's Grams' throat out, but it just felt…right.

Besides, it's true that no matter what we do, Anna's not going to stop trying to open that tomb. Who knows what she might do next time? She'd clearly do anything to get her mother back, and I can't really say that I blame her. I would.

Somehow, even though I know I made the right call, it's Lia's proud smile I can't get out of my head. She looked like she knew what I'd do and was thrilled when I proved her right.

What does that mean?

The Bennet's and Stefan go on ahead with the grimoire and the flame-thrower—Lia looked downright pained to give it up—while Damon, Lia, and I bring up the rear. She seemed to think it best that the three of us meet with Anna before heading to the tomb. I don't know why, but she seemed so certain that I'm inclined to trust her.

Damon has a hand to the small of my back—protectively almost—while Lia trails a little behind, boxing me in.

I'm sort of puzzled by their behavior (Did I scare them that much?), but I suppose we'll have to deal with it later. It's long past sundown.

As we walk through the woods on the way to the church, we are greeted by the sight of a large bonfire and the smell of alcohol. The sounds of music and teenage laughter as we enter the grounds remind me that this time last year, I was at this party.

"The Duke party, I forgot," I mutter. "I hope they stay away from the church."

"Your hope; not mine," Damon quips.

I barely have it in me to conjure up a decent retort when Matt and Caroline overtake us.

"Elena, hi," Matt says, all bundled up in a vest and a snow cap.

"Elena. Oh my God. Where have you been?" Caroline comes up on his other side and, noting
Damon's proximity to me, not so casually links her hand with Matt's. Part of me wants to reassure her, but we really don't have the time.

"Long story. No time to tell it," Damon rudely interjects.

She attempts a glare, "Wasn't talking to you."

His eyes flare sarcastically. "Sure you were."

"Hey, I'm Matt. We haven't met," Matt, sweet guy that he is, introduces himself while extending a hand to Damon.

He eyes it with distaste and simply says, "Matt, there's a reason we haven't met."

"Move it or lose it, love birds!" Lia exclaims. In her dark attire, she seems to sneak up on us out of nowhere as she gives us both a rather strong shove in the right direction. She doesn't even bother to respond to their chimed greetings behind us as we go.

"God, I hate teen drama," she grumbles to herself. Damon's smirk says he's inclined to agree.

The light fades away to a thickly enclosed darkness the further we stray from the bonfire behind us. Though I can make out the flickering of another in the distance, from where I stand now, I can hardly make out the ground beneath my feet.

I'm suddenly thankful for Damon's steadying presence and Lia's easy confidence as their enhanced vampire vision illuminates their way.

We walk in silence as we approach the ruins of the old church and I wonder if they're not more unnerved by all this than I gave them credit for. Perhaps it's anticipation or else exhaustion, but they each seem content to keep their own confidence.

There's a rather large crater in the ground beneath the old church and I make out the weathered remains of a stone staircase before we descend into the tomb below.

Inside, the torch-lit cavern walls close in on all sides and I feel as though I have at least a tiny taste of what it would feel like to be trapped under the weight of these stone walls. Seconds in, they make me nervous. I can't begin to imagine what a century and a half here would do to someone.

Bonnie and her grams, under the four point markers of unlit torches, draw a circle in the dirt. Walking the circumference, Sheila lights the torches one by one. "Air, Earth, Fire," she says with each new flame.

"Water," Bonnie says, handing it off. Her Grams sprinkles the final element from the confines of a plastic water bottle.

Incredulously, I wonder aloud, "That's it? Water from the tap?"

Sheila doesn't seem offended by the question. If anything, she looks rather amused. She arches an eyebrow. "As opposed to what?"

"I just figured it would have to be…blessed or mystical or something."

She chuckles.

The light clacking sound of a pebble on the stone steps behind me alerts us to her presence, before Anna appears at the top of the stairway. Despite my earlier championing of her cause, I feel my
heart rate jump at the sight of her. Just a bit.

She looks around at our accumulated numbers, noting the ritual preparations, before meeting Lia's eyes and sighing in relief. I think she almost can't believe we really came through. She offers Lia a grateful smile and rounds the circle to meet her nearer the tomb's entrance beside me.

Lia doesn't speak, but her eyes do it for her. There's the slightest crinkling of plastic and she removes something bagged and dark red from her coat.

"What is that?" Stefan asks dumbly.

She hands it off to Anna as she answers, "Beautification elixir. What do you think?" She rolls her eyes mockingly.

"We're ready," Bonnie tells us. Here we go.

Inside the circle, the Bennets link hands, eyes tightly closed in focus, and begin to chant.

"What are they saying?" Damon asks rhetorically.

"I think it's Latin," Stefan mutters.

"I don't think it's Latin," I say. There's something about it that sounds and feels so deep and old, uncanny. Too uncanny for such a cliché dead language.

They chant for what seems like hours but is probably only minutes before the pentagram carved into the heavy stone of the tomb's entrance opens to reveal the darkness within. Anna watches anxiously as it does, holding a flashlight beam to illuminate the path.

"It worked," Bonnie breathes, sounding shocked.

"Of course it worked," her Grams replies.

"Come on. Stefan," Damon says, crossing the cave to the discarded flamethrower and gas tanks. "We've got some fires to build."

Quick as a snake, Anna wraps a strong hand around my arm and drags me toward the open doorway.

Everyone jumps. A chorus of 'what are you doing's and 'let her go's sound in the air, but Lia stands between us and Anna pulls me back.

"Don't you take her in there," Sheila warns, but she doesn't leave the circle. "I'll bring the walls down."

"What, you think I'm dumb enough to walk in there with no leverage?" she snaps. "No thanks. I'd rather not be locked in a tomb for all eternity."

"It's ok," I hear myself saying, staring in Stefan's worried eyes. "I get it. She needs to know that you're not going to lock her in when she gets inside. I'll go."

Everyone freezes at that, either unsure how to respond or just resigned to the inevitable.

"Fine," Lia says, shocking me, before flashing to the corner to grab one of the gasoline tubs.

She exchanges an odd look with Damon that I can't even begin to place. He nods tightly. There is a
rush of air and she returns. "But I'm coming with you."

Torch and flashlights in hand, we turn as one and, in single file, cross the threshold.

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**Nadezhda**

I know Damon needed the reassurance that someone he trusts ensure Katherine's absence—as well as Elena's safety though I doubt he'd admit it—but there is more reason than this that sent me over the barrier.

The truth is, I know enough about witches to recognize a powerful spell when I see one and I know our time here is limited. The Bennet's may be a powerful lineage, but holding back this seal is going to take a hell of a lot of energy and I'm not about to trust in the flagging strength of a couple exhausted witches to save me from desiccation via entombment.

Not to mention, there is no way this town's worth of immortal liabilities makes it out of here. I've got my work cut out for me with the one's I've got, thank you.

The breathy groans of rotting, starving vampires fill the air and I feel Elena tense beside me.

"What is that?" she asks in fear.

"They can sense you," Anna answers rather disinterestedly as she scans the walls of grey and be-veined bodies for any sign of the one she most wants.

"Stay close to me," I mutter to Elena, brushing her arm with mine as I make my way to the back of the tomb, casting my torch briefly over each face as I do.

Truthfully, I understand her fear. Beyond the obvious, even to a human there's a certain vibe about this place that seems to scream danger and a suppressed power. To me, it sings. 27 magically sustained undead corpses are like…it's like the Holy Grail to a necromancer.

I wonder if there's a way to harness this energy with their deaths…

"Mama!" I hear Anna's teary voice cry out in the distance. I allow myself a small smile as we reach the end, and prepare for the violent work ahead.

"Trade ya?" I say to Elena, glancing pointedly at the flashlight.

I hand Elena the torch and unscrew the cap on the gasoline jug. There is just enough light from the outer chamber with the small flashlight to make out the bodies if not their faces, and I'd rather not be holding an open flame while I do this.

"Head on out," I instruct her, sloshing gasoline on the first line of victims. "Send Damon in with the other jug and flamethrower if you can." She nods, wide-eyed, and practically runs to the entrance. Not that I blame her. It was extraordinarily brave of her to even come in here in the first place.

I've finished dousing this compartment liberally with the gasoline when I hear the shouting. Between the sounds of the desiccated vampires and the rush of power I feel in their presence, I can't really make it out. I'm not overly worried, however. I'm sure I'll find out soon enough. Probably just more teen drama anyway.
I'm making the last turn when their words reach me. Oddly enough, it's not Elena's hysterical cries or Anna's growls that I hear, but rather the quiet hiss of Damon's threatening whisper. "If you don't open that door and let her out, I will rip your little grand-witch here to pieces before you can even blink."

Hooy na ny!# Are you shitting me?! They were just going to leave us in here? I mean, I know I've hardly done a thing to endear them to me, but God damn it we made a deal!

I can hear them start chanting and the slide of feet on rock that indicates Anna's exit, but now I'm out of gas with at least half a dozen vampires left to go and seconds to get my ass out of here. Fuck it, I'm running.

When I get out, I barely spare a glance for Damon before ripping the second jug from his hand.

"Hold it just a little longer," I order the—as predicted—struggling witches.

Tearing off the lid, I throw it into the tomb as far as I can. I hear it hit the wall and pour over the remaining vampires. At least, I hope so. I take the torch from Elena—for some reason she's still holding it—and toss it in.

"Done." The door slams shut and the screaming begins.

I smile.

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**Damon**

Bracing herself against the stone doorframe Z begins to chant. It's quiet and unintelligible and even the other vampires in the room probably don't notice, but I do and I recognize the stance. Z may have very little value for human life—sort of a by-product of spending centuries feeding off it—but that doesn't mean she doesn't respect it. This respect is multiplied a thousand fold for vampires. In a sense, harnessing the power released by their final death knell is her way of honoring their sacrifice.

My mind is a whirlpool of conflicting emotions at the moment, but the one I feel most strongly is relief that she is here, leaning against the outside of that doorway. Fairly quickly, the rest of our company departs. Anna and Pearl had slinked away the moment they crossed the barrier, the witches had fled from my wrath the moment that barrier closed, and Stefan dragged Elena away the moment she let him after a wide grin of relief flashed across her features at the same time one did mine.

Gratitude to her is probably next on the list of prevailing emotional currents after rage. She was so brave and so fierce tonight in defense of her principles, her desire to do what she had dubbed 'the right thing'. First with Anna, then with Z.

I couldn't have cared less about Anna and Pearl, though I have nothing against the girl really, but I felt utterly helpless when the witches refused to free my friend while she set about protecting them. This is the last time I even allow tentative trust for a Bennet to enter my mind. They're backstabbing turn-coats. All of them. I watch as dark, serpentine veins shift beneath her skin and can only imagine the rippling effects they make beneath her leather jacket.

I've stood here in the past as she stood bare before me, her back exposed, and watched as the ebb and flow of power moved beneath her flesh, filling her veins, and setting those tattooed wings to
shifting and flapping beneath the candlelight.

It is an awesome sight.

The sudden flash of lightening illuminates the cave, setting every ridge and stone in sharp relief, a stark whiteness eradicating shadow in a single moment. The clash of thunder follows just as quickly and the pour of a sudden storm fills the night. Her fingers flex and clench with it as her back tenses and releases when the flow of power reaches its end. The chanting stops and I hear her breath return. Only the screaming remains.

"Damon," she says softly, turning to me, and the look of sympathy I see there brings my thoughts to a crashing halt. The final feeling wells in me: bitter disappointment and a fresh wave of grief.

We leave before the silence tolls their final end.

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**Bonnie**

I can't believe it. I can't…I feel as though the air around me has grown thick and viscous, pouring and rushing in my ears, obscuring my vision. The pressure is so intense I can hardly breathe. I can't move. Is this shock? Am I in shock? I just feel…numb.

In my mind, the only thing I can see is her cold, still, frozen, beloved face; can still feel the emptiness in my chest when I touched her. It's been less than an hour since she held my hands to her chest, soothing me as the rush of our magic consumed me. She was so alive, so vivid, so real. How am I supposed to be here when she isn't?

My feet carry me to the boarding house before I think to direct them. I find myself standing still in the entrance to the big, cavernous central room as she sits comfortably on the couch, watching the fire. Somehow, the contentment on her face enrages me.

How dare she? How dare she sit there like she hasn't a care in the world while mine is falling apart? This is all her fault.

It was bad enough that Damon came, but at least he'd stopped chasing Katherine. If it hadn't been for her, we never would have opened the tomb. Never would have given that other vampire what she wanted. If it wasn't for her…my Grams would still be…here.

She has to fix this. I know she can fix this. It's her fault but she can make it right. She has to. She owes me that.

I don't realize I've spoken till I hear my words echoing in the space between us, ringing their pain and accusation through the yawning acoustics of high ceilinged grandeur. They seem to come from some deep recess of my broken aching heart, and I mean every word.

She is unmoved, arching a brow skeptically in reply. "Do I now?" she charges.

I stare into the face that haunted my nightmares for weeks, so similar as she sits before a hearth fire, the flames dancing across the contours of her face. When it isn't the pale, darkly handsome demon she calls her friend, it is hers I fear in the night. And she dares deny me this?

"You have to. You owe me," I hear myself say.
She cocks her head, blinking once, face expressionless. "You don't know what you're asking me for."

"I don't care," I whisper, my voice cracks on the words.

She scoffs, "You will."

Another hot, bright, searing flash of anger surges through me at this. She has no idea what I would be willing to do for family. She doesn't know me. She never bothered to. No, she and Damon just stormed into my life, flipped it upside down for their own ends, then abandoned me to deal with the consequences. No more. I will not let these vampires take any more from me.

With this new strength in my conviction, I straighten my shoulders and repeat, "I don't care."

Her lips quirk in a condescending smile and I want to scream, rage, rail at her to care but I hold my ground. She sets her glass down on the side-table—dark red liquid still clinging to the sides—and approaches me. Her steps are light, steady, predatory, and there is a dangerous glint in her eye.

"Fine," she says, and something eases in my chest. She smiles a bit, seeming to register this before continuing. It is her next statement that brings it all crashing back.

"Who do you want me to kill?"

I don't breathe again until my feet hit the road. They can't carry me fast enough.

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**General POV**

Back in the tomb beneath Fell's Church, the screams of burning vampires still echo on the walls. Below the din, a single subtle drag of skin over stone can be heard and the heavy slab enclosing them shifts. A charred and shriveled hand crawls beneath.

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**Chapter End Notes**

#Transliteration from Russian: means 'No fucking way'

A/N: For anyone confused by this last bit, I figure it's like this: In the show, the Bennet's manage to open the seal on the tomb long enough for our vampire super friends to escape, but when Sheila dies the seal somehow stays down. Yet, by the time Katherine shows up and Damon locks her in at the end of 2x7, it's somehow resealed? Add to that the fact that Harper, after licking some blood off the wall, somehow has enough energy to leave the tomb. Also, this apparently works for the other 25 vampires left? I call shenanigans. But, they're cannon shenanigans, so I guess they get a pass. Anyway, I figure if "wow, that wall over there smells really yummy" is considered sufficient motivation to escape a supernatural prison cell after a century and a half of desiccation, then "if I don't get the hell out of dodge, I'm gonna be vamp
barbeque" should be too.
Born of Death and Tragedy

Chapter Notes

A/N: One last thing about the last chapter; I started this fic thinking that the tomb vampires would not get out and that all the events of seasons 2 and 3 would be accelerated and adjusted accordingly, but somewhere along the way it became clear to me that that would derail far too much of the foundation for so many of the pivotal character relationships that make TVD what it is.

I mean, it would make so many impossible: Team Badass (Dalaric), the first indication of Stefan's blood addiction, the Miss Mystic Falls dance, Uncle Daddy John and his genocidal tendencies, the vampire device and Isobel's return, all that stuff. SO, I improvised. We'll just have to see how it all plays out.

Remember, reviews are love :)

(Reference: 1x15 "A Few Good Men", 2x9 "Katarina", and a hint of 4x6 "We all go a Little Mad Sometimes")

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Elena

All three of them are in the living room when I get there. It doesn't strike me how odd it is to see them all sitting companionably together until I see it before me, but it looks like the rules have changed.

Damon sits in his favorite wingback nursing a glass of bourbon, not surprising; Stefan sits on the couch with a furrowed brow displaying his worry and fear, also unsurprising; but it is the nervous twitching in Lia's usually confident stance that seems surreal. She paces the rug where the coffee table used to stand, and fairly squirms with discomfort.

I'm suddenly very uneasy about this conversation.

When Stefan texted me this morning with an instruction to meet him at the boarding house, the urgency in his tone struck me immediately, but I was not prepared for…whatever this is.

Still, I get the impression from Lia's attitude that we are about to hear the answers to some long unasked questions. In that, at least, I am relieved.

I take a seat beside Stefan, and he wraps his arm around me in a familiar comforting pose, but his posture is stiff. I almost feel that he is more in need of the physical reassurance than I am.

"Ok, so…I promised Damon before the whole rescue mission thing that I would tell him the truth, and he said since it has to do with Elena that I should tell all of you, and I guess he's right. It's true that I've been keeping secrets, but it's only because I swore to and, really, Damon actually knows more than he—"

"Z!" Damon interrupts, "you're babbling."
"Yeah, sorry..." she looks away embarrassed. Ok, now I'm really freaked.

She takes a moment to gather her thoughts, bringing her steepled fingers to her mouth. She breathes deeply then meets my eyes, looking suddenly intense.

"I told you not so long ago, that I knew about you before I came here. Eh, eh!" She holds a hand out warningly to forestall Damon's protests. "I'm getting there!" she glares him down and he falls silent—begrudgingly.

Turning back to me, "That wasn't strictly true. Well...not in the way you probably think. See, it wasn't you specifically, but the doppelganger that I knew about. See, the last one died exactly 500 years before your birth, and I knew that the next would reappear that same year.

"Not that I knew where, or who, but there have been rumors and legends surrounding this town all the way back to the very first vampires in existence. So," she shrugs. "I took a chance and sure enough, there you were."

Damon stews silently, but Stefan looks ready to pelt her with his own questions. I halt him in his tracks with my own. "Wait, 'doppelganger'? What does that mean?"

"Well..." she starts, glancing at Damon, "the reincarnation of Katherine Pierce, the last doppelganger."

While I attempt to digest this information, she continues. "I think it's really best to start at the beginning. Or, her beginning anyway. Bulgaria, 1490, when her family disowned her and Katarina Petrova first went on the run. She was 16 years old, and her family kicked her out after her father ripped her baby from her arms. She was unmarried, and they couldn't bear the shame of attaching such a scandal to their family name so they took the child, and sent her away. Somehow or other by 1492 she ended up in England, where she was unfortunate enough to catch the attention of those loyal to the Originals—the first vampires. Specifically, Niklaus Mikaelson and his brother Elijah.

For those of you studying vampire history, the story goes that centuries ago an Aztec shaman put a curse on both vampires and werewolves alike. The curse of the sun and the moon they call it. I think you're all smart enough to work out the why. The thing that no one knows, and that you three cannot tell anyone, is that the whole thing is a hoax. The real curse is something much worse.

In another very long and irrelevant story, Klaus had been cursed by a witch to limit his power. He is the only known hybrid in existence—born to a werewolf bloodline and transformed into a vampire. The curse suppresses the werewolf gene, preventing him from gathering his full power. It's a good thing too, because Klaus is certifiably insane. His single prevailing goal for all of his long life has been to find the doppelganger and break this curse. You see, the curse was bound by Petrova blood a thousand years ago. Her name was Tatia, and she looked just like you, Elena. Katarina was her doppelganger.

You see where I'm going with this?"

Somewhere in the stillness, I hear Stefan ask, "What does breaking the curse entail exactly?"

She smirks, but there is no humor in it. "Well, isn't it obvious?" she asks. "Her death."

"What??!" I hear, but from whose lips I'm not sure. Could be both, I suppose.

"Wait, can we go back to the part where werewolves are real?" this question was definitely Damon. "If that's true, then why is it that in 160 some odd years on this planet, I've never seen one?"
Lia rolls her eyes. "Damon, you're like a baby compared to me. Werewolves used to be more popular than vampires. You know…until we killed them all."

"Why would—"

"So not the point right now."

Ignoring all this, I finally find my voice. "So, you're saying the oldest vampire in the history of time wants to kill me?" I ask.

It all seems so unreal. I only just learned that there was even such a thing as vampires, and witches, and god knows what else, only to then learn that I was a carbon copy of my boyfriend's vampire ex-girlfriend, and now there's some other obscenely powerful vampire coming to kill me?

This can't be my life.

Staring down at the floor, I notice the decorative flap of today's boots match the same three buttoned pattern of her corset top. She looks so put together as she wrecks my life.

"Relax," Lia says, hands held out placatingly. "I'm not going to let that happen."

"Yeah?" Damon finally finds his voice. It sounds pissed. But whether at her or just the whole situation is unclear. "And how do you propose we do that?"

She purses her lips, considering. "Well, the easy way is what I did for Katarina."

Whoa, what?!

"You…you turned her? Didn't you?" Stefan asks.

She nods curtly, but there's a hard frown and a sad look in her eye that I don't like. "What happened?" I wonder.

She bites her lip, looking me in the eye. "He slaughtered her entire family in vengeance."

Ok, yeah…I was right. I can't deal with this right now. I'm getting out of here.

In my distress, I don't even see her move. Her eyes are a foot from mine, looking up at me pleadingly, when she says, "Elena, he doesn't know about you. He has no idea. And he won't unless someone tells him…I intend to do my dead-level best to make sure that never happens."

"In other words, boys and girls," Damon says with his usual glib humor as he climbs to his feet. "Smoke 'em if you got 'em."

Without a word, he turns and storms off toward the door. And with a sad shake of her head and a wry smile at us, Lia follows him.

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**Damon**

"Bourbon. Neat," I order the bartender the moment my ass hits the seat of my favorite bar stool. They're good to me here, and the drink is in my hand almost before the words are out. I take a grateful gulp of liquid gold and sigh.
I just had to get out of there. It seems like every new piece of information I learn from her just opens up a million more questions than it gives answers. At this point, I'm beginning to wonder if I really know her at all.

Unfortunately, the reverse could not be further from the truth. This is why I am entirely unsurprised when I see that head full of blue-streaked hair land beside me moments after my own arrival.

The blue/teal and grey plaid of her shirt make her eyes blaze the exact shade of my own. We have never looked more alike than we do in this moment. How ironic that it's now I begin to question our connection.

"So, you turned her, huh?" I say tonelessly, as though one way or another makes little difference to me.

"Just call me Grandma Salvatore," she replies in the same tone.

Yeah, that would almost be funny if I didn't literally just find out that my supposed best friend of over a century is responsible for the creation of the vampire who until very recently I considered to be the love of my life—well, unlife. A vampire, might I add, whose identity she claimed not to know the entire time that I have known her.

It makes me question a lot of things.

Whether she was lying when she swore up and down that she was completely surprised to learn that Katherine and Katarina were the same person. Whether she only came to town for Elena and used me and Stefan to get to her. Whether our entire friendship was a lie.

I just found out that the woman I've loved for almost a century and a half let me believe she was trapped in a tomb for all that time rather than be with me, and now this?

"Was any of it even real, Z?"

For a moment she seems stricken by the question, but the expression just as quickly leaves her face as she stares past me at the man now sitting on my left. I grit my teeth in irritation, and turn to see for myself what has her so distracted. It's Alaric Saltzman. Perfect.

I'd almost forgotten about him in all the chaos of the last few days: finding out about Katherine, Elena getting kidnapped, the tomb, this morning. It's been a little hectic.

I remember what Z told me before about his wife and that ring he wears. I still don't know exactly who it is that I'm supposed to have killed. There's been so many. But if he's spoiling for a fight, I intend to give him one.

"Behold, the teacher," I taunt. "Don't you have some papers to grade?"

"It's uh more fun with a buzz."

"Well, most things in life are," I agree. "Sober's…depressing."

Z remains absurdly quiet beside me. I wonder which one of us has shocked her to silence. Maybe both.

"You don't strike me as someone who gets depressed," he challenges.
"You say that like you know me."

"Nope. Just a hunch," he shoots me a stare so intense I think a mere human would freeze under it.

"You have a good afternoon," he says, standing. He nods past me, "Natalia."

"Not likely," I mutter.

I hear Z take a breath in preparation of whatever defense she has conjured up to my last question.

"Damon—"

Liz Forbes' sudden appearance cuts her off. Well, somebody's popular today. Can't a man get drunk alone in a bar without a parade of people trying to talk to him?

"Day drinking?" she asks, sounding a tad judgmental if I do say so myself.

"It's all the rage," I reply.

"Listen, I need a favor."

Of course you do. Everybody needs something from me lately. It's all I'm good for right? Someone else's use?

Katherine used me for sex and to spread the word around of her death, apparently. Stefan uses me to make himself feel like the better man and to protect Elena when it comes to that. Z uses me to keep her secrets and evidently to give her an excuse to get close to my brother's girlfriend and some millennia long revenge scheme.

So, what else is new?

"You ever felt betrayed?" I ask, and even to me it isn't clear which time I'm referring to.

Liz looks at me blankly in confusion. I feel Z tense beside me. Good.

"Like, there was someone who you just trusted—implicitly—that just threw you away like garbage?"

"You forget I was married," Liz reminds, halfway between skeptical and pained.

"Oh, right," I say, suddenly remembering my audience. "Gay husband."

She looks away, looking a little offended.

I wink at the bartender, hooking a thumb in her direction. "She'll have what I'm having."

"Sit down," I invite her.

She does, before telling me why she's really here. "There's a fundraiser here tonight that the founder's council is throwing. The town's most eligible bachelors get raffled for dates, and...well, we're short a bachelor..."

I chuckle, "Is this what you do when there's no um...vampires? Organize bachelor raffles?"

"Oh, trust me," she jokes. "At this point I miss the vampires."

Yeah, me too. I smirk to myself.
"Look, you're a hero to this town, Damon. I know most people don't know it, but you are, and you're single, and a catch," she explains.

When I look less than enthusiastic, she resorts to pleading. "Oh, come on. Help me out. Carol Lockwood will never let me live it down if I come up empty handed."

Well, when you put it that way…fine.

"You know?" I say. "A room full of women clamoring to win a date with me? …Sounds tasty."

And it does. There is a surprised huff of amusement to my left, but it is quashed quickly.

She laughs, relieved. "Thank you."

Although, if we're doing the favor thing, there is something I'd like to know about our resident Buffy, the wanna-be slayer.

"One thing. Can you get information on someone for me?" She looks intrigued so I press, "Alaric Saltzman, the history teacher. There's just something a little….off about him, and I just want to make sure the high school did their homework on this guy."

Actually, I'm fairly certain they didn't.

She nods in easy agreement. "You got it." She slides her still full highball to me as she leaves.

It is good to have friends in the right places.

Speaking of friends…

"Damon, you already know about Ric so…"

"Not that I'm in the mood to explain things to you, but if someone's going to try to kill me for killing someone, I'd like to know who I supposedly murdered."

Refusing to meet those swirling pools of dusky blue, I return my attention to my glass as I say, "Now, if we're all done with the awkward small talk for the day, I'd appreciate it if you left me alone."

"Fine," she sighs sadly, resigned. I hear her boots hit the floor as she slides from her stool. "But you should know, the answer to your earlier question? Yes, it was real. Every minute."

Her voice breaks on the last word, but before I can turn to look, she's gone.

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**Stefan**

"Alaric's wife might have been…your mother?" I ask, still shocked by the revelation.

She's fidgeting with the clothes in her top drawer like she can't bear to stop moving. Not that I can blame her. After the information bombshell she had dropped on her this morning—and now this—I'm actually surprised she's not more upset.

"It can't be true, right?" she reasons. "I mean, the coincidence alone is just crazy."
It's a testament to her strength of will that she's not a hysterical wreck right now. I can't bear to drop the Damon bomb on her too. She doesn't need to know that he could be responsible for her mother's death. Not till I know for sure.

She pulls a piece of paper from her pocket.

"I have the address for her friend, Trudy," she tells me.

"You want to talk to her?" I ask in what I mean to be a discouraging tone. I don't want her to get too far into this before I figure it all out.

"I don't know. I..." she sighs.

I nod, more than a little relieved.

"I—I don't know," she repeats, but she sounds more interested now. "If it's true and they are the same person, then that means that my birthmother...is dead, and I don't know if I could handle that."

And that is why I don't want her going there. If it turns out that Damon really did kill her birthmother, I don't want her to find out that way. Really, I just don't want it to be true at all, but Damon's not exactly known for his impulse control. I guess the question now is how much does she already know?

"Elena, did Jenna tell you anything about Alaric's wife? How she died?" I ask.

"Just that she was killed and the case was never solved," she says, looking at me questioningly. "You knew that already?" she guesses from what I'm sure is the lack of surprise on my face at the news.

"The morning at the school, when he attacked me, he told me some things," I admit, "about her...death."

"Well—" she starts.

"No, no, no," I chant, taking her hands in mine. "It's not possible. The coincidence is too much."

I will her to believe me and I think she does. I need to get answers for her, before she gets too into this. It's the only way I can protect her from the truth.

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Nadezhda

God, I've never seen him so angry. Not at me anyway. It's killing me to know I've hurt him so deeply. I know that a lot of it is Katherine and Elena and just everything piling up at once, but the knowledge that I am a part of all that just hurts.

I always knew that the day my secrets came out I might lose him. Trust is just such a rare commodity in his world—mine too—that the thought that someone he's given it to could betray him...He doesn't let that go easily. Just look at Stefan.

What makes it really hard though, is the fact that in my long and storied career of secret making and secret keeping, he's the only one I've ever confided in. Well...other than those involved in said
activities.

He has no idea how very much I've opened up to him. I've shared my best and worst memories with that man, and because I held back a few secrets that were not mine to tell, he thinks he can't trust me.

He actually has the gall to ask me if our friendship was real. Like I could ever fake something like that.

I just wish I knew how to tell him how wrong he is.

Flashback

(Chicago: 1923)

I am a shivering wreck on the bed when he gets there, my knees pulled into my chest while my body shakes with the strain of silent, heaving, wracking sobs as I fight to hold them in. He takes one look at me, and is beside me in an instant.

"No," I say into the echoing quiet. I give him a pleading look as I meet those deep, concerned eyes where he crouches there on the floor. "Please, don't touch me. If you touch me right now I'm afraid I'll just shatter and I can't if I'm going to get through this."

"Get through what?" he whispers, heartbroken for me.

Rather than explain, I merely launch into my tale.

"Do you remember what I told you? How I was turned?"

He nods, repeating softly. "You made a deal with a vampire in exchange of a favor. Promised to save her brother from a haunting if she'd turn you."

"Right," I agree. "Well, there's more."

Taking a deep breath for courage, I begin,

"When I was human, in Russia in the mid 12th century, my mother died. See, we were poor and hungry like everyone else, and we had been for most of my life up to that point.

By the time I was old enough to comprehend it, I had lost most of my family—my brothers and sisters to illness, my father and uncles to battle, and my mother to grief. I think it was that last death that finally broke her—a still born child a few months after my father passed. She went mad with the grief, wasting away mentally and physically before my eyes, leaving me to care for my sickly little brother all on my own. She couldn't handle the pain of the loved ones she'd lost, so she neglected the ones she had left.

You see, she didn't have the time for us because she spent every ounce of strength trying to reach them. She wanted to reach their spirits. She was what we called a chernyy ved'ma—a black witch. She was one to whom the conjuring of spirits and the darker turns of the craft came naturally. You would call her a necromancer. This gift she passed to me.

I think she succeeded too, once or twice, but it never seemed enough. She didn't just want to brush hands with their spirits, she wanted to hold them, see them. She wanted them back.

Needless to say, it didn't work out so well. She threw herself so obsessively, recklessly,
conspicuously into her craft that eventually it killed her. She died screaming.

I was 12.

After that it was just me and Alexander, my little brother—my little Sasha. I practically raised him. By the time I was 16 and he was 8, he was more mine than any child of my womb could ever be. I loved him, so much. More than anything else in the entire world.

The day he took sick, I thought I’d die. I cried over his bedside every horrible, heart-wrenching moment. I wiped the cold sweat from his pale, shaking brow as the sobs wracking—heaving—through my dry, throbbing chest turned to bile and I wretched my grief, my agony.

I stayed there days longer than he did.

There was a part of me that had always hated my mother for what I saw as her abandonment—for giving herself so completely to the dead that she seemed dead herself—but after that, I knew we were far more alike than I’d ever known.

I scoured her work room, tore through her journals, her altar, anything I could get my hands on. I was determined to bring him back. My Sasha. My little brother. My baby boy. And, like my mother before me, communion with the spirits was not enough. I wanted him. I wanted him back.

At last, I thought I’d found it—a spell to reanimate the dead. I thought it would work. And work it did. But, see, what I didn't know was that it's not sufficient to bring a body back to life without the soul. And even I can't reach a soul at peace. Even with the power of a beating heart in my grasp, I couldn't bring my Sasha back home to me. I only made a walking corpse.

Desperate, I sought the guidance of whatever spirits would listen—spirits of power found in my mother's books. These were ancient, powerful, evil but I didn't care. I'd sacrifice a thousand peasant girls to see my brother again.

Eventually, they told me a story that had been crossing the continent in a frenzy of rumor and paranoia. A story of creatures who walked in the night—immortal corpses fueled by the blood of the living. They were the perfect embodiment of my craft. They had the ability to absorb energy and power from the life force of another, and to hold it. They could take the vitality and power from the living and turn it to the exercise of astonishing abilities. Things like speed, and strength, and even mind control. I was intrigued to say the least. So when they finally whispered to me where I could find some of these creatures, I couldn't run fast enough.

I found her in England in 1132. She was fair-skinned, young, beautiful with bright blue eyes and golden hair. I was immediately captivated. I quickly learned that she was ruthless, practical, bloodthirsty, and above all fiercely, savagely, irrationally loyal. Yet still, there was an innocence about her, a yearning for something, someone to love and be loved by. I understood all this all too well. And when she told me of her brother's plight, I instantly wished to help.

I told her about my own story and how much I wished for her power to increase my own. I managed to convince her that I could not hope to save her brother without this aid. She agreed.

It wasn't much of a lie either. The five spirits haunting her brother were strong, savage, and cruel and they were single-mindedly devoted to their torture of this man who I later learned was their killer. They would not willingly have obeyed my command, but they were unable to refuse my now impossibly irresistible powers of persuasion. I thought, having banished them, that we were finished. I was wrong.
They came again and again like clockwork every morning no matter how many times I sent them away. I must have taken hundreds of lives just to stave them off. All to no avail. I discovered, in the course of this, that they had been bound by a witch to a sacred duty of her own design and a curse that could not be broken till such time as their deaths had been avenged or their fallen sword taken up by the next champion.

Still, I fought them.

Every morning, I made the sacrifices. Every evening, I commanded the spirits away. Every morning, they returned.

During the course of this, the girl and I grew…close. I came to believe I had truly found my life's completion in her arms. I fell in love.

I fell in love, but I knew that there was little hope in it. The sentiment could be returned a thousandfold, and she would still choose her brother in the end. I did not blame her for this. I would have done the same.

Thus I was, to say the least, surprised the night she asked me to stop fighting. She said it was hopeless and painful and it broke her heart for both of us. I was touched, but I was unwilling to surrender my vow. Instead, I promised to stop this futile exercise if we could find another solution.

I knew from the spirits the gist of the spell that created them and I knew that eventually a new champion must arise, but we were unwilling to await that ambiguous end. We took matters into our own hands.

Now when I took my victims, I fed them my blood first. With the helpful guidance of those other ancient spirits, we sent them out like sheep to slaughter, and waited.

One after one, the spirits left. This time, they didn't return.

It was like waking from a dream, when it ended.

It may have been nightmarish at times, but I don't believe I'd ever felt so complete in my life. Still haven't since. We had spent decades rescuing her brother from his personal Hell, and now that he was free…

He wasn't unchanged, her brother.

I never knew him before the ordeal, but I can't imagine someone being born to that…insanity. He hated me for loving his sister, hated her for loving me. He was jealous and possessive and tyrannical. He believed that the world was against him, that he was so tortured only because the world failed to recognize his greatness. That he was a king in a land of beggars, and he deserved his power. He was determined they would yield.

And in all the centuries I've known him since, that hasn't changed.

The only difference is that now, I'm the one being tortured."

**End of Flashback**

I take a long swallow of colorless, burning liquid as I take a moment to regret all my poor decisions and all it has cost me to make them. Removing my new phone from my pocket, I type out a quick reply I probably should have sent days ago:
Elena

She answers on the second ring. "Elena? Is something wrong?"

It's a mark of the growing insanity that is my life that this is a common greeting.

Truthfully though, I'm not sure why I called. A part of me wants to steer clear of her and all her absurd stories and secrets about my life and who I am, but maybe that's why I needed to call her. I'm looking for answers and she seems to be the only one that has them.

It seems to be a recurring theme with us.

"Not exactly," I say. "Um, do you think you'd be up to taking a trip to Grove Hill?"

There's a beat of silence where I think she'll laugh or refuse or something, but she only says, "I'll be there in 5."

She's at my front door by the time I hit the stairs. How does she know where I live? Oh, right. Vicki. I take a deep breath for courage, and open the door.

She's standing there in the cold in her usual style—tight fitting top, short black skirt over fishnets, high-heeled motorcycle boots—but something about her looks different. Her eyes are dead.

"Um, just a second," I say, gesturing a thumb behind me. "I just have to grab my stuff real quick."

"Sure," she mumbles, stepping just inside the doorway. Oh, that's right. I vaguely remember inviting her in the last time. Odd that I'd almost forgotten.

I grab my jacket and purse from the kitchen table, keys in hand, and lead the way to my car. I wonder if she brought her own vehicle, though I realize now I've never seen her drive a car. I suppose she must have run here.

Pulling out of the driveway, I flip the radio on to the preset Top 40 station I had it last. I half expect her to rail and scream about my horrible taste in music—I think maybe I want her to—but she says nothing. She just looks out the window. She doesn't even ask why I called.

"Um, so," I clear my throat, nervous at the silence. "My Aunt Jenna found some stuff on my birthmom this morning. Or...she told me about it this morning at least."

Lia turns to look at me, expression aloof but not discouraging.

"She couldn't find anything on Isobel Flemming—that's her name—but she did find the address for her best friend, Trudy Peterson. When she told my dad her name, that was the last name she used. I figure, if anyone knows anything about her, it'll be Trudy."

She still says nothing, but she looks vaguely interested now at least. This is really getting disturbing.

"So," I say, resisting the urge to clear my throat again, "that's where we're going."
She cocks her head at me in that almost bird-like way she and Damon share. "You know Alaric Saltzman's wife was named Isobel?"

Wow, déja vu. Freaky. "Um, yeah. Yeah, I found out this morning. Stefan didn't think it could be true though. That they're the same person, I mean. It's too much of a coincidence."

Finally, I get the ghost of a smirk from her. "Do you always listen to what Stefan says?"

No, no I don't. Obviously, or I wouldn't be here. Judging from the knowing twinkle in her eye, I think she knows that.

We travel in silence from then on. I'm not sure what it was I expected when I invited her along, but…it wasn't this. Whatever this is.

I wonder what's got her acting so weird. Damon, maybe? He seemed really upset this morning when he found out she was the one to turn Katherine. I consider asking her about it, but…I don't know.

"I can hear you thinking over there," she teases. "Wanna share with the class?"

Before I can think better of it I ask, "Is there something going on? With you and Damon, I mean."

Surprisingly, she doesn't look angered by the question. She doesn't look inclined to answer either.

"Damon and I have nothing to do with you, Elena," she says, sounding like she means to reassure me somehow. I can't imagine why. Though maybe that's the lie and I'm being deliberately obtuse. "You don't need to worry about it."

"Ok," I mutter, because, really, what else can I say?

Oh, and we're here. Thank God. That had to be the most awkward car ride ever.

It occurs to me belatedly, that Lia can't enter the house without an invitation. I wonder if this will present a problem in the very near future, but she doesn't seem concerned about it so…

I almost turn back at least half a dozen times as we walk up the sidewalk, but at the last I manage to knock.

The woman that answers the door greets us with a cheerleader bright smile and standard issue blonde hair, complete with track-suit. She looks almost like she did in that year book picture Jenna showed me earlier. Or, at least, like she's trying to.

"Trudy? Tr—Trudy Peterson?" I say.

"Yes," she smiles, a little surprised.

"My name is Elena Gilbert, this is my friend Natalia," I glance backwards to include her. Lia just offers a small smile in greeting. "I wanted to talk to you about Isobel Flemming."

Trudy still smiles, seeming pleased. "Well, I haven't heard that name in years." A slightly confused look crosses her face then. "How do you know her?"

Oh, this is the hard part. The part where every cliché adopted child story comes to mind and I feel like I'm reciting a script. 'Hi, I think I'm her daughter'. It feels so much more surreal than I imagined to do this in person.
"I think that…um, well…Do you know if she had a baby that she gave up for adoption?"

Utter shock and a little fear. That's the only way to describe the look that crosses Trudy's face at this news. I'm not quite sure what to make of it, but it does nothing to settle my nerves.

"Oh my God," she gasps. "You're her daughter."

A wave of surprise, relief, curiosity, disbelief, I don't know just washes over me as I see the bright, sunny smile that takes over her face in this moment. I don't even know how to respond.

"I was just about to make some tea. Would you like some?"

I glance back at Lia for confirmation. How is she going to get in? That wasn't an express invitation. She only cocks her head again, looking thoughtful. "Uh, sure," I nod.

"The kitchen's this way," Trudy gestures toward the kitchen which I can just make out at the end of the hall.

I step through the door, turning back to see Lia staring at Trudy.

"You know, Trudy," she whispers, velvet soft. "Whoever it is you're so afraid of? I can help you."

What is she doing? Who?

"You c—can?" Trudy asks, fear and hope in her voice.

"I can," Lia assures her. "They don't want you to talk to her, right? They don't want her to find Isobel. You're scared they'll find out. That they'll come for you. I can make sure they don't. They don't ever have to know, Trudy."

"Really?"

"Yes," she says, still in that eerily silky voice. "But you have to invite me in, Trudy. I can't help you if you don't invite me in."

Dazedly Trudy stutters, "Come—Come in."

"Thank you, Trudy," she says, as she passes easily over the threshold.

What the hell? What just happened? Lia must see my shock and fear all over my face, but she only smirks smugly and shrugs.

When the three of us are through the hall, Trudy rounds on Lia. Her eyes are wild. "How did you know? I wasn't supposed to tell anyone! I never told anybody!" she's practically sobbing now, tears streaming down her terrified face.

Lia brings a soothing hand to her arm, she murmurs, "What did they ask you to do, Trudy?"

"I was—I was just supposed to call him when she came. He told me not to say anything. Oh, God, I was so scared."

What?!

"It's ok, Trudy. We won't tell. No one ever has to know. Elena was never here. You don't have to do anything," Lia croons. I'm starting to be really disturbed by that voice.
"But I have to call," she whimpers. "I have to."

"Have you been compelled?!" I finally find my voice. I direct my question to Trudy, but I'm looking at Lia. She just shakes her head.

"Do you know the man who told you to do this? You have his number, right? What if I call for you?" Lia offers.

Trudy is shaking her head repeatedly, reflexively. "No, no, no," she murmurs. "He'll kill me."

"No, no he won't," Lia assures her. "He won't because I'm going to be here, right? I'm going to help you."

"You will?" she whispers, hope filling her wet eyes again.

"Yeah, I promised didn't I?"

"Ok." We watch as Trudy shuffles to the kitchen, pressing a button on a cordless house-phone while we wait in silence.

I don't hear the voice on the other end, but Lia does. Trudy drops the phone in a sudden paroxysm of panic, falling in a trembling heap on the floor, while Lia intercepts the man now breaking down the door.

"You weren't supposed to tell anyone, Trudy," he growls. The man is huge. Over six feet tall and built like a brick wall. Lia looks tiny by comparison, but she doesn't even blink an eye. She grabs his arm at the shoulder and elbow, wrenching it back at an unnatural angle. I wince and look away at the sound of snapping bone when he hits the wall.

He howls and makes an attempt to lunge again, but Lia is on him in a moment. I allow myself to consider how odd this scene looks for a moment. There's a huge terror of a man cowering on the floor while a tiny girl, no more than 5'4" at the most, looms over him. It would be funny if it weren't so terrifying.

"What do you know about Isobel," she demands, pressing down on his damaged arm. I squeeze my eyes at the sound he makes.

"She doesn't want you to look for her. She says to stop looking!"

This seems an odd thing to say in the situation, and instinctively I glance over in my confusion. But he's not looking at Lia. He's looking at me.

"Isobel? Does that mean she's—"

"Do you understand?" he asks. Well, more like demands.

When I fail to answer immediately, he repeats, "Do you understand?"

"Y-Yes," I say hesitantly. He seems relieved by my response, going limp on the floor. Lia steps back, letting him up.

He pulls a knife from beneath his windbreaker, and stabs himself in the neck. Lia twists her mouth in distaste, while Trudy cries, and I try to catch my breath.

That man just killed himself. Someone compelled him to kill himself.
"Well, that was unnecessary. What a mess," Lia mutters, completely unaffected.

You know, you would think after everything that's happened in the last few months that I would be used to this, but I hope I never look at a dead body like it's nothing more than a mild inconvenience. How can human life matter so little?

"Elena," Lia calls, a wary expression in her eye. She approaches me slowly, hands held out like I'm some feral animal. "Elena, calm down. You're going to have a panic attack very soon if you don't calm down."

What? It's only then I notice the rapid acceleration of my heart, my shaking hands, my heaving lungs. I feel like I can't get a breath. I put my head between my knees, breathing in through my nose, trying to regulate my breathing. That's what they tell you to do, right?

When I finally calm enough to hear her again, she says, "Elena, why don't you go wait in the car? I'll finish up here."

I don't even have it in me to argue.

When I get to the car, I settle in the passenger seat. I don't think someone having panic attacks should be driving. I have no idea how long it takes for Lia to meet me, but it feels like minutes, and hours at once.

"Well," she says, smiling at me from the driver's seat. She looks more alive now than I've seen her all day. If only I'd known that all it took was a little torture and some compelled suicide to bring her Suzy Sunshine act back. "That was interesting. Thanks for bringing me along, Elena."

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**Nadezhda**

We arrive just in time to hear Carol Lockwood announce Plumber Joe, Bachelor Number 3 at the Mystic Falls Bachelor's Auction.

You know, it's amazing to me the number of social events they put on in this town. I mean, doesn't anyone have anything better to do than dress up and sip cheap booze while prattling on about the founding of their great little town and how wonderful the 1860s were? It's really rather tiresome.

We squeeze in at a table with Jenna. Elena finds a seat, but I opt to stand. I get a small smile from the aunt in greeting for my trouble.

"You're running late. I thought you weren't gonna make it," Jenna whispers to her niece beside her. Elena shrugs and attempts to look apologetic. Funny.

So, we missed the first half of the event due to some unforeseen complications. Whatever, a little murder, some torture, at least we got here in time for the main event.

"Number 4, Alaric Saltzman," Carol introduces. "Wow, that's quite a mouthful. What do you do, Alaric?"

"I'm a teacher at Mystic Falls High," he answers.

"Oh, beauty and brains, ladies. This one's a keeper. What do you teach Alaric?"
Damon's got that look in his eye. You know the one. I wonder what he's planning.

"History."

"History?" Carol repeats with a smile. "Oh, well give us a fun fact about Mystic Falls, something crazy."

Oh, what, like the fact that it was founded on the ruins of a witch colony and was overrun by vampires in the 1800s. Something like that?

"Oh, um..." Alaric seems stumped in his attempt to avoid the obvious. Damon looks on with a grin, making a mocking gesture with his hand behind his ear as we await Ric's response.

I almost laugh, but I don't see this ending well. Whatever Damon's doing it's guaranteed to be cruel and self-destructive. Yippee.

"He's probably saving the best stories for his date," Carol attempts to save, but really I think she just wants to talk to Damon. He really does have this entire town eating out of the palm of his hand, doesn't he?

"And last, but not least, Damon Salvatore. We don't have much on you."

"Well, I'm tough to fit on a card," he says with a smirk. Yeah, I'll say.

I notice Elena waving and turn to see Stefan in the crowd now. I gathered in the car that she hadn't told him about visiting Trudy. Wonder what he thinks she's been up to all day. Should be one hell of a conversation for which I will most assuredly not be present.

"Do you have any hobbies, like to travel?" Carol asks up on stage.

"Oh, yeah. L.A, New York. Couple years ago I was in North Carolina. Near the Duke campus, actually. I think—I think Alaric went to school there. Didn't you, Ric?"

Oh, fuck. He doesn't know. I see the realization begin to dawn on Elena's face as the rage floods Ric's. Damn it, Damon. You had to choose now of all times to be funny?

"Yeah. 'Cause I know your wife did," Damon says, that cruel smile twisting his lips. "I had a drink with her once. She was—she was a great girl. I ever tell you that? 'Cause she was—delicious"

Stefan comes running through the crowd as Elena pushes herself away from the table, tears in her eyes.

Noticing the look on her face, Jenna asks, "Are you ok?"

"I just—I just need some air," she gasps as she runs from the building.

I sigh. Damon.

"Excuse me, Jenna," I say to the strawberry blonde beside me. "I've got an asshole of a best friend to deal with."

"Your brother?" she asks with a knowing smile.

I give her a tight-lipped one of my own. "Pretty much."

He's flirting it up with some bar skank when I reach him. Gross. I grab him firmly by the elbow—
he'll be feeling that later—and say through gritted teeth, "Can I talk to you?" It's not a question.

I drag him to a secluded corner over by the bathrooms. "Whoa!" he backs away, hands up. "What's with the jealous girlfriend routine?"

"Oh, shut up, Damon." It's meant to be a snarl, but by the time it comes out it's more resigned amusement than anything.

He pouts at me, batting his eyelashes. Jesus. I fight back a smile. "Damon, you should know, Isobel? Alaric's wife? She's Elena's birthmother."

The smile quickly slips from his face. "What?" he hisses. "When did you figure this out?"

"Just today. We were at her friend's house this afternoon."

"Well why didn't you tell me before…?"

"Before you went all 'Damon' on us?" I taunt. He glares at me. I'm getting rather sick of being on this end of those.

"Well, I tried. I called you three times, and I sent a text which you obviously never read while you were busy throwing your little temper tantrum at the bottom of a high ball glass. Look." I say, pulling up my outbox.

To "Twinsky", From "You": With Elena. Found out mom is Alaric's Isobel. Seeing old friend.

"How you like them apples, asshole?"

He blinks down at my phone, frowns at me, stares at the door—

"I didn't kill her," he admits finally. "I just….you know."

"Yeah, I know. So does Elena."

"Huh?" he asks dumbly.

"Well, the conversation didn't go exactly how you'd expect…"

(one hour ago)

"You know what this means. Don't you, Elena?" I ask when the silence in the passenger seat gets too much for me.

"Hmm?" she looks at me, shaking away whatever thoughts were stewing in there. "Oh, I guess…you said he was compelled to keep me from looking for Isobel so…"

I smile; pleased she worked it out so fast. "Yep. Your birth-mom's playing for my team."

"I wonder who turned her…" she muses.

I sigh. Here comes the fun part. "Yeah, so I think I may have an answer for that."

Her head spins so fast, I'm afraid she'll get whiplash from the stress. "Was it you?" she asks, sounding disgusted.
I'm not exactly hurt by the accusation. I did just admit to turning her doppelganger this morning. "No, I didn't. I didn't even know she was a vampire until today. But I am reasonably sure I know who did."

She looks at me, confused.

"It was Damon, Elena," I admit.

"Damon?" she gasps, shocked and horrified by the information. I don't really get it. I don't see why it's suddenly worse now than it was 2 seconds ago.

"Yeah…Ric told me Damon killed his wife, we just found out his dead wife is actually a vampire. 1+1 equals…"

She doesn't seem to be taking this as well as I hoped. In fact, she looks like she's about to have another panic attack. I pull over quickly, but she seems to have finally gotten a grip on herself.


"Elena, look I get that this is all coming at you really fast and it's gotta be hard to wrap your head around, but this isn't the absolute worst thing is it? I mean, she could be dead dead instead of just…dead" I reason.

"Worse? How could this possibly worse? My mother got turned into an undead supernatural creature by my boyfriend's brother. How is that not the worst thing?"

I find myself a little offended by this, but I guess I can try to understand…no. I don't get it.

"Elena…" I start. I shake my head incredulously. I try again, "Elena, you do realize you're dating a vampire, right?"

She looks at me with those judgmental, morally indignant eyes of hers. There's that glare again: 'The Elena Special'. Man, I think it may actually be worse than Stefan's. Speaking of…

"Yes, but Stefan doesn't hurt people."

Oh? Is that what he told you now? Whew, boy! I could bust the top off that can of worms and blow their whole relationship to smithereens if I responded to that statement the way I really want to. But then, I do try not to piss Damon off when he's already mad at me so, I just let it go. Much as it kills me.

"Yeah, ok. But you do see how it's possible to be a person and a vampire, right? Like, choosing this life doesn't necessarily make you evil?"

She stares at me blankly, eyes blinking away in blatant disbelief. "Who would choose to become a…vampire?"

"A lot more than you think, apparently," I tell her. "For starters: Damon (more or less), me, Anna, Katherine, your mom. And those are just the one's you know."

"Ok…but why?"

I shrug, my lips twisting wryly. "Lots of reasons, most of them probably not up to your overly idealistic standards. But…love is a common one. Like Damon. Like Anna. Survival another. That'd
be Katherine's."

She purses her lips in distaste, her voice snidely condescending when she asks, "What was yours?"

"Power," I say shortly, fighting to keep my face smooth and blank when I answer, knowing her likely reaction.

She stares at me a moment before saying, "How could you choose to become something that preys on innocent people? How could you not care about that? Does human life really mean that little to you?"

I snort. "Elena, I was a killer way before I started drinking blood to survive."

I hear her pulse spike at this, though she says nothing.

I shoot her a cruelly amused smirk. "I love that your more afraid of me now then you were 5 seconds ago."

In the corner of my eye, I can see her struggling to gain control over her reaction. She seems to be fighting an internal battle between fear and self-righteous indignation at my apparent lack of human compassion. Looks like the latter won out. It always does.

I roll my eyes at her obvious revulsion. "Your problem is that you see this as an all or nothing, black and white, moral dilemma. But, Elena, being a vampire doesn't make you evil any more than being human makes you good. If that were true, you wouldn't devote entire institutions of law enforcement to protecting people from each other."

She still looks skeptical, not to mention judgmental. "So you don't think the bloodlust changed you? At all?"

I shake my head, frustrated. "All that vampirism does is highlight whatever aspects of your personality best complement the predator. It doesn't make you a different person."

She remains unconvinced.

"My first kill?" I tell her, figuring I'll just regret it later. "I held some innocent girl down on my kitchen table, and carved her heart out with a knife. No, I don't think the bloodlust affected me overmuch."

Rather than wait for her to respond—Man, I really shouldn't have told her that—I say, "My point is, Elena, that we all make our own choices. Vampirism doesn't make you a bad person. If you are truly "evil" as a vampire, you started out that way. I resist the urge to use air quotes. Barely.

I huff a small laugh to myself, another thought occurring to me. "Granted, our moral code does tend to be a little more...relaxed."

"I however," I say, giving her a sharp look, "tend to think that's more a product of emotional maturity and objective practicality than lack of conscience or empathy."

She juts her lip out petulantly. Or maybe it's supposed to look thoughtful. I don't know. She just looks like a toddler throwing a temper tantrum to me. Come to think of it, that sounds like someone else I know...

"What makes you think Isobel wanted it?" she asks suddenly, returning to a safer topic. Probably wise.
I lift an incredulous eyebrow at her as I pull back onto the road. "Because Damon turned her, obviously. He's not that much of a blood-slut that he goes around turning people at random," I explain.

*I taught him better than that*, I add silently.

"He turned Vicki," she challenges.

"Yeah, but that was just to get back at Stefan. Most of the "terrible stuff" he does is to get back at Stefan." Quotey fingers and all. This time I couldn't help myself.

"For Katherine," she scoffs. Jesus, Stefan. What have you been telling this girl? Ugh, if anything at all.

"You'll have to ask him about that. I'm sure there's loads you don't know. Like, for instance, the fact that he knew about Alaric's connection to Isobel and didn't tell you." There, take that, Stefan.

"How do you know that?" she asks warily.

"Because I knew 2 seconds after the word 'Isobel' came out of your mouth. How long has Stefan been sitting on that information?"

From the look on her face, I'd say awhile. Oh, I am good.

**End of flashback**

"So, you see Damon?" I say happily, slapping a hand to his shoulder. "She's probably too scared of me and too annoyed with Stefan to even work up the energy to be mad at you."

The tiny relieved smile he wears at that is far sweeter than any other thanks I'm likely to receive. Slinging an arm around my shoulder, he leads me out the door. Guess this means I'm forgiven. For now, anyway.

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**Alaric**

When I followed him back to his house, I didn't expect the sprawling mansion that the Salvatore's call a home. It's a little Dracula-esque actually. The evil, immortal monster in a beautiful historic home. Yeah, sounds like a horror novel.

I guess I'm more than a little out of my element in this situation. Still, the fear, the adrenaline, the *rage* running through me in this moment makes me feel more than capable. This is what I've been training for since that day over a year ago that I found his picture in a box of her things.

"Damon Salvatore," it read. Her murderer.

I don't care that he's old, and strong, and far more powerful than I'll ever be. That vampire in there killed my wife. He killed my wife and then he *joked* about it. He taunted me with it like it meant absolutely nothing to him that he had stolen a woman—stolen her life—from someone that loved her, that she loved.

He doesn't get to survive that. I won't let him.
I find him sitting comfortably on the couch before a—rather Gothic if I do say so myself, again very Dracula of him—raging fire, Lia snuggled into his side.

Well, maybe snuggling is not really the right—oh, gross. Aren't they siblings?

"Are you really this stupid?" Damon asks, not even turning his head.

My hand-carved stake is in my hand as I close in on him. He stands and turns, just looks at me, utterly unfazed. That somehow makes it about a million times worse. White-hot rage sears through me, but it leaks out in tears.

He takes a glance at the stake in my hand, taking a sip of his drink. His expression hardens.

"Guess so."

With a single falcon-punch to my sternum, he sends me flying over the couch. I land before the fire place.

Lia watches me from her position on the couch, face emotionless—devoid of all feeling. Her feet are comfortably tucked beneath her. She doesn't move a muscle.

I lurch to my feet as quickly as I can, setting them in an offensive crouch.

"You gonna put down the stake?" Damon sneers. There is no fear in his voice, but there is an anger there that should freeze me cold. The smart thing to do would be to turn tail and run, but I owe Izzy more than that.

When he sees that I have made no move except to set my feet in preparation for the next attack, he shrugs. He still carries his drink in one hand.

"Wow, that's courage," he taunts.

"Where's Isobel?" I ask. The one question none of my discoveries accounted for. Where is her body?

"What have you done to my wife?"

He smirks at me, but it is hard and icy cold. I hear the low thunk of glass on wood as he sets it down. He strolls around the couch toward me, brushing Lia's shoulders with one hand as he goes. A tension I didn't notice was there before relaxes at the contact.

"Do you want me to tell you I killed her? Will that make you happy?" he taunts.

"I saw you feeding on her," I breathe.

"Yeah, and I wasn't lying," he says. "She was...delicious." He says the last with relish, reducing my wife to an evening meal. Though I guess for him it was.

I charge him again. This time, it's a blow to my solar plexus that sends me reeling, gasping for breath.

"Oh, come on. What do you think happened? Never considered the possibility?" he taunts, advancing on me. "I turned her."

Oh, God. So she's—she's really. God, that's so much worse.
"Why?" I gasp around my convulsing diaphragm.

"She came to me, all pathetic, looking for vampires," he tells me, a wistful expression on his face as he remembers. "There was something about her. Something I liked. Something…special"

"You turned her because you liked her?" I ask, appalled.

"No, I slept with her because I liked her." His words slice through me, sharper than any knife. "I turned her because she begged me to."

I finally manage to get my breathing back under control, but there is nothing I can say. No defense I have against this. Not even in my own mind.

"Yeah. But you knew that too, didn't you?" he taunts. "Guess she wasn't happy at home. Wasn't happy with life in general. Wasn't happy with you."

This time, when I attack, I throw everything I have behind it. All my grief, my pain, my anger, my doubt, all of it thrown at the feet of the monster responsible. For everything since the day she left.

Because, I realize, she did. She left. She left because of him, but she left because he offered her something she wanted. Something she didn't have with me.

I throw everything I have at him, and this time when he stops me I hope it sticks.

I feel the ripping of muscle, the scrape of bone, and the agonizing searing pain as the stake is turned in my hand and thrust into my own chest. Damon hardly seems to move. It takes so little effort to end my life.

"Ah, this is a shame," he says over my dying gasps. There's no air left in my lungs to scream. "We're kindred spirits you and I. Abandoned by the women we love. Unrequited love sucks."

Somehow, I think it hurts worse when it is removed than when it went it. I hear the sickening squelch of my life's blood as the stake is torn from my chest.

"Sounds like I got a lung," he says, casually, "which means I get to sit here and watch you die."

I watch him toss the stake on the couch at Lia's feet, grab his glass from the table, and sit back beside her. My last sight on this earth is my murderer curled on a couch with a girl and a smile.

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**Damon**

I wrap my arm back around Z's shoulders. She hasn't moved since the teacher stormed in here with a stake and the intent to kill.

I didn't forget what she told me about the ring, and maybe if I were still angry with her—well, as angry as I was this morning anyway—I would have taken it first before I killed him, but color me curious. I've never seen someone come back to life with a magic ring before.

"Thank you," she says, smiling softly at me as she strokes my cheek. "Thank you for not killing him."

I cock an eyebrow at her, giving a pointed look to the bleeding man on the floor.
She rolls her eyes. "You know what I mean."

"He's going to be super pissed when he wakes up," I comment, smirking a little.

"Well, then let's hope it takes a while for him to wake up," she teases. With the hand she still holds to my face, she turns my lips to meet hers. I smile into the kiss.

What is it with this girl and murder that gets her so turned on?

"Maybe I'll just have to kill him again," I tease between kisses.

She chuckles, but her mouth is busy doing other things. My fingers tangle themselves in that thick mane of hair of their own accord, tugging her lips more securely against mine. I nibble at her bottom lip, coaxing her mouth to open for me. She does, with a sigh.

I feel the scratch of her nails against my scalp, her other hand gripping the lapels of my suit jacket, as my tongue tangles with hers. She sucks the wet muscle into her mouth, pulls hard and deep like she's trying to swallow me whole.

The intense suction in that warm, wet cavern is doing some interesting things to other parts of my anatomy.

As she is wont to do, her fangs descend—just a hint—enough to quickly nick the tongue in her mouth, moaning at the taste as blood fills her mouth.

I grab the back of her neck as she moves to straddle me, pulling her closer so I can bite at her lips, returning the favor.

This is my absolute favorite thing to do with this girl. Blood-sharing is a deeply personal pursuit and not one I'd be likely to try with just anyone.

Yet, despite my recent doubts, she's still the one I trust the most and it makes this all the more intense.

The taste, the thrill of her blood is so rich, so powerful; it sets my entire body on fire. I think I could come from just this. And I know she could too. Hell, we have.

She pushes at the open collar of my suit jacket, and I shrug it off quickly knowing she will merely rip it to pieces if I don't comply. When it's off, I settle my hands back on her hips, rolling up into them to grind my hardened cock against the heat of her arousal.

She thrusts back hard in the search for friction, climbing further into my lap until there is literally no place to go that is closer than inside.

I slide a hand up her skirt, the fishnet tights pulled taut and ever so slightly rough as I caress her outer thigh.

I nip and suck my way down her neck, focusing on that spot behind her ear that drives her wild. I let my fangs come into play, but I don't bite down. I merely scrape them along the skin of her throat so lightly it's more of a tickle.

She whines in frustration. I smirk as she grabs me by the tie, forcing me back to her mouth.

Her hands are tearing at my buttons, while one of my hands reaches to tease her breast over her shirt. These tight things she always wears are great for looking, but they soon become frustrating in
these moments.

I grab a handful of fabric in each hand—

"Guys, seriously?" Ladies and Gentleman, my brother the cock-block.

Z drops her head onto my shoulder, grumbling obscenities and some uniquely terrifying revenge fantasies starring my little brother. I consider voicing a few of them myself, but by this point Stefan has moved far enough into the room to note the dead guy on the floor. Oh, right.

"Damon, what did you do?" he cries out, running to land on his knees beside Alaric.

"Dude, what? He attacked me," I retort.

Stefan turns that patented disapproving glare on me. "Damon…"

Z must recognize the tone because she starts trying to roll off my lap with small show of force. Not enough to overpower me, but a less than subtle hint of her intentions. I hold her in place. I really need her to stay right there, for so many reasons.

"All I did was tell him the truth. His wife didn't want him anymore," I shrug. "It's not my fault he couldn't handle it."

It's oddly entertaining having this conversation when I know that any second from now the body is going to rise from the ground like the Night of the Living Dead.

"Like you've been handling Katherine?" he challenges.

"I've been handling it fine," I say with a sharp smile. And it's true, I have. Haven't gone on a killing spree yet have I?

No, I've been too busy saving his girlfriend and being sucker-punched in the nuts by the girl in my arms with every new wave of 'oh so secret' information.

Yeah, I'm not bitter at all.

"And you," Stefan accuses, glaring at the back of her head while the sparks burn behind her eyes. I watch her curiously as those sparks become a raging fire with his next words. "How could you let him do this?"

Oh, now he's asking for it. This time when she pushes away, she uses enough force to send me burrowing into the leather cushion behind me. If it weren't there, I'd be on my ass across the room.

She spins around to growl in his face. "Let? Let? Are you fucking kidding me? Zasranec!#

Stefan looks taken aback which, yeah. You'd think he'd be used to these hostile outbursts by now. She's never made any secret of the way she feels about my little brother.

"Your brother is not a puppy I can house train with a treat and a spray bottle! And if you think for a minute that I have ever had any interest in trying then you don't know me at all," she sneers.

Stefan looks a little scared of her at the moment and I fight to hide my smile. She is seething in the corner of the couch, her arms crossed over her chest, her eyes blazing.

I know she could take either of us blindfolded with both hands tied behind her back, but really she just sort of looks cute over there.
I slide over a bit to rest a hand on her knee, giving her a calming stare when her eyes rise up to meet mine, and watch as the steam goes out of her like magic. I bite back a smug grin.

Her anger evaporates just as quickly as it came, and soon enough she perks up, shooting me a sly smile. "So, how's Elena taking the whole 'my birth mom's a rawr hiss fangs' thing?" she asks, making ridiculous and dramatic hand gestures for every word. I'm feeling better already.

Stefan just frowns at us. I sigh inwardly. Stefan has no sense of humor.

"Um...she's dealing in her own way." Oh, classic Stefan evasion. Code for: 'she's pissed off at me, but I don't want to tell you why because then I won't look like the good guy' and also 'you just killed someone so back off'.

Z glances at me out of the corner of her eye, fluttering her long mascara-ed eyelashes at Stefan. "Why Stefan, whatever does that mean?"

Stefan looks suspicious at that. Granted, she's hardly being subtle with the taunting. I'll admit that I take a perverse pleasure in the fact that we have seemingly made Stefan forget about the dead body behind him. Poor Stefan. So easily distracted. "Why do you want to know so badly?"

"Well, I only spent the entire afternoon with her, Stef," she chimes. "Am I not allowed to worry about her? She's had a hard day."

She's got a point there. I only managed to get half of the story before—Cliffnotes version—and it certainly sounds it.

"Yeah," Stefan nods, sighing and resting back on his ankles a bit. "She told me you helped her out with all that. Thank you for that. Do you think that Trudy woman's going to be ok? Elena was worried about her."

Z tenses for a second, looking guiltily away. In a moment she'll start whistling.

Stefan freezes, about to confront her, but I answer for her, "Oh, you mean the woman that knew about Isobel and her connection to Elena? The woman that was so terrified of vampires attacking that she wouldn't invite a teenage girl in, was afraid of her own house phone, and was so chalk full of vervaine she ought to start sprouting soon? The woman that watched Z here rip a guys arm off and witnessed him completing his compulsion to kill himself? That Trudy?"

We watch as recognition spreads on his face, quickly overtaking the outrage, and eventually morphing into a sad kind of resignation. If there's one thing I can say about my brother, it's that when push comes to shove he sees reason.

"Had to be done, Stef" I say, patting his knee.

The formerly dead history teacher groans on the floor and Stefan falls back in shock. Z grins in anticipation, and I can feel one tugging at my own lips.

Suddenly, he gasps and attempts to sit up. "What happened? What's going on?"

Stefan's brow furrows in confusion. His eyes flick to me as he asks, "Did Damon turn you?"

"Nope!" I chirp happily. Alaric seems to register my presence now and reflexively flinches away. If only he'd had that instinct for self-preservation 30 minutes ago.

Looking between us now, Stefan argues, "Well, you must have vampire blood in your system if—
"No, it's something else." His ring finger twitches and he glances at Z beside me, a look of dawning comprehension coming over his features. He stares at the ring on his hand muttering, "Isobel."

"Ding, ding, ding! We have a winner!" Z yells, excitedly. "Today's prize: the Magic Ring of Not Dying. Available in any color you like, as long as it's black. Matches any shape and size and, for this month only, the Gilbert family crest!" She holds her arms out dramatically, wiggling her fingers on the ends. 'Ta da!' Jazz hands

"What?" Stefan asks, dumb-founded. I barely restrain an emasculating giggle at the sight. "You knew?"

"Well of course we knew, Stefan," she says, giving him a sharp look that recalls her earlier anger. "You didn't think I just went around letting Damon kill my friends, did you?"

Stefan looks a little shame-faced, but, really, he wasn't wrong exactly.

She hops up off the couch, and bends to pat Alaric on the shoulder.

"Welcome to the land of the re-living, Ric. Hell of a thing you have there," she says, gesturing to the ring, and leaves the room.

The teacher is still glaring at me reproachfully as I sit there, finishing my drink. I stay in the room just long enough to make the other two extremely uncomfortable, before setting my empty glass on the table and strolling away. I've got some actually necessary apologies to make.

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**Elena**

"Damon?" I jump, surprised to see the darkly pale beauty of his leather clad body sitting so casually in my window seat. There is something about his posture, something in the ice blue of his eyes that tells me that this is a Damon I have never seen before. He looks…guilty?

I feel I should be scared, or at least angry or something, but he just looks so sad sitting there. There's a part of me that still simmers with moral indignation that he could have been so callous and impulsive as to turn my mother into a homicidal supernatural creature, and I doubt that's going away any time soon.

Rationally, I know he hadn't even met me yet and she was really just some random woman to him at the time, but I'm having a hard time telling my heart that. Still, after what Lia told me in the car about Isobel and the fact that she must have chosen this life, the heat in my anger has mostly just fizzled out.

Well, for this brother anyway.

Stefan and his secret keeping in an attempt to 'protect me from the truth' or whatever stupidly noble thing he thinks he's doing at any given moment is another story entirely.

I can't even begin to process everything else she told me. Then I really would be scared.

"What are you doing here?" I ask when he remains silent. I wonder what's on his mind. I've never seen him look so fragile—so human.

"She asked me to, you know?" he mutters, finally.
This? *This* is what he's beating himself up about? Why would Damon feel bad about something like that? He didn't care when he turned Vicki and she died, so why would he suddenly care now? Unless...unless it's not what he did to Isobel that's bothering him, but what he said to upset me.

I'd say he's right in that if that is the case. I can't help the anger I feel that it is his fault my birthmother is a blood-sucking demon (despite what I feel for Stefan, this is still true) and probably a murderer to boot.

I feel like, whether or not she is still walking around, she's for all intents and purposes gone. Even if I were to meet this version of her, I'll never know that sixteen year old girl that gave birth to me.

I have him to thank for that.

Still, knowing she asked for it...I can't hate him. Not this time.

"I know," I assure him despite the trace of anger that I can't surrender. "Lia explained it to me. I understand."

He looks puzzled by this, as though he can't imagine me being so forgiving on such an issue. In truth, I doubt I would be if not for Lia's rather coarse tactics at getting me there. She's not much for sugarcoating the truth that one. Although, I suppose she and Damon have that in common.

"She said, and I quote, 'Damon's not that much of a blood-slut that he goes around turning people at random.'" I offer him a wry smile, shrugging. "She seemed pretty sure of herself when she said it, so I'm inclined to take her word for it."

Damon laughs quietly, a happy sound I almost never hear from him. Not unless Lia's involved somehow. It makes me wonder sometimes, despite everything they've both said to the contrary, how deep that affection runs.

"Yeah, well that sounds like her," he admits. Abruptly though, he stands, his glacial eyes boring into me with an intensity I can feel in my toes. Somehow, it doesn't scare me anymore.

"But I'm not here to talk about Z," he whispers, his eyes are soft somehow though they pierce through me. He walks slowly, cautiously toward me, giving me every opportunity to back away. I don't.

He cups my cheeks softly in his palms, warm and close, with a certain...tenderness in his eyes that I don't think I've ever seen from him before. Not even when he spoke of Katherine. Not even when he speaks of Lia.

I tense briefly at the contact, but he's looking at me with such soft eyes that I can't bear to pull away. He's so close I can feel his breath on my face. The skin where he touches me tingles. I wonder if he means to kiss me now. I wonder if I should let him.

He tips my head forward, his back, and brushes his lips softly across my forehead. Something seems to break in my chest at the sweetness of it. I close my eyes to hold onto the feeling.

"I wanted to say, I'm sorry. For everything." The words are softly spoken, almost disappearing on the wind. I open my eyes to see him gone, his words gone with him. I tremble.

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**Nadezhda**
"Damon…" I sigh out, as he does wicked things to my throat with his teeth and tongue, teasing every tiny breathy pant out of me that he can.

He's lying over me, chest bare, between my bent knees. My tights lay across the floor with my shirt, my skirt is hiked up to my waist, and he is running his hot, possessive hands all over me. I can hardly think, but I need to get this out.

"Damon…" I try again, only to gasp when he nips at me at the same moment his finger flicks my clit. God, it's too much and not nearly enough. It is torture, the things he does to me.

"Hmm…Have I told you how glad I am you wore a skirt today?" he murmurs, smug in his teasingly sadistic ways. He's rubbing tight, mesmerizing circles around that sensitive little nub, only to pull away at the last minute, right when I feel myself pulse under the heat of his touch. He's killing me.

"Only...half a dozen…times," I sigh.

It's been like this since he got home about an hour ago. I didn’t ask him where he went, it's none of my business and not my place to ask, but I can guess.

There's really only one girl in this entire town he can't have—or thinks he can't have anyway—and it happens to be the one he most wants. Ergo: distraction time.

"Damon, I need to—I need to tell you—tell you something." I stutter, a fresh wave of pleasure overtaking me. His right hand is teasing my nipple, pinching and soothing in tandem with his left beneath my skirt.

In the same moment, he pinches, presses, and bites with human teeth. My eyes fly open and my breath leaves my lungs all at once.

"I'm sorry, I didn't quite get that," he teases.

"Zaebis!" I exclaim as his fingers slide in, pinch, nip, whatever it is I can't even keep track. Lights explode behind my eyes.

"That's what I thought you said," he chuckles smugly.

I laugh, but it's breathless and practically non-existent. With boneless arms, I push at him, knowing that another second of that and I would completely abandon my goal here.

He watches me from the other side of the bed, propped up on his elbow with his head in his hands as he smirks at me.

"Fuck, Damon," I grumble.

"Thought we were getting there," Damon quips.

"Ugh," I flop back on the bed, throwing an arm over my eyes. "Yeah, but I have something sort of important to tell you, so I'm gonna need you to stop being...you for like half a second." I attempt a half-hearted glare at him, but it's a little hard to be mad at him right now.

He flops back, mimicking my pose, but with his arms crossed over his beautifully muscled chest.

"Yes, ma'am," he says.

I roll my eyes. "Damon, look you remember that text I got from Slater, right? Before all this
happened the last few days?"

He sobers the moment the name ‘Slater’ comes out of my mouth. "Yeah."

"Well, I sort of need to reply to him. He's kind of high maintenance and I'm afraid if I don't give him an answer soon, he'll go shouting his discoveries to the roof-tops. Or worse, other vampires."

He looks at me curiously a moment. "Why haven't you then?"

"Because I didn't want to do that without talking to you first," I sigh. "I meant it, Damon. No more secrets."

"Really?" he asks, skeptical, "because I can think of one or two you're still keeping."


"Ok," he says, rising to a seated position against the headboard. It gives him some semblance of control, towering over me this way. I don't mind, but I understand. "Why didn't you tell me about Klaus?"

"Damon, I—" I immediately object.

He holds up a palm to silence me. "I mean, before all this. Back when we first met. When I told you all my secrets…well, most of them, and you were keeping yours the whole time."

I breathe deeply, running my hands over my face. This is a tough one. How to start?

"Do you remember the story I told you back in the twenties? The one about the girl and her brother?"

He looks confused for a moment, brow furrowing as he tries to decide where this is going.

"Well, the brother I promised to save from a haunting? That was Niklaus Mikaelson," I tell him, and even though he still doesn't know half the story, it's a weight off my chest.

"And the sister?" he asks, knowing the importance of this confession. Finally.

"Rebekah," I whisper. I listen to the single word as it flutters through the air in the breeze from the open window.

Rather than press further on this issue, which I greatly appreciate in the moment, he clears his throat to ask a new question.

"So, what all does this Slater guy know?"

"Just that there might be a doppelganger in existence right now, and that Klaus is looking for her. I told him that she wasn't here after all and to keep looking elsewhere. He doesn't understand how dangerous all this is so I couldn't tell him the truth."

"Why not? If he knew the risk then—"

"Because Slater lacks even basic instincts for self-preservation. When it comes to knowledge and his insatiable curiosity, he doesn't know how to be careful. I couldn't risk telling him things no one who's not an Original should even know if he was likely to go blabbing about it."

"And no one else can be trusted because if they knew about her, they'd go straight to Klaus."
"To curie favor, exactly."

"So what do we do about Slater, then? If he knows about Katherine—Katarina—whichever, then he becomes a liability, doesn't he? How hard would it be to find her face with both of those names tied together, and find Elena because of it?"

"That's just it, D. It wouldn't be. It wouldn't be hard at all."

Without another word spoken between us, our decision is made. We're going to see Slater tomorrow.

Chapter End Notes

# transliteration for Russian 'Asshole'

*a transliteration from Russian meaning 'Holy Fuck'

A/N: Also, for the record, I owe that "Magic Ring of Not Dying" quip to Thomas Galvin and his fantastically hysterical recaps
Companionable Ills

Chapter Notes

A/N: So, just for proactive clarification, I decided to make Richmond, Virginia sort of the state's hub of vampire activity similar to New Orleans (both in TVD and TB) as it occurred to me watching 2x9 that there was quite a lot of screaming and vamp-flesh burning going on in that café. Obviously, vampires are still 'in the coffin' in this 'verse, but I figure if they have restaurants devoted to vampire convenience, why not other businesses?

(Reference: 1x16 "There goes the Neighborhood", 2x9 "Katarina", and 2x10 "The Sacrifice")

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Damon

We take the Camaro to Richmond—because Z doesn't have a car and I have a sneaking suspicion that the human populace of small-town Virginia might object to two super-speeding morons running down the highway—so there is at least a half-hour's span of road-trip small-talk to look forward to as we hasten to the murder of an indiscrete friend. The silence is awkward to say the least.

"Do you think I'm a bad person?" she asks into the gulf.

Wow, loaded question. Not to mention, one that sounds startlingly similar to the sorts of counterproductive self-pity she swore me off of eons ago. I consider repeating the line she used on me time and again ('Abandon all hope, ye who enter here'), but she didn't sound as worried by the implication as the question itself would suggest.

Instead, I ask warily, "Why do you ask?"

"It's just something I said to Elena," she mutters.

I assume she's referring to the road trip to Grove Hill yesterday, but I only got the summary version of their conversation, so I am still at a loss.

At my questioning glance she explains, "I told her that vampirism doesn't fundamentally change a person. That if you are evil as a vampire you were also evil as a human. I'm just finding myself caught in my own verbal trap I guess."

"It's nothing," she sighs, looking back out the window.

It's not 'nothing', but it is a question I have been avoiding for most of my undead life as the sort of philosophical pitfall that inevitably leads to brooding and self-hatred of the Saint Stefan variety. Old as she is, it surprises me that Z is still not immune to the wondering. I would have thought she had dealt with her 'demons', such as they are, by this point.

As a vampire, our entire existence depends upon our willingness to feed off the living to sustain our own unnatural lives and the consequence is a predatory instinct overlaid atop formerly human
ideology. The urge to maim and murder becomes a basic tenement of our new species, but the morality and empathy of the human we once were does not disappear in the process. Thus, we are eternally at odds with ourselves and more than a little unstable as a result.

Making it as a vampire then, without going entirely schizophrenic, comes down to acceptance. Acceptance of our own nature, of a new pragmatism, a surrender to instinct over rigid moral principles, but all the while we have to reconcile this new reality with the old one or flip the switch entirely. Of course, the switch won't hold forever, and this is why true sanity is impossible. We're all a little worse for wear in that department.

But as old as Z is, she knows all this. Hell, she has told me all this more than once. She undoubtedly has her own personal semblance of moral ideology that she has adopted in order to live with her actions. I know I do.

This is why her question surprises me. She shouldn't need to ask.

"Do you believe in 'evil'?" I question then, a bit skeptical.

She glances at me once before answering, her eyes darting about my face searchingly. For what, I don't know.

"A day ago, I would have said 'Hell, no', but now…"

"What changed?" I ask, suddenly curious.

"Not sure," she shrugs. "Just something about her eyes when I told her…" she trails off, unsure.

"Yeah," I sigh. I know exactly what she means.

XxX

Elena

School this morning—'the morning after'—as I have taken to calling it in my mind, feels disturbingly unfamiliar. It is a feeling I am becoming increasingly accustomed to, unfortunately, ever since the supernatural world swallowed my normal life whole and me with it.

I am starting to feel that there are two Elena's: the girl I was before (before my parents died, before the vampires) and the girl I am now (complete with bi-weekly kidnappings and Tuesday Murder Specials). At school, with its routinely mundane, normal, activities, surrounded by childhood friends still oblivious to the change, it's easy to feel like Before Elena. Up till now, even being with Stefan hasn't felt abnormal. Well, until he vamps out or something supernatural happens.

Most of the time, I feel like we're in this together. Like, between the two of us we can somehow bridge the gap between the two Elena's. We can be normal and supernatural at once. I feel like I have a partner. This is why his constant need to 'protect me from the truth' hurts as much as it angers me. It makes it seem like he doesn't trust me to handle it. Like, I'm deluding myself in thinking we could be equals. I don't want to be someone's kept woman or a fragile china doll. I want us to be partners. And, I feel like if he really loves me, he should get that. That's what makes this so frustrating.

"Come on, Elena. You and I both know how Lia feels about me. Are you really going to let her come between us? Haven't we already been through that with Damon?"

I am getting really tired of this argument. It's the same one he gave me at the Founder's Party where
we had our first dance and Damon almost killed my best friend.

Whether or not Damon is an evil troublemaking bastard has nothing to do with Stefan's unwillingness to trust me to handle the truth. I won't be distracted from the point this time.

"Ugh! It's not about them, Stefan! Lia and her hostile prejudices have nothing to do with this. Neither does Damon's impulsive decision to…turn my mother," I mutter under my breath beneath the chattering of the crowded hallway.

"The point is that you keep promising to tell me the truth about everything, and then you turn around and keep something else from me that you think I can't handle. Can you see why that would upset me, Stefan?"

He has the courtesy to look shame-faced at that, his brows furrow and those soft green eyes fill with guilt and love. It makes it so hard not to melt right into them.

"I'm sorry, Elena. You're right. I shouldn't keep things from you. I don't want to. You know that, right?"

"Do I, Stefan? You say that, but then you turn around and do it anyway. What am I supposed to think?"

He brings his palms to my hair, holding my face to his. Guiltily, I'm reminded of the last time someone held me this way, ice blue eyes full of a hard sort of light that should be impossible but freeze me through all the same. The forest green of Stefan's warm me through the memory.

"You are supposed to know that I love you. I just need you to trust me when I say that I only wanted to protect you. I'm sorry that I didn't tell you. I didn't mean to hurt you. I just wanted to make sure that it was true before I told you. I didn't want you to get hurt."

I sigh, unwilling to yield the point, but recognizing the futility. I love him. I don't doubt that he loves me, but this is one issue we'll never side on.

"That's just it, Stefan. I got hurt anyway."

I see the pain in his eyes—the love. I see the depth of his guilt at the thought of my hurt. My resolve softens as my heart weeps for him. I can't hold the anger in me before those eyes.

He kisses my hair and pulls me close, hugging me tightly. God help me, I let him.

Anna

I told Jeremy before that my mother and I would be moving away, and at the time I believed it. I believed that it would be the two of us on our own; together again, as a family. But as a family of two tied together for eternity and always outside the 'life' we had once. It's almost bizarre now the semblance of normalcy a house, a life, a 'family' gives me even as it seems a waking nightmare.

Of the 13 or so vampires living in this house (Dia's pyromaniac tendencies took care of the rest) I have been relegated the de facto life coach on human-vampire coexistence in the new millennium. It gives me an odd sense of pride and confidence that there is at least this one thing I can do. Without it, I'm afraid I would go back to feeling like the child I was before I lost my mother to a vampire hater and a magically sealed tomb.
"Hey Bethanne," I greet as I round the stairs. She does nothing but glance at me in reply. I suppose her relationship with Frederick isn't doing her social skills any favors.

To my right, I hear the familiar sounds of the TV in the living room. This brings a bemused smile to my face as I recognize the sixth consecutive hour of NCIS since I turned it on last night in an effort to entertain the increasingly restless vampires chafing under their forced imprisonment.

"You guys have been watching the same thing this whole time? There are over 150 channels. It's called a remote control. Let me show you. Hold it like this."

While several members of our eccentric little family managed to obtain a daylight ring from Emily back in the 1800s, it was far from all. And, honestly, those that didn’t are not to be trusted on their own among the members of a town they have spent the last century and a half hating. It's why my mother has been at such great lengths to confine them indoors.

Too bad some seemed disinclined to heed her warnings.

I find Frederick in the kitchen, snacking on our human barrier while she tenses and gasps at the pain of his undoubtedly vicious bite at her wrist. The woman looks pale enough to drop dead at any moment, and even if he and the others cannot find it in themselves to care about her wellbeing, the least they could do is be practical about it. If she dies, we'll have no defense against foreign vampires. That may not seem like a great concern at the moment, but I haven't forgotten the risks. One word from them in the wrong ear and this house of cards comes down on all of us.

He releases his hold on her arm and she pulls away, looking both relieved and empty in her compulsion addled docility.

"Did you get enough, sweetheart?" she asks.

"Yes, thank you," he responds politely, but his eyes are cold and hard and they pierce right through me.

She smiles at me with a warmth and affection that fairly turns my stomach. "Anna, are you hungry. Would you like a little?" she offers, holding her still bleeding wrist out to me.

I try to mask my revulsion at the sight when I reply, "No, thank you, Ms. Gibbons. Why don't you lay down for awhile?"

Frederick glares at my apparent insolence. I want to kick his ass, but I'm not sure I could take him. More than that, mother would disapprove. "She's fine. Aren't you?" His pupils dilate as he stares at her.

"Of course. I'm fine," is her dazed reply.

I know there is nothing I can do for her really. Any attempt I make to help her will only backfire in more ways than one, and I can't afford to rock the boat right now. Not when I'm alone and outnumbered with Frederick's cruel smirk staring me down. At once, I find myself wishing my mother would return to exert some degree of control over them, but in a moment I hate myself for the thought.

It's wonderful to have my mother back. Really, it is. It's exactly what I have dreamt and prayed for every day for the last century and a half, but I guess that somewhere along the way—between the plotting and scheming, the alliances built, enemies made, the deep soul-crushing loneliness—I learned how to take care of myself. I guess I never really realized how dependent I had been on my mother until I was forced to go it alone. And in all that time I was fighting to get her back, it never
occurred to me to wonder how things would ever be the same.

I suppose, on the one hand, it's to be expected. When my mother turned me all those centuries ago it was with the promise that we would never be parted, not a day in our lives. She promised never to leave me. She promised that I would always be her baby. It just never occurred to me how stifling that could be when my mind eventually outgrew my body.

Still, I love my mother. I never wanted to be parted from her. I don't think it ever really crossed my mind to think it before, but what she's doing here with these tomb vampires—the 'life' she's trying to build on the ashes of the old one—I don't want this. All I ever wanted was to get my mother back, to go anywhere else in the world as long as we were together. It's only now that she's found a reason to stay—one that has nothing to do with me—that I realize what I would have been missing. There is a part of me that thinks maybe staying here wouldn't be so bad. I'd get to see Jeremy at least.

Well, if my mother gets over her outdated hatred of him, anyway.

I know that I too came to this town with every fiber of that hatred alive in my heart for any descendant of the man who took my mother away from me, but Jeremy's different. I like him, and I'm not some stupid child for thinking so. I just wish she could see that.

Stefan

Alaric's class is surreal to say the least. For several reasons, actually. And the fact that this morning marks my first actual lesson with him barely rates a mention.

The last time I saw the man he had freshly arisen from the cold, dead body bleeding out on the floor of our library with a hole in his chest. And if my head is reeling, I hate to imagine what he must be going through. To die slowly choking on your own blood while your murderer looks amusedly on would do a number on anyone, and I doubt Alaric is any exception. I can only hope that he learned his lesson from his ill-planned revenge attempt.

With or without his ring, Damon will only kill him again. This time it may be permanent.

I attempted to tell Elena the story this morning in an effort to calm any fear she might have felt for him after my brother's cruel taunting at the auction last night, but she was too concerned with yesterday's discoveries to listen. She's still angry with me for withholding information from her regarding her birthmother's death yesterday morning, but I still hold out hope that she will forgive me when she realizes that I only did so to protect her. I think she does, but I hate that she seems so hurt by it all.

Surely, she knows that I would never wish to lie to her. It's only that I love her too much to willingly hurt her with potentially false information. I had no intention of keeping it from her forever, but what is there to be gained by delivering truths that will only cause her pain? Besides this, it seems absurd to me that my attempts to protect her are rewarded by her anger while Damon gets a free pass for turning her birthmother into a vampire and then openly taunting her grieving husband in front of half the town. I can only conclude that this is Lia's doing somehow.

I had thought that we were beginning to understand one another now that we share a goal in her returning to Mystic Falls for the express purpose of protecting Elena. It seems I may have been too hasty to rush to that assumption, however. Damon is still her number one priority.
The man in question seems as disconcerted by the sight of me in the light of the new day as I am to see a formerly lifeless corpse flushed with renewed life and leading my history lesson. But it's the looks of mixed sympathy and concern that he continually throws Elena's way that makes my decision for me.

Perhaps the truth about Alaric's run-in with the less restrained inhabitants of the Salvatore residence will help Elena put things in perspective.

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Nadezhda

We climb the steps to Slater's apartment, the heels of my round-toed stilettos clacking on the concrete, and—despite the potentially gruesome task ahead—I have to suppress a smile.

Even through the 2 inches of solid steel that bars our entrance, I can hear the breathy gasps and moans that tell a rather explicit tale of *exactly* what is going on behind that heavy industrial freezer door.

If the look of half-amused disgust on Damon's face is any indication, I'm not the only one.

It seems Slater was a bit too preoccupied this afternoon to read my text. Good for him. If this turns out to be his last day on earth, at least he got to enjoy it. I shudder at the thought.

When I reach the landing, I don't bother to knock. There's some sort of perverse amusement for me in barging into my friend's apartment whilst he is in flagrante saguinum. Maybe I should take it easy on him today of all days, but why end our friendship with a lie?

The heavy door produces a huge rush of air as it opens and I feel a slight chill pebble the bare skin not covered by the banded black bralette and my open jacket, but I can only smirk at the scene that greets me.

On the couch just beyond the front door, a tall brunette goth with dark red lips straddles a nerdy looking man, moaning as his fangs pull greedily at her bleeding breast. For a long moment neither seems aware of our intrusion, but the heavy slam of the steel door sends them scurrying to opposite ends of the room in an inelegant frenzy.

Slater busies himself wiping at his bloody lips, but his girlfriend is considerably less modest.

"Nadia?" she asks, seeming pleasantly surprised.

"Hi, Alice," I smirk, but by this point her attention is not on me. No, in fact she is now shamelessly ogling the gorgeous man beyond my left shoulder.

I half expect her to break into prepubescent fan-girl screams in a moment.

"Damon Salvatore? No. Way."

While Damon cocks an eyebrow at the greeting, I hasten to chase his newest flunky out of the room. "Yeah, yeah, yeah, I know it's exciting, but I kinda need to talk to your boyfriend in private now, k?"

"But—" she starts to protest. I quickly cut off her spluttering objections with a leveling stare.
She nods dumbly and flees the scene. One down, one to go.

When I turn back, it is to catch the slight alarm and confusion on Damon's face at the boyish exuberance of his number one fan. Slater looks positively delighted.

Despite all the gratuitous publicity rippers like Stefan receive it's amazing to me that he seems so blithely unaware of his own fame.

Throughout the vampire world there are subtler rumors—whisperings of the half-crazed, impulsive, but fantastically gifted older Salvatore. There are stories and rumors enough to make of him something of a local legend. For every vaguely awed fan the Ripper of Monterey obtains, there are another three for his darkly complex shadow.

Damon Salvatore's name carries its own infamous weight in certain circles, and they're not as scarce as you might think.

With the unabashed excitement of a school boy in the presence of his idol, Slater greets him with pride, eager to show off his knowledge.

"Damon Salvatore: turned 1864 in Mystic Falls, Virginia by Katherine Pierce (aka Katarina Petrova)," he announces, a boastful grin stretched across his young face at his own knowledge. It soon falls however when his audience fails to be suitably impressed.

"But I guess you knew that…" he fairly pouts.

At the sound of his Sire's true name, a sharp predatory look overtakes Damon's confusion. His eyes harden with sudden ice. "The question is…how do you?" he challenges.

True to form, Slater remains completely oblivious to the implied threat in the question, opting instead to beam in pride and excitement at the opportunity to share his new discovery with a fresh audience. There's a distinct pep in his step as he leads us to the desktop across the room.

"Well, that's a long story," he says as he takes his seat. Sharing an amused look with Damon, I follow the younger vampire to the desk and I watch his fingers as he enters the password. "Kristen Stewart". Ugh. Figures.

Slater turns in the chair to prop his right arm along the back as he explains, "So, you know how I've been interested in the legends that surround Mystic Falls for a while now?"

I nod encouragingly, ignoring the arched brow Damon directs my way.

"Well, when you went to check it out, I decided to dig a little deeper," he continues, finally turning back to the now unlocked screen. He opens his web browser and quickly finds his desired page as he speaks.

"Turns out some of the oldest werewolf legends in the world revolve around that town. I got curious."

Werewolves, huh? This isn't really news to me, but what do werewolves have to do with Katarina?

"Eventually, I got into contact with a guy who seemed pretty convinced that I should be looking into the Lockwood family for answers. I followed up."

Wait, Lockwood? As in Vicki's Jock Douche ex boyfriend? Oh, and the mayor's wife, Damon's cougar friend.
Suddenly far more intrigued, I find myself leaning over Slater's right shoulder as he pulls up a news article dated several years back. It reports an accidental homicide at a carnival of all places. I think I know where this is going.

"Turns out, about 10 years ago, this guy—Mason Lockwood—ran away from home after a suspicious accident wherein he killed his best friend in 'self-defense'. Now that wouldn't be so weird—"

"Except, we know that the first kill is what triggers the werewolf gene," I finish for him. He nods in agreement. "What else did you find on him?"

I throw a glance at my companion, but he seems as absorbed in this story now as I am despite his relative ignorance on the subject.

"Yeah," Slater confirms, pulling up a webpage that looks distinctly familiar and a little odd in this situation. I throw him an incredulous look, but he only smirks. "So, I tracked him down to Florida. I found his Facebook page and this picture came up."

His profile picture is one of those overrated and obnoxious couples' photos, but it's the girl that has my knuckles white where they grip the chair. Oh shit.

Slater moves on, oblivious to my distress. Damon watches the screen with similar anxiety. 
"Apparently, he's been dating this girl since the 'accident'. Again I wouldn't have thought anything of it except that when I looked into her…"

The tag reads: "Katherine Pierce". The wonders of modern technology.

"It was a name I knew. After that I started retracing her steps before Mystic Falls and after awhile I got in touch with someone who knew her by a different name."

I'll bet he did. Highly inconvenient for us too.

We came here thinking to put an end to the trail with this one single liability, but despite Slater's many talents it is clear this was far from the most difficult discovery he's ever made. And if he can make the connection so quickly, there's no way we can protect the secret much longer. It hardly seems worth it to try.

I risk a glance at Damon, curious how he's taking this new turn of events. The corners of his eyes are tight, and his mouth is twisted in a barely suppressed grimace.

Of course, it hadn't occurred to me before but he just found out the woman that left him to fruitlessly pine for her 145 years ago has since hooked up with some sun-baked werewolf in Florida. Ouch.

Still…

"Do you know where she is now?" I ask Slater.

He shakes his head, but not in a discouraging way. "Not now, but I can find out." He jumps a bit, his attention returning to the keyboard as though anxious to jump back into the new task. Probably is.

"I can keep tracking her for you if you like," he offers, getting excited now.

Damon's eyes flicker a bit in reluctant interest. It's all the answer I need.
I pat Slater firmly on the shoulder. "Good, Slater. Do that. I want to know if she so much as sneezes in the wrong direction."

"Can do, boss," he grins.

I nod with a pleased smile as we turn to leave him to it. "Thanks, Slate."

Reaching the door, Damon at my elbow, I turn to meet his gaze again over my shoulder. "And please," I urge, "remember what I told you. If this information gets into the wrong hands…"

Slater nods at my warning, but he already seems distracted. I can only hope the sheer number of times I have told him this will do him some good.

"Yeah, yeah, of course," he agrees blandly.

I sigh, resigned, as I open the door. "Right."

The heavy metal slams ominously behind us as we leave.

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**Jeremy**

Rather than waste my last period staring out a window and doodling idly in my notebook, I decide to take advantage of the currently empty house. While Jenna and Elena are otherwise educationally occupied, I can revisit the chat room I left open on my desktop in all its mildly mortifying curiosity for my new obsession: vampires. I blame Anna.

At first, I thought her weird preoccupation with the old legends and her seeming willingness to believe them was just her own vaguely creepy version of flirting.

Like her bluntness and stalkerish tendencies.

Maybe that's still true. I don't know. What I do know, though, is that I'm starting to wonder if they're really as ridiculous as I thought.

In the end, it was Jonathon Gilbert that convinced me with a single throwaway line that I had on first, second, and third reviews taken for an obvious creative invention—dramatized imagery meant to add some horrific embellishment to his impossible tales of supernatural murder and mayhem.

He spoke of facing the enemy, and "staring the demon in his blood red eyes". It's absurd—insane, even—despite all the supposed evidence of mysterious deaths and animal attacks.

It's obviously impossible to take seriously. It can't be real.

At least, that's what I believed every time I read those words in my ancestor's rambling hand, and it's what I would have continued to believe for what may have been the rest of my life.

The words would have swirled in my mind with newspaper clippings of mauled bodies and images of strangers with blood-stained mouths.

They would have filled my dreams and sketchbook with nightmarish creatures and idle musings of immortality and power, but eventually it would all have faded away. This hole in my chest would only grow, and my questions remain half-formed and unanswered.
But then, I saw her face.

The same face I find behind my front door where she stands happy and smiling with her finger on the doorbell.

"Anna," I say, mouth agape.

"Surprised?" she teases. Yeah, to say the least.

"I, uh, I thought you and your mom were leaving town." I'm not sure whether to be excited or terrified by this situation. If I'm right about her, Anna could be the answer to all my questions and the gaping holes in my memory, but then again…

"Mm," she shrugs with a secret smile. "Change of plans."

What the picture I must make standing here with my jaw on the floor and my eyes glassy in shock. I still have no intelligible response to this.

She must interpret my silence for disappointment because she explains, grimacing with embarrassment, "I'm sorry. I thought you'd be psyched."

I blink, shaking the dazed expression from my face. "No, no, I mean, I am. Of course I am," I stutter.

"Alright then," she chuckles. "Step aside." She casually brushes past me with her usual brash confidence.

Having been here many times before, she heads immediately to the living room couch and the video game I left running at the sound of the doorbell.

"Hey, so, uh, what made you and your mom decide to stay in town," I ask, grabbing the controls from the play station.

"Oh, she got this business opportunity," she explains with a fond smile. Either she's a truly remarkable actress, or there's more truth to this story than I might have expected.

"She's gonna open up a little store. It's always been her dream. So, yeah, we're staying. And I'm thinking of going back to high school, so you'll be seeing a lot more of me."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Enough of homeschooling, you know? I'd like to be a normal teen for once," she grimaces.

"But I have to ask my mom first. She'll have an opinion."

Despite my suspicions about her, she still seems exactly the same weird yet somehow charming girl I met all those weeks ago in the public library. The homeschooled girl that was all too eager to help a relative stranger with an assigned interest in vampire folklore. It gives me an idea.

"Yeah, well I wish you were there now. I actually have to write another paper. I was thinking about squeezing one more out on the vampires of Mystic Falls."

"Really?" she asks, something like anxiety overtaking her usually calm exterior. It's almost enough to convince me I'm right about her. "Haven't you exhausted the subject?"

As the smile slips from her face, I feel my heart rate spike in my excitement and I push harder.
"No, no I want to go deeper. You know? I want to understand why people were labeled as vampires back in the day. I mean, maybe there is such a thing as vampires. They're just different from the way we always thought they were."

"What do you mean?" she prompts.

I watch her closely as I say, "Well, uh, maybe they're normal—and good—just outsiders, you know? Umm…misunderstood."

"You're kidding, right?" she scoffs.

"But don't you think it could be possible? You did give me all that info."

"Jeremy, I made it up, ok?!" she exclaims. "I mean, you were all cute and floppy and I wanted to make a good impression."

She's convincing, I'll admit. I would almost believe her if it weren't for the faint note of desperation I think I detect beneath her words. Still, there's no harm in being sure, right?

There's one more test I think I can try. This one's guaranteed results.

---

Damon

I'm an idiot. And not even the mostly harmless, accidental mouse-killing* kind either. At least Lennie died blissfully unaware of his own idiocy. No, I mean I am actively, deliberately, masochistically, stupid.

Somehow, despite everything I have heard to the contrary, I managed to convince myself that all was not lost.

Somewhere—so deep down that it was hidden even from me—I retained the belief that Katherine was not the heartless, cold-blooded she-bitch that her actions would seem to indicate. That it was still possible in some twisted, selfish way that she ever loved me.

That I might have meant something to her.

I know this because when Z's nerdy friend showed me that picture of the former love of my life wrapped around Lockwolf the Surfer Dude on his freaking Facebook profile, I felt something in me shrivel and die. A tiny, emaciated—but still impossibly living—spark that sounded suspiciously like hope as it burned to a crisp.

They must have support groups for this shit. I'm certifiable.

"We should stay." Z's sudden declaration wakes me from my self-flagellation. The leather of the steering wheel whines lowly beneath my twisting white-knuckled grip as I look at her in confusion.

"What?"

She turns from the window to meet my glance. Her face is expressionless, but her eyes tell a different story. They are too knowing—too pitying. For a moment, I wonder if she really is in my head. Thankfully, she doesn't comment on it.

I watch as a mischievous grin quirks the corner of her mouth in my direction instead.
"We should stay in town for the night. There's this marvelous little club out here that you've got to see at least once," she says. "It's made for people like us."

"What, hungry and horny?" I smirk.

She huffs a laugh, but the look quickly turns pensive. "Actually, that's not far off the mark," she muses.

I snort, smiling in bemusement. "What?"

She opens her mouth to reply, looking away briefly in thought. "Have you ever seen True Blood?"

"That deep-fried Anne Rice re-enactment where staking equals exploding blood balloon?" I scoff. Yes, obviously I've seen it. I've read Twilight for God's sake. Of course I've seen it.

Z chuckles knowingly. "Well, think Fangtasia minus the bureaucracy," she explains.

She pauses for a moment, considering.

"And then add strobe lights and drugged-up teenagers," she adds.

I'm already driving back toward downtown Richmond when I ask, "Why would this interest me?"

She beams in triumph, knowing she's already won. "Don't ask me why, but there are a startlingly large number of vampires passing through this city at any given time. Enough, that someone decided there was a profit to be made in it."

She grips my shoulder through the leather. "Dude, they want you to drink from them. No compulsion required." She slumps back in her seat, a smug grin on her face. "You'll love it, babe. Trust me."

I arch an eyebrow at her. "Is this why you insisted I wear leather pants today?"

She snorts. "If you'd ever seen your ass in those things, you wouldn't even need to ask."

I smirk.

A guilt-free night of booze, drugs, and all the blood I can handle with no Stelena drama, judgment, or K word in sight? Sounds like just what the doctor ordered.

"Ooh, pull in here!" Z directs excitedly, pointing toward a particularly fancy looking hotel for the area. I wonder what they charge a night, considering this is still Virginia. Not that it matters.

If this town is really as vampire-friendly as she's indicated, it's not like we can be expected to pay anyway.

"You stayed here before?" I ask, questioning her sudden exuberance. The cab darkens as we pull into the parking garage.

"Nah," she shrugs. "It just looked expensive. Figured we could kick some guy out of his penthouse suite for shits and giggles. We still got hours to kill."

Ah, Z. You do know me. She winks at my expression, exiting the vehicle.

I swing the door shut as I watch her sashay her way across the covered lot, painted on printed jeans hugging her curves in all the right places. She notices if the saucy smile she throws my way is any
She props a hand on a cocked hip as she waits for me to catch up and I glimpse a string of electric blue fabric snug on the bones above her low slung pants.

I smirk. It's gonna be a good night.

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**Elena**

"After Damon's performance at the Bachelor's Auction yesterday, Alaric followed him home looking for revenge and answers about Isobel. Damon killed him."

"Oh, my God," I gasp. "But then how—"

"You know that huge ring he always wears?" Stefan asks. "The one he says is a family heirloom?"

At my stunned nod, he continues, "Well, it's apparently a lot more than that. According to Lia, it's spelled to protect the wearer from supernatural death."

"Wait, Lia? But—how—when—" I stutter.

"Yeah, she was there the whole time just watching. She knew the whole time that he wouldn't stay dead. She's also known since the night of the decade dance that Damon killed Alaric's wife—well turned, I guess—and never told anyone but Damon."

So Damon knew at least. I guess that means he knew that killing Alaric wasn't permanent. I would like to take some comfort in that, but I don't imagine dying was the way he'd have liked to find out. Poor Mr. Saltzman.

Though, I would have expected Lia to tell him at least. She seems to be fond of him in her own way.

"Why not tell Alaric?"

"I don't know. Maybe she thought he wouldn't believe her if he didn't experience it for himself. She just laughed when he woke up, like the whole thing was some big joke to her."

Sadly, that doesn't really surprise me. I can just imagine the two of them yucking it up at Stefan's distress and Alaric's ignorance, killing him and leaving the body for Stefan to find rather than let them in on the joke.

"So what, it was like some sick initiation into the secret world of House Salvatore?"

He offers me a wry half-smile in answer.

Honestly, I'm not entirely sure how to feel about this. Nothing's really changed since yesterday. I mean, my mother is still a vampire—I'm dealing with that one and I'm trying not to let my feelings cloud my judgment where Damon's concerned—and Ric is still alive to talk about his failed attempt at avenging her.

I could curse and rail at the universe, hate Damon for being an impulsive psychopath, Lia for her casual cruelty and general apathy, bawl my eyes out over my mother's change of species, but what would any of that really accomplish?
With everything going on lately, I feel emotionally drained. I'm not sure I could conjure up the energy to fuel a good mad if I wanted to.

I think at this point, I'll have to resign myself to pain and bitter disappointment. It's the only thing that never seems to change.

When did this become my life?

Anna

"Alright, roast beef, turkey, what do you want?" Jeremy calls as he rifles through the meat drawer of his kitchen fridge, tossing each on the island in turn.

"Uh, let's do the works. Pile it high," I say, having no particular preference in this.

"Alright, I like your style," he smiles. He picks up a large knife and prepares to slice the tomato in front of him. "Will you, uh, grab the bread for me?" he asks, gesturing to the counter behind me.

"Ok," I agree easily, turning for the loaf.

Behind my back, I hear the distinctly metallic sound of steel dragging across flesh. The world's most tantalizing scent fills the air between us: blood.

"Ah!" he exclaims, hissing and grunting in pain.

I whirl about to stare at him in shock. There is no way that was an accident, but the alternative…

"What are you doing?" I gasp.

"Mm, it's just a cut. Will you hand me that towel?" He holds his hand outward, like he knows exactly what he's doing to me. Then again, if he did I can't believe he'd be this stupid. Forget exposing myself, I might kill him.

"I—I—I can't," I stutter, determined to maintain whatever distance I can. He seems to have something else in mind.

"You got a problem with blood, Anna?" He's practically daring me. I very nearly salivate at the smell of it—the image of the boy I can't seem to shake extending a hand in the single cruellest temptation I could ever imagine.

"Mm mm," I shake my head, gritting my teeth against the demon slithering just below the surface.

"What's the matter?" he challenges, stalking toward me.

Funny that in this moment I spend warring with myself against the instinct to tear out his throat, I'm the one that feels cornered. The implied threat in the situation is doing nothing for my control. I feel the predator chomping at the bit, pricking my inner lip with her fangs.

The blood pools in his hand, seeping through the wound all thick and appetizing. The smell is nearly irressistible.

With what little mind I retain through the haze of bloodlust and barely there restraint, I wonder whether he knows the danger he courts here tempting me this way. Does he know what I could do
to him? God, there's barely a part of me left that cares.

"It's just blood, Anna."

Oh, if he knew anywhere near as much as he thinks he does, he'd never call it just anything. 'Just blood'? How about 'just life'? Just being? Just anything but 'just blood'.

He keeps pressing forward, that sweet ambrosia in thick red flow stretched toward me in offering. Finally, I can't stand it. I attack, throwing him back against the fridge.

"What are you doing?" I demand, the demon beneath my skin unleashed to full effect. But somehow, still, despite gasping for breath beneath my throttling hand, he doesn't look scared.

"I knew it," he breathes, triumphant in having bated the beast with his own life. Does he want to die? How can he be so careless with himself?

He smiles, looking down in my eyes with an expression I can't begin to place. It looks like acceptance. It looks like excitement.

The trek from his eyes to his hand takes only a moment, but when mine latch again on that steady stream of blood time stands still.

I can't deny what is being so happily offered to me. I take his hand in mine, my fangs aching for the bite to come, my veins thrilling at the thought of it. I see no hesitation in his eyes. If anything, he encourages me.

I bring his palm to my lips, and I bite down. I feel as my teeth sink easily into the tender flesh, my tongue lapping at the spilled liquid as fresh, warm blood fills my mouth.

I don't know whether it's the situation itself—the sacrifice having been offered to me so freely—or whether Jeremy is actually special in this, but I nearly moan at the taste. He's delicious.

"Jeremy!"

His reflexive jerk at Jenna's call snaps me out of it. I allow him to walk away. God, I have to get out of here. Maybe my mother was right. I'm such an idiot.

---

**Damon**

The pearlescent pale skin of her exposed midriff fairly glows in the moonlight (as does the dark blue piercing in her navel), setting the tastefully scattered glitter from her shoes to her eyes alight.

After securing ourselves the hotel's finest suite—with rather hysterical ease, I might add—Z had set about decking us both in what she termed 'club-appropriate attire'.

For her this meant an additional hair clip she pulled from God knows where to secure the normally loose sweep of hair behind the silver arrow-shaped barbell through the top of her right ear and a single painstakingly applied swipe of royal blue glitter beneath her already darkly bedazzled eyes.

Somehow, this seemingly simple process took well over an hour as it was apparently of paramount importance that her eye-makeup perfectly match the bright blue celestial pattern of her jeans.

By the time this was finished, I was justifiably worried for my own reformation, but she merely
took one look at me and promptly tore my shirt in half.

When I protested, I was informed that I was 'far too pretty to be so overdressed'.

I'm still smiling.

The club is built into an underground chamber similar to a large bomb-shelter deep in the inner recesses of the city. A towering brick wall of a man bars the slanted entrance. His ebony skin against the flashing black lights leaking through the cracks of space surrounding the solid black doors casts the white of his teeth in such stark clarity they're almost blue.

"Nadia!" he greets amiably in a deep booming voice to match his stature. There is a subtle hint of fang in his wide grin. "Damn, it's good to see you. Been a long while."

"Thanks James. It's good to be seen," she returns, her smile just as sharp. She takes my hand, redirecting his attention. "This is Damon. He's a friend."

"Friend, huh?" he comments, giving me a speculative once-over. At her pointed look, I flash him some fang of my own. It seems to be the currency around here. Z wasn't kidding when she said they were friendly.

Instantly, his cold reception thaws and he offers me a hearty laugh in welcome, gesturing us both inside though I notice his eyes follow her as we walk away, chilling as they watch me pass.

The moment the doors open and we duck inside, I am hit with a wave of sensation from the vibrant lightning fast flashes of color along the walls to the thrumming hypnotic beat of the music. The smells of blood and alcohol hang conspicuously in the air above the teeming mass of sweat-soaked bodies. It's all a little overwhelming.

And in a shocking twist that surprises exactly no one, the entire club (at least the human accoutrement) is decked out in techno/gothic resplendence. It suits the vampire theme nicely. This is hardly the first time I've done the rave scene—it's not even the wildest I've seen in my time —and it certainly won't be the last, but it tends to take a bit to reacclimatize oneself to the discordant environment.

Sometimes, ultra sensitive vampire senses can be a literal pain.

As though sensing my momentary distress—in fact, likely sharing it—Z squeezes my hand and offers me a sympathetic smile as she directs my attention to the long and fully stocked bar across the room. Now we're talking.

The bartender offers her a friendly smile in recognition when he notices her and she throws a two fingered gesture in his direction, hooking a thumb at me.

I arch a quizzical brow. Just how often does she come here? She only shrugs, smiling mysteriously, as she claims the single empty barstool and I prop an elbow on the bar beside her.

The man delivers our drinks in record time, dropping both handfuls of shot-glasses in front of us.

Evidently, 'two was the signal for 'two rounds', I note as I watch him line two rows of three-deep glasses on the bar. The clear liquid reflects every vivid splash of color thrown by the strobe lights as they flash in time with the heavy electronic bass.

Vodka. Typical.
Thanking him with a smile, Z raises the first glass in my direction. She watches as I follow suit, waiting for the verdict it seems.

"Payèkhalee!#" I toast, smirking irreverently. Let's get wasted.

She nods, pleased, as she clinks her glass with mine and we down our first shots in unison. The second and third glasses meet the first with almost super-human speed and I swallow hard at the familiar burn as I feel the slight buzzing of the alcohol's beginning effects.

One of the benefits to vampirism is the unnaturally fast metabolism that allows for almost instantaneous effect. Downside: it burns off almost as quickly. You just have to keep drinking.

The next round disappears just as quickly as the first, and I feel the pleasant buzz settle in with an accompanying spread of warmth. A relaxed smile finds its way onto my face.

From the looks of things, I'm not alone.

The crowd cheers to the beat of the bass drum intro as the next song blares from the speakers, blue and white strobe lights pulsing with the beat. "Oh, I love this song!" Z shouts excitedly, a beaming smile overtaking her face.

I recognize the opening synthesizer's sultry rhythm to Nine Inch Nails' "Closer" as she jumps happily from her seat and charges into the writhing mass on the dance floor, half dragging me behind her. The raven's wings seem to move of their own volition against the glowing white of her skin beneath the black-light.

You let me violate you...

She drops my hand as she dances her way into the center of the room, brushing hands and bodies with every pass and drawing several eyes to the hypnotic grind of her undulating hips.

You let me desecrate you...

She's quick to find a partner in this fashion—a sexy brunette all too quick to get her hands on my girl.

You let me penetrate you...

She brushes a hand down Z's bare arm as she rocks her hips into the space between them.

You let me complicate you...

Z throws her head back in a seductive flip of blue-black hair and welcomes her with a flirty smile, pressing their bodies together from chest to thigh as they move to the sensual beat of the song.

Help me! I broke apart my insides!

Brazenly, the girl lunges forward at the seeming invitation to press a hungry kiss to Z's smiling lips.

To her credit Z doesn't let her surprise faze her at all as, without hesitation, she returns the oral assault with equal fervor.

Help me! I got no soul to sell!

She pulls away a moment later with a saucy grin, intertwining their fingers as they roll their bodies
to the liquid surge of the music.

*Help me! The only thing that works for me…*

I notice the still bleeding puncture wound on the brunette's tanned wrist as they raise entwined arms in the air, and remember that Z told me it's the custom here to leave them unhealed. Something about tagging the humans and warning against accidental exsanguination.

*Help me get away from this hell!*

It's obvious by the way she moves that the girl's panting for the sort of pleasure only a vampire can provide.

*I wanna fuck you like an animal…*

Z winks at me over the girl's shoulder, no doubt guessing the direction of my thoughts. The smirk she's throwing my way seems to indicate she is more than happy to accommodate.

*I wanna feel you from the inside…*

I take a moment to appreciate the tempting image, before I join them amid the crowd. Hands stroke and grasp at my exposed chest, and a few at the tight leather of my pants, as I wade through them.

*I wanna fuck you like an animal!*

I set my hands to the brunette's shimmying hips, pressing myself into her backside as Z and I sandwich her between us—warm, tanned skin writhing between two palely cold predators. The girl cocks her head up and back to meet me and she hooks a hand about my neck, pulling my lips to hers.

*My whole existence is flawed!*

Immediately, she thrusts a hungry tongue into my mouth, piercing playing with my blunted canines until they elongate under her ministrations. As her blood wets our dueling tongues, she moans. She pulls her mouth from mine and stretches her neck invitingly beneath me. Needing no further encouragement, my fangs descend, plunging into her tender flesh.

*You get me closer to God!*

A mere beat later, the girl sighs and I feel Z's hair brush my shoulder as she joins me. Wary of overindulgence in a single source, we pull away after only a few mouthfuls. The girl whines at the loss, but Z takes my hand and backs away further into the crowd, taut abs flexing as she saunters away.

She stops only when her shoulders meet the torso of a leanly muscled blonde teenager. He barely seems to register the contact as his dazed eyes look to the ceiling above, his body instinctively swaying with the music.

The boy's eyes are blown black with lust and intoxication as he looks at us, but Z only smiles as she turns to face him, pulling me hard against her body as she does so.

The boy licks his lips once, staring at me, and for the second time tonight I find my mouth under assault of a lusty teenager. Not that I'm complaining.

*You can have my isolation…*
Out of the corner of my eye, I see Z bite at her bottom lip as she watches below us and—just to screw with her—I rake my nails through the boy's hair, scratching lightly at his scalp.

*You can have the hate that it brings...*

Predictably, he whimpers and parts his lips, allowing me to seize control of the kiss.

*You can have my absence of faith...*

Unable to restrain herself, she tears into the pectoral muscle just before her eyes, quickly reaching the artery.

*You can have my everything...*

His blood hits the air and he hisses a breath at the sensation, throwing his head to the sky. It's not a negative reaction by any means.

*Help me! Tear down my reason...*

Seizing his wrist, I stroke the veins just there beneath the thin skin before biting down.

*Help me! It's your sex I can smell...*

As expected, the blood that fills my mouth at my confident pull floods my veins with far more than life and alcohol.

*Help me! You make me perfect...*

Almost instantly, I feel the drugs hit my bloodstream and I know it won't be long till I'm flying as high as he is.

*Help me become somebody else...*

Content to seek mainly alternative means of intoxication, I take only a few more gulps before licking up the excess and leaving them to it.

*I wanna fuck you like an animal!*

As I shift and slide back through the hot crush of enraptured bodies, the world fades away into the ebb and flow of spell-binding sensation.

Colors brighten in a vivid, vibrant tableau of impossible color, the sultry bass line of the music resonates through me, and every cell in my body ignites in a pleasant, tingling frenzy.

My body continues weaving through the crowd, fangs tearing and tongue licking at the deep red ambrosia as I float above them.

There's something enthralling about these moments—so deliberately addicting about the weightless sensation of psychological nirvana while the flesh below feels every tiny brush of fingertips, every nip of teeth and swipe of tongue like the most overwhelming full-bodied pleasure.

Even pain and discomfort pulse in a bright wave of beautiful sensation. Hunger and lust sing in the air, clouding the breath and spaces between in a haze of mindless ecstasy.

I know them here. I know them all. They are mine.
Even when the chemical high fades from my system, the gifted blood soars in my veins. Though, the borrowed pulse is set to a new tune now.

An electric green fan of laser lights adds a higher note to the vivid color play and Manson's "Tainted Love" oozes from every corner. The scene flickers and flares with every sweep of light and sound. My blood sings with it.

_Sometimes I feel I've got to…_

I cast an eye through the crowd, quickly spotting Z gyrating between a pair of blonde humans across the way—both sporting dripping bite marks like trophies on their fair skin.

_….run away_

Her back is pressed to the man's chest with barely an inch to spare between them, but it's the woman that has her attention.

_ I've got to…get away_

Even from this distance, I can feel the lust rolling off them in waves as they seem to make a concerted effort to swallow each other whole.

_Got to…get away from the pain that you drive into the heart of me_

Black veins slither beneath Z's eyes and the kiss is hard and violent with the addition of fangs and blood to the battle of tongues and lips. Still, it's not until I see the blonde girl slip a hand down the front of Z's jeans that I find the presence of mind to look away.

_The love we share seems to go nowhere_

A silky mass of chocolate brown curls brushes the bare skin of my chest as the sexy woman in my arms grinds herself back into me, writhing in my lap.

_I've lost my lights. I can’t sleep at night!

Miles of smooth, olive skin lay bare before me in her shorter than short halter dress as my fangs sink deeply into her exposed shoulder.

_Once I ran to you_

She moans as I thrust myself against her squirming ass and she presses harder against me, begging for more.

_Now I'll run from you_

I dislodge my teeth from her shoulder and grasp her chin in my palm, pulling her into a sharp and hungry kiss. Blood stains her mouth and chin, but a single look from her stops my undead heart.

_This tainted love you've given_

There's a seductive smirk on her painted lips—long lashes curl flirtatiously at me—but the dead look in her big brown eyes brings my thoughts to a grinding halt. They're Katherine's eyes. They haunt me.

_I give you all a boy could give you_
Oblivious to my momentary distress, the girl throws a seductive curl over her shoulder and a coy wink my way as she takes my hand.

*Take my tears and that's not nearly all*

The familiar sashay of that knowingly provocative walk enrages my intoxicated mind as the rotten memories of another duplicitous succubus invade my thoughts.

*Tainted love*

With a predatory gleam in my eye and a feral grin, I follow her.

*Tainted love*

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**Anna**

Angry and hurt—mortified even—at my own stupidity, I stalk back to my bedroom, flinging my purse on the bed.

"Where were you?" my mother demands at the door. Great. That's the last thing I want to talk about right now.

"Out. I was out," I snap.

"Annabelle, don't do this. I can't fight you too."

The look on her face faintly breaks my heart. This is my mother. It's not her fault she was right. My shoulders slump—ashamed. She's just looking out for me.

"What?" she asks, puzzled by the immediate change in my demeanor.

I feel tears fill my eyes as I look at her, my heartache spilling out.

"I'm sorry," I say.

Her eyes soften, and she pulls me in tight. I missed her so much.

---

I'm waiting for him by the time he makes it to his bedroom.

"What the hell!" he gasps.

"I could have killed you," I growl.

"Yeah, but you didn't," he says, still irrationally unfazed. His lack of concern for his own life is seriously starting to piss me off.

"I should have," I tell him. I almost believe it.

"But you didn't," he repeats. There's a starkly white gauze bandage wrapped around his wounded hand as he continues to stalk toward me.

"How did you know?" I ask the question that has been haunting my thoughts all night. Whether I mean the vampirism or my reluctance to harm him is unclear even to me.
"I knew this girl—Vicki," he says, looking nervous for the first time tonight. We really need to sort out his priorities. "She uh…she was attacked by an animal—a bite to the neck."

I'm not entirely sure what to make of this story, though the twinge of jealousy at his words belies my silence.

"She started acting crazy. You know, weird, and it seemed like drugs," he explains, that same vaguely smug smile finding its way back to his face. "But then, you showed me those articles."

God, this again? If I had just fed him to my mother like I was supposed to it wouldn't matter now that I had been stupid enough to bond with a Gilbert over vampire stories. I really am an idiot.

"And then I saw your face and how it changed."

Yeah, when I kissed you and nearly lost control. Story of my life.

"That night in the cemetery when I kissed you," he finishes.

God, this would be so much easier if I could kill him. If I could bear to hurt him. Or, hell, if I could bear to make him forget me. But I just…can't.

"Look…" I say instead, "you know you can't tell anyone, right?"

He scoffs, "Who'd believe me?"

"You'd be surprised," I warn seriously. Something like understanding washes over his face. Finally. Good.

"Why didn't you?" he asks after a beat of silence. "Kill me?"

Million dollar question.

"I don't know," I admit. "Maybe I'm a sucker for guys like you."

"Like what?" he questions.

"Lost," I murmur, but the softness of the moment is quickly lost in the reemergence of my earlier anger.

"Why would you confront me about it?" I demand, honestly enraged by the danger he so recklessly charged into. I'm careful to keep my voice below human hearing when I challenge, "Why would you risk it?" He's not allowed to get himself killed. Even if I'm the one he's in danger from.

"Because if it was true, maybe it was true about Vicki," he admits, but it's his next statement that renders me speechless.

"And also because…” he says, visibly gathering courage to make his claim, "I want you to turn me."

---

Nadezhda

The moment we enter the bedroom, I kick off my shoes and fall face first on the bed. I don't even bother with the covers, too tired and too dizzy to even consider moving.
Unfortunately, the heat of my own breath quickly flushes my face with stifling warmth and I am forced to roll over to my back. I settle for covering my eyes with a pillow instead.

Now if Damon would just turn off the freaking light, maybe I could get some sleep. When I hear the flick of the bathroom light-switch I expect the sudden jump of the mattress under his careless weight.

What I don't expect is the button snap that follows.

"What are you doing?" I ask, somewhat confused at the rush of cool air I feel as his fingers unzip my jeans. I mean, not that I'm not grateful to be rid of them, but there's no way he has the energy for that tonight, surely?

"Just let me take care of you," he murmurs, as he peels the tight denim from my legs, leaving me in nothing but a crop top and a barely there thong.

Shit, I've been wound tight as a spring since the lovely Erica gave me that naughty little show back at the club, so if he's offering to do all the work, I guess I can't complain. Whatever.

"Mmm…ok." I don't even bother to dislodge the pillow from my face.

He gently spreads my thighs apart and I feel his huff of amusement as a breath of cool air on my suddenly molten hot center.

Wedging a hand beneath me, he slides a finger along the fabric strand from the cleft of my ass to my aching hole, nudging the small electric blue triangle aside to brush lightly through my wetness.

I bite my lip beneath the pillow to hide my whimper. He needs to stop teasing me right fucking now!

As though hearing my thoughts, he surprises me with an abruptly forceful pinch to my swollen clit.

"Ngh, fuck!"

He backs off immediately, removing his hand from me entirely. Before I can complain, however, something warm and slick and delicious slides in to replace it.

His tongue plunges deep and hungry and, without further adieu, my entire body melts into pliable goo.

He hums appreciatively as he feels me relax into him, pushing myself up into his mouth as he fucks me thoroughly with his tongue. I grab at his hair as my thighs clench around him, holding him to me.

He flicks his tongue up to brush my clit, unceremoniously plunging two fingers hard and deep into me at the same time. Both fingers and tongue work me over at inhuman speed and my mouth falls open in a silent scream.

He sucks the swollen nub into his mouth, sucking hard with the barest hint of teeth—just how I like it—his fingers thrusting mercilessly all the while.

"Damon!" I come with a shout, the world ablaze behind my eyelids. My entire body seems to explode with the force of my orgasm, clenching and pulsing tight around him. I think I might have actually blacked out for a second there.
Finally removing the pillow from my face, I stare at him in wonder. He gives me a smug grin with shiny lips. He knows exactly what he does to me.

"God damn, you're good at that," I say breathlessly as my racing pulse begins to slow.

Crawling up the bed to lounge beside me, he props an elbow on the mattress and arches a teasing brow at me. "Better than that little blonde you had earlier?" he taunts with a cocky smirk.

"You saw that?" I laugh, not in the least embarrassed, as I roll to my side to face him.

"Mm hmm," he smirks, dropping his head to the pillow as he strokes my arm.

"I didn't think you noticed," I admit with a smirk of my own. "You seemed pretty taken with that sexy little minx you were dancing with. Whatever happened to her anyway? You kind of disappeared."

Instantly, the smile leaves his face as something dark and self-loathing fills his eyes.

"Hey, what's wrong?" I ask worriedly. What the hell was that?

He doesn't answer me. He just rolls to his back with closed eyes pinched at the corners. I can almost literally feel the pain emanating from him.

"Damon?" I prompt, growing rather frantic now. What happened that's making him look like this? What's going on?

He ignores the concern in my voice, opting instead for distraction. He lunges at me, his forceful kiss taking me utterly by surprise.

I react instinctively at first as his tongue shoves its way into my mouth—I can still taste the hint of myself on his lips as he does—but the need in it is what shocks me enough to push him away.

It's then I notice the fine tremors wracking his body. If I was worried before, I'm positively terrified now.

"Baby, you're shaking," I gasp, holding him slightly apart from me.

Again, he says nothing. He makes as though to kiss me again. "Damon, what—" I start, but he only drops his head to my chest.

"Ok. Ok," I soothe, rubbing his shoulders lightly as I try not to freak out myself. I have never seen him like this. Ever.

I gather him to me, pulling him into my arms with a hand around the back of his neck. I scratch my fingers lightly against the soft hair there, as my other arm strokes the smooth expanse of his back. The ease with which he settles against me fairly alarms me. It reeks of desperation.

His forehead tucked snugly beneath my chin, his cheek on my bare chest, I do something I once swore to him I never would.

I enter his mind uninvited.

In the brief glimpse I allow myself before scurrying away like the cowardly traitor that I am, I am shocked into silence.

The bloody, bitten body of a young girl in a red party dress lies broken and still on the bathroom
I nuzzle my face against the jet black hair beneath my cheek and hug him tighter.

He's already asleep.

Chapter End Notes

* Reference to Steinbeck's "Of Mice and Men" if it was too random to follow
# Transliteration of a common Russian toast, similar to English: "Let's get started!"

A/N 2: I know the whole club scene was way more nineties than 2009, but I just couldn't help myself. Marilyn was just so perfect for the dark metal/electronica vibe I was going for. And who doesn't love Trent Reznor?
Trust me, you should be grateful this isn't season 3 (or I guess S4/5 in TVD's wonky timeline). I would have definitely thrown some Korn at you. "Narcissistic Cannibal", anyone?
Love Letter

Chapter Notes

A/N: Ok, we're making a brief foray back into canon 'verse with this one. Boring, I know, but it's important. I also promise Delena time this chapter for anyone annoyed by the slow pacing of that pairing (I am too if it's any consolation). Although in my defense, I did warn you.

R&R Pretty please with a naked Damon on top?

(Reference: 1x16 "There Goes the Neighborhood")

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Caroline

Matt's mother hates me.

How pathetic is my life that this seems like the end of the world? I mean, he and his mother may not be close, but that doesn't mean that her opinion means nothing to him. It can't be a good sign that Kelly Donovan so utterly loathes me that she can't even be bothered to smile when I walk into a room. God, if looks could kill…

Worse still, she absolutely adores Elena. If that's not a tragic statement on the story of my life, I don't know what is.

"We can watch a movie at my house," Matt suggests as we enter the school.

"Mmm," I scratch my nose at the absurdity of that image. He's kidding, right? "With your mom and a six-pack?" I scoff.

"You know, you don't really help the situation," he says reproachfully. "You could at least try to be nice."

I pull my hand from his grip, offended. Me? He thinks I'm the one that needs a lesson in manners? Is he being serious right now?

"Oh, I'm sorry," I chuckle scornfully, turning to face him as we reach my locker. "It's hard for me to show kindness to people that hate me. I'm not that evolved."

He frowns a little at me, but his eyes shift distractedly over my shoulder. I turn to follow his gaze. Elena and Stefan. Why am I not surprised?

At this point it's more than just a twinge of jealousy I feel every time I catch him throwing longing glances in her direction. It hurts.

"So, a movie tonight," I say, trying to regain his attention.

"Whatever you want to do is fine by me," he assures me with a smile. Is it wrong that that makes me feel worse? "But I'm late and I gotta go, alright?"
"Bye," I mutter, watching him walk away as I consider our current dilemma. I knew going into this relationship that he wasn't over her, but sue me for hoping he'd actually want me for me.

Am I really just the rebound girl?

Well, if nothing else I guess I can hope he realizes in time that he and Elena are done. She's way off in Stefan land and his pining away for her is only hurting us. It means nothing to her.

That gives me an idea.

I spot Elena and Stefan at their lockers and quickly move to intercept her before I can think better of it.

"Hey, Care," she smiles. Ever the darling. "What's up?"

I bite my lip, thinking. Oh, screw it. I'm going for it. "How would you feel coming out with me and Matt tonight?"

She just stares at me blankly in confusion and a discouraging lack of interest, but I refuse to take no for an answer.

"I'm thinking, nothing huge, just dinner at the Grill. Maybe a late movie…"

"You mean, like a double date?" Stefan asks as she eyes me with distaste. I choose to ignore this reaction.

"Two pair, out on a Friday night, coupled. Yeah, a double date," I affirm.

"Do you think that's a good idea?" Elena asks, still failing to recognize my brilliance. Stefan looks intrigued, however. Perhaps he is the brains in this operation.

"Why not?" I challenge. "We all haven't gone out before, and I don't want it to be uncomfortable for us."

"Look, the couple dynamics have changed," I explain with a forced cheerfulness they've all come to expect from me, "and there's been a little awkwardness between you, Matt, and…me and I just think it's important that we get over it."

I'm not sure any of them appreciate how hard it is to admit all this when they only ever look at me like the vapid, blonde cheerleader with no brain or depth to speak of. I can only hope she gets it. This is me practically begging for her help.

From the look on her face, she doesn't. "I don't know…" she shakes her head.

Thank god there's another voice in attendance here.

"You know what?" Stefan chimes in, "I—I think that sounds like a great idea."

Really? I smile gratefully, trying and failing to keep the desperation out of my expression.

"You do?" Elena asks skeptically. Seriously, what is her damage?

"Yeah, a nice evening out with friends sounds fun. As in, fun," he agrees, with a pointed look at Elena I don't bother to analyze.

*Exactly,* I nod to myself, smiling widely. Man, I knew I liked him.
Elena smiles, a little resigned but accepting. "A double date it is," she agrees.

"Ok!" I chirp, nearly giggling with excitement. "So, we will see you tonight."

"Ok," they chorus.

Yes! I cheer internally, pulling at my brightly colored scarf in my glee. Finally, something works out.

Look out world! Caroline Forbes is on her way, and she's got a date with reality and a boyfriend to smack with it.

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**Damon**

I catch her staring at me every time I turn around. The winged black and silver of her eye-makeup offsets the drab grey of her short-sleeved corset top with a mesmerizing sparkle.

The pity in her blue-grey eyes is really starting to piss me off.

I know what it means.

Still, despite the betrayal of trust her little invasion of privacy displays, I can't work up the energy to be angry about it. I can't really blame her for caring enough about me when I was practically falling apart in front of her to question why. And it's not like I was inclined to share. I'm still not.

I just wish she'd stop looking at me like that.

Every time I close my eyes, I see that girl from the club lying there on the grimy tile floor and I feel sick to my stomach. After she dragged me into the bathroom, unknowingly inviting her murderer into her metaphorical bed, I very nearly lost myself to a mindless, drug-induced rage.

I fucked her hard and fast against the bathroom stall she locked us in, tearing into her throat with vicious abandon at our mutual climax and eagerly signing her death warrant in the process.

It wasn't until my eyes met hers again—out of some perverse desire to watch that ostensible light fade from her cold, dead eyes—that my long neglected conscience made a jarring reappearance.

The chocolate brown eyes were no longer Katherine's. They now held a fear and a deep, soul-crushing sadness as they seamlessly morphed into the beautiful, doe-eyed gaze of the one girl on this earth whose eyes reflected my forgotten guilt: Elena.

I couldn't stand that look knowing that I had put it there.

I fed her just enough blood to ensure her survival and ran from that dirty stall like a bat out of hell, dragging Z behind me on the way.

I left her bloody and unconscious on the floor.

Z seems to note my distress as she sighs, expression sad. "Damon—"

Abruptly she freezes, mouth agape. Her brow furrows in worried confusion as she stares at me. Cat-like, her entire body stiffens in sudden alarm and her eyes sharpen with a predatory focus. There's someone else here.
She follows closely as I creep around the foyer entrance to the parlor, listening attentively for any sign of our intruder. I don’t have to look long. They stand with arrogant assurance before our embroidered couch.

Ms. Pearl has decided to make an appearance I see.

"Hello, Damon," she greets smugly, her back still to me.

"Nadia," her daughter nods.

And she brought little Annabelle for back-up. Joy.

Z comes to stand beside me, Victorian laced boot extended from her cocked hip.

"Anna…" she returns cautiously.

"Ever hear of knocking?" I ask facetiously. Who the hell does she think she is, barging in here like this?

"An invitation wasn’t necessary," Pearl says by way of answer. "I’m surprised that no living person resides here." She finally stands to face me, barely sparing a glance for my companion. That seems unwise on her part.

"Is it just you and your brother?"

"Yeah," Anna pipes up. "How do you keep out unwelcome vampires?"

"Kill them," I smirk. With a sudden burst of vampire-speed, I wrap a hand around Pearl’s throat—squeezing.

Only the slight tightening around her eyes suggests she is at all affected by my attempted throttling.

For a brief moment, the room is still. Neither Z nor Anna so much as flinch when Pearl slaps a hand to my wrist, crushing it beneath the inhuman force of her grip.

I feel the bones protest under the strain and I grunt—"Damn," —as she wrenches me around and tosses me to the couch.

"Have a seat, Damon," she smirks.

Somehow, this worked out differently in my head.

I hear the cushioned footfalls of Z’s boot heels on the carpet as she comes to sit beside me in a move that speaks volumes with its deliberate carelessness, glaring warningly at Pearl all the while.

Her filigreed earrings sway as she moves and I recognize the Celtic variation on her world tree in the design. I know they match the Slavic sun lying hidden between her breasts—a mark of her thinly veiled power.

"I was hoping we could have a word," Pearl says.

Unwilling to appear at all fazed by Pearl’s show of strength, I smile as I lean back against the backrest and stretch my arm along the wood behind us.

"Sure," I say with a light smirk. Z shifts her shoulders toward me, her bare back held slightly apart from the stitched fabric.
Pearl looks to her, ignoring me for the moment. "On behalf of myself and my family, I would like to thank you for your efforts to release us, Nadia."

"Wait, family?" I ask with a pointed look at Anna. "What family? The rest of those tomb vampires should be charcoal by now."

"Not exactly," Pearl replies with a smug smile.

I look at Z, alarmed and not a little confused. Her mouth pops open in a silent gasp, her eyes drawn comically wide. She stares at me until I understand. We left before the screaming stopped.

Fuck.

Licking her lips and attempting to regain her impassive demeanor, she shifts back to face them. I notice she's moved closer to me in the interim.

"So where have you and your would-be BBQ rabble been hiding?" she asks with an arched brow.

Taking note of her subtly threatening posture, Pearl moves to settle in the chair across from us on the other side of the Persian rug. Anna comes to stand at her side.

"We've taken up residence in a farm house just outside of town," Pearl answers. "It'll suffice for now."

"All 25 vampires?" I question, hardly believing the possibility.

"Not all. Some," she answers to my relief. At least we did something right.

But, still…

"How'd they get out of the tomb?" I ask, honestly at a loss to understand.

I watched those witches struggle with every ounce of power in their little bodies to open that seal and they still only managed by the skin of their teeth. It killed Sheila. How could it possibly be down?

"I think the witch screwed up that part of her hocus pocus," Anna says.

"Oh."

Z snorts scornfully. She's not exactly a fan of the Bennet clan. For good reason.

"I understand from Anna that the founding families still have a secret council?" Pearl says, directing my attention back to her as I shrug.

"And you're a part of it," Anna taunts.

"That's ridiculous," I chuckle unconvincingly. They don't seem to buy it.

I turn to look at Z, but she only rolls her eyes at my pathetic attempts at deflection.

"I've been in Mystic Falls since the comet Damon," Anna quips. "I'm up to speed."

I sneer at her, refusing to be baited.

"So am I," Pearl adds as she starts rattling off commands like she has any right to order me around.
"And now that you've infiltrated the Council, I'll need to know everything they know. Starting with a list of names of all the Council members and their families."

I grit my teeth at her demanding tone and I feel Z bristle beside me. As usual, we seem to be on the same page.

"And everyone you've supplied with vervaine," Anna adds. We glare at her in unison.

"Yes. That will have to stop immediately," Pearl scolds.

I'm sorry, is she under the impression that she's my mother? I don't take orders from anyone, least of all an overstuffed vampire matron who until very recently was rotting away in a tomb. Bitch can shove it.

"What exactly are you trying to achieve?" I challenge, still curious despite my irritation to hear the result she foresees for this conversation. From me or the Council.

"Mystic Falls is our home, Damon," she says. "They took that from us. Our land, our home. It's time we rebuild."

Wait, seriously?

"What are you crazy?" I scoff. "That was 1864!" I roll my eyes. "Wake up, woman. The world has moved on."

She chooses to ignore this sage advice. "As a reward for your help, I'm willing to give you what you want most," she says instead.

"I want nothing."

"Katherine," she retorts. Hmm, well even if I was interested, you're not the only game in town, I think to myself as I glance at Z beside me. She's not even the best.

Z seems to guess my train of thought when she taunts, "Nice try. No dice."

"You wouldn't even know where she was," I add. "You've been under the ground for the last century and a half."

Pearl smirks again. I'm really beginning to hate that condescending expression. "Katherine and I were best friends long before we came to Mystic Falls, Damon. I know how she thinks. I know her patterns. I know where to find her."

I share a look with Z at this and, to my surprise, she looks intrigued. Still, neither of us are the type to willingly enter into a deal of this sort. We won't be made someone else's gophers.

So instead I reply, "I no longer have any desire to see Katherine ever again." I'm surprised to find I mean every word. "And there's no way in hell I'm gonna play the role of your little minion."

I stand to leave but she stops me with a hand to my throat, throwing me back in my seat.

"I'm not asking, Damon," she threatens, looming over me with a dangerous glint in her eye.

There is a low and distinct growl promising pain and torment of the burning hellfire variety from the cushion to my right and all the heat seems to flee towards it.

"Take your hand off of him," Z snarls in a voice so cold it could freeze the Sahara, "Now."
Obediently, Pearl retreats. She needs no further warning than this. You don't get to her age by pissing off your elders.

Oh, right.

Maybe I should be embarrassed by Z's constant need to stage rescue missions in an effort to save me from my own impulsively courted disasters, but mostly it's just funny.

She barely moves but to relax her bare shoulders back against my arm, outwardly seeming totally at ease, but the threat implicit in her voice has Pearl fairly cowering like a scolded child. Serves her right.

"Let me tell you how this is going to go," she informs them both. "You and your daughter here are going to take your offensively presumptuous demands and quietly slink away to whatever hovel you're currently inhabiting."

Pearl opens her mouth as though to object, but Z steamrolls over her. "If we decide to humor you, I'll have Jeremy call you. K, Anna?"

Anna's face flushes at this as Pearl whips around sharply. Ooh, that was a low blow. I wouldn't want to be in her shoes right now.

I'm also sure that the omission of a last name in that statement was Z's one concession to their friendship.

"Bye bye," Z waves with false cheer, dark red lips set in a dangerous smile.

Without another word between them, they flee.

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**Elena**

The door opens to reveal Stefan with a bright bouquet of flowers when I run to answer the bell.

"You got me flowers," I giggle, charmed. I quickly take them from him, smelling their lovely fragrance on the air as he crosses the threshold.

"Well, I figured it's a date. Why not do it right?" he chuckles behind me as I head back toward the kitchen. I know just the place for these. "I would have driven too, but you're the one with the car."

Yeah, I notice Lia's like that too. As old as they are, it's really sort of bizarre.

"You know, you'd think for someone who was around when the car was invented, that you'd have one," I tease, finding the vase I want and setting it gently on the counter.

"Oh, I have one. I just never drive it," he admits. I guess vampire speed-running is easier. Weird.

I let the banter fade to the background as my anxiety returns. I'm not sure how I feel about this evening at all. Sure Stefan and I are in a better place now—more or less—but I'm not sure that I'm quite ready to jump back into the storybook romance just yet.

I'm still dealing with the fact that the perfect relationship I thought I had has some fundamentally irreparable flaws, not to mention everything else I've learned recently.
High School date night is so far out of my eye-line that it's ridiculous.

So much has happened recently to shake that up, I just worry that I'm being foolishly naïve to ever think we could just go on like a normal couple from all this. Not to mention, the idea of spending the evening with my ex and his new girlfriend—who happens to be my insecure control-freak of a best friend—does not really appeal to me.

I have my own drama to deal with.

"You know, it's not too late to cancel," I hint, not so secretly hoping he'll take the bait.

"Why would we do that?" he asks, looking genuinely confused.

"I don't know it just seems surreal," I half-confess. "Like maybe we weren't meant to get to the normal part."

"That's exactly why we're gonna do it," he argues with a smile, his hands coming up to brush my hair from my face. "We're going to go out, have some fun, and try to remember that we don't always have to be so serious."

I sigh, not sure how to respond to this. He seems rather set on the idea. Sometimes, I think he cares more about this "normal teenage" stuff than I do.

"Listen," he urges seriously, "when I decided to stay here and get to know you, it was so that I could do things like this. I could bring my girlfriend flowers, take her out on a date, and try to be normal."

I can't help it. A part of me that sounds suspiciously like Lia laughs at his explanation. Seriously, Stefan? You're a 162 year old supernatural being and that's your purpose in life? High School?

"Have you ever even been on a double date before?" I question, resigned to my fate.

"Oh, absolutely," he answers with a teasing smile. "Um, '72. Hef and the twins."

"What?" I can't even begin to picture that. Stefan and a Playmate? Seriously? I mean Damon maybe I would understand, but Stefan? That is surreal.

"Yeah. Playmates, I got Ms. June."

"Are you serious?" I laugh, not entirely sure I believe him.

He smiles in affirmation as he throws an arm around my shoulders, guiding me to the door.

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Nadezhda

"Tell me again why we're going to the Grill?" I ask with some irritation. I'm getting really sick of this town. "Again?"

"Because I need a drink after that smack-down, and someone drank all the alcohol at the house," he explains with a smirk in my direction.

Well, I'm inclined to give him this after last night regardless, but there's no way I'm leaving that statement unchallenged.
I arch an eyebrow at him. "And by someone, you do mean you, right?" I clarify. "Or is there something else you need to tell me? Are you hearing voices too?"

"Ha ha," he fake laughs, pulling the door open with a rush of air. The baking heat inside has me quickly shedding my jacket. I may not feel temperature change anymore, but it still looks odd to outsiders wearing a leather coat in 80 degree weather. Not that Damon ever worries about it.

I know for a fact that John Varvatos button down under his jacket is long-sleeved. He's not much for variety in his clothing choices, this one. Good thing he looks damn good in black.

He heads immediately for his favorite stool, but there's some middle-aged cougar on the other side. At least she left my seat alone, I think as I scale the wooden legs of the chair on the right. Have I mentioned before how much I hate that?

Predictably, Damon ignores my distress as he pretends not to laugh.

"You’re new around here," Cougar says by way of greeting. I glance up to find her hungrily eyeing my friend, undressing him with her beady little eyes. Gross.

"Oh, on the contrary, I am very old," Damon quips.

"Bourbon, neat," he orders as the bartender makes his appearance. Hooking a thumb at me, "and a vodka for this one." Ah, you do know me, D.

"I haven't been gone that long," Cougar flirts. "I would remember someone who looked like you."

I snort. Really, lady? Why not just strip down right here? Subtle, you are not.

If she hears me, she chooses to ignore it, though I am gratified by the fleeting smile that slides across Damon's handsome face.

"Yeah," he sighs, rather disinterested if I do say so myself. "Where'd you go?"

Glasses clank on the wooden bar as the bartender delivers our drinks. Thank God.

Ugh, Stolichnaya. Old and familiar, but tastes like pure ethanol. Oh, well.

"Around, about," Cougar smiles.

"Been there," Damon chuckles, taking a sip of his 'top shelf' bourbon. You know, with the amount of time we seem to be spending here lately, it may be worth it to invest in an improvement on the merchandise.

"I love to see a man drown his sorrows," she says in what she no doubt thinks is a seductive tone. "It's so sexy."

I choke on my drink, coughing through my uncontrollable giggles.

She glares at me across his body. "I'm sorry, who are you?" she demands, looking me up and down with distaste.

God, this is too much. "Who are you?" I retort rudely. Skank.

Damon bites his cheeks against a grin. "Ladies, ladies," he soothes. "No need to get testy."

He smiles at Cougar flirtatiously. "She's my sister," he assures her. I barely resist the urge to smack
him as she visibly retracts her claws.

"Oh," she simpers.

"It's more like nursing my wounds," he says, returning to the earlier topic. "And you?"

"Well I was supposed to be interviewing for the bartending position, but I think the manager blew me off," she says.

Gee, I wonder why. You're such a charmer.

"Well, that's not very nice," he jokes.

"Yeah, well the last time I was in town I slept with her boyfriend," she admits.

Ok, even I have to laugh at that. Freaking delightful. I offer her a conciliatory smile and decide to ride it out. At least she's mildly entertaining.

"Well, that's not very nice either," I say.

She shrugs, "It happens."

"Yes, it does," Damon agrees with feeling. Yeah, tell me about it.

"Kelly?" a familiar voice laughs behind us. I turn in my chair to find my favorite pseudo-parent with a huge smile on her face.

Cougar (I refuse to call her anything else. We're not that close) grins in recognition, jumping in her seat. "Kelly Donovan," Jenna chuckles, running up to greet her with a warm hug,

"Jen!" she shouts, returning the embrace.

"I heard you were back in town," Jenna laughs, turning to offer Damon and me an explanation. "She used to babysit me." Wait, what?

"And then I used to party with her," Kelly finishes. Well, *that* makes more sense.

Damon reclines against the bar with a smile on his face. I can only imagine the thoughts swirling around in there at all this. Never a dull moment.

"This woman is crazy," Jenna jokes.

"Not as crazy as you," Kelly—Damn it! *Cougar*—argues. Hmm, well that might make things interesting.

"Ha," Jenna huffs wistfully. "Not anymore." What? No, Jenna! You have to play with us. Don't leave me alone with these two. I'll be subjected to their disgusting mating rituals.

"Well, sit, drink!" Cougar invites.

Yes, Jenna. Listen to your babysitter. Oops, did I say that out loud? From the chuckles I receive, I'd say so. Oh, well.

"I shouldn't…" she sighs, looking sorely tempted. "I'm all responsible now, haven't you heard?"

"Well, take a night off. It's good for the soul," Cougar urges as she reclaims her seat.
"Great for the soul," Damon echoes. Couldn't have said it better myself.

She bites her lip indecisively, but a moment later she's grinning as she sits her cute butt down beside us.

"That's what I'm talking about," I encourage. She smiles at me excitedly.

"Oh, wow," Damon sighs.

"This is not gonna end well," Jenna says.

"Isn't that the whole point?" I tease.

"Hell. Yes," Kelly agrees forcefully, raising her glass.

"Can't wait," Damon declares, following suit.

With a clink of glass and a hoot, we drink.

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**Caroline**

"So, uh, Matt," Elena starts awkwardly. "How do you like working here?"

Seriously, you were in diapers together and that's the best you can come up with? I guess I should be grateful she's not commenting on the weather or, worse still, their former relationship.

Actually, no, on second thought this is good. I can work with awkward.

"Uh, it's not that bad," Matt answers. "Wait staff tips pretty good. We can't keep a bartender to save our lives but…"

Elena shares a look with Stefan, obviously amused at her own lack of originality in small talk.

"I actually put my mom up for the job," Matt tells us.

She looks at him with genuine interest at that. "How's that been? Having Kelly back?"

I scratch at the table with my nails, not wanting any part of this conversation.

"You know, same old Kelly," he answers. "She's, uh, she's trying, sort of…"

Elena chuckles. "Kelly and my mom were best friends growing up," she tells Stefan.

Yeah, Elena I really don't want to hear about your shared childhood with my boyfriend and your loving relationship with his mother. Not when she hates my guts.

As usual, she's oblivious.

"That's how Matt and I met. We shared a crib together," she reminisces.

"You're kidding," Stefan smiles, unfazed. It must be nice to know you're the one your significant other wants to be with.

"No. We've, uh, known each other our whole lives," Matt answers. And there's that smile again.
The one that says: 'you're the love of my life, Elena'.

There's a familiar husky laugh behind us and Matt twists in his seat to look. There at the bar, laughing, drinking and having a high old time, sit Kelly Donovan, Aunt Jenna, and Damon Salvatore.

Damon raises a drink at us in a mocking toast before downing the shot. Ugh.

Beside the gaggle of 'legal guardians', I spot an elaborately tattooed back naked beneath a widely laced corset top and wavy blue-black hair woven in a twisted crown that looks effortlessly elegant. Something about her seems familiar.

"Hey isn't that Ms. Salvat—I mean your sister?" I ask Stefan.

"You can just call her Lia," he replies, looking pained. "Everyone does."

"Why haven't we seen her at school lately? She's been MIA since the decade dance."

"Um, she's just been hanging out with Damon," he explains uncomfortably. "He's been… going through something."

Yeah, I'll say. From the looks of it, he's been "going through" the bar's entire supply of alcohol. Asshole.

"What, are they close?" I ask, a little skeptical. I sort of like…Lia. She seems cool. But I really can't imagine anyone even semi-sane liking Damon enough to spend that much time with him. Even Stefan hates him.

"Yeah," he chuckles a bit. "Very."

Even Elena smiles wryly at that. What am I missing here?

Matt looks a little confused too, but he just shrugs. That's so not what we're here for anyway.

At my questioning look, she replies, "They're, um… twins."

Ok… I guess that makes sense. Whatever.

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Damon

I stare into my nearly empty highball glass, swirling the remaining liquid in a hypnotic amber whirlpool. I have been diligently avoiding any and all serious thoughts all day, but the alcohol is starting to soften my mental walls. Brown eyes and angry vampires are dancing with the pink elephants behind my eyelids.

Can this day get any worse?

"Don't be grumpy," I hear on my left. Jenna is watching me with sharp eyes. "It can't be that bad."

"You’d be surprised," I tell her, still playing with the glass. "My primary reason for existence has abandoned me and, after today's events, the remains of the shaky ground I walk on are about to go 'Kaboom'."
There's a moment of silence wherein all three women look at me with startled sympathy; the lion's share goes to the girl on my right.

Fuck that. I don't need their pity.

I raise my glass in a toast, and wait for them to join me. "Let's get hammered," I say.

"Let's," Kelly agrees.

The tequila goes down warm and smooth this time. That alone says it all.

"So…" Kelly starts, thankfully changing the subject. "What's your story, Lia?"

Z purses burgundy lips, apparently unsure how to respond.

Jenna saves her. "Damon and Lia are twins," she answers. "Lia teaches English at the High School."

I smirk at this explanation. It's really sort of absurd when you think about it.

"Really?" Kelly questions skeptically. Can't say I blame her.

"Well, no," Z chuckles. "I think you'd do better to say, I drop by the English class on occasion. You know, when I feel like picking up a paycheck."

"Not your passion?" Kelly challenges.

"Hardly," Z scoffs.

Yeah, I'll say. Until the schools start teaching the noble art of human sacrifice and communion with the spirit world, I don't think she'll be making a living with her 'passion'.

Speaking of…

A particularly mouthwatering scent wafts on the air past us, as a tall brown-haired man in a denim jacket passes the bar behind us. Z follows him with her eyes as he heads for the door.

She gives me a hard look, trying to communicate something to me with nothing but her eyes. "I'm gonna go, um…grab a…smoke," she says lamely.

I consider following but…what's the point?

She grabs her jacket as she leaves.

Jenna glances up as she walks toward the door, and quickly ducks down behind in surprise. Guess she finally noticed the audience by the pool table.

"Quick, hide! We're not here," she whispers.

Kelly smiles, playing along, "Why? Where did we go?"

"Children under our care, 5 o'clock," she warns her. "This is not role model-ish."

"Damn," Kelly sighs.

Good thing I don't care.
Elena

I watch as Caroline storms away, confused, defensive, and more than a little guilty all at once. Did I really make her feel that way? I was just having fun with an old friend. I can't just erase my past with him. And this was her stupid idea anyway!

Ugh.

I follow after slowly, not eager to return to our awkward little gathering. God, I really wish I'd stayed home tonight.

"Whoo!" Damon's drunken party hollers. Admittedly, there's looks like a hell of a lot more fun.

Before I can think better of it, my feet are carrying me in their direction.

"Hello there, Miss Gilbert," Damon greets with his usual sarcastic charm.

"Damon. Jenna. Kelly," I reply in turn. Jenna squints her eyes, embarrassed, but quickly returns to her conversation with Kelly rather than deal with it. Can't say I blame her.

This leaves me alone with Damon, however. I don't know whether or not that's a good thing.

The last time I saw him, he was kissing me on the forehead and looking at me with vulnerable blue eyes. What was I thinking coming over here?

"Trouble in paradise?" he asks, startling me.

"Huh?" I reply dumbly.

He sends a pointed look toward the other side of the building where my boyfriend, his brother, plays pool with my childhood friends looking much happier than I would right now.

"Right," I say. "Listen, I wanted to say—"

"Nope," he cuts me off. "We are not going there tonight."

I reel back a bit, equal parts offended and baffled by his rejection.

His gaze softens, and he offers me a wistful smile in apology. "Five minutes, remember?" he gestures to the bar.

I smile at the memory. Atlanta seems so long ago now. I guess I can't fault him for needing his own break from the K word drama.

"He lied to me about Isobel," I admit, surprising even myself with this turn of conversation. I don’t know why I just told him that.

Well, no hope for it now I guess.

Damon slips me his glass as he waits for me to continue.

I sneak a peek at Jenna before taking a grateful sip, wincing at the burn.

"He said he did it to protect me, but that's not how I want to be protected."
He seems to understand as he smiles at me sadly. "Lies are no way to found a relationship," he agrees, surprising me with his sensitivity. It seems he's always surprising me.

I watch him with a new found respect and sympathy as the similarity occurs to me. Of course, he would value honesty over "noble" secrets.

Come to think of it, this should have been obvious long before now. Damon almost never lies. Even when he's taunting someone with the truth with the specific intention of causing pain for his own sick amusement, he doesn't lie. In any capacity.

It's who he is. He would rather be the worst version of himself than someone else's pretty lie. And between Katherine and Lia (the two women he's trusted most in the world), he has been lied to more often than he can stand.

For perhaps the first time since I met him, I think I finally see him. At least a little.

The look in his eyes as he watches me watching him is so intense, so beautifully multi-faceted in its hidden depths that I can't bear to look away.

He blinks in surprise at something over my shoulder, and the tension snaps like a thread. The moment ends. Something like loss washes over me.

I follow his eyes to find Lia moving toward us, an unreadable expression on her lovely face.

"I—um—I—I gotta…" I stutter, staring at his jacket collar as I gesture back toward the pool table.

He watches me sadly as I walk away.

---

Nadezhda

Licking the last drop of dinner from my reddened lips, I watch Elena rush past me in a haze of confusion and nerves. Across the room, I hear the man mistake her for Katherine, but as she leaves with Stefan shortly thereafter, I say nothing. She's safe enough for now.

I share a look with Damon as I round the bar, knowing the turn his mind has taken. It may be painful now, but he'll be better off in the end. I won’t stand in their way.

Instead, I perch beside Jenna, giving him an unobstructed view of the door as she walks away.

"Coast is clear, Jenna," I chuckle, noting her huddled posture and guessing at the reason.

"Oh, thank God!" she exclaims in relief. I laugh. "So, now that you're all drunk and disorderly," I tease, "why don't you give me the deets on you and Alaric?"

I regret the subject change instantly as her face falls. "There's nothing to tell," she sighs. "I really like him, and I thought it was going somewhere, but he's been totally blowing me off since the auction. I don't know what's going on with him."

I roll my eyes at the absent hunter. "Men are stupid. It's a fundamental fact of life."

Damon raises an eyebrow at me, obviously hearing me, and I smirk.
Jenna snorts at that, but she still looks sad. Though, with the way she's attacking that drink I doubt this mood will last long.

She proves me right not five minutes later when she orders another round of shots and promptly kicks all our asses on the count. Genetics be damned, now I see where Elena gets it.

Jenna and I watch as Damon and Kelly do their gross little mating dance, quickly looking away to resist the urge to vomit.

"Is he always like this?" she asks me, looking rather sorry for me. Of course, she thinks he's my brother so…

"Pretty much," I chuckle, unable to keep the amusement from my voice.

"That's gross," she grimaces.

"Eh," I shrug. "You get used to it."

We pass the next hour or so in idle chit chat as the bar slowly empties of other patrons, but honestly I'm way too distracted chasing my drink to care. I do look up though when I hear Damon giving Kelly a lesson in tying cherry stems while she stares at him like she can't wait to drag him back to her cave. Horny, thy name is Donovan.

He's such a man-whore sometimes.

"The thing about cherries," he says, pulling a perfectly knotted stem from his mouth and taking a new one to demonstrate. "You have to—

Cougar takes the new one from him, stroking his lip as she does, tossing it in her own. She ties it easily, staring at him with those hungry eyes I can only imagine from this angle. Her posture says it all.

"Oh my goodness," he chuckles flirtatiously, taking it from her teeth with his own.

Jenna and I share a look at the view, mutually repulsed by the two of them.

"That's amazing," he says as she laughs. "You were quick."

"And…that's my cue," Jenna says, opting to save herself. Smart girl. Though she does offer me an apologetic smile as she slides from her seat.

"You giving up already?" Kelly asks, still licking her lips at Damon I imagine. Yuck.

"Oh, yeah," Jenna agrees with feeling. "See ya, Lia."

"Bye, Jenna," I call as she walks away, leaving me alone with their grossness. Ugh.

Yeah, there's no way that's happening.

"Hey, Damon?" I say.

"Yeah?" he answers, still staring at Cougar.

I grab my jacket and slip to the floor. "You remember that thing we have to do in the morning? We should probably head home too. Maybe try to get some rest?" I prompt, glaring at him pointedly.
He stares blankly at me for a moment before understanding spreads. "Oh, yeah," he says in mock surprise. "You're right. We should get home."

"Oh, do you have to?" Kelly pouts.

He just frowns and nods, trying to look disappointed. "Yeah, unfortunately we do. We'll just pick this up another time, yeah?"

He smiles and winks at her as I drag him away. Finally.

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**Caroline**

The house is enormous. Not to mention unbelievably gorgeous. But it's also weirdly familiar…I don't know what to make of the feeling I get looking at it. It's like déjà vu meets *The Shining*.

Worse, the building's not the only thing smacking me over the head with memories. Matt hasn't stopped talking about Elena all night.

God, even a beat up old car reminds him of her. I was such an idiot to think a double date would solve all my problems. I can never win where Elena is concerned. Maybe I should just stop trying.

Speak of the devil. "Caroline—"

"I don't want to talk about it," I cut her off harshly. This is not something she can help me with. In fact, she's the dead to last person I want to be talking to right now.

"You're being ridiculous." Yeah, thanks. Great pep talk.

I spin to face her; angry and fed up with the same song that has plagued me for my entire life. "And insecure, and stupid, but that doesn't change the fact that Matt's always gonna be in love with you, and I'm always gonna be the backup."

Predictably, she replies, "You're not the backup." It's the instinctive, programmed response I get from everyone. Never makes it true.

"Yes I am. I'm Matt's Elena backup. I'm your Bonnie backup—"

"Now it's about me and Bonnie?" Elena scoffs.

I stare at her incredulously. Does she really not see it? How can she go through life so blithely unaware of her own good fortune?

"You don't get it. And why would you? You're everyone's first choice."

She's always been the girl that everyone *wants*. Even when I'm the one they can *have*. I can't compete and what's worse is that to her it's never been a competition. She never even has to try.

The sound of a revving engine signals the boys' arrival and I am shamelessly glad for the distraction. Unfortunately, this problem isn't going away any time soon. It never does.

"Piece of cake," Matt says smugly, climbing from the newly fixed car.

Stefan looks between me and Elena, obviously more perceptive and understanding than either of
our other companions. "You know what? Why don't you guys go ahead and take it for a spin?" he tosses Matt the keys.

"Really?" he asks, a smile lighting up his face at the prospect.

"Yeah."

Matt turns that glorious smile on me, but I’m too hurt still to let it warm me. "Caroline?" he invites, gesturing toward the car.

Somewhat reluctant, but wanting the time with him all the same, I climb in.

We trace the road at the end of the long drive for a while, driving back and forth along the dark street in relative quiet. Eventually, he pulls the car over, squinting through the windshield at the moonlit road.

"Did I just pass their driveway?" he wonders aloud.

"Uh, I think it's up there," I mutter.

He doesn't respond to this, but when he speaks again his adoration for the vehicle is clear. "This is an amazing car," he sighs.

I wish he'd look at me half as affectionately.

"Did I pass?" he asks into the silence.

"Um…" I respond, not sure what he means.

"The whole double date thing was obviously a test to see how I'd do around Elena," he challenges.

Oh, I guess I didn't realize I had been so transparent. Of course, now that just makes his endless hurtful anecdotes all the more painful. He knew what I wanted and he still couldn't keep his eyes off of her?

"I don't know. You were reminiscing about the Elena years all night so…" I say.

Sounding irritated, he retorts, "Caroline, that stuff came before, ok? It's not just gonna go away."

"I know that, ok? I know," I say brokenly.

"No, no you don't. Because you're letting it turn you into a crazy person."

Wow, really? Way to cushion the blow, Jack-ass. Yeah, I'm being ridiculous for pointing out the reality of the situation. Excuse me for caring that my boyfriend is still in love with his ex.

"Look, it's my fault. You know? I— I mean, I made it pretty clear early on that…Elena still…means something to me, but all that talk…it was just two old friends and some memories…Tonight wasn't about me and Elena. I was there…because I wanted to be with you."

I look at him in shock, a smile finally tugging at my lips as I listen to the words I've longed to hear.

"And…I don't know what this means or what we are, but I do know that you're the only person I want to be in this car with right now…I don't even know if this makes sense because…I'm not really that good at expressing myself—"
"No, no, I think you're doing fine," I breathe. I can't help the watery smile that overtakes my face.

He sees this and one of his own echoes it. He slides a palm along my cheek and pulls me in for a tender kiss that quickly turns heated as his words ring in my ears.

He actually wants me.

I move to straddle him in the driver's seat, but I forget the tiny confines of the stupid car and I smack my head hard on the ceiling.

"Ow!" I exclaim, still too happy to let the pain faze me more than a moment. "Sports cars," I smile.

"Yeah," Matt chuckles. He pulls me in to another kiss.

Elena who?

Damon

We stumble through the doorway, Z still dragging me by the hand she has yet to release since we left the Grill. She's been huffing and stomping along since she pulled me away from Mama Donovan earlier and I'm having a hell of a time fighting my growing amusement.

She comes to a stop beside the glass-topped antique cabinet in the foyer, turning to glare up at me reproachfully. Her sweet little mouth is twisted tightly in an angry frown and I have to physically stop myself from kissing away the wrinkle between her furrowed brows.

Smirking at her as I deliberately invade her personal space, I walk forward to press her back against the wall beside the stairs. My hands flatten against it on either side of her head as I bracket her in with my arms, my hot breath on her face.

She stares up at me in alarm, attempting to look angry, but her pupils expand at the move.

"You're cute when you're jealous," I tell her with a smug grin.

Her teeth clench at my words, but I know it's to hide her smile. "Cute, huh?" she challenges, scratching at the lapel of my leather jacket.

"Mm hmm," I agree, rocking forward slightly till our bodies brush with the faintest rustle of fabric.

She jerks her head away, refusing to meet my gaze, and her jaw flexes noticeably. She seems to be at war with herself internally—debating what I don't know—but she reaches a decision quickly.

"Fuck it," she sighs and yanks me forward by her grip on my jacket to meet her lips in a forceful kiss.

Without hesitation I slide my tongue against hers, licking at her blunt teeth as I pull her bottom lip into my mouth. Her nails scratch at my scalp as I bite down.

Removing one hand from the wall, I wrap it around her back and pull her body flush against me. As the hardness in my jeans meets her hot center, we both groan.

In a flash of supernatural speed, I have her perched on the foyer table with her legs wrapped about my waist, pulling me into her with her heels on my ass.
As one hand massages her half-bare breast through the firm fabric of her backless top, the other slides down the soft skin of her naked back to grip a handful of her ass beneath the seat of her jeans and I press her more firmly against me.

She rolls her hips forward at the move and I am rewarded by the breathy gasp of pleasure that leaves her mouth to be swallowed by mine.

She claws at my shoulders with the nails of one hand, fingers grabbing at my hair with the other, and fairly whines in her growing desperation. It's time to move this party upstairs before—

"Lia?"

"Damon?"

I pull away quickly, allowing Z to slip to the floor beside me as we turn to meet our audience. Seems the whole gang is here. Even the quarterback, though he looks like he might run screaming any moment. Caroline looks utterly repulsed.

Oh, right. They think she's my sister.

But it's Elena's look that stops me cold. She looks...betrayed.

What the hell?

It seems Z is thinking more clearly than I am at the moment however, for while I stand there staring like an idiot, she has already sped to intercept our wayward humans before shit really hits the fan.

Ripping the necklace from Blondie's throat—hardly reacting at all to the hissing rise of steam at the contact—she grabs the girl's eyes with her own.

Stupidly, Matt looks ready to attack her for the threat to his lady, but I grip his arm in a bruisingly tight hold and he stills. He stares at me wide-eyed at the move, but this gives me the perfect opportunity for my own compulsion.

"Forget what you just saw. We were never here. You and girlfriend came over, the four of you played happy humans for a bit, and you left. You did not just see me making out with my supposed sister. Got it?" I command.

Satisfied by his toneless repetition, I release him to join his dazed girlfriend at the door. They leave without another word between them and I smirk. Crisis averted.

It occurs to me after a moment how odd it is that I haven't had Elena screaming about free will and civil rights this whole time, but when I turn toward her I quickly see why.

Stefan has a restraining grip on her arm as he soothes murmured nonsense words into her ear, but this is not what halts her fury.

Her eyes still blaze in hurt and accusation. The look cuts me, but I'm at a loss to understand why.

Without a word, Elena storms away and after a single patronizing glare in disapproving Stefan-fashion, he trails behind.

Wonderful.

Z remains frozen beside me, unusually quiet. I glance at her, feeling guilty for some reason at the
sad expression in her eyes.

"Look, I'm—"

She rolls her eyes at my aborted apology. "I'm not an idiot, Damon," she says, sounding exasperated. "I know when I'm being used."

I lick my lips, unsure how to respond to this—and not merely because the feeling is mutual. Not for the first time I wonder if this aspect of our relationship is more attributable to our genuine sexual chemistry or our shared aversion to hot but faithless women. The result is the same either way.

We're using each other.

I glance between her and the recently vacated hall, torn.

She pats me hard on the arm, offering me a soft smile. "Well don't just stand there, Moron. Go."

With a grateful nod, I do.

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Stefan

"Sorry I'm bailing," Elena sighs as we reach the drive.

"I just wish you'd let me drive you home," I say seriously. After that scare tonight with the mystery vampire, I'm more than a little afraid I'll wake up to find her missing again.

"Normal people don't have chaperones or bodyguards or babysitters. We're normal tonight, remember?" she reminds me. I have to smile at that. Using my own arguments against me. Sneaky.

"I know. I just get so worried about you," I admit, stroking her beautiful face with my eyes.

"Stefan, I can't spend every minute of my life afraid that someone's gonna come after me. I won't," she declares. "That's not living."

"Ok," I concede, opening her door. I notice her frown has not fully relaxed yet, however, and, looking back toward the house, I think I can guess the direction of her thoughts.

"I'm sorry about them," I say as I hand her into the driver's seat of her car, trying to dispel the tension in the air since we walked in on my housemates molesting the furniture.

"It's fine," she sighs. She unconvincingly attempts to smile around her grimace.

I could kill those two. Can't they keep it in their pants for once? No one wants to see that. And now we have two of our friends walking around with false memories. No wonder she's upset.

"Look, maybe I could talk to them—"

"Really, Stefan," she says with a warmer smile this time, "it's fine."

"Ok, just call me when you get home."

She kisses me sweetly on the lips, stroking my cheek once, before she slides behind the door and drives away.
I stalk back into the house, intent on giving the two of them a piece of my mind, but to my surprise it is apparently empty. The distant thunk of wood from the kitchen draws me on, but I find only Lia there to greet me.

"Where's Damon?" I ask, irritation clear in my voice.

"How should I know? I'm not his keeper," she responds from where she kneels on the wood floor. There's an edge in her voice to match her challenging eyebrow. I sigh internally, knowing this is not an argument I'm going to win. I never do.

I watch in confusion as she rummages confidently through the island cabinet, glass and plastic clanking as she shoves them aside.

"Aha!" she exclaims, brandishing a dusty bottle of clear liquid that looks at least a couple decades old. How in the world did she know that was there?

"Kubanskaya, 1993," she sighs wistfully, watching me from the floor. "They stopped making this, you know?"

She stares longingly at the bottle. "Too bad, too. It's good stuff," she pouts.

I blink at her incredulously while she hugs the bottle fondly to her chest. This is too weird. I forget how funny she gets when she's drunk.

There's a crash from the living room and she sets her prize tenderly aside before racing beside me to investigate. I reach the parlor just in time to see a blurring form lunge at me as he tackles me to the ground in a burst of shattering glass and a blinding stab of pain as he plunges a huge shard into my chest.

Before he can take further advantage however, he is thrown across the room by my snarling companion. I'll admit I'm momentarily surprised by the save as I lie there groaning in pain, but there's no time for questions now.

The sounds of their struggle fill the room as I attempt to dislodge the stained glass knife in my heart. I barely manage in time to halt the attack of a second vampire as she too leaps through the shattered window.

Halting her is all I can do however, for she easily tosses me aside where I land in a pile of splintered wood that once was a chair.

Knowing time is short, I look frantically for a suitable choice of weapon and a sharply broken chair leg catches my eye.

As she lunges toward me again, I meet her with its pointed end. Though I miss her heart on the first try, I quickly recalculate and soon she is lying cold and grey at my feet.

I turn my attention then to Lia's fight just as the first vampire sails through the air to land hard before the fire.

He leaps quickly to his feet in an offensive crouch, takes one look at his fallen companion, and leaves as he came.

I look at Lia with some trepidation as an alarming realization comes to me.

"I remember them," I tell her. "They were in the tomb."
She bites her lip sheepishly, not in the least surprised. "Yeah…"

**Elena**

"What are you doing here?" I snarl when I reach my bedroom to find the slutty Salvatore perched comfortably on my window seat. He's starting to make a habit of this, and as of now I don't like it one bit.

He stands, holding his palms toward me in surrender. "Retract the claws, Kitten. I just came to talk," he says with a subtle smirk I just want to slap off his cocky face.

"You can't be in here right now," I snap. "I let it pass last time because you were apologizing, but don't think for a second that one moment of non-loathing makes us friends."

He throws his head back at that, looking both offended and startled by my declaration.

"What's this really about?" he asks confused. "Not an hour ago we were having a perfectly civil conversation at the Grill, and now you're back to hating me?"

Refusing to offer him the explanation I can't even find myself, I glare at him scornfully.

"Why do you even care?" I challenge. "Go home to your girlfriend if you're so desperate for someone to like you."

Infuriatingly, he looks amused by this statement. His lips curl in that cocky smirk I hate so much and his entire body relaxes.

"So, that's what this about," he says with a smug grin and I have to resist the sudden overwhelming desire to stake him. "You're pissed because you saw me kissing another woman."

I scoff in contempt for his arrogance, crossing my arms as I avoid his gaze. As if.

"We're just friends," he admits slowly. Does he really think I'm buying that anymore?

"Really?" I challenge, arching an eyebrow at him skeptically. "That's not what it looked like where I was standing."

His mouth twists uncontrollably as he fights back a laugh. I wonder if that pencil on my desk would look good sticking out of his face.

"Well…" he chuckles as he saunters toward me, "there are some fringe benefits."

"You're disgusting," I spit, watching as he stalks me. The closeness is beginning to get to me, and I take a step back toward the wall.

"Really? You sure?" he taunts, cocking his head at me as he advances closer still. Finally, I find myself pressed to plaster a mere foot from him. His entire body seems to engulf me in heat and I barely resist the urge to cower under his smile.

He braces a hand above my ear, leaning in close. "Or are you really saying that because you wish it had been you?"

That does it, I think as I finally find the will to fight back. With my hands against his chest, I shove
with all my strength to push him away. He stumbles back a few steps in surprise.

"Get out," I growl. "Get the hell out of my room right now or I'm calling Stefan."

His eyes flash once as he sneers at me. "Stefan, huh?" he taunts. "Funny how you didn't mention him till now."

With that parting shot, he leaves. Finally I can breathe.

I'm still staring into the suddenly empty night through my open window when the phone rings. Speak of the Devil.

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Nadezhda

"Are you ok?" Stefan asks worriedly as he presses the phone to his ear.

Yeah, Stefan. I'm pretty sure we were the ones that just got attacked. Teenagers.

"Yeah, I'm fine. What's going on?" she asks. She sounds pretty hot and bothered. Decidedly not for her boyfriend. Way to go, Damon.

Predictably, Stefan chooses to deflect rather than admit his real concern. "Um, nothing. You didn't call me. I was just checking to see you were alright."

Wow, Stef. Needy much?

"Well, I'm home. Teeth brushed and ready for bed. Safe and sound." I repress a giggle at the annoyance in her voice. At this point, I don't think it even matters for which brother.

Taking a long swallow of my favorite limited edition vodka, I smile happily to myself. Things are looking up.

Of course, then there's this mess…

I sigh, glaring reproachfully at the dead vampire currently staining the carpet. Damon's gonna be so pissed. Oh, well. At least the fireplace is huge and accommodating. I wonder if that was intentional.

"Something wrong?" Elena asks, obviously noting the tension in his voice.

"No, no, no," Stefan chants. I roll my eyes as I grab the vamp's wrist in my free hand and pull. "You still have a few minutes left of normal. I'll tell you about it tomorrow, ok?"

"I had a really nice time on our date tonight."

Oh, barf.

He scoffs. "Such a liar."

This isn't working. I'm plenty strong enough but the angle's all wrong. I suppose I could put down my drink, but I already had to do that for these bitches once tonight. They don't get that courtesy twice.
"No, I'm serious. In a way, it was exactly what it was supposed to be."

What, willfully naïve and delusional? Who has time for normal under these circumstances?

"I had a really nice time too," he sighs before hanging up.

Finally! I could use that extra arm.

I look at Stefan expectantly, waiting for him to offer his help.

He blinks at me. Seriously?

"You mind?" I prompt. His eyes widen comically as though the thought of offering his services had never occurred to him.

"Gandohn.*)"

"Did you just call me a condom?" he asks, puzzled.

I gape at him in shock. Oops. Figures he would know that one.

I bite my lips. "Right."

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**Damon**

She's lying comfortable and familiar in my bed when I get there; nothing but a thin sheet and an oversized band-tee to clothe her nakedness. She called me earlier to warn me the tomb vampires were on the warpath and to keep a weather-eye open, but at this particular moment I couldn't care less.

Z smiles when she sees me. She doesn't seem to recognize the blazing danger in my eyes.

"You're back," she notes happily. "How did it go with—"

"Shut. Up," I order. Immediately, her smile falls and the sparkle in her eyes is replaced by something else. A cold, hard glint of recognition…and lust.

Confidently, she rises from the bed. The sheet falls carelessly to the floor as she strides toward me, silently pulling the shirt over her head to leave her body glowing white and powerful in its bare form. She doesn't stop again until she is pressed right against me, her head craning back to meet my gaze. Without her heels and leather, she's barely tall enough to touch her forehead to my chin.

She's fierce in her nakedness.

As directed, she doesn't say a word, but her palms slide up the fabric clothing my chest until she reaches my face. She spears hungry fingers through my short hair, coming to rest at the back of my neck. She smiles.

In a move similar to our earlier tryst, I press my hands to the small of her back, pulling her tight against me. She arches her back in a graceful curve, rising on her tiptoes to meet me as I seize her lips with mine.

Her lips are hard and firm—ravenous—as she fights with me, but she easily submits to my
dominating kiss.

Wrapping one arm around her to bring her higher still, I raise my other hand to tangle in her wavy tresses. She still has them braided in that unnecessarily complicated half-do and I impatiently rip my fingers through it, probably pulling hairs as I do.

She doesn't complain though. If anything, she presses against me even harder. Her tongue sucks hard and greedily at mine, nicking me with her fangs, as she moans.

I walk her back toward the bed as she licks at my blood, relishing the taste, knowing it will be all she receives from me tonight.

I let us both fall when her knees hit the mattress, keeping our position as I pin her beneath me. Her hands claw at my jacket, frantically removing it before going to work on my shirt buttons.

I smirk, ignoring her struggle as I wrench her head to the side and bare her throat before me. She gasps in pleasure as I tear into her throat, drinking greedily.

The potent zing of her blood charges through my thinning bloodstream and I am reminded that I have yet to feed tonight. I can already feel the rush as the power in it spins my head in a dizzying rush. Should make things interesting.

My shirt rips under her impatient assault—buttons fly haphazardly about the room and I stand to shed the tattered remains. Staring down at her, holding her blown black eyes with my own piercing blue gaze, I drop my pants to the floor. She bites her kiss-swollen lip, watching me.

"On your knees. Hands on the headboard," I order, the threat clear in my voice. She scrambles quickly to obey.

For a vampire as old and powerful as she is, it always excites me how easily she submits to me. She's practically begging for it. And only from me.

She brushes the pillows aside, throwing them to the floor, as she moves to kneel at the head of the bed, hands spread in a firmly secure grip on the headboard. I move to kneel behind her—my knees between her spread thighs—and bend her forward at the waist.

I take her hips in my hands, squeezing tight, as I position myself at her entrance. I have no patience for foreplay tonight.

Just to tease her, I slide my rock hard cock along her wet slit, relishing the breathy moan she releases behind her bitten lips.

With no more warning than this, I shove forward, sheathing myself up to the hilt.

Z screams and her body clenches tight at the sudden intrusion, squeezing me like a vice.

"Holy fuck, you're so tight," I groan, rocking forward and back a bit as the muscles slowly relax. Even still, she's hot as hell and twice as snug where her body grips mine. Fucking perfect.

Before she's really ready for it, I thrust in and back, settling into a powerful rhythm that has her fluttering and tensing around me. I know it has to hurt, but the sudden flood of wetness that coats my cock on every drive says she doesn't mind.
I slide my hands up her bare arms, setting them between hers on the headboard for leverage as my thrusts become harder—more violent. Soon, I'm pounding into her at a breakneck pace. The wood slams into the wall with every beat.

"Damon..." she moans as I finally reach my goal inside her. "Oh!" she cries out as I slap a vicious hand to her ass at this, my palm leaving a searing red handprint before it fades. My hips continue to pummel into her as it does.

"What did I say about talking?" I growl, delivering a particularly brutal shot to her cervix. She jumps, but grits her teeth in silence.

I sweep her hair to the side and her right hand slips from the headboard, trailing her body to slip between her thighs.

"Don’t you fucking dare!" I warn, spanking her again. She yelps and obeys.

I grip the wood more firmly between us, plowing into her with all the strength and speed my 145 years of vampirism can command. "You are going to come," I growl between thrusts, "Just. Like. This."

Right on time, she does, screaming wordlessly as she comes hard. Her entire body tenses and heats with the force of it, squeezing me more tightly than I can stand. To my shock, she plunges vicious fangs into my arm, drinking deeply as she spirals.

"Shit!" I shout as I follow her down, ripping into her throat as I do. I shoot my release deep inside her as the world turns white around us.

An interminable time later we collapse to the bed—heaving unnecessary gasps of air—and she rolls silently out from under me. Silently she curls on her side a good three feet away, her bare back facing toward me.

Not another word passes between us. None are needed. We both know exactly what this was.

For the second time in as many nights, I fall asleep to the vision of chocolate brown eyes brimming with accusatory tears and betrayal.

Chapter End Notes

*Russian transliteration meaning (literally) condom. Used like the English "prick" or "asshole"
Chapter Notes

Yep, you guessed it. We're still deep in the pit of cannon 'verse, but we're digging ourselves out one Damonesque heart-rip at a time. We'll get there. Maybe sooner than you think….

(Reference: 1x17 "Let the Right One In")

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Nadezhda

The thunder bellows its power. Like Aeolian strings torn free from their base, trees whip back—roots clinging desperately to the earth—and leaves scatter wild and free on the howling wind. The flash and crack of his brother, Lightning, echo with the resounding crash of an old oak. I watch as tears of rain slide reluctantly down the glass of my window before the backdrop of grey and ominous sky. The calamity of springtime prints and colors in the once sunny bedroom stand forgotten at my back.

Eying my unmade bed with a reproachful glare, I take a final swig of the bottle which has been my only companion in this new room of mine. After Damon drifted off last night, I decided to make myself at home down the hall rather than tempt fate and my recent decision-making. This guest room is small and not a little lonely, but I think it's for the best really. I know all too well the constant pain and heartache Damon faces with each passing day since Katherine's betrayal, but I am not the one to help him with it. Not that way. What's more, I am tired of pretending that I don't know that.

With this thought in mind, I pull my hair back in a messy bun—wispy curls catching on spiked metal along my ear—and head toward the voices a floor below. The damp chill in the air brushes exposed skin through the more than decorative slashes in my grungy Zeppelin tee and I'm not even bothering with make-up this morning. It's just that kinda day. I can feel it.

Another flash and crack shakes the walls of the stairwell surrounding me.

See? Even the weather agrees with me.

Thunk, thunk, thunk! And that incessant noise is not helping.

"I say we go to Pearl's, bust down the door, and annihilate the idiot that attacked us last night," Damon says, hammering away at the now boarded up window. Figured it was his job since he wasn't around to deal with the breaking of it last night. That and Stefan and I are both lazy assholes.

"Excuse me, 'us'?" I tease, walking into the room. "I think you'll find it was me and Stefan kicking tombpire ass last night, right Stef?"

Stefan smirks a bit, but doesn't respond. I think he's still sore at me for that condom remark. Oh, well.
"Please," Damon snorts. "We all know he'd already be dead if I'd been here."

"Yeah and why weren't you, Damon? Too busy trolling the high school for victims? Who's next, my chemistry teacher?" Elena sneers, but it rings hollow to my ears. Alaric's suicide by Damon was like eons ago. Besides, she knows exactly what he was up to last night—the faintest scent of leather and bourbon lingers in my 900 year old nose—and we all know what she's really thinking.

Well, I think as I glance at Stefan, those of us that matter anyway. God, he's so oblivious it's sad.

"Well, guess that cat's out of the bag," Damon mutters too low for any but me to hear. I smirk, but otherwise ignore him as I answer Elena.

"I don't know," I mock with false concern, "Is there some reason he should be? Have you noticed an odd scent about him lately? Demeanor changed dramatically? Has he become alarmingly secretive and defensive when questioned?"

"Aren't those the signs that your husband is cheating on you?" Damon asks, smiling.

"Oh, right."

Stefan rolls his eyes, ignoring our banter. Poor little guy."Yeah. And then what?" he asks sarcastically. "We turn to the rest of the house of vampires and say, 'Oops. Sorry.'?"

"Not necessary," I retort. "You don't need an apology if you're dead."

"I can't believe you made a deal with her," Elena fumes, still bristling with mock-rage.

"Who said anything about a deal?" Damon scoffs, grabbing a fire-poker and flopping to the couch. "Z handed her her ass on a silver platter. Pearl left here with a bruised ego and her tail between her legs."

"Why thank you, Damon," I smile, pleased. "I'm glad someone around here appreciates my efforts."

"What did you do," Elena mocks, "threaten to crush her to death with Damon's ego?"

There's a beat of intolerably awkward silence wherein the three of us stare at her with varying mixtures of amusement and offense. Even I have to crack a smile at that one.

Though, in all seriousness, what is her problem? Is she really still this bent out of shape over all that?

"Who tied your panties in a wad?" I ask, a little puzzled but growing more irritated by the minute. "You're like…extra snarky."

"I woke up this morning to learn that all the vampires have been released from the tomb. I've earned snarky," she snarls. Ok…

"What exactly are you so angry about?" Damon asks, his tone deliberately casual as he distractedly twirls the fire-poker in his hand. He seems dismayed by her attitude, but there's a tiny spark of amusement there too.

"I'm not angry, Damon. I've accepted that you're a self-serving psychopath with no redeeming qualities," she sneers.

"Ouch."
"Ok, can we can the harpy routine at some point? It's getting kind of old," I challenge, barely restraining the urge to growl.

Ever the mediator, Stefan steps in. "This isn't being very productive," he says. Glancing at Damon and me, he asks, "We're gonna figure out a way to deal with Pearl and the vampires, yeah?"

Obviously. Whatever, Stefan. We're so done with this.

---

**Elena**

"I'm sorry," I tell Stefan when they're finally out of sight. I press my face to his chest as he wraps me in his arms. "He just makes me so cranky."

"I know," Stefan readily agrees, propping his chin on my hair. "He makes everybody cranky."

Understatement. Damon just…ugh. He makes me so mad. Every time I look at him now I want to punch him in his smug little face. What makes it even worse is that I'm not even sure I have the right to be angry.

I mean, it's not like he owes me anything, and I did tell him I forgave him for the Isobel business. Maybe if I were just mad about him killing Alaric I'd feel less ridiculous, but even I know that's a lame excuse.

No, the truth is I'm still mad about catching him and Lia last night and it's pissing me off. Both because I didn't want to see it and because I shouldn't care that I did. I suppose it's just easier to be mad at him about it, than admit I'm being unreasonable.

It's just that I can't help but feel a little mortified by the whole thing. I feel made a fool of by them both. What with Lia's constant urgings to see—pushing me toward Damon with every dig at his brother, prompting me to consider him in a new light. A light that caused many a sleepless night and a plague of guilt every time I think of Stefan, I might add. And then, when I finally look and start to think that maybe I can see what she does, she snatches the floor out from under me.

Damon is almost worse. He flirts and teases, gives me these looks full of such a hidden beautiful vulnerability, makes me feel for him when I know there is no logical reason I should and then… this. Despite everything they both told me; everything they've led me to believe.

I just…I feel played.

I glance at Stefan. I wonder what he makes of all this.

"So what are we going to do?" I mutter into his shirt.

"Damon, Lia, and I are gonna handle everything, I promise," he assures me, but I don't like the tone of it. I crane my head back to meet his eyes.

"Well, what about me?" I ask, not appreciating the exclusion. "I can't just sit here and do nothing."

I'm not some delicate flower he has to protect from everything. I can contribute something. It's my life too, you know.

"Yeah, that's exactly what you're gonna do because that is what's gonna keep you safe," he reasons,
but I'm not having it. I'm hardly the only one at risk here.

"Which means nothing if you're not safe too," I urge.

"What do you mean? I'm perfectly safe. I have Damon, the self-serving psychopath, on my side," he quips. Yeah, that's sort of what I'm afraid of.

"Well that's comforting," I mutter as I return my head to his chest. What a great way to start the day.

Anna

"Ok, we have some time. I'm not meeting my mom until later."

He looks suddenly alarmed, "Wait, does your mom know you're a—"

I can't help it. I laugh. "The fact that you would even think it's possible to keep something like that a secret from your family is just further proof that you're not ready."

"'Not ready' is a step up from 'no'," he says, that eager expression finding its way back to his face. The puppy dog eyes are in full effect.

"And a million steps down from 'maybe'," I quip.

He looks down at his hands, disappointed. The move draws my attention to his wrist—something I'll admit I've been working hard to ignore lately—and I notice something I hadn't before.

Something tickles at the back of my mind. "I like your bracelet," I say, gesturing toward it as I work to keep my suspicions from my eyes.

"Thanks, my sister got it for me," he says. Pretty much all the answer I needed. Then again…

"Can I see it?"

"Yeah. Yeah," he agrees quickly, taking it off to hand to me.

Fortunately, it's stuffed rather than soaked or my hand would be burning now. As it is, the faintest waft of scent on the air alerts me to the danger. "Your sister doesn't know you're hanging out with me, does she?" I check, though I doubt it.

From Nadia's barb yesterday, it's obvious she knows so I can only be grateful she hasn't spread the news to Stefan. Damon I can probably trust—he wouldn't care enough to say anything—but Stefan… And if Elena knows, it's all downhill from there. She makes a habit of butting in where she's not wanted.

"No. No, but I don't see why it would be a problem. I mean, it's not like she knows what you are," he smiles. Good, that's what I was hoping you'd say.

"I'd rather keep it our little secret," I tell him. If he suspects anything, his sweet smile doesn't show it.

"You know, why don't you um—why don't you keep this?" he offers suddenly, gesturing the bracelet toward me.
Not sure whether to be flattered or baffled, I ask, "Why would you give this to me?"

"Because you like it, and I like you," I almost smile at that, but then I remember…

"You only like me because of what you want from me," I deflect.

"No, I—I like you," he chuckles, and his smile seems to light up the room.

It's impossible, but I think I can almost feel my skin blush under that grin.

Not entirely at the absurdity of the image.

"Um…You know, you should wear it. It looks better on you anyway."

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**Damon**

I give a careful crank of the wrench in my hand as I attempt to rewind our massive antique of a broken-down grandfather clock. The time's been off for weeks, and I could use the distraction.

Stefan marched off to his room two minutes and an impassioned lecture on the virtues of humanity and free will ago, after Elena stormed out of here in her own self-righteous funk.

Honestly, does she think I don't know what she's mad about? All this bullshit about killing her history teachers and messing with Blondie's head is exactly that—bullshit. It's nothing but a giant distraction from her real problem and it only goes to show how badly it's affecting her.

It calls to mind the first time we had this conversation at that so quickly ended football game at the beginning of the year: "I get to you. You find yourself drawn to me. I bet you think about me even when you don't want to think about me."

Truer words. If only I knew what to do with them.

"Hunting party?" I call as Stefan reappears with a windbreaker and an anxious scowl.

"Guy did a number on me last night when he stabbed me," he says. "I gotta get my strength back up."

"I don't think bunnies are gonna do that for ya, kid," Z snorts from somewhere to my left. I almost jump at the sound. I'd forgotten she was there.

Continuing where she left off, I offer mockingly, "I have 2 liters of soccer mom in the fridge."

Predictably, Stefan only glares at us in reproach. "No?" I tease.

He releases a put-upon sigh as he shakes his head in refusal.

"We'll talk when I get back?" he confirms, hand already on the door.


Still turned slightly in his direction, my eyes catch Z's at my elbow. Her pale eyes look on me with an expression equal parts amusement and sympathy. It's a bizarre combination, but somehow on her face it works.
"You wanna talk about it?" she asks, though her tone betrays her resignation.

"Nope," I say shortly.

She nods, unsurprised. "Yeah, ok," she mutters once and falls silent.

I turn back to the clock.

---

**Elena**

Ugh! There goes the phone *again*. Take a hint, loser. I *don't* want to talk to you.

Halfway up the stairs, someone knocks at the door. Unfortunately, I have a sneaking suspicion that I know who.

Yep, it's the psychopath and his morally indifferent shadow. Just who I wanted to see.

"You're ignoring me," Damon says as he shoves his way through the door, dripping rain and mud on the floor as he passes. Lia looks like a drowned rat in her grungy wet clothes. The image brings a sadistic smirk to my lips.

"The six missed calls?" I taunt, crossing my arms with a sneer. "Sorry, my phone's dead."

"Stefan here?" he asks, ignoring my barb. Something about his tone strikes me. He sounds almost...frantic.

"No," I retort, but my rage is fading and it sounds like a question as I bounce my eyes between them.

Giving in to it I ask, "Why? Something wrong?"

My answer worries him, I can see it. He tries to look nonchalant, but he's barely restraining the urge to panic and my own concern is mounting as I watch him. I still have no idea why.

"He went out in the woods and didn't come back," he explains, eyes shifting to his cell. "I can't get him on his phone. I figured he was here with you."

Alarmed now at the evident fear in Damon's eyes, I press the speed dial of my own phone and listen as it cuts to the automated voice on the other end.

"It's going straight to voicemail," I tell them, feeling my heart race at the thought. "Where could he be?"

Damon meets my eyes and I swallow painfully as the cold hard fear in them spikes a wickedly sharp chill in my own throat. "You're not gonna like what I'm thinking."

---

Z says nothing as we wait for Damon at the edge of the woods. The storm rages on beyond the shelter of metal and glass around us, but the inside of the car cries only in silence. The quiet does nothing to deflate the swelling lump in my throat.
I jolt in my seat as the blurred movement of a dark shape emerges from the trees. Damon's back. But he's alone.

"What happened? Where is he?" I demand, as I leap from the vehicle. A second door slams shut behind me, but I only have eyes for this vampire.

His eyes seem to weep as they meet my glare. "They have him. I couldn't get in."

"What? Why?"

"Because the woman who owns the house is compelled to not let us in," he tells me, and I know he feels my fear.

"Wait, Lia. You can get in!" I realize suddenly. "That thing you did at Trudy's. She was on vervaine and you got in. You can do that here, right?" I look at her, my eyes no doubt screaming my growing desperation.

"What, glamour?" she asks, biting her lip at my expression. "Mm, that's like the hedge-witch version of hypnosis. It's just magical persuasion. No, if she's been given a specific directive not to invite in any strange vampires..." she looks to Damon for confirmation. He grimaces in anger and worry, but nods.

"...There's nothing I can do," she apologizes, but I know she doesn't care like I do. She doesn't even like Stefan. But there's one other option.

"Then I can get in," I say, more determined by the minute. I take a step forward, but Damon shoves me back with a firm grip on my arms.

"You're not going in there," he informs me, but that's not stopping me.

"I'm going!" I snap. I struggle to pull my arms from his grasp, but his hands are too tight where they hold me. All the will in the world is no match for his strength.

"You're not going in there." Damon stares me down, unmoving as stone. Lia watches from the sidelines, not saying a word.

"Why are they doing this?" I plead with my eyes, needing an answer. My vision blurs, swimming with the images in my mind. I can't bear the thought of it. "What do they want with him?"

"Revenge," he admits. "They want revenge."

Katherine. God, why does it always come back to Katherine?

"We've gotta do something."

"I know," he agrees, his eyes turning back toward his brother. Only the house shows its worn face.

"We can't let them hurt him! We've gotta get him out of there—"

"Elena!" Damon's hands cup my face, his palms brush softly in my hair. "I know." The haunted look in his crystalline eyes halts me in my tracks.

"But I don't know how to get him out." Those eyes seem to pierce right through me. The ice in my throat thaws, if only a little.
"I think I know," comes Lia's hushed voice.

Something like hope melts the edges.

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**Alaric**

"Hey there, Ric," a voice smiles behind me. I turn down the hall to find Lia, eyes dancing with mirth. "Long time, no see."

"You're certainly looking alive and well," I spin to find my murderer behind me. They box me in.

"You can't hurt me," I say, as much for my own benefit as theirs.

Damon smirks at that. "Oh, I can hurt you alright."

From my open classroom door, steps Elena. I've never been sadder to see her than in this moment. Isobel's daughter, surrounded by vampires. "Mr. Saltzman. We need your help."

Yes. You do. But that's not what you're after.

"Whatever it is, I don't want any part of it," I tell her with a pointed look to her companion as I brush past her. I quickly come to rest behind my desk, putting some much needed distance between me and the vampire that killed me. This is so not my day.

Surprisingly, the non-humans accommodate, leaving Elena to plead her case while they lurk in the background. Damon settles in against the windows while Lia perches on a desk, her foot propped on the plastic seat. I'm left defenseless against the lethality of those chocolate brown eyes.

When she first begins her tale, I'm intrigued. By the end, I am flabbergasted.

What the hell have I just walked into?

x

"Stefan's in the house. Damon and Lia are vampires. They can't get in. We need you," she explains as she reaches the close of her story. "I would go, but—"

"But your life is valuable," drawls the vampire in question. Damon pushes up from his perch at the window as he looks at me. "Yours on the other hand is…"

His eyes trail to my ring, but it's Lia who speaks. I'd never noticed how creepy this tag-team thing was before. Not to mention…gross.

"What with that nifty little ring on your finger, you can't lose," she shrugs with a smug grin. "What's left to worry about?"

"Oh, a few things," I answer drily. "Getting mixed up in vampire business for one."

Lia smiles, something like affection in her eyes. "Mmm, but you've got such a knack for it," she teases. I feel like a particularly adorable puppy she's taken a liking to. "Don't you think so, Damon?"

He smirks. "Hmm, well, you know he does still seem to be breathing so—"
"Yeah? Well how 'bout I give killing you another shot, only this time I won't miss?" I snarl, taking a threatening step forward. Lia shakes her head at me fondly. That patronizing smile is really starting to grate on my nerves.

"Mr. Saltzman, please," Elena begs, her hands raised to halt me in my tracks. Her doe eyes plead with me as she does. "It's Stefan," she says, as though that's all the answer I should need. For her, it might be. For me…

"I'm sorry, Elena," I say, determined though I almost wilt as the tears fill her eyes. "It's not my problem."

"That's a shame 'cause the woman in charge of the crowd can help you find your wife," Damon taunts.

Elena looks shocked by this declaration, whipping around to stare at him. Lia only watches with interest as he advances.

"You're lying," I scoff, but my heart races in response.

"Am I?" he challenges, a mocking smirk quirking at his mouth as he reaches the desk. "Why don't you ask her for yourself?"

I can only stare at him, skeptical and reluctant to believe him or let him play me for a fool, but I can't help but wonder…

"Coward," he accuses, and this time the smirk makes it through. "Come on, girls," he says, a light hand to Elena's back. Lia hops off the desk with a swing of her boot heels and starts to follow, though the look she gives me says she knows what I'm thinking.

Unable to take the challenge in that gaze, I glance down at the gaudy ring on my finger—the ring that saved my life, my final gift from Isobel. That decides me. I have to know.

"Alright," I call, and Lia grins. I'm sure the smug smile on her face is echoed on Damon's. Elena spins back to stare at me, naked fear warring with the budding hope in her dewy brown eyes. Damn. "I'll go," I tell her. As if I ever had a choice.

Jeremy

Anna's been telling me about this new game she's been obsessed with all weekend—the new Uncharted I've been waiting for all year actually—and while normally I'd be interested, I can't stop thinking about earlier. I think I may know what to tell her now.

"So I have an answer," I say, cutting her off mid-rant.

"To what?" she asks, looking confused.

"To why you should turn me."

She rolls her eyes, sighing. "We're back to that?"

I know she doesn't see it, and maybe she thinks this is just some childish whim of mine, but I really need this. "Look, I wake up every day, and I feel ok," I tell her as she watches me with ageless
eyes, "but there's something missing. Like a—like a hole. Some people, they fit—in life or whatever. I—I don't."

"So, you want a pity turn?" her words are biting, but her eyes are soft. "I don't think so."

"No, you should turn me because I don't have anything else."

As she stares at me, I think I'm finally seeing her—the vampire—not the quirky human girl she pretends to be. I'm surprised to find my own hollow loneliness echoed in the soul-deep chasm of her eyes. That understanding is why I know I need this. I've only seen that look on one other face before today, and they have more than this in common.

"Do you even know why we turn other people?" she asks, staring up at me in sympathy. "It's not to give someone a one way ticket out of loner-hood, ok? One; we need someone to do our dirty work. Two; revenge. Three; boredom," she chuckles, "but you know that never turns out well."

"And then, there's the obvious one," the searching look she gives me at this last scares me a little. I don't know what it is she wants to see.

She smiles sadly at my confusion. "You love someone so much that you would do anything to spend all of eternity with them."

Oh.

She clears her throat. "I'm sorry, but...you don't fit any of those categories yet," she teases with an unconvincing chuckle. Her eyes still burn.

She stares at something over my shoulder and the moment breaks. Her voice changes entirely. Suddenly, she's the familiar home-schooled teenager again. "So yeah," she says, sliding from the chair. "Just make sure that your thesis is clear, and she'll love it." She fumbles with her bag as she walks away. "See you later," she mutters to me, but she's staring at her phone.

A moment later:

From "Anna": Mom

I watch as she approaches an older Asian woman at the entrance to the Grill, looking nervous as hell. I smile.

---

Nadezhda

Under the light of his desk lamp in the storm-shadowed classroom, we watch as Alaric unrolls a leather carrier filled with some wicked little toys. Maybe his slaying days will come in handy after all. Glad I thought of it.

"Teacher by day, vampire hunter by night," Damon drawls with a smirk to match my own.

Alaric glares at him, intent clear in his eyes. "I've got you to thank for that."

Yes, well...yeah I've got nothing.
"What are these?" Elena asks, fingering the syringes. From the acrid smell of them, I think I can guess.

"Those are tranquilizer darts filled with vervaine," Alaric answers, confirming my thoughts.

Hooking a thumb at me as he stares at the teacher, Damon says, "Just get us in. We'll get Stefan out."

"That's your plan?" Elena scoffs. "You're just gonna take them all on yourself?"

I snort to myself. Could she be more transparent? "Well, I mean, Damon the baby vamp may stumble around like a chubby-legged toddler—"

"Well, I'll be a little stealthier than that, hopefully," Damon cuts in, looking a little offended.

I smile to soften the blow. "But, seeing as between the two of us, we've got more years and motivation than the rest of them combined, I feel reasonably safe in assuming that: Yes, Elena. We can rip them into tiny bloodless pieces just fine on our own. No help from the non-slaying ex-cheerleader required."

Apparently, this explanation was unsatisfactory to Stefan's eager beaver of a human girlfriend as she continues to stare with interest at the darts, pulling one out of its pocket.

"Whoa. What are you doing?" Damon questions as though the answer wasn't obvious.

Elena finally looks up at that, innocent doe eyes fooling no one. "I'm going with you guys," she answers. Because obviously we need a human tag-a-long on this trip through enemy territory.

"No, no, no, no. No way." Damon denies immediately.

"Did you ignore everything I just said?" I scoff.

"You need me," she urges. "I'll get in. You could distract them, and then I'll get Stefan out."

Is she crazy or just suicidal? She can't be serious. "Excuse me? Need y—"

"You'll get yourself killed. You're not going in there," Damon informs her, adamant.

Unfortunately, Elena is just as stubborn. "I'm going," she snaps.

Rolling his eyes as he ignores her, Damon continues, "So, when you get us in, get out as quickly as you can. We know how to sneak around where they can't hear us. You'll basically just be in the way."

"Damon, I won't just sit on the sidelines. You can't ask me to do that," she rants, growing increasingly frustrated.

I glance up at Alaric, wondering how he's taking this little lover's quarrel. He actually looks vaguely amused, though his smile falters when it locks on mine.

"Fine. Elena, you can...drive the getaway car. You're not going in the house."

"You can't stop me. It's Stefan we're talking about here. You don't understand."

Is she kidding? She's kidding, right?
True to form, Damon responds with yet another scathing reply. "Oh, I understand. I understand," he croons mockingly. "He's the reason you live. His love lifts you up where you belong. I get it."

I actually smirk for a moment before I catch the look in his eye. He means it when he says he gets it. He's more worried for his brother than she is.

"Can you just not joke around for two seconds?"

Can you be reasonable for two seconds?

"I can't protect you, Elena," Damon snaps, finally losing his patience at her stubborn irrationality. "I don't know how many vampires there are in there."

He snaps his fingers in her face. She jumps. "That's how long it takes for you to get your head ripped off. I have to be able to get in, and get out. I can't be distracted with your safety."

Fear swims with anger in his eyes and they bore into hers, filling them to the brim. "Or this will end up a bloodbath that none of us walk away from, including Stefan. I know. I get it. I understand."

There's a pregnant silence between them as he strokes her arm. No one says a word.

Alaric clears his throat, pulling them from each other."If we're gonna go, let's go," he says. We nod.

(Brief note: There's a lot happening here plot-wise, and in order to keep up with the multi pov's, there is a little overlap in some scenes. Just warning you now in case it gets confusing.)

Alaric

It's pouring rain, the roads are flooded, and I'm in the middle of the woods, knocking on the door of a cabin full of vampires. On the grand scale of poor life choices, I think it's safe to say this is off the charts.

He answers at the second knock. "Oh good. Someone's home," I say, though my mind is screaming all sorts of other things. "Uh, could I use your phone? My—my car broke down a few miles up the road. This was the first house I saw."

He's short and scruffy and reasonably unintimidating—till you see his eyes. I'm guessing this is Frederick."Well, lucky you," he says, and his black eyes flash with danger. If I had any sense of self-preservation, I'd be kicking dust the other way. Then again, if I had any sense at all I wouldn't be here in the first place.

"Yeah, lucky me," I mutter, holding character. "It's no trouble is it?"

"Not in the slightest," his lips twitch in what I suppose should be a friendly smile, but those hard eyes give the game away. How is it possible they fool anyone with eyes like theirs? No human has a gaze so dark.
"Great," I smile, as he lets me through. I rub my hands against the chill. "Whew! Hey, man, I really appreciate it. It's, uh, it's rough out there."

The first vampire turns his attention to another behind me, jerking his chin in command.

"Billy, show our visitor where the phone is in the kitchen," he orders as 'Billy' leads the way, no doubt plotting my death via exsanguination. "And get me something to drink." Called it.

"Yeah, sure thing," Billy answers, gesturing me ahead. We pass by a billiard room down the hall, a game of pool in play. I count only half a dozen vampires in attendance. I'd hope that's all we face, but something tells me we're not that lucky.

In the kitchen, a kindly looking woman with sickly pale skin chops zucchini. The bite marks that riddle her arms and neck blaze an angry red against the stark white of her doughy flesh. It turns my stomach.

"Hey, Miss Gibbons. This guy wants to use your phone," Billy tells her in an amiable tone, sounding for all the world as innocent as a newborn babe.

She greets him with a smile so warm you'd think she believes it. "Oh, sure, honey," she tells me, gesturing with the knife. "It's right there."

"Thanks," I say, following its directive. As I turn my back to them, I slip the stake from my sleeve. When Billy attacks, he gets a chest full of wood in reply.

Quickly, I turn the handle on the faucet and press the button on the food processor, letting loose a stream of white noise to cover the sound.

"What's happening?" the poor woman has had her brain scrambled so many times by these disgusting parasites, she can't even see straight. I hope she makes it out of this in one piece.

Reluctantly, I take her by the arm and guide her gently to the door. "Ma'am, I'm really sorry, but you're gonna need to invite some friends of mine inside." I swing the door wide to reveal a surly looking Damon waiting damp and impatient on the porch. Lia stands just off to the side with a savage grin. If I didn't know any better, I'd say she looked excited.

"Oh, I'm sorry," Miss Gibbons says with an apologetic smile. "Strangers aren't allowed in the house."

"Yeah, I know," I ramble, far too aware of the danger we court wasting time, "but you have to make an exception."

"Get her out of the house," Damon snaps. "Now!"

Seeing no other solution, I listen. As she stumbles onto the porch, he catches her shoulders in his hands. He looks deep in her eyes as he asks, "Miss Gibbons, tell me the truth. Are you married?"

She glances between us, confused. "No, b—"

"Parents? Children? Anyone else who lives on this property?" Damon presses on.

She giggles a little, compelled docility intact. "No, it's just me."

"Good," I hear only a beat of ominous silence before the sick snap of a broken neck sounds her death knell.
I watch, speechless, as she falls to the ground. Damon only smirks as he crosses the threshold.

"You were supposed to compel her!" I hiss, catching him by the jacket.

"It doesn't work that way," he whispers, unaffected by my horror.

"She's human!" I nearly shout, utterly aghast at his callous demeanor.

"And I'm not! So I don't care," he snaps, and the ice in his eyes stops me cold. "Now, get out of here. Get rid of the body!"

He shoves me out to the porch and I nearly trip over her lifeless face. My horrified eyes catch Lia's as the door closes behind them, searching desperately for some trace of conscience, remorse, humanity.

She only shrugs.

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**Elena**

The rain veils the car in a showering curtain of water, covering sight and sound with equal efficiency, and I can hardly breathe for worrying. My skin crawls with the thousand spindly legs of a creeping anxiety that sets my teeth on edge, clenched tight against the blinding pain in my chest as my lungs hold fast against panic's merciless chokehold. My heart clamors for escape, pounding angry fists on my ribcage. The lump in my throat throbs in time with the rapid beat of my heart as I sit here trapped alone in a stranded vehicle while my boyfriend suffers untold pain at the hands of a house full of pissed off vampires out for revenge waiting for a rescue I have no part in. I've been confined to a seat on the sidelines like a misbehaved child, while they all fight for their lives inside.

I thumb the rubber grip on the vervaine dart in my hand as I imagine the scene.

The furious pulsing of my heart fills my ears in the suddenly ominous silence and the impenetrable darkness beyond the window teems with the shadows of unknowable enemies. Every splash of water is the whisper of an enemy footfall, every clash of thunder a killing blow.

*Bang!*

I jump at the sound of a broken tree branch landing hard on the foot of the car. The longer I sit dumb and blind in this car is another foothold my fear gains on my body and mind. At this point, any danger to my life is preferable to the overwhelming assault on my psyche.

I decide then and there that I would rather be indoors facing the danger beside them, then worrying sick out here. I can't take the waiting. Scrambling from the car, syringe in hand, I run toward the cabin.

Ducking my head into my coat, I beat a hasty retreat in the rain from my Damon-imposed isolation and, before I know it, come to rest hard against the wooden exterior of Stefan's prison.

I hear shouts through the walls. "Billy! Jacob! Get back in here."

Knowing time is limited, I scan the building for some indication of Stefan's whereabouts. When I spot the entrance to a cellar, I know I've found it.
Creeping low but quick beneath the window, I race to the stairs and hopefully his rescue. The locked door that bars my way confirms it.

My luck holds in the window pane above the lock and, looking through the weathered glass, I see no one in the hall. Good. Unable to pick or force it, I smash my elbow through the glass, reaching through to turn the lock.

At the end of the first turn I halt, casting nervous eyes around the corner at the vampire guarding my destination. It further affirms my hopes, but the dart seems to suddenly shrink in my hand against futility of the fight. He's distracted by his music and magazine which may be my saving grace from his attention at the moment, but I have no doubt he will kill me the moment that changes.

Still, I am determined to see this through. Stefan needs me and I won't leave him to die.

Suddenly, the vampire rips the buds from his ears and stands to attention. Oh, no. Did I move? Did he hear me?

He looks right at me and I gasp, clenching the dart in my hand in a white knuckled grip. He strides decisively toward me and—

From nowhere visible to me a hand emerges, stabbing the vampire in the neck with its own syringe. Damon steps from the hidden hall to stare at me in blatant incredulity.

"Are you insane?"

---

**Caroline**

For the third consecutive hour, I sit bored, scared, and frustrated in varying degrees while the wheels of my car remain mired in mud. I am in the middle of some unpaved farmer's road through the middle of the woods, no one knows where I am (thanks to my GPS), phone signals are down, it's pouring outside, and darkness is setting in. It's safe to say I'm screwed.

Angrily, I punch the radio silent. It's failing miserably in its task to keep me distracted. If I don't get out of here soon, I think I might scream. Though whether from panic or boredom is anybody's guess.

Left with no other option, I grab my umbrella from the back seat and leave the car to hunt for a signal. Unsurprisingly given the day I'm having, I've paced nearly the full length of the quarry and found nothing.

The ground is growing increasingly slippery under my feet as I skirt the water's edge and on a single misplaced step, my boots lose their tentative traction and I slide down the slope and the rushing waters below.

I grasp at anything and everything as I fall, terrified I’ll be swept away on the current should I reach it. Thankfully, at the last moment, my knees catch the ground and I come to a stop. My feet brush the water's edge.

Clinging to various branches and rocks on my path, I climb my way toward the top, but lose my grip again as one falls loose under my weight. Tightening my hold on the branch, I suddenly note the odd weight and feel of it in my palm.
That's when I see it.

In my grasp, I hold the cold, lifeless flesh of a human hand. There is a corpse buried shallowly beside me. I scream.

The storm rages on.

Anna

I'm drying my hands in the bathroom when she corners me. My heels dig tracks in the tile at the rage on her face.

"Jeremy Gilbert?" she demands. "Is that what you've been up to?"

Ever since Nadia dropped the bomb about my 'secret boyfriend' yesterday, my mother has been eying me with growing suspicion and not a little disapproval. The only thing preventing this ambush before now was the omission of a last name.

I don't know how she found out, but this is the moment I've been dreading. My grace period of avoidance is at an end and there are some harsh truths to be delivered.

Things may never be the same.

"He's my friend. What's the big deal?" I challenge, refusing to revert to the obedient child she left behind in 1864. I'm all grown up now, and I take orders from no one.

"His family is the reason I was locked in a tomb for over a century," she scolds, as though I was unaware of the relation. I dealt with it myself once upon a time. I tell her what I told myself then.

"That doesn't mean he'll make the same choices."

Ignoring my argument, she orders, "I want you to stop seeing him."

This is what I was afraid of. When she looks at me, she sees little Annabelle in her hand-sewn frock and a white ribbed bonnet, but I haven't been that girl in a century.

"I've been on my own a long time, Mother. I can make my own decisions." I move to step around her, but she blocks my path.

"Then stop acting like a child!" she shouts. Looking again at me with sad eyes and a pleading smile, certain of my painful naiveté, she says, "As soon as Jeremy finds out what you really are, he will turn on you—"

"He already knows," I interrupt, needing no more of her lecture.

"What did you say?" she asks in shock.

I can't help the slight smile that quirks my lip when I repeat, "Jeremy knows. He likes it and he likes me."

Without warning, I find myself at the receiving end of her fury always before reserved for others. My head whips back at the sting of her vicious slap. My cheek burns where I clutch it. I stare at her in surprise, hurt by the act in more ways than one—none of them physical.
She does not deign to apologize. Her eyes remain angry.

As she storms back through the grill, I trail behind her, my phone in my hand.

To "Jeremy": I'll do it.

(Quick note: we're back tracking just a little here.)

Damon

The vampire the teacher took out earlier is still lying untouched on the kitchen floor, but I know it's only a matter of time before they send someone in to check on his progress. I'll have to choose my moment carefully if I don't want to blow this thing before I find my brother.

I'm hiding in the pantry when I hear it.

"Billy, what's the hold up?" someone (Frederick, from the sounds of it) calls from deeper in the house. Soon thereafter I hear the footfall of another vampire on the kitchen tile, and I make my move. He's distracted by the blender, and he doesn't hear me coming. Too bad, Z beats me to the punch.

When he looks up to silence the machine, he finds her crouched—smiling at him with a gargoyle’s cold indifference—on the island as the knife she stabs through his throat kills his voice before it sounds. Her head tilts curiously, lips twisting in a cruel smirk, while he gurgles and chokes on his own blood. Bringing her hand to her lips, she makes a show of licking the redness from her thumb, eyes fluttering in apparent pleasure. I stake him through the heart while he stares at her.

I know her well enough to recognize the act for what it is, but still…Ew.

I smirk to myself, pleased with the ease of our success though I find myself wishing I could take the time to award each and every one of these bastards the slow and excruciating death they deserve. This was almost too merciful. Z only looks vaguely annoyed.

She rolls her eyes at my grin, jerking her chin toward the cellar door. "Go, I'll keep them busy," she says.

I nod and start to head that way, but, knowing her as I do, at the last moment I add, "Z…don't play with your food."

She sticks her tongue out at me, and I know my warning has fallen on deaf ears. She smiles wickedly, and disappears. Only a distant creaking and the hiss of hushed voices mark her passage.

Shaking my head in perverse amusement and only a hint of disgust, I creep down the hall undercover of her attack.

I find the stairs to the cellar quickly enough, and discover at the end of the hall that there is only one vampire left on guard duty and he's taken pains to distract himself from any potential threat. Swell guy.

At the same moment though, we both catch the faintest scuff of concrete at the end of the hall and he moves to investigate. Taking advantage of his shift in focus as he passes by me, I administer a jolt of concentrated vervaine to his neck with a single thrust of my hand.
"Are you insane?" I challenge as I watch Elena creep around the corner, looking the very definition of stubborn. I'm pretty sure if you looked up "suicidal" in the dictionary, you'd find a picture of a bleeding Elena Gilbert running toward a hungry vampire and begging for hugs.

I smile a little at the image, but push her ahead of me while I scout for reinforcements.

"Elena…" I hear Stefan groan. "You shouldn't be here."

I enter the room to find my little brother stretched from fingers to suspended toe nails by rope and half a dozen unhealed knife wounds. I'm going to kill Frederick.

"She was supposed to stay in the car," I explain, equal parts relieved and exasperated.

I move toward the wall where I see the rope secured on a pulley at the back. "Let's get you down," I mutter.

"There's vervaine…on the ropes," he gasps. Right.

"Elena, pull that."

Without hesitation, she does. Thank god for small favors. "Alright, let's go. Clothes on."

I head to the door to check the hall while she gets him together. "Can you get him in the car?" I call to her behind me.

"Yeah," she breathes. She sounds like she wants to fall apart, but I'm going to need her to keep it together a little longer. Useful as she was with the rope, there's more than a small problem with our current scenario. There's no way I can carry them both.

"Alright, go," I instruct, reaching a decision.

"What about you?" she asks, though her mind is already on the run.

"You rescue, I'll distract. Go." Without another word between us, I speed away.

---

**Stefan**

My wrists still burn from the rope wounds. The vervaine sizzles in them like acid where Elena grips my arm—the skin pulled taut as she drags me through the woods. She clutches at me desperately as she strains under my weight, but I am helpless to carry my own.

"Can you make it?" she asks worriedly. I manage a jerky nod, but it takes all my strength of will to lift my feet with every step.

At once, she stumbles and I crash to the ground to land hard on my stomach. A weak groan leaves me at the impact.

"Nngh!" she cries out as she falls.

"You, ok?" I ask as the faintest scent of blood fills the air between us, though she tries to disguise her fear. "Yeah," she mutters, wiping her hand on her pant leg. As though that could cut the smell.

"Come on, we gotta keep going. Come on," she pulls me to my feet again, putting a brave face on
the terror that she hides from me. For her sake, I pretend to believe her.

After what feels an eternity of searing, throbbing, **blinding** pain, I spot the light blue metal of my brother's car. Something like relief swells in me at the sight.

Elena seems to agree as, with renewed spirit and attending strength, she drags us forward. "Come on, it’s right over here," she encourages.

It takes both of us pulling and pushing—gritting my teeth against the pain in my feet as I stand propped up by my brother's most prized possession—but somehow we manage to get me inside. Falling back against the familiar leather, I allow my eyelids to drop in relief matched only by that at the sound of the driver's side door as it seals her in beside me, alive and safe.

"Stefan…" she whispers suddenly, the renewed fear unmistakable in her voice. It's the only warning I receive before the shattering glass at my ear sounds the alarm and I find myself yanked from the car by inhuman hands.

I don't need to see his eyes to recognize the rage and pain of those hands, but when I do I see them blazing with a crazed fury so intense and black with bloodlust that my hope snuffs out like a flame. I know how this ends and I am powerless against it.

My body recoils at every blow, but I barely register the hits. So deep is the intensity of my pain that every new addition rolls into the next in a never ending wave of agony that soon has me wretching my hurt as I clutch at my stomach and my knees curl into my chest.

Through the darkening haze of my mind, I feel him lift me to my feet by the collar. His hot breath chills the sweat of my flushed brow.

"This is for Bethanne," he growls as a new white hot, searing, burst of pain stabs through my gut, sending spasms of an impossible, roaring fire through my entire body. I cry out as I burn.

"And this is for the tomb," he hisses and the rage in it brushes against the skin of my clenched eyelids. This is it. The end.

"No!" Elena screams, fear and determination echo in it with equal intensity, and I drop to the ground.

"Stefan?" she calls, but I barely hear her through the tunnel of my darkening landscape. Crashing waves of silence fill my ears as I fade into it. "Stefan, no…Stefan? Stefan? Stefan!"

I float for an eternity in the blackness, my body but the briefest speck of sensation in the eternal peace of the abyss behind my eyes. Suddenly, there is a bright but tiny ember of light—a spike of awareness—as something warm and irresistible touches my tongue.

"Here," I hear her whisper as the world rushes in. It's her blood. God, it's her **blood**.

"Elena, please run," I beg, terrified of what this means—of what I might do to her if she doesn't **run**.

"No. Please, Stefan. My wrist. Here, take my wrist. You need more blood," she's sobbing in desperation, **pleading** with me to bite her. Her blood pumps hard and tantalizing in my ears as the taste of her warms my singing tongue. I barely have the will to refuse.

"Go, Elena. Run…Run." God, please **run**.
"No. I trust you."

My eyes fill with blood-stained tears, but my fangs sink into her flesh. As her blood hits my tongue, I lose myself. Only her breathy gasps of pain and shock tether me to my once tightly held restraint.

His snarl of newly awakened blood-frenzy wakes my own and I release her to face my enemy. I wrench the wood from his grasp, throwing him from me to hold him by the throat before me. The shock of fear in his eyes only excites me as I drive my weapon into him. Over and over, again.

In this moment, the predator—the vampire—is all that I am, and I won't stop till he is dead.

"Stefan!" Hands grab at my shoulders and I turn to growl at their owner. How dare they stop me? This kill is mine.

She backs away in fear, her eyes shining with unshed tears. God, Elena.

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Nadezhda

Besides Frederick and the two morons rotting on the floor in the kitchen, I count five vampires in the billiard room and another three about the house. There's no telling how many are still unaccounted for, but I can't wait to find out.

In the upstairs bedroom, I find two men in hushed conversation. Not that I care enough to listen, but I catch something about the appropriate application of text messaging of all things. As I race past them—so fast I'm but a rush of air on the wind—I let loose a giggle at the image.

Immediately, they tense. The taller of the two (Tweedle Dee, I'll call him) whips around, pulling loose a stake from his belt as he stalks toward the door. Quick as lightning, I whisk his companion (Tweedle Dum) from behind his back, cracking his neck as I do. Tweedle Dee spins on his boot heel, eyes shifting searchingly about the room before coming to rest on the body of his fallen companion.

Deliberately, I scuff a toe at the wooden floorboard.

I smile wickedly as he turns again. "Hi," I wave once, but before he can so much as blink I have my hand in his chest up to the elbow and his beating heart in my fist.

He dies with a quiet whimper and a thunk to the floor. As his eyes turn grey and lifeless, I scoop the fallen stake from his rigid grip. The music below covers the sound of his dying groan, but the creak of old wood signals another victim.

They're just lining up for me, aren't they?

"Lee? You up here?" I hear from the stairs. I suppose he's grown worried by the silence. He gets a stake in the chest for his trouble.

Five down. Who's next?

I know, I know. I could have killed them all by now, but what can I say? I didn't want to risk someone escaping the melee to chase after Damon or Stefan.

Besides, if I'm being really honest, it's fun.
I smile as I hit the hall, momentarily gladdened as well as surprised that Damon's crow has yet to caw the signal of our success just yet. That either means that there were complications which he needs my distraction to cover, or he's thought better of ruining my fun. Regardless, I can't say I'm overly disappointed.

I speed past the rec room, taking note of their positions as I do. Frederick's hackles seem to rise at the stir of the air as I pass. "Turn that down," he orders. "It's too quiet."

I smile. Now for something I'll really enjoy.

There's a squelch of blood and flesh as the woman so recently dancing almost drunkenly in the corner falls to the ground—a stake in her heart I did not put there. What the hell? That wasn't the plan!


The first one to pass me leaves his heart behind, but I'm already moving toward the hall as he falls. I make it there in time to see Damon take one down with a poisoned injection and I send another flying with a swift kick to the hip. I hear bone crack beneath my heel.

"What the fuck, Damon?" I shout, delivering a vicious blow to a chin with such force his neck snaps when it whips to the side. "You're supposed to be—"

I'm cut off by the throttling hand of the vampire I'd kicked before. Wrapping my hand around his wrist I flip him to the ground. His shoulder dislocates on impact. Poor guy's having a hell of a day.

"—headed for the hills by now."

Damon ducks a swipe at his head from the bear he's fighting. "Yeah, change of plan," he grunts. The vampire drops with a dart in his thigh. "Elena's got him."

"Elena?!" Another heart splashes wetly to the ground. "God, why do I even try?"

By this point, we are fairly well surrounded by fallen vampires in varying degrees of decomposition and those still fortunate enough to be moving are looking more than a little wary. I notice a few take off toward the front door and—allowing myself a final exasperated glance back at Damon—I follow them.

The first is two steps beyond the threshold when he sees me. Or, rather, when he smacks right into me.

"Going somewhere?" I taunt. He stumbles back, surprised by my speed, but he's not the one I'm worried about.

The vampire behind him watches with cold, fearless eyes as the others charge. They don't get far. Man, I'm on fire today. He takes one look at me, face expressionless, and runs.

Seriously?

What follows is a reasonably decent workout that soon has me wondering how Frederick is in charge of this rabble. That is, unless this one's just a bonus and not actually a party to this little abduct and torture revenge scheme. Oh, well.

His speed is almost appalling. Ultimately, I know it is no match for mine, but the effort I expend in
combating it has me more than a little surprised. He goes for my throat as I duck, bobbing and weaving between his legs as he chases me.

With a blow to the knee that sends him sprawling to the ground clinging to his broken limb I lunge toward him, intent on the next heart-rip to add to my growing tally, when I realize finally what had him so confident before. The missing vampires.

Unfortunately, I don't discover this until 2 have me pinned by the shoulders as a third looms above with death in his hands. A fourth and fifth come streaming from the trees even as I lie there.

I sigh internally. Play time's over.

In a flurry of fangs and brutal fingers, kicks and punches amid shameless swipes of teeth and nails, I tear into them. Screaming in shock and outrage (and not a little pain) they fight desperately against the now inescapable force of my frenzy.

A few land lucky hits here and there—I feel the sharp sting of a bite mark in my arm, the deep throbbing of a stake in my thigh—but they fail to slow my attack even a little.

Within moments, I am surrounded by my wounded prey where they lie prostrate before me. Pulling the stake from my leg, I make short work of each of them. No use leaving them behind.

A few minutes later, I wipe my hands down the torn denim of my jeans as I make my way back inside. From the sounds of it, Damon has things well in hand—a twig-like crack of bone and a yowl of tomb-vamp pain bring a proud smile to my lips.

The scene that greets me makes me wish I'd hurried.

"Damon!" I cry out as a vampire sneaks up behind him, stake at the ready. He wheels about at the sound, recognizing the warning, but before either of us can make a move the vampire falls to the ground. A stake pokes through his chest. Behind him stands Alaric, stake launcher in hand.

An indecipherable silence passes between them as they stare at each other, but it is quickly broken.

"I'm going after Frederick," Damon says, and in a moment he disappears.

I watch Alaric as he stands awkwardly beside me in the uncomfortable moment that follows Damon's exit. From the almost sheepish way he turns his face from my gaze—no doubt glistening with an unspoken gratitude—I half expect to see him scuff a toe on the wood in embarrassment. I'm not sure even he knows why he did that, though I am glad as hell that he did.

I also can't help the tinge of giddiness in my smile that my favorite human may actually like my best friend. Even if he'd chew his own arm off before he admitted it.

I'm getting warm fuzzies just thinking about it.

"Frederick's gone," Damon says when he returns a moment later.

"Damn…” I sigh, irritated.

"Let's get out of here," Alaric says, moving toward the door.

"Ugh, I'm gonna kill him," Damon groans.

"Uh…guys? Aren't you forgetting something?"
They look at me blankly and I roll my eyes. I gesture to the unconscious, but decidedly not dead, vervained vampires scattered about the room. "You really want a repeat performance?"

They nod. "Good point."

As we are apparently out of serviceable human weaponry, Damon and I set to the vamp on vamp version of environmental clean-up—lots of hearts and heads find their disembodied home on the wooden floorboards.

Alaric looks momentarily lost for a moment before the metaphorical light bulb appears above his head and he ducks out of the room. The distinctive crash and crack of wood sounds from the living room and a moment later he returns with what seem to be the splintered remnants of a TV tray. Huh.

The makeshift stakes clatter to the floor as he sets about dispatching our fallen enemies with a somewhat alarming amount of force. There may be hope for him yet. Throwing a deliberately casual glance at Damon, he says with a dryness that belies his words, "So what you said to get me to do this, about my wife? It was a lie, wasn't it?"

"Yep," my friend admits easily. There's not even a hint of remorse in his tone. My lips twitch.

I'm twisting the head off a groaning blonde when the echoing stomps of boots on wood behind the door alert us to approaching company. Backs tense in anticipation as all three of us stare hard at the door as it creaks open, spoiling for a fight.

It's only Pearl and Anna.

"What's going on here?" Pearl demands, staring aghast at the wreckage of furniture and body parts strewn about the hall. "What did you do?" She glares hard and angry at us and I see blazing fury in her eyes, but I'm so not in the mood for her crap.

Damon, even less so.

"Me? Your merry little band of vampires spent the day torturing my brother," he growls. The still unspent rage and vengeance is implicit in his tone.

Pearl looks momentarily chastened by this news. "Trust me, the parties responsible will be dealt with."

Too little, too late.

"Yeah, great," I sneer sarcastically, my own anger apparent. "Except, I'm pretty sure we did that for you. But feel free to tidy up. And if you happen to see Frederick around, do us a solid and stake him, huh?"

"Nadia..." Anna's eyes plead for my understanding, but I have none to give. I warned her there'd be hell to pay if things went south. She's the one that swore they'd make no trouble if I helped her free her mother. It's not my fault she failed to keep her promise.

I stare at them a moment in tense silence, allowing them a good hard look at the white hot rage in my eyes. I can only imagine the hell-fire they find there.

Pearl glances between us and, from the look she gives Damon, I can only assume my anger pales by comparison. "This wasn't supposed to happen," she says.
"Well, it did," Damon snarls, wrenching open the door. "If I had a good side? Not the way to get on it."

The door slams behind us as Damon stalks off into the woods, the shadows swallowing him as his angry steps crush leaves and grass in his wake, and Alaric and I are left to follow somewhat awkwardly behind. The sight of it, in the wake of my adrenaline rush, recalls my former irritation and I struggle with the sudden urge to stomp off after him. Maybe I can beat some sense into his Elena-addled brain, since logic and reason have proven so maddeningly ineffective.

Alaric is the first to break the silence, puncturing a small hole in the mounting tension of my simmering anger. "Nadia, huh?" he probes with a not-so-subtle flare of the eyes.

It reminds me of his endearingly awkward attempts at "small talk" when we first met. It's almost enough to cool my ire.

"My real name," I answer easily. He really might as well get the whole story at this point. It's getting sort of ridiculous.

"So you two aren't…?" he presses and the look on his face clues me in.

"Oh! God, no. I totally forgot about that!" I shout. That means, this whole time he thought we were…I shudder.

"No, Natalia was just a cover story," I assure him. "Well…more or less."

"Why…?"

I smile inwardly, shrugging. "Seemed like a good idea at the time."

We've caught up to Damon by this point, but considering the eerie stillness of his body, I'm not sure that's a good thing. We trudge along, but I keep an eye on him. His silence makes me uneasy.

This is a man who never misses the opportunity for a sarcastic quip or a hugely inappropriate and/or perverse taunt. The only time he ever shuts up (and down) like this is when

A: he's pissed (usually because some idiot had the gall to threaten one of the handful of people he gives a shit about)

B: he's scared (usually that that same someone may actually accomplish said threat)

or

C: some combination of the above.

All of which inevitably lead to impulsive acts of homicidal violence and generally reckless behavior.

Yeah, not real comforting.

Damon glares hard at his phone, his jaw clenched tight at whatever news he finds there. He says nothing. The only sound for miles is that of our own footsteps as we squelch muddily through the rain-soaked forest. Finally recognizing the silence for what it is, I lose my patience.

"So, tell me again how it is that Elena rescued Stefan?" I snap.

Predictably, Damon responds more to the irritation in my tone than my actual words as he replies
defensively, "She came in after us, what was I supposed to do? Leave her there?"

"No, you idiot!" I groan. Did he forget the entire plan? "You were supposed to go after her!" And, you know, protect her suicidally stupid ass.

"And leave you alone in a house full of vampires?" he scoffs, laughing scornfully at the thought. "Yeah, that'll ever happen."

I roll my eyes in disgust at his idiocy. Like I was the one in danger. Give me a break. "Ugh, I had it," I growl. "I didn't need your help!"

He could have warned me at least. Or did he just forget why we brought a pet crow on our rescue mission in the first place? Jesus, if he hadn't shown back up the entire lot of us would have been home free before the morons even knew what hit them. You know? Like we effing planned.

"Well, excuse me for caring."

I'm about a second away from shanking his stubborn mug with a sharp stick, but I grit my teeth against the impulse when I (with the patience of Job, I might add) remind him, "Damon, there were other vampires out here. They could have died!"

That's when I spot Frederick. I take one look at his mangled body and my blood runs cold. I'm still frozen in my horror as Damon reaches the trail—fuming.

"Why do you even care? You don't give a shit about Stefan, and Elena's nothing but bait on hook until your arch nemesis comes to collect. Hell, it might even be easier for you. He can't sacrifice her if she's already dead."

I reel back, stricken. The ominous sight before me is momentarily forgotten as I stare at him in shock. The question hurts me far more deeply than I care to admit. Does he really think me that heartless?

"Fuck you, Damon," I breathe, backing away as I swallow hard against the lump in my throat. "Just…fuck you."

I turn my back on him, my entire body rigid and tense with barely restrained emotion as I walk away.

"Where are you going?" he calls somewhat sadly, but there's not nearly enough guilt in his voice to quell my anger.

I shoot him a sharp glare, my eyebrow rising in a cruel challenge. "The boardinghouse. I figure someone ought to be there right now." My eyes turned inward, I let out a single mirthless chuckle. The shrug that follows is just as self-loathing. "Then again, what do I care?"

His expressive brow furrows as an apology springs instantly to his eyes. His lips part as though to voice it.

I'm gone before he gets the chance.

Alaric
One eye on the rather tragic remains of the convertible and the other on the now empty void between us, I watch Damon digest the events of the last few moments in silence. Not the barest flinch of muscle or quirk of a lip gives voice to his thoughts, but there's something in his eyes…

If I didn't know any better, I'd say it looks like guilt.

"You're kind of a dick, aren't you?" I smirk, an incredulous eyebrow quirking of its own accord, and his head whips around to face me.

He cocks his head and for a moment his brows furrow as though deciding whether or not to take offense. I don't kid myself; I knew the bear I was baiting with that jab, but, dangerous as it is, I am willing to wager on his decision.

After a tense moment, Damon shoots me a half-hearted glare at that. The wry smirk on his lips tells me he agrees.

"Get in the damn car," he orders, but it's not half as threatening as I would have expected a day ago.

I watch him with a sort of dark fascination (and not a little amusement) as he fiddles with the steering column and the gutted ignition to expose the wires at the base, grumbling all the while about the mutilation of his precious vehicle and the goddamn cruelty (and irony) of having to hot-wire his own car.

In the last few hours alone he's managed to surprise me at least a dozen times with his capacity for genuine—though uniformly violent—emotion and self-deprecating humor. That look right there? The regret, the anger, the fear? That's what saved his sorry ass tonight.

Somehow, through all the threats and cruel taunts, the sarcastic quips and random bursts of homicidal violence, I saw a spark of something in him today that I never thought I would: humanity.

I want to blow my brains out for even thinking it, but…it actually felt good fighting beside him today. Hell, I watched him kill a woman in cold blood and I still saved him. One way or another, he got to me. I just couldn't let him die.

Now, I'm not about to hop on the Damon bandwagon (believe me, I still hate his guts), but I recognize that storm of emotion—the pent up rage, the loss and betrayal, the alcoholism, the obvious fear for his—gag—'loved ones'—

God, just saying that makes me want to vomit.

But, even the poor impulse control and sporadic acts of violence are familiar. Granted, my minor 'assaults' (i.e. bar brawls) never led to quite so much bloodshed, and I hope to God I will never be so casual about death, but…he reminds me of…well…me.

I might just hate him more than ever for the comparison.

It would all be so much easier if he were still the (mostly) faceless, unfeeling monster that drained my Isobel and haunted my every vengeful thought for years. If he could just have stayed that evil, nightmarish, black hole in the center of my collapsing universe instead of this…person.

The idea that I might actually be able to relate to him—let alone like him—kind of makes me want to unleash holy hell on his murderous ass and a three-foot hunk of flaming wood in his chest. Unfortunately, that ship seems to have sailed.
Fuck it. I need a drink.

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**Elena**

With nervous fingers, I shove my phone back in the snug pockets of my rain-dampened jeans, hiding the incriminating words from curious eyes. *(Stefan took me home. He fed, Damon)* I look up at the image of myself before me, a swirling confusion of feeling swimming through my mind. My vision wavers and I blink hard against the wetness in my eyes. I watch my reflection in the darkened glass as it drips freely down her translucent face. It's the storm's sympathetic answer to my tumultuous thoughts.

The deliberate thump of a boot on the floorboard warns me a moment before his stranger's face catches mine in the night's mirror.

"How are you doing?" I ask, breathing deeply to calm the wavering remnant of fear in my voice.

Stefan's eyes are haunted with his own shame and guilt and the darkness swimming in them somehow soothes me.

"I—I'm ok," he says, looking almost apologetic for the answer. "The wounds have mostly healed."

"Good." I nod determinedly.

"Elena…" he starts. My name trails regretfully into the air between us and I know what he sees there though I refuse to acknowledge it. There is more than enough blame to go around.

"Yeah?" I say instead.

He smiles sadly at me, but he refuses to grant me a reprieve. "What you did today, coming to help me…You could have been killed."

"I know," I admit. That is the one thing I will never regret about this day. I will never leave someone I love to die. No matter what.

"And what I did," he intones and the shadows that haunt him darken his gaze again as he looks at me. He seems to be searching for something in my eyes—some echo of his own guilt—but I have none to give. This was not his fault. "I'm sorry that…I'm sorry that you had to see it."

"I've just never…" I begin though my voice fades as I have no words to complete that thought. "You were like this other person."

My fingers wrap tightly about my wrist as I gesture toward it. In this moment, it seems almost another entity altogether. The culprit. "And it's my fault. I made you—"

"No, no, no, no," he cuts me off, the force of conviction in his voice. "You didn’t make me do anything. You were saving my life."

I nod in understanding, though the words do little to assuage my guilt. All I see behind my eyes is the monster he could have been—that I made him.

"And I was saving yours," he strokes my cheek softly and I try to take comfort in the gentle brush
of his warm green eyes. This is my Stefan, not the crazed doppelganger I met in the woods. This Stefan. "Everything's gonna be ok," he soothes and I almost believe him.

The shrill ring of my phone breaks the moment and I rush to answer it, my eyes still locked on his.

"Hey, Jer..." I greet with a smile, genuinely grateful for the interruption.

My relief fades at the overwhelming grief in his panicked voice. This is exactly how he sounded when—

"Wait, wait—what's going on?"

The phone nearly falls from my grasp at his answer.

"Oh, no."

Caroline

The devastation on Matt's face is breaking my heart, and not just for the residual guilt I feel at being the one to bring him this news. He hasn't said a word since we told him.

Despite the decade's worth of nightmares I have to look forward to—visions of sucking, sliding mud, the beckoning call of a rushing river, and the bone-deep chill of cold, dead flesh race through my mind on an endless loop—somehow the worst part of all this is that I have no idea what to do for him. I just feel so helpless.

A warm mug cradled in my palms, I pad softly across the hall toward him. He sits silent and frozen in his grief on the edge of the bed. His eyes sparkle with unshed tears.

"I made you some coffee," I offer lamely. A brief twitch is my only acknowledgement.

"Thanks," he breathes, but he barely spares me a glance. I don't blame him, but I can't take this. I have to do something.

"Are you..." I start to ask, but I know how stupid that question. Instead I say, my growing desperation ringing in my voice, "Is there anything I can do?"

At this, he finally faces me, but it's only to leave the room. "I just, uh, I need to be alone right now," he explains. I understand, but the rejection stings all the same.

"Matt..." Elena's gentle call finally thaws his frozen silence and the tears flow freely down his face. I watch as he fairly runs toward her loving embrace, empathy brimming in her own eyes. I am forgotten.

Damon

The chortling splash of liquid reaches my ears as the new (and likely to remain nameless) bartender pours a steady stream of liquid gold over smooth glass and amber droplets before my eyes had even registered the need. They may have a laughably low survival rate—both literal and figurative—but you can't deny the quality of service. Guess it figures when you're responsible for the primary
supply in a town where day-drinking is practically a way of life.

I shift slightly in my seat as I wrap firm fingers around the cool glass, bringing it gratefully to my lips as the day's events flash exhaustively through my mind. Still, much as I try to drown my thoughts, they keep straying to the less than ideal circumstances that brought me here: Stefan's torture and subsequent blood transfusion, Z's betrayed expression, Elena's text…

Through several miles of backwoods dirt and electrical current, I can practically hear the break in her voice by the words across my phone screen. Something happened out there; something that scared her enough to text me.

Trouble is, I'm not sure which of them I'm supposed to be helping. Or even if I want to…Well, whether I want to want to anyway.

At least I know Z's back home keeping an eye on them.

Part of me is proud, despite my disappointment, that Stefan managed to take that bastard out (I can only hope it was exceedingly painful for him), but I can't help worrying over the anger and strength it must have demanded. He didn't leave Pearl's with that energy, and, what with Elena's obvious distress, there's only one conclusion to be drawn from that.

I take another gulp of bourbon, the liquor eradicating the thought in a familiar burning trail down my throat, as I throw a sideways glance at my drinking partner.

If possible, Alaric is looking even surlier than usual, but there's a sort of reluctant camaraderie to the moment anyway. Looking at him now, I remember this exact expression on his face when he killed that vampire about to stake me—with a pneumatic stake launcher, no less.

Gotta give the guy props for ingenuity. Damn, if he isn't handy in a fight.

"That was fun," I say finally as the memories of today's one enjoyable adventure pulls at my lips.

He looks less than impressed at the statement, but I know what I saw today. He may not want to admit it, but he was having as much fun as I was. Sigh.

"Oh, don't look at me like that. I know you hate me," I tell him. My hand flies to my mouth as I offer a wink and a stage whisper as though divulging some great secret, though we both know it's a hard won fact. "Guess what?" I taunt, "Everyone hates me. But you can't deny it. We were bad ass."

Ric's only response is a hard right hook to my jaw that nearly sends me sprawling to the floor. It's not exactly a surprise, though I'll admit I hardly braced myself against it. Still, I watch with vague disappointment as he stalks out the door.

Glancing once at the gaping faces of the Grill's other patrons, I shrug. "Happens."

Having successfully chased away the only solid distraction from my less than pleasant thoughts, I glance down at my only remaining companion. I watch the amber liquid swirl once against the glass before bringing it again to my lips. Some part of me sighs in false relief at the burn, but the only thing behind my closed eyes is hurt and disappointment in my best friend's eyes.

The thing is—being vampires and naturally passionate people both—this is hardly the first time we've been at each other's throats. At least this time it was only metaphoric. The alternative can be rather bloody, and not always in a fun kind of way. Still, I think I crossed a line tonight—some invisible mark in the sand between us I had never known existed before I broke it with a careless
word—and I'm not entirely sure what to do about it.

But, you know, she shouldn't have jumped on my case like that. It wasn't my fault that Elena couldn't follow a simple instruction and stay in the goddamned car. I was just doing my best with what I had. How was I supposed to know they'd meet trouble on the way? Besides, it's not like she wouldn't have done exactly the same thing. I didn't see her working too hard to get away from the blood and carnage either. She loves a good fight as much as I do. Let's not kid ourselves that she would have run away from one if the situation were reversed, right?

Right.

Speak of the devil, she chooses that moment to appear beside me at the bar though she studiously avoids my eyes. My first thought is 'What the hell are you doing here?' quickly followed by a 'Where is Elena?', but she beats me to the punch. Nice to see some things never change.

"Elena went out," she says curtly. I turn my own face forward as I nod, but if she notices she doesn't acknowledge it. Her eyes deliberately slide past me as they dart to the now empty chair on my right, her voice sounding vaguely bored when she asks, "Where's Ric?"

"I don't know," I answer, my eyes narrowing slightly in annoyance. "Lost track of him after he punched me."

"Hmm," she hums ambiguously. There may be the barest hint of a smirk, but it's buried beneath 120lbs of feigned impassivity and the cold burn of tightly bound anger.

"Why?" I ask in much the same voice, taking another gulp of bourbon for effect.

She says nothing, but the phone she abruptly thrusts beneath my nose answers for her. Her eyes finally meet mine, scanning my face once as I turn my attention to the image below.

Two lovely women share a steaming cup of coffee on the cobble-stoned patio of some fashionable café, but I only have eyes for one. Her long brunette hair is a wavy mass of modern curls and her cold eyes are covered by a stylishly large set of aviators, but that coy smile is unmistakable. Katherine.

It's then I notice the caption below (Slater's commentary, I can only assume): Paris, 2008.

"What the…but this is from 2 years ago. And not even in the country," I say finally when I can find my voice again.

A trace of sympathy crosses Z's face, but it is quickly quashed by her returning annoyance. "It's not about the when and where, Damon," she scoffs, pushing the image closer still. "Look closer."

This time, the initial shock of Katherine's reappearance having worn slightly, I take a moment to consider her companion. Oh.

"Well, shit."

Jeremy

Rough fingernails dig painfully into the meat of my palms; wetness pools in my eyes as I fight to keep the tears from spilling and my eyes burn with the effort of an unblinking stare, but I barely
register this discomfort. Every cell in my body is exclusively focused on my barely restrained emotions. I can't spare a thought for anything else.

My pulse speeds at the sight of our front door and my feet can't carry me fast enough through it. I head immediately toward the stairs and the safety of closed doors the moment they cross the threshold, and my guts churn at the promise of relief to come.

"Jer…" Elena calls from the landing. The door closes gently behind her and chocolate brown eyes swim with pity when I turn to face her.

"Are you ok?" she asks as though there is any answer I could give that she doesn't already know. There certainly isn't one she wants to hear.

I steel myself against the rising emotion in my chest, and say instead, "I'm gonna go get some sleep."

I fairly run the remaining steps to my bedroom.

The second the door closes behind me, I fall against it and the tears finally pour from my dry eyes.

Grief burns a searing path through my lungs, filling them painfully as the air turns to fire. My chest feels fit to burst with the pressure—to explode outward in a spew of violent emotion—as all the dreams and longing of my obvious idiocy turns to impotent rage.

The hope I had left simmering in the back of my mind these past months lets out an agonized scream as it cries its anguish in the all-consuming blaze. Flimsy newspaper clipping crumple and tear in my frenzied grasp as a fresh wave of self-loathing and anger pierces through me.

How could I have been so stupid as to think I would ever see her again, that I'd ever have the chance at that happiness? Hell, to think such a childish fantasy of happily ever after and eternity could ever exist? Especially for me?

I should have learned by now, everyone leaves.

"What are you doing?" Anna's voice startles me, but I make no effort to disguise my grief. It's pointless now.

"My—my friend, Vicki, she's…she's dead," I explain, my throat burning around the words.

She looks confused a moment, but sympathetic nonetheless. "Vicki? The one you thought was a—"

"Yep." A hint of my self-loathing creeps into my tone when I say, "Turns out she's been dead all along."

Something that looks equal parts understanding and betrayal crosses her gaze when she gasps, "She's the reason you wanted to turn."

I look away, unable to meet her eyes as I hear my own thoughts echoed back at me so harshly.

"You wanted to be with her."

This, at least, deserves a response. I tear my eyes from the torn paper in my hands to start, "Look, I'm sorry—"

The curtains billowing in the open window are her only response.
"Listen, about earlier…” I pause, a little at a loss for the words to follow. I look at her hoping she'll cut me some slack here. She knows how hard this stuff is for me. She only raises her brows expectantly, her lips quirking at the corners.

“Uh—I, uh, you know with all the Stefan stuff, and Frederick and just...I was, you know, pissed off and...but I maybe—I mean probably, really shouldn't have said...um. Yeah. And I just, uh, well I guess I’m, uh, you know...I'm…sorry," the unfamiliar words taste funny in my mouth as I chew them and I grimace as I force them out, but Z only looks amused.

"Was that as painful for you as it was for me?" she asks, smirking.

I release a gust of air in relief. "A little, yeah," I admit, nodding emphatically. She laughs.

Then, sobering, she says, "Well, for what it's worth, I am too. Sorry, I mean. I was frustrated and angry, and more than a little scared, but I shouldn't have taken it out on you. That wasn't fair."

"Ditto," I smile a little sadly. "So does that mean you'll move out of that creepy bedroom now?"

"Creepy?" she questions.

"Z, the wallpaper is yellow," I stress. "And there are flowers everywhere. If that doesn't spell creepy to you…"

She chuckles, conceding the point. "So maybe it could use some redecorating but…” The smile drops from her lips as she shakes her head, eyes sad. "I think I'm better off where I am. It's better that way. You'll see."

I'm not sure what to make of the look on her face. When I woke up this morning to find myself alone in bed for the first time in months, I assumed she'd gone off for a drink or a midnight snack (maybe both at once). I never anticipated she'd spend the night locked in a tiny guestroom while she polished off the remaining dregs of her small stash of vodka all on her own. I certainly didn't expect her strange rejection to hurt as much as it did, either.

I guess I just got so used to her constant presence that I forgot what it was like to be alone—to feel unsupported. With this thought, my mind strays to my devastated brother. He could use some of that right now. I know he is going to be slicing himself into tiny guilt-ridden pieces right now after he fed from Elena earlier, and I know he's going to need someone to be there for him even if it's only to hide the scalpel. Unfortunately for him, I'm the only one he's got.

Three steps from the landing I hear it, and I am surprised myself by the concern I feel at the sound. A month ago, I would have thrown a party—complete with sorority sisters and bourbon for two—and danced merrily through blood and severed limbs to catch sight of him, but now…

There's no pleasure in it for me anymore. Especially not after a day like today.

The hungry slurping echoes ominously in the stairwell and I share a look with Z as we reach the top floor. The first thing I see through his open bedroom door is an empty blood bag—plastic bent and wrinkled between impatient fists like a child's on a tube of Go-Gurt, crimson liquid still lingering in the crinkled folds. This is followed by another…

On the floor by the overrun bookcase, my little brother crouches greedily over a third bag, the
plastic tube caught between clenched and dripping teeth as he pulls desperately at the liquid. He looks no less strung out than your garden variety heroin addict—a junkie clinging to his next fix harder than to life itself. I know exactly how he feels.

Blood pools in the corners of his mouth.

When he meets my eyes, something about the shame and need, the hopelessness, cries out to me. It terrifies me in more ways than one.

For a long moment stretching out into a eternity of silence, no one moves nor dares to make a sound. Into the void, Z breathes a single horrified word, and in this she speaks for all of us.

"Fuck."

Chapter End Notes

A/N 2: Ok, so since I was initially confused by this myself, I figure I should explain. Re-watching 1x17, it occurred to me how odd it was that Damon even needed to get into the house in the first place if the cellar entrance was outside and no one was guarding the way. At first, I thought that the hallway he pokes out of was just another room, but then I realized that since the door Elena breaks through on her way in is obviously still locked, there had to be another entrance. I figured, since he came in through the kitchen that that made some sort of sense to me. I don't know. Hope that wasn't too confusing.
A/N: Alright, I just have to say that I am super excited for this chapter. This one is sort of the first step toward that all out AU I keep teasing, and it can only get better from here. It is probably my favorite so far, despite the fact that it's actually very Stefan-centric, and I really cannot wait to hear what you guys think. So please, please, please let me know.

(Reference: 1x18 "Under Control", 1x19 "Miss Mystic Falls", and 2x7 "Masquerade")

Stefan

The comfortable burn of muscle and the blaring ricochet of the stereo thrum through me, igniting every reachable nerve-ending with the thrill of physical labor—my body at its peak of focus and heightened awareness. Still, it is not enough.

The gnawing hunger—the need—slices through everything like a steak knife through melting butter and there is nothing I can do to stop it. The best I can do is ignore it. Ignore it until it fades to the background of my ever-present lust, drowned out by the cacophony of everyday life, of normal, of humanity.

"Can you turn it up a little bit? It's not annoying yet," Damon shouts from the doorway. Over my shoulder, I watch him cross to the stereo and punch the power.

My fingertips grip securely around the shallow eave and the muscles in my arms flex and tense as I lift my chin to meet them. "Sorry," I gasp out around the slight ease of pressure at the bottom end. Damon silences the stereo with a single irritated jab, and I drop to the floor. My palms hit the wood, back ramrod straight, as I fall into my next set.

In the corner of my eye, I see his boots stride toward me, but all I can smell is the blood in his glass. "When you going back to school?" he asks, the smirk implicit in his voice. He knows. Eyes rooted to the floor between my hands, I say, "Soon."

"Oh, come on. Just drink already," he groans. He crouches beside me, the tantalizing liquid sloshing in the glass between his knees—beckoning. "Come on. This self-detox is unnatural."

I fight the growing hunger, the yearning, the desire to lunge fangs first into the breach, but with the smell of it so near to me the call of the blood is nearly irresistible.

"Could you get that away from me please?" I snap. I am pleased at the lack of desperation in the tone, no matter what I feel on the inside. Rather than wait pointlessly for him to subtract the temptation, I remove myself from the equation.

"How long did it take you to wean yourself off of it after you last indulged?" he prompts.

Propping my feet on the chair, I change angles for a deeper burn. I don't answer that. How can I?
But I'm not willing to slip that far this time. It can't take that long this time.

"...That's not good."

"I'll be fine," I snap, pausing in my repetition to glare at him reproachfully. "It just takes a little bit of time." I'm not sure which of us I'm trying to convince.

"I don't get it. You know, you don't have to kill to survive. That's what blood banks are for. I haven't hunted a human in—gahh—way too long."

"Oh, I'm impressed," I taunt. Damon Salvatore, murder free since...last month.

"It was completely self-serving," he replies, following me again to stand behind my chair. "Trying to get the town off the trail of vampires, which is not very easy, considering there's been half a tomb of them running around."

Surrendering to the inevitable, I hop to my feet and turn to face him. "What are we planning to do about that?" I ask. From what they tell me, the tomb vampires are taken care of, but I've heard that one before. Besides, there's still Pearl and Anna to worry about.

"You're not gonna be doing much of anything if you don't have your strength," Damon says seriously. "There's nothing wrong with partaking in a healthy diet of human blood from a blood blank. You're not actually killing anyone."

I can tell he's growing frustrated with my obstinacy on this issue, but that's only because he doesn't understand and I can't really expect him to. I envy him that.

"I have my reasons," I answer simply.

"Well, what are those holier-than-thou reasons?" he prompts, flopping back in the chair he chased me from a moment ago. He sets his glass on the table as a mocking smile crosses his face. "You know, we've never actually discussed that. You know, I—I'd love to hear this story."

I look at him sitting there with his smug smile and his relaxed posture, completely nonchalant as he pokes relentlessly at my thinning resolve. He could at least act like he wasn't so entertained by all this. "You're really enjoying this, aren't you? Just watching me struggle."

"Very much so," he smirks.

Not willing to give him any more ammunition than he already has, I say, "I hate to break it to you, Damon, but I actually have it under complete control."

"You do?" he taunts.

"Mm hmm," I repeat. It's a lie, but hopefully it won't remain that way.

"Oh. Well, then you should just carry on making the rest of us vampires look bad," he teases, climbing to his feet. "Have a great day, Stefan." The glass stays behind when he leaves.

Despite my resolve, I can't help but stare. The blood is such a rich, deep red, the smell so mouthwateringly vivacious, I feel the veins beneath my eyes squirm in anticipation. My entire body from teeth to toes freezes cold and rigid—tightly restrained against the mounting scream of my need.

"Oh, hey!" Damon's reappearance breaks my concentration. "I almost forgot something. Oops."
The sly look in his eye makes my blood boil, but the hunger does not fade. In my very veins, the monster salivates—tearing at his chains with superhuman strength, nearly ripping them free with every ravenous lunge. It's only the iron will I have painstakingly built one crumbling stone at a time for over a century that keeps me still.

My eyes follow as he takes it away.

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**Nadezhda**

The bar is repulsive. It's sort of the epitome of hole in the wall, with the dark wooden interior, the clearly loyal (though scant) patrons, the obvious lack of concern for hygiene… The rusted stool creaks as I shift in my seat, crunching broken peanut shells with its feet. My hand leaves the bar-top as I release the bartender's glazed eyes from my hold, and it comes away sticky. Ugh.

Still, it beats hanging around Mystic Falls and the never changing scenery at the Grill. Don't even get me started on the boarding house. If I had to suffer through another hundred repetitions of "chin up, push up, flog thyself" to that horrible blaring caterwauling while Stefan internally reenacts "A Clockwork Orange: Vampire Edition", I think I would have introduced him to the business end of a coat rack.

I know the memories he suffers through—that he tortures himself through. The images are all too real. Unfortunately, though putting a permanent end to them might make me feel better, I can't imagine Damon would be too thrilled if I murdered his brother. Oh, well.

Snaking the bottle from beneath the blank stare of the bartender, I hop down from the stool in search of this morning's meal. Just because Stefan's busy denying his nature and his implicit thirst for violence and blood, doesn't mean I have to be. I sigh inwardly. This would have been a lot more fun with Damon, but what with his whole "No, we can't eat in" and "Don't kill the townspeople, it's suspicious"—Ugh. Like I'm just going to drink from blood bags now? Talk about boring.

Oh but, wait. I'm not in town, Damon. So take that!

I giggle at my own joke. So…I might be a little drunk. 6 hours paying devoted tribute to the gods of vodka will do that to a girl.

I settle at a booth at the back with a good view of the bar and its pitiful assortment of flavors.

Down the side wall, there's an older man with a scraggly grey beard and a red-bandana with his arm pressed against the plastic window as he leans into the juke-box. Despite dressing like a "Sons of Anarchy" reject, he reveals a geriatric indecisiveness as he flips through page after page of outdated old hits. Honestly, I expect some over-zealous hair band selection from the wanna-be bad grandpa, so his choice of song is initially unnoticed by me as my eyes scan my remaining options. Though, even in the distracted background of my mind, the soothing piano accompaniment to the jazzy number is a welcome surprise.

I spot a few younger red-necks crowded about the pool table. Beers sit idle and dripping on the wood as they hassle their companions, cues forgotten in their play.

There's a middle-aged cougar that reminds me of Mama Donovan across the way, nursing her sorrows in a gin and tonic that probably tastes like flat soda and rubbing alcohol considering the location. She doesn't exactly look any more appetizing than Biker Joe or the greasy bartender
The low, hypnotizing tenor of Dean Martin's voice thrums through me and pulls me gently from my reverie. Floating on the musical air, my ear catches on the words—familiar and new all at once—and the bubble bursts. The clouds are swept away in the chilling breeze of a memory. A cruel laugh and sad, dying eyes overtake my mind and for a moment I lose myself.

"Turn it off," I demand. The disembodied voice sounds cold with fury and command. Not a hint of the desperate throbbing in my veins or the ache in my heart are present.

"Excuse me?" the biker sneers. No respect. He has no idea who he's dealing with.

I catch his eyes easily with mine, pulling them into my darkness through 12 feet of dim lighting and dusty air. "I said, 'Turn. It. Off.'"

This time, he obeys. Good boy.

Fortunately for me, the regulars all seem to take this little exchange as a matter of course and thus fail to react at all. I doubt they'd even bat an eye if I took a swing at him right now. Hmm. Guess seedy back-alley establishments are good for something after all.

Maintaining the connection, I refuse to release him from my gaze as I approach him. The green/brown flecks in his eyes take on all new meaning in this moment. My fangs are aching for a taste, my skin for the rich, hot feel of his blood as it pours down my chin. I want to drown in it, feel it flowing through my veins, and know that this kill was mine. Know that I have consumed him—his life, his mind, his blood—in every sense of the word. Know that I have taken from him that which is now forever lost to me.

Laying a deceptively light hand on his shoulder, I stand on tip-toe to whisper my instruction in a weathered ear. Though the beast within me gnashes anxious teeth for a taste of him, I know he's not the one I want. Not really. Still, he'll do in a pinch.

Several minutes pass before I have him in my grasp again, this time in the grime-encrusted alley behind the bar, but my awareness fades as I sink my fangs into his flesh—sucking hungrily at the bleeding wound. As I draw from it, his life flows into mine. The feverish pounding of his terror-stricken heart sends his blood to the surface in thick, gushing bursts as I take it in.

All the sorrow, regret, pain, hurt, anger,…love, of his life—his mark on the world and others on him—fill me with every greedy swallow of the hot, pumping liquid as warm blood coats my tongue, my throat, my veins. In his blood I see a laughing girl with a sunny smile and her father's eyes—now wrapped in the arms of a vicious man—now screaming anger and betrayal, tears streaming—now lying pale and still on a steel table.

Necessary though it may be, it's really a shame to let this one go. There is so much guilt and anger in him, that I can feel it feeding my own as flashes of my worst living nightmare play behind my eyes. So long neglected—futilely avoided—but never forgotten.

It's the closest I can get to humanity.

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**Bonnie**

I curl into the soft confines of my aunt's guest bed—the plastic of my cell pressed hot and ever so
slightly damp against my ear—with what I can only imagine is a bemused expression. It's sort of a
wonder she doesn't pass out from lack of air with the way she carries on. Sometimes, I think she
must have the lung capacity of a hot air balloon.

I wouldn't have it any other way.

"I don't know, Bonnie. Am I being too pushy? Should I back off? It's just…I want to do something
different for them, and everyone always says you should cook for people when they're grieving, you
know? And I just want to help…"

I shake my head at her, though I know she can't see it. This is one area in which I feel well
equipped to offer advice.

"Yeah, I get that Care, but…7 lasagnas? That might be a little much," God, even the thought of all
that cheese makes me sick to my stomach. "Take it from me, no one should have to eat that much
casserole."

"Oh my god! I'm so sorry, Bonnie. I totally spaced!" she shouts, immediately contrite. "I shouldn't
even be complaining about this. How are you anyway? Sorry—stupid question. Um, when are you
coming back?"

I smile softly at her words. Caroline may be flighty and prone to chatter, but she really is a great
friend when it counts.

"Actually, that's sort of why I called…" I start, not sure how to ask what I need to. "I'm getting
home today—"

"Oh my God that's great! I've missed you!" she exclaims excitedly. I find the feeling's mutual. I've
really never felt closer to her than I have in the last few weeks. She's really been my one constant
friend through all this.

"Yeah, you too," I say, meaning every word. "But, see, I just have to ask you a favor. It may seem a
little weird, but…"

"Of course. Anything you need," she answers easily. It doesn't really do much to quiet my nerves.
I'm not at all sure how she's going to take this one.

"Just…don't tell Elena I'm back yet, ok? I'm just not ready to talk to her yet."

I never told Caroline what happened, obviously. I couldn't even really explain to her why Grams'
death made me distance myself from Elena, but…I think after the way we've spoken lately she gets
it. On some level at least.

It always surprises me, when Caroline finds the tact to silence her perpetual curiosity. She's not the
best at keeping secrets.

"Oh, well…ok. Yeah, I mean I probably won't even see her for a few days anyway. She's going to
that Founder's Party tonight, so…"

Hidden by miles and the one-way medium of cellular communication, my mouth twists in a
grimace of vague disgust and a simmering anger so intense and abiding that it has only grown more
violent in the preceding weeks. It is very nearly brought to a boil at the thought of them.

"With the Salvatores?" I ask through clenched teeth.
"Yeah, I guess," she sighs disappointedly. "Everyone's having more fun than I am."

My brow furrows in confusion at that. "Wait, why aren't you going?" I ask. The Caroline I know would be gushing over the hours she spent hunting for the perfect dress and telling me all about her hair and accessories. All while managing to make me excited about it. She's a wonder really.

"Ugh, visiting my dad and Steve," she whines. "I missed his daughter's birthday this weekend and now I'm stuck making up for it."

"Hmm," I hum distractedly, lost in thought. This…could be interesting.

"Oh! Speaking of, I gotta go. My ride's here. But, I'll talk to you later Bonnie." There's the slightest rush of air as she pulls the phone from her ear, only to change her mind mid-retreat. "Call me the second you get home!" she orders cheerfully and my lips twist in a wry smile.

At least one of us is still having fun.

"Will do. Bye."

_Click._

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**Damon**

"Right this way," Mayor Lockwood's surrogate bouncer ushers me inside. I think he's a Deputy or something…Carl? Bob? Eh, who cares?

Though inside, I'm cackling maniacally at the continued charade, I nod respectfully as I cross the threshold behind him. My Dudley Do Right mask is securely in place.

Liz is at the podium as I make my way inside, passing the clueless lot of them as I find a spot in the back—a wolf among the helpless flock of sheep. Ironically, they'd be a hopeless mess without me. I can count on one finger the number of times they've succeeded in finding a vampire 'on their own', and I'm the one that set the play. It would be cute if it weren't vaguely terrifying. Sometimes, I still can't believe that I care.

"The coroner's office has officially ruled Vicki Donovan's death a drug overdose. Her family has been notified." I note the sadness in Liz's eyes. Despite her professed dislike of Kelly Donovan, she clearly feels for them. Or maybe she's simply thinking how broken she'd have been if it were her daughter.

"The truth will stay in this room, and we can put this behind us," she says, sympathy and an echo of almost-grief in her eyes. If only she knew how close her nightmare almost was to coming true.

Right on cue, Dick Lockwood steps up to the podium, waving her away with a dismissive nod.

"Thank you, Sheriff," he says, his features schooled in a lazily crafted affectation of sympathy. As the only actual non-human in the room, the sight of it is rather pitiful really. I'm the one that killed her (the first time anyway), and I am so much at this acting-human thing than he is.

"And, on to a more pressing issue, John Gilbert has asked to say a few words," with an imperial sweep of his arm and a wide smile, he gestures to a man in the front row that I have never seen before. "Welcome back, John. It's good to see you."
Right away, the sight of him makes my skin crawl. Some intangible coldness about him demands the predator in me sit up and take notice; hackles rise as my eyes note his sharp focus and I feel my brow furrow with suspicion.

"Thank you, Mayor. Hello, everyone. It's wonderful to see you. I wish it were under better circumstances." His eyes sweep the room impartially, but the moment they meet mine I know. The connection is brief and disinterested, but acute all the same—the look of a predator. Seems there's another wolf hunting the sheep. I don't like it one bit.

"As a founding family member, I find it's my duty to report some very distressing news."

"He's a Gilbert?" I ask Liz, who's come to stand companionably beside me. I'm careful not to betray my thoughts in the question.

"Elena's uncle," she confirms. Interesting. "His name's John, but I call him Jackass."

My eyelids flicker briefly, but otherwise I make no response. I'm far more concerned about exactly what Uncle John Gilbert is telling my blessedly ineffective vampire hunters.

"A hospital blood bank in the neighboring county of Amherst has reported several break-ins in the past 2 weeks. 7 hunters, 4 campers, and 2 state employees have been reported missing as well. All of this within a 75 mile radius of Mystic Falls."

Dick interrupts with an unconvincing chuckle. "O—ok. No need to get alarmed right at this moment."

"Meaning, he doesn't want to cancel the Founder's Day kick-off party," Liz scoffs.

John ignores the attempt to laugh off his warning. His eyes are shrewd and almost patronizing in their superiority. "You think all of your problems are over," he says, "but I'm here to tell you nothing's been solved."

Oh, how right you are.

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**Alaric**

When the last of her classmates have filed from the classroom, I gesture to Elena to close the door while I grab the essay from my desk drawer. After this weekend's fiasco, it seems high time we got everything out in the open. That starts with getting the Gilberts on the same page.

Sitting precariously against the side of my desk, I turn an evaluating look on the teenager in front of me. The teenage girl in love with a vampire and pretending she can keep it to herself. She lives in an elaborate bubble of delusion—wrapped with the false warmth of stubborn and deliberate naiveté—thinking if she only holds the world at arm's length that she can keep the two from bleeding over the line. But secrets have a way of getting out, and, in a struggle between 'normal' and the 'supernatural', the monsters always win.

This is only the beginning.

"I made a copy of a paper Jeremy wrote for me. I think you should take a look at it," I tell her, delivering it to her waiting palms.
She looks surprised and not a little confused as she glances down at the packet in her hands. The moment the title registers in her mind, her face goes slack with shock.

"Jeremy wrote this?" She asks with wide eyes and bated breath.

I can't quite conceal the incredulous quirk of my brow at the stunned disbelief on her face. Did she really think she could keep him out of this forever? At this point, she's practically devoted her life to these creatures. She didn't think that would have consequences?

Somewhat against my better judgment, I assure her, "He's very clear that he didn't think it was real." Though I have my doubts on the subject.

"I really hope you're right, because I have done so much to protect him from all of this," she says, doe eyes damp with unshed tears.

"So how do you deal with it?" I ask before I think better of it.

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know, with all the lies and the secrets. You have to lie to everyone who's important to you."

I see some of that stubbornness and fire flare up again in the face of my challenge. Her back stiffens defensively as she shoots me a reproachful glare.

"It's not safe for them to know the truth…" she reasons. "So, yes, I keep it from them, but it's only because I love them."

I have to turn away at that, standing for a moment with my back to her. She says this with such conviction that I feel the need to physically restrain myself from voicing my frustration. Does she not realize that by building and clinging to a life so intricately intertwined in the affairs of vampires, her family is already involved by default? She is a part of their lives, and hers comes equipped with a house full of murderous immortals and a host of horrific dramas and adventures like this last. At this point, ignorance is not protective. It's dangerous.

"I think Stefan's a good guy," I say, finally, instead, "but, uh…at the end of the day he's still a vampire."

My words fail to make even the slightest mark on her conviction. The glossy film of it between us stands thin, but determinedly intact.

"I know it's hard to understand, but Stefan's different" she says, eyes shining. "He would never do anything to hurt me."

Oh, Elena. If only that were true.

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Elena

"Why would he write a report on vampires? Do you think he's starting to remember?" I ask, my eyes staring blindly at the fabric of my comforter, fingers picking at the threads.

Through the fan of my lashes, I see Stefan shake his head. "Damon took those memories away for
good; you don't have to worry about that," he assures me.

It doesn't really make me feel any better, but I am glad that he's here. I had called him the moment I left Ric's class—my mind a dizzying mix of fear and confusion—and, despite his own troubles and days' long reclusion, he had come immediately.

It's good to see him, even under these circumstances.

"Tell you what?" Stefan says suddenly. "Why don't you just ask him?"

I finally tear my eyes from their distracted observation of my bed-spread and gape at him in disbelief. "I—I can't," I say.

"Why not?" he challenges, as though the very idea were not patently absurd. "I mean, if he doesn't know anything then it's just a—an innocent question."

I ignore the obvious flaws in this argument, and instead answer to my own disappointment, "I don't even know how to talk to him anymore."

I feel a sad smile tug at the corners of my mouth as I tell him, "I mean, we used to be a lot more open with each other. But now, with all these secrets just piling up…You know, I haven't even told him that I'm adopted yet."

"Maybe it's time you start opening up to him again," he urges with soft eyes and a supportive smile. "I'm not saying you should tell him everything, but at least try to find out what he does know and be prepared for it."

I watch his eyes as he speaks and the pain in them pierces my heart. In my own preoccupation, I had almost forgotten what he had been through this week. I can't hope to understand what it really means for him, but I want to be here for him however I can. I owe him that at least.

"What about you? How are you doing?" I ask, concern drawing a line between my eyebrows.

He looks decidedly nervous at the question, but does me the courtesy of telling me the truth.

"I'm much, much better. Yeah, I'm—I'm still, you know, a little uh—a little jittery, a little bit on edge, but, uh…I'm—I'm gonna be ok." He watches me with haunted, yet somehow grateful eyes. He seems to appreciate my support even as I know he hides the worst from me.

"I've been really worried about you," I admit with a concerned frown.

"I've missed you." His sweet smile brings one to my face as the hand brushing my cheek pulls my lips to meet his.

I go willingly, but what I had expected to be a soft brush of lips in this quiet moment quickly becomes heated. I pause only a moment before I respond, reacting to the fervor of his passionate kiss. I soon find myself stretched out beneath him—his hands in my hair, cupping my face, roving the length of my body—as he looms over me. My hands grip at his shoulders, my legs pinned beneath his weight, as he moves to nuzzle into the warmth of my neck, nipping and sucking at the sensitive skin. I release a breathy sigh in pleasure which suddenly becomes a yelp of surprise as his teeth pinch just this side of painful.

He freezes above me, and I attempt to catch his eyes. "Stefan?" I breathe softly.

The uneasy silence hangs between us, and I feel my worry for him return. I pull back as deep into
the pillows as the limited space will allow, trying to catch a glimpse of him—wanting to soothe him.

But when finally he rises on his elbows to stare down at the bruising flesh, I see his face and my heart runs wild. Dark veins shift and squirm beneath eyes filled with blood, and his fangs burst eagerly from between parted lips. The last time I saw that face, he was stabbing someone to death with a sharp stick. Looking into those eyes, I see my own terror reflected back seven-fold before he retreats—physically catapulting himself as far from me as he can get, slamming his back to the wall with such force that dust and flecks of plaster fall to the floor with the resounding crash of a bookshelf.

He stares a moment longer in horror before he disappears.

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**Damon**

The door swings open and my first sight of her is the naked relief in her eyes. I swear I can hear my heart pick up speed—just for a second—as a broad grin stretches my lips. "Oh, good. You're here."

"You call, I come. I'm easy like that," I tease, stepping inside with a smirk.

She mock glares at me, placing a finger over her lips to hush my voice as she gestures toward Jeremy in the next room. Her head turns toward the stairs to invite me up quietly, but I've never been one to miss such a dazzling opportunity.

"No, Elena," I shout, lifting my voice loudly to reach her brother's ears, "I will not... go to your bedroom with you!" She rolls her eyes at me and I laugh as I follow her up. Good times.

"Ah... just like I remembered," I say as I catch sight of the familiar space. Not that she knows about that, obviously.

"Stop messing around," she scolds. Not possible, I think as I flop on her bed, scooping up a well-loved teddy bear as I fall. I sit him atop my stomach and meet her reluctantly amused/pseudo-annoyed glare.

Giving her an appraising look as I recall my earlier encounter with the eldest Gilbert, I say, "You know, did you know that your uncle's been kickin' it with the Founder's Council?"

"What?" she gasps, clearly shocked.

"Yep."

"Perfect," she groans sarcastically. "We'll just add it to the growing list of how everything's falling apart."

Across the room from my place on the bed, I notice a large and Stefan-shaped dent in the wall. The shelf there had collapsed from whatever attack it endured. I can only imagine what that might have been, but suddenly the purpose of this little rendezvous becomes clear.

Then again, it isn't like I hadn't already known that before I showed up.

"What happened right there?" I ask, though I know the answer.
She glances back nervously, following the direction of my gaze. "Uh, nothing…" she lies unconvincingly, but at my challenging stare she relents. "Look, Damon, I—I'm worried about Stefan. He says that everything's ok, but he's clearly struggling. How long is it gonna take before he's back to normal?"

"A few days, give or take," I try.

She looks unimpressed by this answer. "It's been a few days," she reminds me.

"Give, then. I don't know," I shrug, standing to break the tension. "What's the big deal?"

I wander over to the dresser on the far side of the room. I've never really had the chance to explore her space before. I'm finding it rather entertaining, actually. Pulling open the top drawer, I peak inside. I give myself a mental pat on the back at the discovery. Got it in one.

"He's not himself, Damon," she argues, voice breaking.

I snort internally. That's rich.

"Well, maybe his problem is he's spent too long not being himself," I tell her, finding a cute little rainbow striped bra that brings a delighted smile to my face. "Ooh!" I exclaim a moment before she rips it from my hands and slams the drawer.

"Ugh," she groans, glaring for real this time. "Please don't make me sorry for asking you."

Tucked into the vanity mirror behind her, I catch a glimpse of a younger, happier, teenager than the one standing here now. "It is what it is, Elena," I say, pulling the picture out of its spot for a closer look.

"Hey!" she exclaims, chasing after it.

I allow myself a simple smirk of amusement before I turn back to her with serious eyes.

"The Stefan you know is 'Good Behavior' Stefan, 'Rein it in' Stefan, 'Fight Against his Nature to an Annoyingly Obsessive Level' Stefan, but if you think there's not another part to this then you have not been paying attention," I shake my finger at her with a mocking pout, "Tsk tsk."

"He is not you," she says, finally ripping the photo from my grasp. She returns my finger wag as she sets it back on the dresser. "Not even close."

"Well, he doesn't want to be me," I agree with a slight smile, but my tone is deadly serious. This is something she needs to learn now, before she gets herself hurt. "But, that doesn't mean that deep down that he's not."

I watch her eyes as I tell her this and, while her fear and worry for my brother are apparent, I can tell my warning has struck a deeper chord in her than her spoken confidence would suggest. She knows on some level that it's true. Stefan's not the man she thinks he is.

At least…not all of him.

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Stefan

The hunger is a black hole—a pit in my stomach, though the vortex reaches every cell in my body
—drawing everything that I am into its gravitational pull. Love, lust, hate, hurt, everything in constant flux—within, around, beside—filling and yet expanding the irresistible vacuum. Endlessly, endlessly into oblivion I turn and fall, dissolve and swell, until he claws his way free—the walls of his prison cell slick with blood and the bars worn away by the perpetual war in between.

I know his victory is inevitable (he always wins eventually), but I can never surrender the fight. The shame of his existence is enough. It burns me from the inside out, the flames licking at the feet of the man I want to be. I'm afraid that if I ever gave in…the fire would consume me.

The heavy door creaks in the foyer as someone else enters the house. Glass of whiskey in hand, I turn to find Lia standing behind with a predatory stillness and cold eyes.

"Stefan…hey," she greets, but the words seem to belong to another entity entirely. They sound nervous, concerned, warm even, but those eyes…they're like ice.

In a single absentminded inhale, I catch the intoxicating smell wafting on the air between us. That's when I notice the blood on her clothes.

"You have…" I breathe, staring hungrily at the single droplet of red against the creamy fabric of her shirt.

"Hmm?" she asks, eyes following mine. She picks casually at the stain when she finds it, smiling softly.

"Oh. Right. Messy eater," she shrugs.

"You didn't…"

"Do you think I have no self-control?" she scoffs, as though the question were utterly ridiculous on my part. I'm not fooled; I know how she is. "No, he's probably home sipping orange juice out of a cardboard box by now."

Honestly, I'm more than a little jealous. I have wished more than once in my long life that I could enjoy myself as Damon does, as she does, without the fear of losing myself to the Ripper. Every day that seems an impossible feat, and I can't help but wonder at the ease with which others survive it. How can such a thing be possible?

Yet, this ancient soul in front of me who is so often the very epitome of what it is to be a vampire—who seems to give in to the predatory instincts, the hunger, and to revel in the thrill of it all—finds the very implication laughable.

"You alright there, bud?" she asks, head cocked. She watches me with shrewd eyes and a latent cruelty I can't begin to understand. "You're looking a little…strung out."

"Mm hmm. Fine," I answer, attempting to nod confidently.

There's a ghost of a smile on her lips as she stares at me, but she shrugs easily anyway. "If you say so."

The moment she disappears, I turn my back on the room. With a single scorching gulp, I down the glass. This is going to be a long night.
Bonnie

Luck must be on my side, because when I reach the Lockwood manor, Mrs. Lockwood is nowhere to be found. I manage to slip easily between the distracted folds of the guests decked in their clueless finery, chattering happily as homicidal monsters lurk in the shadows. I envy them that.

I've only just rounded the corner into the dining room when I see them crossing the threshold with a brazen confidence that sets my teeth on edge, decked from head to toe in the easy affluent elegance of their old-world arrogance.

Nadia stands small and slim between them, flanked by the brothers in their dark suits, but she shines brighter than either. In her blood-red dress, she looks every inch the demon I know her to be and I feel the hatred flare to a searing heat as it boils over and spills from my eyes. She can't see me from here; I hold the perfect position of attack, yet I know that I am weak as a newborn kitten before her inimitable power. Some day, I vow, that will change.

The soft slide of chiffon brushes over the skin of my arm where it hangs behind me, and a rush of soothing calm washes over me, breaking me from my trance. I spin to find the culprit, wildly curious who could cause such a feeling, but there is no one there. All I see is a diaphanous wing of chiffon as it flirts with the wind in its flight from the room.

Nadezhda

The night drapes dark and ominous as we approach the mansion, pale bodies bathed in moonlight through the black sky. The boys' handsome faces stand illuminated and ethereally beautiful above the solid black of their dress clothes on either side of me where I stand clothed in the cocktail dress I chose specifically for the occasion. The crimson fabric with its sheer overlay of black lace is eerily reminiscent of another I wore some 80 years past. Even the cut of it, fitting tight at the waist before falling loose and straight above the knee, suggests the era. And, despite his silence, it's not just Damon who notices.

"Oh, God. I shouldn't be here," Stefan groans, trying and failing to keep his worry beneath the drunken camouflage of liquor in his veins.

"Come on, don't be a downer," Damon teases, as cheerful as his brother is glum. "It's a party for the founding families. That would be us! It would be rude to skip it."

"You know, I really liked you a whole lot better when you hated everybody," Stefan complains.

"Oh, I still do. I just love that they love me," Damon says with a smirk, and I find myself smiling at his effervescence.

Only a hint of his real concern shows in his eyes when he turns them on Stefan over my head. "How you feelin'?" he asks.

"I'm good. I'm fine."

I snort. Yeah, Stefan, pull the other one. Doesn't matter how many times you say it, it won't make it true.

Something catches at my senses, some dark tendril of a foreign presence creeping in the periphery, and my attention drifts from their conversation as I scan the walls for its source. It smells faintly of
rotten fruit, like the sickly sweet odor of decaying flesh. Actually…it smells like my magic. That alone is terrifying.

"No cravings? No urges? Has that whiskey you've been drinking all day doin' its job?" Damon taunts.

Their words momentarily pierce the haze of my mind and I shake my head to clear it. With an essence that strong, that distinctive, I'm sure to find it again one way or another. My lips twitch at their banter, but Stefan's stubborn denial remains unmoving.

"We are who we are, Stefan," Damon tells him. "Pretending doesn't change that."

"Oh, nothing would make you happier than to just see me give in, huh, Damon?"

"Whatever. It's inevitable," he shrugs, affecting nonchalance.

"Hmm," Stefan hums noncommittally, his attention already straying from us in retreat. "I'm gonna go find Elena."

"Don't embarrass me, young man!" Damon calls after him, chuckling. The amusement fades a little as he watches him go.

"You do know this isn't going to end well, don't you?" I challenge with an arched brow.

"Oh, I'm counting on it."

My lips purse at that. I know he means it, but Damon's motives are still a lot purer than mine. He wants to expose the hunger, make it scream inside his brother's head until he can't take it anymore. Until, the only choice he has is to turn to Damon for help and finally confront the truth he should have accepted a century ago: Abstinence is not control.

Because, Damon knows what I do; this fall is inevitable. The only hope for Stefan is a reconciliation between the best and worst parts of himself—to embrace the part of him that he has so long disowned. The part that he has spent a century feeding with all the pieces of himself that he cannot accept, until that self emerged whole and autonomous from his broken psyche. That part of himself that has been forming, growing, gathering strength as he bides his time in isolation, waiting for the slightest weakening in Stefan's iron will that will set him free.

For, as he always is with Stefan, the Ripper is just beneath the surface. All he needs is the slightest of nudges to break free, and it's my pleasure to provide it.

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**Elena**

I spot Stefan over by the drinks table next to Kelly Donovan, and confusion pinches at the corners of my eyes as I make my way to him.

"Hey!" he shouts when he sees me. There's something about his posture, even the sound of the words that seems sort of…off.

"Hey! How are you?" I ask, not at all sure what I'm seeing, though it seems reasonable to assume it has something to do with earlier. He pulls me close, pressing a sweet kiss to my cheek, and I finally catch a whiff of the alcohol on his breath.
"Are you drunk?" I ask in surprise.

"Um…Ok, I know it's a little weird, but it's really helping me. The alcohol, it, uh…takes the edge off."

His mood is infectious, and I want so much to join him in it, but this afternoon marked the second time in less than a week that I was confronted with that demonic visage that so scares me. The second time that the vampire I was afraid of was Stefan. Even knowing that the thought of that face terrifies him far more than it does me, it's not so easy to forget. Still, I can see how much he needs for this to work. Considering his latest torment is for something I did, the least that I can do is show him my support.

Summoning a smile, I joke, "You're totally that drunk high school guy at the party sneaking booze."

"I totally am. Yeah," he readily agrees and this time my laugh is genuine.

But I can't banish my thoughts so easily. My eyebrows crease with renewed concern as I ask, "How worried do I need to be?"

"Oh, no. You don't need to be worried," he hastens to assure me. "It's just until, um, the cravings go away. Listen, I think we should enjoy it while it lasts. Would you like to dance with me?"

I balk at that. "You hate dancing. I usually have to beg you," I remind him, taken aback.

"No, no, no. You have to beg the sober me. The drunk me, there's no begging necessary."

I gaze out onto the entirely empty dance floor, soporific as the stilted piano playing through neglected speakers across the way. The crowd is practically pressed to the walls in their diligent avoidance of the center.

"There's really no one dancing," I comment.

Stefan seems unperturbed by this. If anything, he looks positively cheerful.

"That's because they need something better to dance to. Be right back," he says before crossing the barren wasteland to the DJ's booth.

"Yeah, that's not gonna work," Kelly announces on my other side. "I already tried to bribe the DJ with 20 bucks and a date. He said Carol Lockwood has complete control over the music choices."

Watching Stefan as he meets the dazed stare of the DJ, I say, "You'd be surprised what Stefan can accomplish when he puts his mind to it."

A moment later, the buoyant notes of Phoenix's "1901" plays out across the hall and the crowd stirs.

"Thank God!" Kelly shouts, immediately dragging my returning boyfriend onto the floor.

I shake my head watching them, vaguely mystified by this turn of events.

"Have I entered an alternate universe where Stefan is fun?" Damon's mocking voice asks as he appears beside me.

"Is he gonna be ok?" I ask him rather than respond to his taunt.
"Eventually," he says mysteriously. "One way or another."

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**Damon**

Muttering something about an overripe pineapple, Z wandered off and left me with no other recourse than to seek out alternate company. Elena was a nice detour, but hanging with her means keeping too close to my baby bro than either of us is comfortable with.

Luckily, I spot Liz looking a little lost and lonely in her black evening dress across the room. She's clearly uncomfortable in the unfamiliar garb, and I'm in surprisingly good spirits tonight. A smile springs effortlessly to my lips as I reach her.

"Ah, you know I love a woman in uniform, but I have to side with this look. You look—you look smashing," I call in greeting.


The smile I flash her then is that of loyal, vampire-slaying Damon, the rakish, but essentially kind-hearted son of a founding family. It's almost eerie how well I am beginning to wear the façade.

"You know, I had my doubts about you at first. But, like everyone else on the Council, you've won me over," she tells me.

"Thanks, Liz," I say, easily shrugging the act back onto my shoulders. "It's—it's really nice how welcoming the Council's been. I like my life here in Mystic Falls. It's starting to feel like…home again."

Oddly enough, it's not even a lie.

"Well, then you're not gonna like what I have to tell you," she says, and my smile instantly fades. What now?

"Jonathon Gilbert's claims check out. The blood banks, the missing people, all of it's true. We might have a problem."

"Excuse me, Sheriff?" Elena's kid brother interrupts, sparing me a moment for thought. "Um, I was curious if there's been any more information on what happened to Vicki Donovan."

*Jesus*, it just keeps getting better and better. I'm starting to agree with Elena. *We do* need a list.

"It was an overdose, Jeremy," Liz assures him, throwing a worried glance in my direction.

"Yeah, but her body was buried. Somebody must have done that," he argues.

Curse these Gilberts and their stubborn nosiness.

"We're aware of that. The investigation is ongoing, but there's nothing more I can tell you at this time. I'm sorry." She looks it too, but she knows as well as I do that no good can come of him knowing the truth. It's just our reasons that are different.

"Uh, that's ok," Jeremy mutters, before beating a hasty retreat.
Damn, I've got to find Elena.

Stefan

Somewhere lost in the crowd, Elena waits for me, but my feet carry me ever onward into the swaying mass. The music drives us on; at every turn a new hand waits for me, and we whirl about the hall. The swimming haze of my intoxicated mind fills my body with their energy, pulling me this way and that in time with the beat.

Every now and again, my eyes find that familiar face in the shifting sea of them and my breath catches in my throat.

I watch her bob and weave her way through the crowd, exchanging one partner for another as she flits across the dance floor, a dazzling smile shining bright across her pale face. None of it ever seems to pierce the icy calm of her eyes. The upbeat tempo of the music inspires a hopping number that reminds me viscerally of that decadent time so long ago when the world was thrilling, the people wild, and the fashion elegant. In that dress, it's easy to imagine her there.

I see the dazed expressions on her partners' faces, the open awe in their eyes, as they take her in their arms. However briefly they hold her, they are none of them unaffected. It's moments like these I can't help but wonder at their ignorance. How can they not see the monsters among them? How can they not know?

She is a drop of dark blood on the pristine landscape of their all too human innocence, a viper in the nest of unsuspecting victims—a hunter, a vampire. Lethally beautiful. She strides through my crumbling mental walls like a living, breathing memory of my own worst self. From the elegant sweep of her hair to the intricate beadwork detailing her crimson gown, she is a walking, waltzing nightmare.

It's 1923 and the Ripper is alive again.

Bonnie

With an eye to the dance floor and its vampiric revelers, I follow that strange sensation through the lower story of the sprawling mansion. A time or two I think I spot that same sheer fabric and a long dark fall of hair, but every time I turn to look, it's only Nadia I see.

Nadia, who looks as confused and curious as I am. Her eyes scan the room—study each and every face—with a predatory focus from her position on the wall. That sharp gaze pauses only briefly now and again to light on Stefan's glassy eyes where he stands apparently frozen in thought, and a secret smile tugs insistently on her blood red lips. He barely seems to breathe.

I watch her as she gazes about the room, her searching eyes hidden by the broad shoulders of the men that invariably approach her, drawn by her magnetism. If only they knew what she was—what she was capable of—they wouldn't be so quick to throw themselves on her non-existent mercy.

Keeping to the shadows far from the sharp eyes of the Salvatores, I hug the walls along the house in my search for her. I'm sure now it was a woman I saw, or felt rather. A witch, I think too. Someone with power and the knowledge to use it. Someone like me. It's maddening this feeling,
being aware of that presence—that peace—just beyond my reach. Just beyond my line of sight, and never staying long enough to let me catch it. My eyes wander for me, climbing over the walls, the crowd, the shadows…everywhere, looking for her. Looking for that peace.

There!

For a moment, she turns—a young woman not more than a handful of years older than me in a gauzy blue dress, dark skin and brown eyes just like mine. The smile she sends my way invites me to follow. Just like that, I do.

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**Elena**

Dancing with Matt is warm and familiar, nostalgic and simple in a way things haven't been in a very long time. He's become something of a symbol for me of times past, of childhood days spent building sand castles and slinging wet dirt in each other's faces—of an effortless happiness. Before my parents died and everything went to hell.

He finally pulls away to find another partner and I giggle as I spin about. I find an echoing smile on Stefan's face when he catches me.

"Please dance with your alcoholic vampire boyfriend," he requests, offering his hands to me in a gentlemanly manner that recalls his own remembered days.

I take them gladly, in a way relieved to finally have him in my grasp and away from Kelly's clawing hands and my own useless fretting.

Immediately, he pulls me into a spin that has me pressed back to front against his chest, his hot breath in my ear, before twirling me out again at arm's length. Unfortunately, in his less than typically suave state, he whirls me right into the firm backside of another dancer on the floor.

"Oh!" I gasp as I crash into him.

"Whoa! Watch it!" he shouts angrily.

"I'm sorry," I apologize, giggling a little at my drunken boyfriend's lack of coordination. "My fault. I'm clumsy."

To my surprise and offense, the man laughs scornfully, "Well then get off the dance floor."

"Excuse me?" I respond, unprepared for this reaction.

But the bigger shock is Stefan's answer. Stepping in front of me, he stands toe to toe with the man, threat implicit in his growling voice. "That's no way to talk to a lady."

"Whatever," the man scoffs.

"I think you need to apologize," he snarls, eyes boring holes in the other man's skull.

"I'm sorry," he says absently, conscious mind fleeing before the force of Stefan's compulsion.

For a moment, I think this will be the end of it, but Stefan shocks me again with an angry grab at his elbow. He yanks him back to face us. "Now say it like you mean it," he orders.
The man's eyes turn to me then, and the vacancy in them chills my blood. "I'm really, really sorry," he repeats, and I want nothing more than to free him from the blank hole of his mind.

"Stefan, it's fine," I say, clutching at his arm just this side of begging. I can't stand that look in his eyes, and I hate that it's Stefan that put it there.

"Now walk away," Stefan commands as, immune to my distress, he shoves him away.

He turns to me then, concern in his eyes. "Are you alright?" he asks as his thumb strokes my cheek. I can only nod, shaken, as I stare at him with new eyes.

What the hell was that?

X

There's a clink of glass that reaches even my pitiful human ears when the bartender sets a drink on the marble top. "Bourbon," he says as he slides it toward his patron.

"Thank you," Damon answers as he takes the glass, bringing it to his lips as I reach him.

He turns to meet my worried eyes as I ask, "Have you noticed what your brother's been up to?"

"Nope," he responds with a rather disturbing indifference. "I've been too preoccupied with yours. Jeremy's been asking questions about Vicki Donovan's death."

That…seems odd. "He knows that her death was ruled an overdose," I tell him.

"Really?" Damon asks sarcastically. "'Oh, but, Sheriff, someone buried her. Who would do that?'"

His hand rises in a mocking imitation of a student in class. "I know. I know. Me!" he jokes, his frown just as suddenly returning. "I mean, I could compel him, but he's wearing vervain."

"No! I don't want you to compel him," I answer immediately. I can hardly bear the thought that it was my request that did that to him the first time. I can't let that happen again.

"If he keeps asking questions…?"

"Damon, no. I'm serious," I refuse, empty words and vacant eyes flashing through my mind. "I'm not gonna do that to him again. I'll handle it."

Damon plucks a single blood red rose from a nearby bouquet, twirling it once between his fingers as he stares at me.

"Ok, but don't say I didn't warn you," he says, handing it to me with a rare sobriety that frightens me in its intensity…and the answering flutter in my chest. Nothing good can come of any of this.

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Damon

"Damon, right?" a voice calls from behind me, breaching the silence of the night air.

"John," I greet with false warmth.

He smiles with apparent friendliness as he approaches, but something in his eyes is pissing me off.
"We didn't get a chance to meet at the Council meeting."

Sliding back into character without a moment's hesitation, I respond. "Yeah, it's—it's a pleasure. Are you enjoying the, uh, kick-off?"

The shoulder of his suit jacket almost brushes mine as he comes up beside me at the balcony. "Oh, yeah," he says. "Forgot how much fun these small town celebrations can be."

"Yeah. Yeah," I agree. I feel my eyes tighten with a concealed suspicion as I ask, "When's the last time you were here?"

"Hasn't been that long," I see a brief sadness flicker in his eyes, but the arrogant smirk never falters. "My brother's funeral. How long have you been in town?"

"Oh, not long at all," I answer, my own smirk fighting to show.

"So, what do you think, Damon?" he asks, still playing the part, but he's getting one step closer to a little permanent problem-solving with every twitch of those condescending lips. "You know this vampire problem is real, right? It's a potential blood bath."

"Well, I wouldn't overreact, John," I reply.

That knowing glint in his eye grows impossibly more pronounced as he says, "Oh, I think it's like 1864 all over again. Vampires running amok. Guess we're just gonna have to hunt them down, throw 'em in a church, and burn them to ash."

"That is the story, huh?" I comment. If this conversation goes where I think it's going, he's got about 5 minutes to live. Tops.

"Part of the story, yeah."

"Oh, there's, uh—there's more?" I say, my eyebrows rising with my incredulity.

"Oh, there's a lot more. You see, seems there was a tomb under the church where the vampires were hidden away, waiting for someone to come along and set them free," he tells me, and I look away a moment to hide my bemused smile.

"But then, you already knew that didn't you? Being that you're the one that did it."

Not exactly, but what's the use in denying it?

"And you're telling me this, why?" I ask, a predatory glint in my eye as I face him. It's almost a relief to drop the mask for once. Too bad he won't live long enough past this conversation to appreciate my moment of honesty.

"I just thought we'd get the introductions out of the way," he tells me, blithely unconcerned, and I almost laugh at the brazen gall—the balls—it takes to walk up to a vampire, tell him you know that he's a vampire, and start slinging threats around.

"Well, you know that I could rip your throat out before anyone would notice?" I taunt.

"Yeah," he returns immediately.

"Yeah, ok. But you probably ingest vervain, so…"

"Why don't you take a bite," he teases, "find out?"
Well, that settles it. The man is clearly either delusional or insane. I almost shake my head in disbelief at the absurdity of this exchange. "It's not worth my time," I say, walking away, and, for that moment at least, I mean it.

At the entrance to the balcony, however, I turn back and our eyes meet in a single deceptively long stare. Between one blink and the next, I have him by the jaw, wrenching it in a vicious twist. His neck snaps like a twig and I toss him over the railing. Watching him fall, I notice my audience only a second before he hits the ground with a—

Nadezhda

Splat!

"Dude!"

He smirks, but only shrugs in reply. I roll my eyes at his antics, glancing down at the corpse at my feet. It's some vaguely amphibious creature I've never seen before, but even in death he looks like an ass. From the awkward angle of his head, I can tell Damon went for the neck snap. His arms and legs extend haphazardly from his still form like a broken doll and the unnatural hollow between his shoulder and the arm caught beneath him suggests it was brutally dislocated by the fall. Good thing he was already dead.

Still…

"Who the fuck is this??" I ask, careful this time to keep my voice down. I mean, killing some random in the middle of a Founders' party of all places? Is he trying to start a lynch mob?

"Uncle John Gilbert," Damon's answer reaches me, floating softly on the breeze.

"Oh!" I say as understanding dawns. "Well that's a different matter, then. As you were."

Without a backward glance I head off after the bitter scent of tainted witchcraft that called me out here in the first place, leaving the body for someone else to find.

There's a candle-lit sconce branching from the stone above my head, and the flicker of its light marks the passing of a shadowy figure in the darkness. The lingering scent of decay wafts on the air in its wake, and I follow close behind. I keep to the wall as I round the mansion, peering around the corner, but it's not the witch I find there. Stefan stands at the gate on wobbling feet—hand clenched between wound twinkle lights in a white-knuckled grip on the rail. Even from this distance I can see his eyes are bloodshot and ravenous with that aching, irresistible need. Blood drips from his fingers.

I smile.

It was ridiculously easy getting into his head earlier. The small amount of human blood he's consumed this week is not nearly enough to supplement nearly sixty years of malnourishment. I've met baby vamps with more mental resistance than he has. It's pitiful, really.

That spot of blood was a stroke of genius, but a spontaneous whim nonetheless. This sort of subtle manipulation requires the technical finesse of a master and all my centuries of carefully honed skill in dream-walking besides. The exertion of will to influence the waking mind—no matter how lightly, and it has been lightly—requires age, knowledge, and an exorbitant amount of power very
few alive can hope to match. It’s a different art entirely, really, but it's one to which I am perversely suited. The evidence stands before me. Stefan will meet the Ripper again, and this time I won't let him go so easily.

It’s only a matter of time.

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**Alaric**

I watch with furrowed brows as Richard (henceforth, "Dick") Lockwood climbs the steps toward the podium looking the very picture of relaxed authority. Despite what I just saw outside, the mayor seems decidedly unconcerned with his son's welfare. He may not have said so, but I'd wager ten to one he cares more about the spectacle Tyler made beating the crap out of his friend outside, than anything it might have said about the kid's emotional state. The anger I saw…Well, let's just say I think I'm more worried about his son than he is.

"Thank you all for joining us tonight," Dick announces with a confident smile. "In just a few moments, we will officially begin the countdown to our upcoming founder's day celebration, and it's a very special one this year: the one hundred and fiftieth birthday of our town."

Cue the cheering.

"And!" he calls over the applause of the crowd. "And I would like to welcome back one of our town's favorite sons to do the honors of ringing our official charter bell. John Gilbert, would you please join me up here?"

A shorter blond man meets him at the front of the room, glancing once at the bell before turning his attention on the assembled guests. There's a sort of knowing air about him, like he's privy to some truth none of us could begin to fathom. A wolf eying sheep.

I don't like him.

"150 years of community, prosperity, family. We take care of each other, look after each other, protect each other," he says with an odd sort of emphasis as his eyes focus somewhere in the crowd. "It's good to be home."

I feel the slightest brush of air at my shoulder signaling another presence a moment before Damon appears at my elbow. I feel a skeptical eyebrow lift at the move, but he ignores it. "Look at his right hand," he directs instead from the corner of his mouth.

"Whose?" I ask, decidedly confused by this turn of events. Does he think we're friends now?

"The town's favorite son," he answers through gritted teeth. "Look at his ring."

When my eyes drift to the object in question, they grow wide in surprise. "Wow," I say, clearing my throat from the shock of the sight, "it looks like mine."

"Yeah, and that would be a big coincidence if he didn't just come back from the dead five minutes ago," Damon bites out.

My eyebrows lift at that, but sadly not as much as they probably should have. It's official; I've been hanging with vampires way too much.
"Where the hell did you get that ring?" he growls in question.

"Isobel, my wife," I breathe. I'm abruptly reminded of a very similar discussion I had with another blue eyed vampire not 2 months past. Things are coming full circle now, and Izzy's not coming up as shining as I'd like to believe.

"Who gave birth to Elena under the medical care of the esteemed Dr. Grayson Gilbert, John's brother," Damon says, his mind working at the puzzle as quickly as Lia's—Nadia's—had.

"Oh, you think John knew Isobel?" I wonder aloud, but I'm not as surprised as I wish I was.

"I think John knows a lot of things."

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**Stefan**

The coppery taste of that warm, delicious liquid ignites my tongue with its vibrancy—the power it brings so long lust ed for and so long denied now filling my body with the heat of a million tiny suns as every blood cell sparks at the taste. The Ripper laughs delightedly somewhere near my throat, and the sound of it sears my tongue with hate and joy in equal measure. I know that if I pause on this step a moment longer, I will not be able to deny him. His hunger grows stronger, more irresistible, by the minute. Her blood still coats my tongue. I want—need—more.

I have to get out of here. I have to get out of here now, or I'm afraid he won't stop until he's torn the throats out of every person in this building and bathed naked in their blood. It's too much to refuse. My feet slap hard against the pavement as I force myself away from the smell, the temptation of their blood…the hot, rich river running just beneath that thin surface, begging for release—to flow free…my fangs cry out for a taste. All at once, the thumping in my ears grows louder still and I recognize the beat of a human heart in my path. I will my feet to walk away, but I soon find myself pressed chest to chest with that pumping heat. My eyes are drawn immediately toward it.

"Sorry about that, man," the man says. Dimly, I recognize him from the dance floor. The ass hole who was so rude to Elena. "No, really, I'm terribly sorry."

The jeering nature of his tone simmers in my gut with the remnants of anger at the memory, and I tighten the reins on that snarling beast inside as he thrashes within.

"You don't want to do this man," I bite out in warning.

I try to step around him, but again he blocks my path, this time knocking a shoulder hard against me at the move.

"Sorry about that too," he taunts, apparently every bit as anxious for a fight as the monster he's baiting. I can't hold him off forever. "God, all I can do is apologize. What's that about?"

"Get out of my way, please," I try again, just this side of begging. He doesn't understand. How could he? He doesn't know it's him I'm fighting for.

"No girl to show off for now? I see how this is," he pauses a moment, his eyes alight with a mocking glare, before his fist flies at my jaw.

My open palm plucks it from the air and a thrilling terror fills his eyes.
This attempted assault is the final straw, and the wall I fought so hard to hold against the rising tide of violent, merciless, hunger buckles beneath the pressure of my unbridled rage. In my vice-like grip, the bones crack and break, crushed beneath the force of my inhuman strength. He cries out in agony, his knees giving way beneath him, but still I squeeze.

It's as though the hand belongs to someone else entirely—the Ripper subduing our victim, toying with him before the final killing bite. I only have the presence of mind in this moment, to throw him to the ground away from me, as the frantic, pounding of his terror echoes fierce and tantalizing in my ears.

The veins beneath my eyes slither beneath the thin skin as my vision flows red with borrowed blood. My fangs rip free at the sight of my helpless, frightened prey. We eye him hungrily. I lunge.

**Bonnie**

As quickly as the strange woman appeared, she left again—nothing but the lingering scent of that eerily familiar aura to mark her passing—but not before she delivered this final parting shot: "You are not alone."

She told me of our connection, of our mutual goal, and she gave me the hope I think I've most needed since the night I lost the only person in my life to ever truly know me. She gave me back a family. Somehow, it makes the threat of Grams' murderers all the more terrifying, and before I can think better of it, I find myself tracing the steps of the youngest Salvatore as he races across the long drive.

I make it just in time to see him nearly tear himself to pieces against some colossal burst of hunger, halting himself mid-lunge as a human man quivers on the cold ground.

I see his struggle with that inner demon, and while I cannot forgive him for what he is—for what he's brought into our lives—I can find it in myself to acknowledge the strength of will it must take every day to fight that down. I don't know what any of that is like for him, and I really don't want to, but somehow still, despite my better judgment, I find that I...pity him. I watch him compel away the memories, and flee into the night.

Lost in my own churning thoughts, I turn back toward the road and my drive home, and run smack into another body.

Nadia stands there cold and smirking, her head cocked in a bird-like curiosity, as she regards me silently. The air has left my lungs and all I can do is stare, wide-eyed, at the ancient vampire in my path. She seems to sense something then, almost seeming to...breathe in the air between us, and something like shock fills her eyes.

"Well, well, well," she chants, a cruel smile twisting her mouth. "Bonnie Bennet. What have you been up to?"

**Damon**
Beneath the cover of enthusiastic guests, I watch Uncle John attempt to slip out the back, undoubtedly in an attempt to avoid exactly this encounter. The thought brings a smile to my face and I gesture Alaric to follow me as I move to intercept him.

"Going somewhere? Hmm?" I call out from behind him, bringing him to a stop at the bottom of the stairs.

"Never like to be the last one to leave a party. It's too desperate," he returns, pivoting on a heel to face me as we reach him, flanking him on either side.

"You here to kill me again or are you gonna let Mr. Saltzman do your dirty work?" he taunts with a sideways glance at my companion.

"Ok, you obviously know who I am," Ric responds dryly. I think I'm starting to like him. "I do," John confirms. "Alaric Saltzman, the high school history teacher with a secret."

"You sure know a lot for someone who just got to town," I say, anger sparking at his continued arrogance. That and the fact he's still walking around. When I kill someone, they're supposed to stay dead. These stupid rings are taking all the fun out of it.

"More than you can imagine, Damon," he answers, condescending smirk firmly in place. "My knowledge of this town goes beyond anything that you, or you, or the Council knows. So, if you were planning some clever high-speed, snatch-ring, vamp kill move, know that if I die, everything I know goes to the Council including the fascinating little tale of the original Salvatore brothers and their present day return to Mystic Falls."

Damn it.

"How'd you get that ring?" Alaric asks suddenly. Of course that's what he'd be worried about. Not the fact that we've got a nosy uncle with way too much information for my comfort, and a booby trapped survival plan preventing my usual brand of creative problem solving without a particularly messy punch line. This just gets better and better.

"I inherited one," John snaps, glaring at Ric, "my brother Gray the other. This was his. I wouldn't have given mine to Isobel had I known she was gonna hand it off to some other guy."


John smiles. "Who do you think sent her your way when she wanted to become a vampire?"

"You sent her?" I challenge.

"Guilty!" he chimes mockingly. "Why, did you think someone else sent her? Maybe Katherine Pierce?"

Wait..."How do you know about Katherine?"

"How do I know anything, Damon?" he replies mysteriously.

"What do you want?" I demand, determined to get some answers out of this ass-hat beyond these vague oh-so-superior hints.

"So many questions...." he taunts to my continued frustration, before throwing a glance and a fake smile the teacher's way. "It was a pleasure meeting you, Rick. I've heard so much about you."
Without another word, he strides merrily off into the night.

God, I hate that guy.

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Elena

"Not so excited that we have another month of these Founder's Day events," Jenna comments as we hike up the stairs, both mentally and physically exhausted after tonight's escapades.

"Tell me about it," I groan.

I notice Jeremy's door is open when I reach the landing, and I find myself worried at what I'm likely to find after our talk. I know better than to think he bought my lies and excuses about Vicki, but I can only hope he lets it go when he can't satisfy those questions. The last thing he needs is the truth.

I find him hunched over his sketch-pad, looking almost too accepting. "You ok?" I ask, needing a real answer this time.

"Fine," he deflects, but I know it's a lie.

"Are you sure?" I try again.

"I'm fine, Elena," he snaps, and I sigh internally. I can't really help him if he refuses to talk to me.

My shoulders slump in defeat, but I nod anyway. Mentally resolving to try again later, I make my way to my own room.

When I've closed the door behind me, my thoughts drift to Stefan…and Damon, and what he told me about his brother. After what I saw tonight, I'm afraid to admit that I might be starting to believe it…just a little. That, maybe the Stefan I know is only one side of the story.

I sigh, snapping the clasp on my shrug and tossing it carelessly to the floor. It's not that I don't love Stefan, or even that I don't trust him, I just…sometimes I feel like there are these parts of himself that he hides from me. Like, he wants me to love him, but only the part he wants me to know. Like, he can't imagine someone loving the whole picture.

I turn toward my vanity mirror, and my hands reach instinctively for my hair. Part of me wants to hug him close and swear that nothing he could tell me would ever change how I feel about him, but lately—

"Oh, my God!" I shout, as I spot the face in the mirror. My hand flies to my chest as I turn to face him. It's only Stefan. "You scared me," I gasp around the frantic pounding of my heart as it slows.

"Sorry," he mumbles, and the misery on his face instantly calms my irritation.

"I'm sorry that I—I ran off earlier," he apologizes.

"What happened?" I ask, and the fear I had not allowed myself to entertain before leaks into my voice at the thought. His silence is not reassuring. "Is everything ok?"

"Uh…no," he answers brokenly, finally meeting my eyes. The pain in them fairly breaks my heart.
"Talk to me. Stefan, tell me," I urge.

His eyes fly from mine again, body shivering with tension before suddenly dropping to the bed.

"I tried…so hard to keep it together tonight," he admits. He looks so much like a lost and terrified boy sitting there that part of me longs to take him in my arms, but I'm still too aware of what he is and the fragility I see there to dare.

"And it was working. It was working, uh, but—but then Matt's mom, she, uh, got hurt, and she was bleeding, and I had her—her blood on my hands."

"And then what happened?" I prompt, fighting to keep my own fear from my voice and failing miserably.

"And then that—that guy in the parking lot, I wanted to feed on him and it took everything inside of me not to do it," he rants, and for a moment I can almost feel the struggle in him—the war he fights within himself, though I may never hope to know it the way he does. God willing, I'll never have to.

"But you didn't?" I breathe.

"No, but I wanted to," he tells me, and that burning need in him rages in his eyes as he explains with tears of shame in his eyes. "God…Elena, I—my—my head is pounding, I feel like my skin is on—is on fire, I have this hunger inside of me that I've never—I've never felt before in my entire life, and all I keep thinking about is how I promised that I would never keep anything from you, and so I am telling you this."

"That's ok. I need you to tell me these things," I insist, echoing my earlier thoughts.

"But I don't want you to see me like this. I don't want you to know that this side of me exists."

Oh, God, Stefan. I know you don't.

"Stefan, you're gonna get through this. I'm gonna help you pull through. It's gonna be ok. You're gonna be ok," I say, willing it to be true, even when I can hardly believe it myself. It has to be.

With this thought in mind, I move to embrace him, to let him feel my love for him, but he turns from me before I've taken another step. "No, no, no, no," he says, practically running from me. "I'm sorry. I—I can't. I—I'm afraid of what I could do to you."

I bite my lip against any lingering doubt, but the terror and the pain in his eyes reassures me. He could never want to hurt me. "I'm not. Stefan, Stefan, I'm not," I declare, my stubbornness fueling the words, as I cross the gap between us. I pray he can't see the fear in my eyes.

He seems to believe me for a moment, looking adoringly into my eyes, but it only takes a second for the look to fall before a sudden horror of realization.

"Yes, you are. You're afraid of me," he says, backing away with wide eyes full of shame and heartbreak. "And you should be…"

"Oh, God, I shouldn't have come here—I shouldn't have come," he mutters, shaking his head in horror. He ignores my pleas, my wordless denial, as he retreats further and further into himself. I can only imagine the sorrow and regret in my eyes.

"I'm sorry," he breathes, and before I can reach him—before I can even form a word against his
assertion—he's gone.

**Stefan**

The fire glints off the glass tumbler, throwing flecks of golden light in patterns on the dim walls, as the contents beckon with glistening eyes through ruby red seas. So deep and dark and inviting is that ocean that I lose sight of dryer path—the *better* path. The part of me that cares is steadily losing ground beneath the weight of that lust. I feel the Ripper in my eyes.

Distantly, from the other side of that collapsing tunnel, I hear Damon's voice. The shrinking piece of me still in control manages to catch his words, though they fail to reach my lips.

"We have a problem, Stefan. And, when I say 'problem', I mean global crisis. Seems Uncle John has a…" he pauses, as his eyes finally turn to me. They are both knowing and somehow encouraging. I see an answering darkness in them to meet my own.

"You don't look so good," he says, his soft voice whispering with the pull of that crimson glass. "It's different this time, isn't it? The *need* is too strong. Of course it would be after all these years."

He stands then, moving to leave me with my still yearning thoughts. The glass sits abandoned and tantalizingly close on the table as he does. "Have a good night, brother," he whispers, and I am alone.

Hissing voices and invisible hands seem to draw me on, calling to me, urging me on. The hunger, the *need*, fuels that spinning vortex in my stomach—the burning desire in my very skin. It's all too much and not enough. Still too far, yet close enough to touch. I want it, *need* it, have to have it. It's too much to resist. Almost before I've even registered the movement, the glass is in my hand, the blood staining my lips as it pours over my dry and thirsting tongue. Every nerve bursts into flame and the power—the life—floods to every barren crevice of my long starving body.

Somewhere in the empty confines of my thumping, frenzied chest, the Ripper sighs. The warmth that fills me then flows through every liberated nerve ending, washing me away on the wave of crimson life, soul, exhilarating power. It thrills through me and I am carried on the crest of its irresistible tide.

Time passes in minutes, days, hours, unknowably as I ride with that current, only finding myself again long after my hands have been washed clean, the glass hidden away, staring wonderingly at the humming keys of our piano. My fingers walk them, somehow possessed with an understanding and a memory I can't unlock. The notes they play are achingly familiar and yet unknown to me.

I recognize the tune…somehow…but I cannot understand the rumble of laughter in my chest at the sound.

The soft brush of carpet beneath a footstep recalls my attention, and my eyes drift upward to meet hers. She stands there clothed in the same dress she's worn for hours now, but, watching the flickering firelight dance with the dark pools of hatred in her eyes, I see her anew.

*I know* her.

"You…"
John

I sit lounging comfortably on the couch in Henry's now vacant apartment, as I take a well-deserved gulp of my favorite scotch. It's been a long hard night at the end of a very difficult road, but I think it all went as well as could be expected. The Council is back to a semi-functioning degree of incompetency, the Salvatores and their pet history teacher know better than to come after me, and, if everything goes according to plan, Elena will be free and clear of this monstrosity of a life these vampires have imposed on her sooner rather than later.

I smirk to myself. All in a day's work.

A knock at the door breaks through my thoughts and I turn toward the sound with some annoyance. Henry certainly wouldn't need to knock, and I'm certainly not expecting company any time soon. Who would even show up here this time of night?

I wrench the door open to reveal a tall woman with dark brown hair and matching eyes wearing a smug grin and a sheer blue dress.

"Can I help you?" I ask, eyes pinched in irritation.

"No," she smirks, "but I think there's something I can do for you."

I scoff audibly at that. "Whatever it is, I'm not interested," I say, moving to close the door.

She presses a surprisingly strong palm to the wood, halting its motion. "You will be," she tells me confidently. "Name's Lucy Bennet. Katherine Pierce sent me."

That, at least, is enough to get my attention. Though I can't help but wonder "…Why?"

"Heard you had a bit of a vampire problem on your hands," she says by way of answer. I suppose it is, though I can't imagine what this girl thinks she has to offer me.

Noting my skepticism, her eyes seem to sharpen with an intense focus on some point beyond my right shoulder. I turn to follow her line of sight and find the room in chaos behind me. Lights flicker, the walls shake, picture frames crash to the floor. It's as though an earth quake sent a single concentrated burst of destructive force on this one singular spot. I stare at her in shock. She's a witch.

The triumphant glee in her eyes does nothing to dim the sudden enthusiasm in my own.

"Why don't we go inside and talk about it?" she says, and, wordlessly, I wave her in.

Things are looking up.
A/N: You'll have to forgive me in advance for any anachronisms or inaccuracies with the cannon timeline in this chapter. I tried to keep as close to it as possible, but I'm sure there are bound to be slips. Also, for the purposes of this story I extended Stefan's Ripper days in the 20s farther than in show (according to S3, Lexi found Stefan in '22). Here, he's been in Chicago with the Mikaelson's since 1922 if not longer.

(Reference: …um…my brain? Also, 3x3 "The End of the Affair")

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Stefan

"You…How do I know you?"

She stood there clothed in the ethereal glow of the fire, flickering at the edges with the dying cadence of an elusive song, looking both strange and familiar. She was a portrait grown dull and grey with the passage of time, a monument to a memory eroded and lost, yet I knew her. I know that I knew her. Once upon a time.

Her responding laughter sounds harsh and mocking in the sudden stillness between us. It cracks like lightning through the dark hall and something ominous settles uneasily in my chest. Even the Ripper’s smug silence seems preferable in its wake.

“That’s perfect. You have no idea,” she scoffs, though her eyes fail to mask her pain at the admission. They hold a knowing sort of hatred, but the heat of her anger fails to reach me through my confusion. They cry out for my guilt, for vengeance perhaps, but for what I don’t know.

“Why...why don’t I remember you?” I ask, my brow tight with the promise of an echoing pain. Laughter rumbles sardonically in preparation of her next words.

Her blood red lips twist in a wry smirk and in the blink of an eye she stands before me. She seems to tower above me with darkening, blood-filled eyes as she stares me down.

“I can't give you back those memories,” she says, head tilting in thought, before grey-blue eyes alight with inspiration and a pale hand rests cold and sharp on my flushed cheek. “...but I can show you mine.”

Chicago, 1923

It was a brisk and stinging winter, the winter Broadway's "Runnin' Wild" brought us the Charleston, and I had no idea what I was doing in Chicago*. There I was, a powerful vampire who prided herself on a fierce independence through centuries of life, allowing a practical babe in bloody arms to lead me about by the nose.
I hadn't known Damon long (a decade give or take), but one way or another he had burrowed himself under my skin. It had been a long time since someone had done that, and I wasn't overly inclined to give it up so easily. So, when he left word that he'd had to follow his brother on some homicidal rampage (no matter how many times I had tried to talk him out of it), I decided to tag along.

It didn't hurt that I had family there myself.

Unsurprisingly, I ended up meeting him in an establishment with which I was especially familiar. The witch that ran this particular speakeasy was well known to me as, like most of her kind, she had a rather difficult time keeping out of vampire business and I have never been one to miss an opportunity for a useful alliance.

Not that Damon knew any of this, of course. We had hardly known each other long enough to divulge my own gift, let alone another's. Though, that would soon change.

"So, your brother's got himself in a bit of pickle, and you want me to help you keep an eye on him," I say. A puff of smoke streamed from my lips, punctuating the sentence.

He blinked at my tone, his lips pinching briefly in a line equal parts annoyance and amusement. "That's about the size of it," he smirked.

The thin metal of my cigarette holder perched delicately between long fingers as I regarded him with the arch of an imperious brow. "Now, explain again why that's your job. Seems to me the guy outta be lookin' out for himself. Boy's gotta grow up sometime."

"Do you feel guilty?" I asked, making no effort to hide my surprise. I caught the slightest flicker of hesitation in his eyes before he shrugged, leaning back in his chair. "Not particularly," he claimed, though I wasn't fooled. "But I can't help but feel a bit…obligated."

"That was more than ten years ago, Damon," I argued, feeling the skin between my brows wrinkle in bemusement. "Doesn't change the facts," was his curt reply.

I had to look away at that, having nothing much to offer in sympathy. "Hmm. Well, I still think the kid's responsible for his own messes, and I think you're making a mistake cleaning up after him, but…fine," the black fringe of my blue-beaded dress dragged softly across bare skin as one leg unconsciously came to rest across the other. "I guess I'll…help."

"Thank you," he nodded shortly, but there was no mistaking the spark of relief in his eye.

Looking out into the crowded joint, I spotted a familiar head of platinum blonde curls near the stage. They swept out from her face like the wispy feathers of some majestic bird of prey, and her eyes were no less predatory. She'd given the platform to another eager performer, though her sweeping gaze was no less shrewd as she cast an eye about her proud establishment.

*Say, did you ever hear the saxophone let out an awful moan, let out an awful groan?*

"Oh, hey, look it's Gloria!" I exclaimed, my shoulder jerking subtly in her direction. All it took was
the slightest wave of my hand to draw her attention and turn that sharp eye on our table.

"You know her?" Damon asked in surprise. It didn't surprise me that she was known to him as searching for his bloodthirsty reveler of a brother was sure to lead him here one way or another, but it amused me nonetheless considering his probable ignorance on the subject.

Now listen for a minute and it’s the birth of jazz you’ll hear, and where there is a little jazz you’ll always find me near.

"Hey, I happen to like this town," I smirked. "And I make a habit of knowing who's who and what's what in the towns I like. You should remember that."

"I'll take it under advisement," he answered with a wry smile.

"Good," I nodded proudly, before lifting my voice at her approach. "Gloria!"

"Nadia," she greeted, not unpleasantly though with a little wariness. At the shock of my presence, I wouldn't wonder. "Back so soon?"

I shrugged in answer rather than explain. "Yeah, well what can I say? I like the company."

Damon chuckled a little at that, and a smug smile overtook his face. "None of it too good I hope."

"Never," I assured him with a broad grin.

Wise men keep out of my way. They know I’ll lead them astray.

Gloria smirked briefly at our exchange, but it was quickly lost as she turned a frown on Damon. "Speaking of bad company, you seen your brother lately?" she asked him seriously.

His brow furrowed a bit at her tone as he answered a trifle uneasily, "Here and there."

"Yeah, well here's about right," she replied, her displeasure obvious. "He and those friends of his are in here most every night, making the rounds. No good can come of that friendship, I can tell you that for free. I'd keep an eye on that one." She was speaking to Damon, but those sharp eyes were turned on me and I felt my heart plummet at the unspoken warning.

Take a tip, take a tip from me for I am all the evil music has.

"Got it," Damon answered immediately, though his eyes betrayed his confusion. She nodded once, giving me another hard look, before stalking off into the bar.

"What did she mean by that, do you think?" Damon asked.

I shook my head, eyes wide and innocent. "Haven't the foggiest," I said.

That was a lie of course. She'd been careful to conceal the knowing glint in her eye from my companion, but I knew what it meant.

The Mikaelson's were back in town.

I'm the meanest kind of vampire. I'm the wicked vampire of jazz.*
Leaving Damon at the apartment with a vague excuse he seemed to accept if not believe (miraculous as that was), I made my way deeper into town and my own family reunion.

A miracle in itself.

After nearly 6 centuries of watching every last member of my family killed at Klaus' hands, I had learned to keep my distance. More than that, I learned to stop caring about human lives, to stop worrying and grieving over their deaths. It was a form of self-preservation that gave me the courage to follow my heart, not to be cowed by Klaus' threats. But it was also absurdly lonely.

The only contact I ever had with a loved one was in those few stolen moments with Rebekah, and somehow still Klaus found some way to punish me. It was easier not to care.

Irina changed all that. When I first met her in 1720 in Russia, she was the first relative—albeit distant—that I had ever allowed myself to care for. She was a magical siphon and a Necromancer just like me, and she was the first person in all those years I felt could really understand me.

When the plague made its vicious reappearance, she begged me to turn her and I did. Understand that this was not a common thing for me, for well I knew that anyone I showed concern for became fair game in my constant battle with Klaus. It was rare that I chose to take that risk. The last before her that I cared for at all had been in the 1400s, and we all know how that turned out.

But, Irina took the gift of eternal life and turned it into something truly beautiful. For her, despite—or perhaps because of—our intrinsic need to feed off the living—she saw immortality as the chance to celebrate life, to witness history, live history, watch it take shape and grow over the centuries of our existence.

To her, life was all about that celebration, and she lived. She lived with an intensity, a joie de vivre, that I had never encountered before and likely never will again. Everything was a source of endless wonder for her—art, politics, fashion. Everything from hoopskirts to face powder…And let me say, am I ever grateful lead make-up finally poisoned off the last of its defenders. Talk about gross. But Irina loved it all.

You should have seen her in the 18th century. By the end of the era, her hair was so elaborately ridiculous, I remain convinced we could have crushed an entire African village under the weight of her wig alone…God, I wish we had tried.

There were, and still are, so many things in this enormous, marvelous new world that I wish I could show her…

Anyway, she was what you might now call a fashionista—a trend hound, even. She was always fashionable, always on the cutting edge, so of course she was a flapper. Hell, she was listening to Jazz from its first conception, and was on to Blues while the rest of us ran to keep up.

It helped that music—singing, really—was her purest form of pleasure. I've always believed that culture plays its loudest note, a resounding symphony, in music. It's a belief we shared. She once told me she believed that in music, man came closest to the divine…

Anyway, Irina became my family—my only family. Eventually we parted ways, and she took to building her own family—a coven of witches and necromancers as we had been though she turned none. All but one (a fellow traveler she’d picked several decades past in Finland), they were human for all intents and purposes though there were ways to increase their lifespan.

It was through their strange bond I finally learned the true power of blood sacrifice. It’s a lesson I
could only wish I had discovered sooner.

They travelled the world, adding to their number, and with every new addition came another source of culture, art, history in Irina’s growing collection. She ate it up with a spoon…

She was a rare gem, my Ira, and I loved her dearly.

About 10 years past they had finally settled into a new town and a new life in the heart of Chicago and the Jazz Age, and I had finally been blessed with the opportunity of several lifetimes: a chance to find a home.

The lot of them (at that time 12 in total) had settled into a cozy looking mansion downtown, large enough to accommodate them, yet old enough to go largely ignored by the general populace. Not to mention, with times and crimes being what they were, the police were far too busy to investigate supposed squatters.

My park heels clacked on the cobblestoned drive as I approached the building, and the sultry tones of a bluesy single rang out through the night air. The clearest note, however, was my own Irina’s trilling soprano gliding lightly over the song.

"I've got the blues. I feel so lonely. I'd give the world if I could only"

Rather than interrupt this impromptu performance, I slowed and gentled my stride to tread silently across the grounds and over the threshold. I leaned casually against the doorframe and an affectionate smile pulled insistently on my dark lips. I made no effort to fight it.

I spotted Ben and Victoria through the open foyer looking just as amused and entertained as I was. They offered me welcoming grins as our eyes met, but kept quiet at my gesture. My finger slipped from my mouth as I watched her sing, eyes closed with feeling.

"Make you understand. It surely would be gra—"

"Nadja!" she broke off mid note as she gaped at my sudden presence in her makeshift concert hall. A broad smile graced her features at the sight of me, echoing my own.

"Irina," I chuckled lightly, pushing off the wooden frame. "Who is this, Bessie Smith? What happened to Sophie Tucker?"

I'm gonna telephone my baby. Ask him won't you please come home…

Recovering quickly, Irina beamed at the gramophone in the corner of the room. "Oh, I still think she's the bee's knees, but one of the girls played me the record and I just love it. Isn't she just nifty?" she gushed.

Cause when you're gone, I'm worried all day long…

Lottie, I wouldn't doubt: the newest member of our little family. Ira found her down south with a saucy smile and a song in her heart only a handful of years past. She'd been barefoot wading in the bayou, molding magic out of the earth and not a soul in the world to call her own. She was a perfect fit.

That was just before I came to visit the last time, in fact.

"Sure, Ira. She's the cat's meow," I assured her, biting my lips against a teasing smile.
She regarded me through the slits of her glaring eyes. "You're razzing me," she accused.

"Yes."

She glowered at me, the purse of her lips sour and evidently offended. I stared blankly back, eyes wide and innocent.

At the same moment, we burst into girlish laughter, embracing each other warmly. It hadn't been long (by my standards, at least) since the last time I had seen her, but she was a sight for sore eyes all the same.

Of course, after nearly eight centuries my wanderlust was well established and my visits depressingly few and far between. This made my reappearance after only a handful of years something of an anomaly, and she didn't hesitate to tell me so.

Pulling back to meet my eyes, she said, "So, not that I'm not tickled pink to see you, but what are you doing back in town?"

I remember the copper of her dress glowed iridescent against the rosy flush of her skin, bringing out the mahogany flare in her hair and eyes. Fair as the fallen snow, bright as the sun at dawn; she was beautiful, my girl.

I cleared my throat under the weight of her discerning gaze. "I, uh, came with a friend of mine. He needed help with something," I said vaguely.

"He, huh?" she arched an eyebrow at the word. "Why, has our little Nadyusha gone and got herself a boyfriend?" Hers was not the only teasing smile in attendance. I'll admit, I felt a little sheepish amongst those grins.

"Oh, dry up," I rolled my eyes to cover the impossible ghost of a blush. "I'm practically your mother. Besides, it isn't like that."

"Never is..." she sighed in what seemed genuine disappointment. It confused me and offended me all at once.

"And what's that supposed to mean?" I demanded.

She turned those hazel eyes of hers on me, and I could see the worry and concern in them. On someone else, my reaction would have been a tad bit more explosive. "Just that you've been stuck on that little chippy for so long, I wonder if you remember what it's like...to have someone." Her eyes skated to her man, Lucas, and his bright blue eyes caught hers lovingly.

My lips pursed at the reminder, especially in public as we were, but I refused to be baited. She couldn't possibly understand, but I knew she meant well.

"I have you," I quipped, my eyes sweeping the assembly once before landing softly on her.

She sighed resignedly, but her mouth curled in a fond half-smile. "Yes, but there's more to life than blood and bootleg gin. Even amongst family."

"When did you grow up on me, you old bird?" I teased.

"Someone's got to be the adult around here," she mock-scolded, a hand on her hip. "What, did you want the job?"
"You bite your tongue, Missy!" I exclaimed in apparent outrage.

She only laughed at me. "Sounds about right."

As her tinkling laughter filled the space around us, my eyes stroked these now familiar halls and their assembly of beloved faces. My heart seemed to sigh with relief at the sight of them.

It was good to be home.

The following evening found us again comfortably nestled in the familiar warmth of Gloria’s bar, coats thrown carelessly on the floor between us where pretense itself was abandoned in favor of friendship and a little cooperative stalking. We had situated ourselves in a far corner of the joint that offered a full view of the room and, not so coincidentally, the stage.

“Mary Green, seventeen, mother’s only child...”

Damon’s latest conquest was this sweet little Jazz singer he’d found making eyes at him from the stage one night and had won the dubious honor of his attention. It was just his luck she rather favored Gloria’s open mic (when she was gracious enough to extend the courtesy that is). Mine too, if it came to that. I retrieved my fountain pen from the coat pocket between my feet and relaxed in my chair to watch the show. She wasn’t half bad.

“Kiss and swoons, afternoons, with a boy next door...”

Still, it wasn’t for Damon’s new sweetheart that we were here, and if my friend’s sudden shift of focus were anything to go by, the target was now in sight. Rolling the pen beneath my palm along the table-top, I followed the direction of his dilated gaze over my left shoulder and spotted a sandy haired man with a slim though muscular build and a familiar jawline. Despite the rather obvious differences, this last was enough to tell me who this must be.

Granted, even without that handy hint I felt I would have known him. Hair slicked back and a charming eel-like grin, there was something about him that just screamed vampire. One vampire in particular actually. Seriously, I thought I might have even spotted blood on his collar. Little wonder he’d caught that one’s eye.

“I’ll let him hold me though you scold me when I’m through...”

"That's your brother, huh?" I said, hooking a thumb in his direction. “The bimbo over there?"

Damon smirks amusedly at the comment, but his eyes never leave his brother’s back. "He's not so bad when you really know him. He's actually sort of a blue-nose."

"Says you," I scoff.

"No, really," he assures me, meeting my eyes with a wide grin. “You should have met him when we were still human. You'd have hated him."

I have to laugh at that, watching our Ripper of Monterey charming the scarf off a helpless victim from across the room.

"So, pretty much the same then."

Somewhere behind me a wolf-whistle slices shrilly through the air and the lecherous chuckles of
drunken comradery set my teeth on edge. Beneath the scrapes of chair and nudging elbows, one whispered "Sweet Mary, look at the gams on that baby vamp" and the long-dead muscle in my chest heaved a mighty sigh. I didn’t have to look to know she was there.

“I hate to make Mother and Dad go terribly mad, but there are times when it’s good to be bad…”

My eyes dropped to the table and my hand scratched idly at a napkin. I didn’t have it in me to wonder at the sketch as a flash of flaxen hair and long, fair limbs danced in the corner of my eye.

"Who's the doll?" Damon asked as she stepped into Stefan’s warm embrace.

"That would be the bad company…I'm guessing," I said through clenched teeth as I watched their all too familiar interaction. I told myself the jealousy I felt was unreasonable, but I would be lying if I said it didn’t hurt all the same.

"Wouldn't mind a little of that myself."

You and me both.

I turned my eye from the unwelcome sight, and focused my attention on the movement of my right hand as the serpent took shape beneath the scrawling fountain head. His scales etched the symbols and his tongue yearned upward and onward toward an invisible sun—the underworld thirsting for the distant warmth of the summer sun. The winter left cold and empty with its departure.

Once—young and dangerously poetic—I had likened us to this. She, my Kore, goddess of the springtime wielding power of Death itself.

Though, Irina preferred a different analogy. ‘Angler fish’, she called her: Blinding ethereal light dangled invitingly before, and nothing but sharp teeth and searing pain beyond.

That was the first and last time I introduced them.

“*I’m gonna hold hands if I like it, and I like it…*”

A flash of light caught my eye and the shimmering sway of silver beaded fabric redrew my attention to the stage as the song reached its peek, and I took a moment to appreciate this singular find. Her hips sashayed to the saucy beat and her shoulders bounced in time with her half-raised arms as though the tingling excitement of the music—no longer be contained—must trickle out through her dancing fingers.

“A little squeezing is so pleasing when you’re blue”

Blazing red curls and grey eyes that glittered with mischief and thinly veiled lust belied the sweetness of that soft cherubic face. The look she shot my companion with that coy twist of ruby red lips was positively filthy. It felt almost indecent to watch.

“And when a handsome man with wondrous arms

*Is gonna hold me tightly in his arms...*”

Not that he seemed particularly bothered by it. I thought I caught a glimpse of tongue as he bit his lip in cocky amusement. He looked about to eat her alive. Literally.

“I’m gonna do it if I like it, and I do!”
"What do you think?" Damon asked, flashing me a cocky smirk.

I could only grin delightedly at his antics, though I nodded in genuine approval.

"Good choice," I agreed. A twinge of disappointment threatened the corners of my lips as the urge to glance behind me tickled the air. My shoulders leapt with excitement then as a sudden flash of inspiration summoned my next words. "Except I have a game for you."

"What?" he asked somewhat warily.

"No compulsion," I smirked.

The slight hesitation in his eyes brought a pleading whine to my voice as I practically begged.

"What? You're telling me you need a handicap?" I ask, baiting him.

His eyes narrowed as he glared at me, well aware of the manipulation afoot yet powerless to resist the challenge all the same. Ah, Damon. So predictable.

"You're on."

As Damon slipped from the table to fetch tonight’s entertainment, I hazarded a glance over my shoulder to find the pair joined by yet another sandy-haired gentleman with a hateful, oily grin. I watched with a silent sneer as Klaus clapped a fraternal hand on Stefan’s shoulder and Rebekah smiled warmly, so clearly pleased by their obvious bond. They seemed a lovely, familial set the three of them, laughing with an easy warmth and a careless grace one could only admire.

My nails drew blood as they clawed my thigh.

Even without this added complication, it was time to beat a hasty retreat. But not before I made my play.

A young man wearing a distant expression and a uniform black waistcoat passed beside me and I caught him round the elbow. Brimming glasses shook precariously on their jostled platform—the man’s splayed fingers gripping expertly at the base—as I wrested his widened gaze to mine.

Slipping the folded note beneath the stem of a champagne flute, I whispered my instructions. When I was sure my will had lodged deep within the mundane hum of his thoughts, I released him and watched him stride away as ignorant and guileless as I had found him.

As my eyes trailed behind him, a familiar hand waved to me and I turned to find Damon and the jazz singer staring expectantly. With a sigh, I unfolded my still healing leg from beneath me and strode toward them.

His body still turned fully to her, Damon swept a hand in my direction. "Dorothy, this is Z, the girl I told you about," he said with a warm smile.

She seemed decidedly less pleased with this introduction.

"Yeah?" she challenged, looking me up and down in a move that can only be called ‘sizing up the competition’. I bit back a smile at that. "Well, listen up. I'm not some dumb Dora, and I'm not into any o' that funny stuff, so you can just buzz off. I don't share."

I nearly laughed aloud. This girl was a spitfire, that’s for sure. I decided I liked her. "No? What happened to 'I'll do it if I like it?' or was that just big talk?"
"Come on, baby. For me?" Damon flashed her his most charming smile—the one that could melt even the hardest of hearts into a puddle of goop—and I watched the wavering resolve flicker in those dewy pools.

More than that there was intrigue—a gleam of excitement—in those dazzling greys that belied whatever caution she chose to affect. And whether it was habit formed of Damon’s previous compulsion or simply a product of her own brazen lust, I saw no fear in them.

In fact, I could see anxiety and that tempted sort of innocence so intrinsic to the time warring with a rebellious streak a mile long in her doe eyes. I could tell long before she did which side would win.

"Let me get my things."

That’s what I thought.

One eye trained on that distant table, I saw the moment Klaus slunk away from the nuzzling lovebirds and, just as planned, my waiter appeared instantly. Flute and note were delivered precisely and discretely; the murmured words of my message clear on his lips as she accepted.

I watched with baited breath as she peeled the damp pages apart to uncover their contents, and (though momentarily disturbed by her lack of tact) took great satisfaction in the jealous clenching of her boyfriend’s jaw as she visibly brightened at what she found there.

“Z, you coming?”

Damon’s voice broke me from my longing thoughts and with a smile and a sharp nod, I tore my eyes away.

Rebekah was still smiling.

I fastened the buttons of my pea coat over sheer beaded gown and crept silently on the balls of my bare feet to the door, hesitating only upon reaching the threshold to cast a fond eye over the sleeping forms of my recent bedmates.

Damon’s handsome face looked nearly angelic in the soft glow of the dozing city, sated slumber smoothing all the hard edges of his daily mask. Not even the fleck of drying blood on his ivory throat marred the image. For a moment, my fingers itched to wipe it away.

With a final blink, I squared my shoulders and stepped out into the cold night air.

The wind brushed raven curls from my cheeks, breathing in my ears memories of night’s long past and empty air unstirred by the welcomed presence of another. The cold nipped at my heels and, despite the impenetrable chill of my dead flesh, I shivered.

"Bekah…” I sighed as she stepped golden and wondrous into place beside me, and the brightness of her smile brought to life that flame within so long buried. My limbs were flooded with the warmth of shared affection and relief at her appearance.

It was short lived.

“What the hell is he doing here?” I demanded as a newly familiar face shattered that momentary peace into a million tiny shards of pain and resentment tearing at my flesh as they filled the space
between us, leaving only frigid air whistling in their wake.

"Nadia, this is—" Rebekah started, but not even for her can I control my anger now.

"Stefan Salvatore, I know," I finished.

His brow furrowed with confusion, but his green eyes held the beginnings of suspicion. "How do
—"

"Your brother's told me all sorts of things," I said with forced nonchalance as my lips twist in a wry
almost-grimace.

"My brother?...How'd he find me?"

"Wasn't hard," I scoffed. "Just followed the trail of body parts right to your front door. Sloppy
work, Stefan." Tsk, tsk my finger wagged mockingly.

This at least seemed to have some effect on the arrogant baby vamp, as his jaw clenched with
undisguised irritation. "He shouldn't be here," he bit out through gritted teeth.

"Oh, believe me, I agree with you," I said easily. "Unfortunately, he seems stuck on the ridiculous
notion that you need saving from your latest blood binge."

My eyes shot between him and my oddly quiet sire, brow arched in challenge. "Gotta say, you don't
look so distressed to me."

He followed my gaze and his hand dropped to intertwine his fingers with hers, smiling warmly.
"No, I don't suppose I am."

"Hmm" I grumbled, and this time it was my turn to tense with irritation. Not to be bested, I reacted
the way I always do: with biting sarcasm. "Guess you finally found someone Nick approves of, eh
Rebekah? Tell me, do you think it's the homicidal recklessness or the sycophancy he likes best?"

She, at least, had the decency to look ashamed by the exchange. Stefan, on the other hand, had
other ideas.

"Ok, I think you'd better beat it now. You're distressing the lady."

"Yeah?" I didn't bother to restrain my glee at this pathetic challenge. Did he really think for a
single delusional moment that he could take me? "What are you gonna do about it, tough guy?" I
taunted, genuinely eager for a response.

I got one too. As expected, he failed miserably. It takes more than a few years draining boarding
schools and speakeasies to get one up on a Necromancer, never mind one as old as me. Never
stood a chance really.

He takes a running leap at me, hissing all the way like some back alley stray, but he could have
been running in slow motion for all the good it did him. With the flick of a wrist and a (not so)
gentle toss, he slammed into the tin panels of the warehouse door, denting the metal on impact.

I resisted the juvenile urge to dust my nails while I waited for his second attack which (to his
credit) came sooner than I might have expected, but when I bared my fangs to meet his lunging
form, I was met with Rebekah’s instead.

"Enough!" she stands solidly between us, protective rage blazing in her eyes, as her vampiric
contempt snarls at my own wounded pride. In a moment, the action seems to register in her mind and those beloved pools of blue/green swim with a vague remorse that does nothing to soothe the sting. "Nadie..." she breathes into the shocked silence.

Gathering what dignity I can, I flash to my feet. Brushing the dust from my dress, I growl with all the callous indifference I can bring to bear against the weight of my own hurt, "Yeah, I got it. There's nothing for me here anyway."

With one last scornful glance at the couple, I disappear.

Barely a mile away, I came to a stop. Unnecessary air burned with a frozen chill in my long dead lungs as I fought to wrest my usual calm from the growing whirlwind of chaotic emotions. I didn't know what to make of all this. Rebekah’s frequent and frenzied love affairs were hardly news to me, but not once in more than eight centuries had I ever felt so betrayed by them.

How could she bring him there? How could she share this with him? I thought...God, despite the years and miles, the deaths, the betrayals, I thought it meant more to her than that. I thought I meant more to her than that. And why Stefan? Because Klaus approved? Damn it, why does it always come back to that? Why does he always win?

“I’d say I told you so, but...

I whipped around at the familiar voice, equal parts appalled and touched by the sudden interruption. I hadn’t even heard her there.

“Irina?” I wonder aloud, my eyes scanning the abandoned alley as though expecting a full-blown ambush. “How did you—”

“After more than 200 years, you think I don’t know your patterns?” she teased, hazel eyes dancing with mirth, but I called bull shit. No way she just knew.

“Gloria?” I guess, an amused smirk tugging at my lips despite myself. She always did have that particular gift. Good thing too, as I’d always been what you might call a mercurial personality. Basically, I’m a moody bitch is what I’m saying.

Irina laughed warmly in response. “She saw you making the googly eyes at that blonde necker all night,” she admitted cheerfully. “Subtle you are not, my darling.”

My lips twisted in a wry smile, but the self-loathing I felt in that moment overrode any amusement I might have felt at her teasing. She seemed to sense my mood as she caught my eye in her concerned gaze.

“You ok?” she questioned somewhat warily, as though afraid I’d snap at her offer of unwanted sympathy. Any other night I might have, but this one I simply lacked the energy. The fight had fled some time ago.

“I’ve been better,” I said.

Relieved I suppose at the lack of violence in my response, she pressed on. “You should really take your own advice you know?” she prompted, ducking her head to hold my sullen stare. “She isn’t worth all this.”
There’s where you’re wrong, I thought but bit my tongue before the words escaped me. I knew she couldn’t understand. Hell, I wasn’t sure that I did half the time. It wasn’t worth the ensuing argument to explain.

“Are you really so invested in my love life that you trekked halfway across town for an exclusive peek at the whole sorry tragedy?” I shot back instead. “You know, if I didn’t know any better, I’d think you had an ulterior motive. What will Lukas say?”

“Please, Nadja. We’re family. Blood. That means something to me. Of course I’d be here,” she says, suddenly serious. She was always saying things like this as though determined to drill into my mind the existence of this entity I had lost all hope for. As though willing me to believe I had one. As though she thought I doubted it.

“Mmm.”

Seemingly satisfied for the moment, the familiar gleam of that teasing smile returned to her eyes and she said, as though wondering aloud, “You know, speaking of family…”

“Oh, no,” I said reflexively. Nothing good could come of this. Absolutely nothing.

“Well, I think it’s high time we met this new friend of yours that’s got you revisiting old haunts so soon. Maybe I’ll buy the man a drink. On the house.” Wink wink

Like I said. Nothing good.

“Yeah, I don’t really think bombarding him with an entire coven of self-mutilating witches is the way to thank him. Tends to be a little off putting as first impressions go,” I commented drily.

“Oh, hush,” she smiled, waving away my concerns with a graceful hand. “Just me then. Tomorrow? The Pier?”

Veles. Irina and the Pier. There was just something about the excitement of the crowds, the tourists it drew in with the promise of playgrounds and theatres, restaurants and waterfront skylines that called to her like a moth to a flame. I could never understand it.

“Yes, because screaming children and hapless tourists are just what I need right now.”

“Don’t play that game. We both know you love it. What do you say?”

More like she loved it, and I was too much of a sap to deny her something that made her so exorbitantly happy. I sighed in resignation.

“Do I have a choice?”

“Nope,” she chirped victoriously, and her smile lit the night.

Helplessly, I laughed.

Under the cover of the still clouded night sky, I slipped stealthily into the hotel room. Or tried to anyway. I jumped embarrassingly high when I was confronted with the glowing ice blue of Damon’s sparkling eyes.

He said nothing, but the infuriating smirk I could clearly see despite the thick veil of shadows in
the dark room said it all.

I rolled my eyes in fond amusement before divesting myself of my stifling outerwear and sliding into bed beside him. I spared the still form of our third companion and the evidence of tonight’s activities which still littered her ivory skin in starkly red impressions an amused once-over, before curling into Damon’s side and meeting his gaze.

Though I doubted even the screams of a wailing banshee could wake her from her hard-won sleep, we pitched our voices in hushed whispers. Barely more than warm breath ghosting over cool, pressing skin and the faintest rumble beneath my cheek, I felt his words more than heard them. It was as though through proximity and close touch, our thoughts transferred between us.

My eyes slipped closed as I spoke.

“So, I have a sort of favor to ask of you.”

“Well that sounds ominous.”

“Yeah. Um, see I’ve got this friend...”

“Are you trying to set me up? Because I don’t know if that’s really the direction I saw this friendship taking.”

“No. God, no! Irina...She’s the closest thing I have to a sister and...Well, I guess I’d like for you to meet her.”

“Fair’s fair and all that, huh?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“She hot?”

“Does it matter?”

“Taking that as a yes, then.”

“She’s taken, Damon.”

“Hasn’t stopped me before.”

The words hung suspended in the air as the awkward tension lingered in silence. Damon shifted uneasily beneath my flattened palm as he broke it.

“So, uh. When is this little ménage à trios of ours taking place?”

Perhaps I had misread the movement as the tone of his question was neither embarrassment nor uneasiness. If anything, he sounded...anxious. Either way, there was something in his tone that had my eyes springing open in alarm, my head arching back on my neck to meet his smile.

My eyes narrowed in suspicion as I noted the mischievous twinkle in his.

“Tomorrow night...What’s that look and why am I suddenly sure this night’s about to end very badly for someone?”

“As long as it’s not us, do you care?” His shrug jostled my narrow shoulders as I levered myself up from his chest.
“Guess not,” I admitted.

A grin almost too brief to catch flashed once before reappearing in the doorway, hat and keys in hand, before I could lift a finger to stop him.

“Perfect! I’ll drive.”

I shook my head exasperatedly, but his mood as always was infectious. Besides, I may have been beyond exhausted, but what he undoubtedly had in mind was bound to be more interesting anyway.

I cast an eye behind me to find the girl still as death around Damon’s pillow, before following him toward the now idling vehicle.

Wait...

“...When did you get a car?”

I think I knew the moment my foot hit the empty dock the next evening that something was wrong. Irina was many things, but a breaker of promises was never one. I think I was simply too afraid to acknowledge the truth of it when I noted her absence. I couldn’t bear the thought.

I left Damon there with a carefully crafted smile and an easy shrug, assuring him she must be running late. That I would find her and drag the ninny out by the hair, and he should find himself some company in the meantime. There was no shortage of helpless victims to choose from. I think I even managed a laugh.

But in my dark red dress, I felt like a drop of blood on freshly fallen snow as my steps marked the only sound in my buzzing ears. I knew in the sharp rapport of my heel on cobblestone, the echoing stillness in the crisp night air, the silence beneath the thin stream of recorded blues on the breeze, that the vice around my heart had been right to squeeze so tightly.

It was stupid, really, to have thought otherwise. If there was one thing I should have known after nearly 8 centuries in this high stakes game of cat and mouse with the world’s most powerful psychopath, it was to never underestimate your enemy. One misstep could cost you everything.

"Rina?...You there?..."

I can still hear the click and waver of the gramophone beneath the old recording—Bessie Smith's voice echoing on the silent breeze as she cried out the melancholy lyrics. I remember the wry smile on my face as I noted the absence of Irina's enthusiastic accompaniment. "Baby Won't You Please Come Home" still turned beneath that skipping needle as diligently as it had for weeks as Ira’s fascination wore a steady groove in the vinyl disc.

It was just my luck that even decades later, others would reignite that fallen torch.

Looking back, I know it was willful naiveté that kept me calm as I opened that door, but I don't think I could have ever imagined the scene that awaited me.

“Oh, my—” I gasped through a wind-pipe grown suddenly tight. The air froze in my lungs as they seized in my chest, heart railing against the prison of my ribcage and the ball of solid ice in my throat. Tears of pain and horrified disbelief burned my shock-white cheeks like liquid fire through frost-bitten flesh.
Laid out before me in a gruesome tableau dedicated to my unforgivable hubris, I found them…
dismembered, bloody, parts torn and strewn across the hall like so many broken figurines.
Someone had quite literally ripped my family into tiny gruesome pieces.

My heart thumped in my throat, all the air left my undead lungs, but this scene was not the worst to
come. Irina…God, Irina. She was hanging from the rafters when I found her, the corded noose of a
bass string wrapped tight around her neck. With every passing moment, it cut into her pale skin
deeper and deeper. The blood poured down her silent throat.

She was still alive.

The look she gave me then, I'll never forget. Irina, my sister, my child, my friend; her eyes were
filled with terror, horror, and a betrayal so deep I could not bear it. She knew it was my fault—all
my fault that this happened. My fault that our family had been torn asunder, that their bodies lay in
pieces on the floor. As I stared at her aghast, I heard the laugh. It was the laugh of a villain, a
maniac, a ripper, and I knew at once to whom it belonged.

Stefan Salvatore stepped from the shadows beneath the stairs, his mouth covered in the blood of
my murdered friends, his white shirt drenched in it, and without a word, he pulled the wire. I
watched, frozen in my pain, my shock as her body tumbled to the floor and her head came to rest at
my feet.

How he knew—how Klaus knew—I didn’t know. I couldn’t admit even to myself, though there
was really only one explanation. I refused to believe she could have had any part in it, but Stefan—

Still, while my thoughts raced with a million possible explanations, a million questions, the only
thing I managed to say as I stared into those flat brown eyes, clouded with the decaying light of
final death was, “Why?”

Her eyes—I'll never forget them. Her eyes were frozen in that same look of horrified betrayal. They
are forever etched on my undead heart.

"Why not? Oh! Klaus sends his love."

I wanted nothing more in that moment than to rip Stefan’s still beating heart from his chest, to feel
the warmth of his stolen blood on my hands, to kneel in it, soak in it, as his body lay grey and stiff
at my feet. But I could not. Damon loved him, and I would not betray one friend for the sake of
another. So, I let him go and I never looked back.

(Present)

Stefan

I can only stare at her with eyes full of shock and a horrified awe as the notes fade into the air
around us. I can still feel her torment—her grief—as the echo of their mangled, bloodless bodies
filled her dreaming mind every night for all these years.

The pain and burning hatred still glowing in her tortured eyes fills me with a white hot shame—a
guilt of such intensity even I have no words. I can hardly bare the haunted depths of loss and
betrayal in those eyes. I know I cannot bare to face my own. I fear whose face I might find
there. When she turns to run from me, I make no move to stop her.
In the wake of her sudden departure, my eyes fall again on that dazzling glass and its refracting, translucent red-flecked light as the fire licks glistening gems of the lingering ruby drops and the guilt recedes. My eyes fall shut and I smile.

Somewhere deep within, the Ripper sighs.

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Nadezhda

I still hear them ringing in my ears. The laughter—his cruel, hers bright and forever lost. The music old and new, happy and torturous. Those notes which have haunted my every nightmare for more than eight decades; that have plagued me with their cruel popularity, and the memories of that night.

Unable to stomach the guilt in her murderer’s eyes—the seeping memory of malicious, insatiable glee—I turned my back in a desperate flight toward that welcome rush of death-defying power I always sought in such moments. Sharing those memories tonight (reliving them with him) has opened the veritable floodgates to decades’ worth of repressed grief, rage, loss, guilt—a pressurized tumult of emotions that now whipped and tore through all my carefully constructed walls, my unflappably calm.

As they did then, my veins yearn for it, body humming, fangs aching for a taste—for that sweet, euphoric relief only blood can provide. That power freely offered, eagerly shared. To give and receive in that potent, heady ritual that only two eternal beings can fulfill. To gain mastery over Death, the ultimate power. It’s this gift I granted my bloodline when I bartered my tattered, broken soul for the promise of immortality. The singular power only my family had shared. And now I was the only one left.

My bare heels fly light as air above the stony steps of eye and memory as the ghost of my former self possesses my vision.

I had swallowed my tears as they left a blazing trail like acid down the back of my throat, eating away at the sensitive flesh as my grief and hatred ate every happy memory of my family whole and well. Blood dripped freely down my palms as my nails tore the skin in a white-knuckled grip and the icy air ripped the peeling scabs away as I ran toward home—toward Damon, the only family I had left.

I swore to myself then and there that I would never be vulnerable again, nor allow a friend to be. Never again would I put my faith in the remembered warmth of a dying love to preserve them when I now knew even the brightest, hottest sun—the fiercest flame—must burn eventually to ash.

I would protect myself and the only family I had left. No matter the cost.

"Z?"

So I had told him my story. Or part of it anyway. And I taught him the secret of the blood. Of our blood. Though at the time, I had no idea how right I was to do so.

Even now, the sharp coppery scent of it sings sweetly between us and with the whisper of steel and the kiss of crimson dripping lips, we seal our pact.
* I shit you not, the song is called “I’m a Jazz Vampire”, and in my head it’s the Marion Harris version. I just couldn’t resist the pun. Sorry, not sorry.

# “Baby Won’t You Please Come Home” as performed by Bessie Smith

^ “I’m Gonna Do It If I Like It” again by Marion Harris
A Lesson in Vengeance

Chapter Notes

A/N: Ok so we’re picking up right where we left off in Chapter 14 here. I could try to sum up, but it would be tedious. Think 1x18 with a witchy twist. Vampiric and otherwise.

(Reference: tiny, tiny bits of 1x19 “Miss Mystic Falls”)

(Saturday night)

John

Despite the false etiquette of her request for entry, Lucy strides through the doorway with brash confidence and a more than somewhat condescending expression. She stops midway through the front hall, eyes scanning the bare furnishings and crumbling walls with a critical eye.

“Nice place you got here,” she announces with obvious sarcasm, turning back to face me with a raised brow. ”Yours?’

The pointed look she gives to the kitchen floor sets my teeth on edge, as though I fear somehow Henry’s booted feet will reappear beneath her eerily knowing eye. But his greyed and lifeless flesh lays still and rigid some 6 feet below the earth well beyond its final undead heartbeat, and there is not an ounce of guilt in me for her to prey upon.

“No,” I answer immediately, not in the mood for these sorts of head games. “So exactly what are you doing here because I’m not buying for a moment that Katherine just wants ‘to help’”.

“Told you,” she smirks and the superiority in the expression has my jaw clenching hard enough to chip a molar. “You’ve got a vampire problem too big for your, frankly, doubtful hands.”

“Found out tonight the vampires from the tomb have already been disposed of, and the only ones left are too busy mainstreaming to see me coming,” I say, unable to resist tossing my victory in her face. “Hardly an insurmountable problem now is it?”

“Wasn’t talking about the tomb vamps,” she returns, brow quirking in challenge.

“What, Stefan and Damon? Please,” I scoff. After tonight, I have those two well in hand. Vampire-slaying history teacher or not.

“Ooh. Close, but no cigar,” she taunts, and I am getting really tired of this.

“Well if it isn’t the tomb vamps and it isn’t the Salvatore’s, then please, by all means, enlighten me to this mysterious vampire threat you think I can’t handle,” I demand, beyond frustrated.

She smirks a bit, but finally answers, “Nadezhda Ivanovna.”
“Never heard of her.”

“No, you wouldn’t have,” she replies, smile finally dropping. “But believe me she is well known to Katherine, and Kat has it from a very reliable source that she’s in town.”

“So?”

Lucy strolls to the book shelves, trailing a hand across the spines as she turns her back to me. Whether it’s to cut the awkward tension, or delay the inevitable is unclear. She seems determined to maintain the upper-hand in this conversation, and I can’t help but wonder why.

“So, she’s very old, very powerful, and knows more than enough about all the wrong things to make her a threat to all our plans. And we both know how Katherine feels about threats,” her eyes meet mine again at this last and I see the warning in them, though again it fails to reach me.

“Ok, so I’ll find her, stake her, and maybe light her on fire for good measure,” I return immediately. “What the hell do I need you for?”

She smiles wryly. “Because a stake is worthless if you can’t get close enough to use it.”

“So I’ll steal a stake launcher from Isobel’s former slayer of an ex-husband. He’s so cozy with the Salvatore’s now I doubt he’ll even miss it.”

“It’s not that easy,” she chants again with that mysteriously knowing air. Can she ever give a straight answer? This whole conversation is severely trying my limited patience.

“Why the hell not? If she’s not an Original, then she’s just another vampire. Doesn’t matter how old she is. They all die the same way.”

“Nadezhda is hardly a regular vampire,” she says, suddenly serious. “She’s just about the closest thing to a vampire/witch hybrid in existence, and if half the things I’ve heard about her are true she’ll see us coming from a mile away. You don’t stand a chance on your own.”

A vampire and a witch? “But that’s impossible...”

“Maybe. Doesn’t change the facts,” she shrugs, but it doesn’t reach her eyes. She meets my gaze straight on and the severity in her dark brown eyes sends a latent jolt of excitement through me. Her voice whispers promises of blood and vengeance that has my heart thumping in dark anticipation.

“That’s why you need me. Because with a little help and a lot of magic, I can neutralize the bitch long enough for you to drive that stake of yours through her cold, dead heart.”

(Monday morning)

Elena

Plastic grows warm against my skin where I press the phone to my cheek, though the chill breeze that wafts through my bedroom has me longing for the lingering safety of my recently abandoned comforter. My eyes meet my own worried gaze in the bathroom mirror as Damon’s tinny voice sounds through my cell’s tiny speaker.
“I’m worried about him, Damon,” I confess through his fruitless reassurances. “What if he does something? What if he hurts himself, or worse someone else? How am I supposed to live with that?”

“Elena, whatever he does now is not your fault,” he says again. I’ve lost count of the number of times I’ve heard this exact phrase these past several days. “You were doing what you had to. He’s a big boy, he can handle it.”

A sad smile tugs at my lips at his attempt, but even Damon’s tireless reminders do nothing to assuage my growing guilt. It was bad enough when Stefan’s struggles were only distant and mysterious, visible only in my naïve imaginings, but after that night...All I can see is the panicked, haunted shadows in his eyes when he backed away from me. I’ve barely slept in days.

“You didn’t see him, Damon. He...and he thinks I’m afraid of him now. You should have seen the way he looked at me. God—

“Elena, calm down. This isn’t our first rodeo. Eventually, this will all blow over and the two of you can go skipping off into the sunset hand in hand like the real life YA romance you are. Although, if you’re looking for sparkles, I’m afraid you’re shit out of luck. That is, unless Stefan’s got some body glitter tucked away amongst that beauty salon of hair products...Wait! Don’t tell me. I don’t want to know.”

Despite my still very present fear, there is a tickle of amusement and a swelling gratitude at his teasing tone. “You’ve read Twilight?” I joke incredulously, and I can hardly believe the smile on my lips. How does he do that?

“Blondie takes forever to get ready.”

I grimace at that, but my lips still smirk at me in the mirror. “That’s gross.”

“Eh, live and learn,” he answers with an audible shrug.

There’s a beat of silence then as my fear and uncertainty return to me. “I don’t know...”

“Just trust me, Elena. I got this,” he says immediately, and though a large part of me remains worried and unsure, I find myself wanting to agree with that professed certainty.

“Ok...” I sigh. “Thanks, Damon.”

Damon

There’s still the hint of a smile on my face as I end the call. Despite the dire straits we’ve found ourselves in lately, I can’t deny it’s nice to hear her say my name like that. Let’s not forget this is the same girl that, not so long ago, referred to me as ‘a self-serving psychopath with no redeeming qualities’. Now she’s calling me for relationship advice and thanking me with that soft sweet sigh of hers while my brother, the Saint, is busy circling the drain of his own martyrdom on the blood-junkies’ train down south.

Huh. Does that mean I’m the good brother now?

Nah.
With a shake of the head and a bemused smile, I turn my attention to this soap opera’s other players. Although, with their collective invisibility of late, they’re beginning to feel more like the imaginary friends of my tortured youth than actual housemates.

The house is eerily quiet. Which is saying a lot considering that it is quite literally a home for supernatural predators blessed with the art of the silent hunt. Still, two days and hardly a creak or hiss out of either of them is a little...weird.

Not even Elena has been around as a distraction, as it seems Stefan has effectively cut himself off completely since the night of the Founder’s Party. Not so much as a text message. The barest mention of her name sends him running for his dusty attic retreat in a more than typical Stefan-sulk. All of which would be funny if I weren’t also trying to field her near constant influx of questions and concerns about the self-same martyr whose been ignoring her for days now.

Still, despite being drafted by those big brown doe eyes as her own personal therapist and pseudo marriage counselor, the real concern is that she’s somehow got me smiling about it. If that’s not cause for alarm, I don’t know what is.

Add this to the obvious tension between him and boarding house resident number 3, and let’s just say I am more than a little curious about the mysterious details of that night.

It’s not as though I don’t know something is going on with them. Whether he wants to admit it or not, I know Stefan is this close to snapping and, from the obvious distress I witnessed when she threw herself at me two nights ago, Z’s not far behind.

I don’t know what happened there, but I haven’t seen her that upset in decades...come to think of it, the last time she and Stefan were in the same town. Coincidence? No way in hell.

Even so, judging by the desperation in her eyes when she found me—not to mention the frantic blood-share that followed—she’s afraid of something. And what scares her, should properly terrify me.

There’s only one thing she has ever feared in all her long life: loss.

It’s the cause of a lot of things too—the cold pragmatism, the deliberate indifference to 90% of the lives she meets, revelry in her vampirism. It seems counterintuitive, but the only real solution to the fear of losing someone is to have no one to lose.

It’s a fear we share, and with every passing day spent wading through the melodrama this town attracts like flies on shit the list of possibles gets one name longer. It’s growing increasingly clear how poorly we’d handle losing one.

My eyes drift upward toward the invisible forms of my silent housemates and I realize this is the first time since the night of the Founder’s Day party that they will have been alone together. The thought briefly gives me pause, but with Uncle John Gilbert on the loose and a brother still on the blood-a-holic’s 12 steps program (and failing spectacularly), Council meetings are sort of non-optional. So I guess there’s nothing for it but to hope they don’t burn the house down or rip each other and the townsfolk to shreds in my absence.

Fingers crossed.

Stefan
The slam of the front door is music to my ears (as it leaves me without the far too knowing gaze of my suspicious brother) and I find myself standing before the cool air of the basement freezer almost before the thought even enters my mind to move.

Despite Nadia’s loud distaste for what she and Damon dub “that packaged shit” they can both be depended upon for the steady supply of O positive chilling in wait for the midnight munchies and a rainy day.

I have managed thus far to limit my hunger to this room, but every ear-splitting beat of a living heart, every vein that pulses beneath living flesh—the echoing cacophony of sight, sound, smell of the all too human scenery—brings an echoing throb of hunger to my thirsting fangs.

But the once superfluous supply has noticeably dwindled, and my three-week grace period is almost up. At this point, even their cursory gazes are bound to notice.

The luscious, coppery liquid fills my parched mouth and I keep an ear out cautiously for Damon’s return. Even through the consuming pleasure of the blood, I hear the telltale crash and shatter of ceramic and the vitriolic exclamation which follows is decidedly feminine. It seems Nadia is home after all.

I am momentarily surprised by this as she has taken great pains to avoid me these past days (for good reason, I admit) and I had started to believe she had vacated the premises entirely.

Seems I was wrong.

I’m not sure what drives my approach exactly, only that there is a burning physical need in me to face her, to offer her my guilt—my craving for repentance—on a silver platter to her rage if only to break this impenetrable void which somehow draws us together as it holds us apart.

She had been a shadowed form stood back to me across the yawning chasm of her own unspoken resentment, breached only by an irrepressible animosity that struck like lightning bolts between the cracks of her indifference. Until the day she turned to face me and the knowledge in her eyes lit the canyon of our darkened past with a blast of guilt and hatred that could no longer be contained, and all at once I knew her.

And then she had turned from me—fled from me—like hiding her eyes and turning her back could somehow sheath the knowledge that had passed between us. Could somehow revoke the understanding we had reached. But, like truth, what I now knew could never be unknown, for I can see now with a startling clarity the shape of things between us.

Memories and secrets. This is what we share. Memories that pulse and throb with each painful beating of an undead heart; secrets that slowly grind to dust the brittle bones which shape the masks we wear. Neither acknowledged, neither addressed for fear of shattering the only pure, untarnished thing we’ve built between us—silence.

But beneath the fractured remnants of my straining resolve, the Ripper smiles with my lips; his searing malice makes hollows of my eyes and his fill the void. And as his hunger fills my throat—burns in my veins—and my will to fight him dwindles, so too does the barrier between us until all that stands between is a shimmering gossamer veil striding the space between He and I. All that is needed to breach that gap is a single determined slash, and the Ripper already holds the knife.

She stands with her back to me, the feathered ink of her raven’s wings clearly visible through the open back of her sweater and the hastily tied fall of her dark hair, as she glares hatefully at the ruined remains of the vase at her feet. She seems darkly fascinated by the array of delicately
painted flowers that lay in their broken detritus upon the floor.

“What are you doing?” I ask. If possible, her back grows tighter still with tension at the sound.

Her head lifts from its contemplation of the shattered porcelain, and I imagine the fury burning coldly in her eyes as she stares ahead.

“Redecorating,” she says, shrugging, but the stiffness in her shoulders belies the nonchalance of the movement. “It’s an art piece on the fragility of existence.”

I haven’t a moment for the formulation of a reply before I hear a cold voice answer with my lips, “Even the beautiful things must die.”

Slowly, so slowly that for a moment my heart jumps with an anxious excitement, she turns. Some part of me wonders at the hesitation in her movements, at her fearfulness to face me. Perhaps she is afraid of me. It’s an odd thought, but it thrills me all the same.

But then, for the first time in days she meets my eyes and I finally see why she had hid them. The look in them is most assuredly not fear—it’s hate. A hate so cold, fierce, and blazing that my brother’s rage on his worst day pales by comparison. Two days ago I would have balked at that look, but today, with human blood thrumming in my veins, I smile.

Her name seems to hiss reproachfully in the air between us. The image of the broken, bleeding doll flashes in her eyes, sending a hateful wave of malicious glee through my body and a hot, pulsing lust to my fangs.

Nadia meets the Ripper’s eyes, but her gaze seems to capture me with him and, strangely, the sight calms her ire if only a little. The blazing blue of her hatred fades behind greyer hues, and she answers me calmly.

“Yes.” She blinks coolly in wait for my response.

This time it’s me who answers, though my voice sounds somehow unfamiliar, as I speak the thoughts that have been troubling me. My words sound cold and challenging—cruel even—but I know the guilt and fear in them must shine brightly behind my eyes. “You’ve been avoiding me for days. If I didn’t know any better, I’d think you were afraid of me.”

She laughs sardonically, her eyes sparkling with a cruel amusement. “Stefan, the only one here afraid of you is you.”

I can only stare at that, my brows furrowing deeply as the truth of her words settles over me, but somehow the move does not breach the barrier of my skin. I feel the other presence twist my lips in a chilling smirk, my brow in a challenging arch. That rapacious excitement coiled deep in my gut springs and strikes with a venomous glee through my own mind. The look she turns on me leaves no doubt that she can see it. See him.

“You think I don’t see him staring out through your eyes?” she taunts, confirming my thoughts. Her eyes harden, the malicious glint of them turning blue-grey to cold steel as she approaches. Nadia stalks forward with deliberate slowness and a focus that reminds me forcefully of the predatory sleekness of a large black panther, waiting for the perfect moment to pounce. She knows she has it.

“I don’t need to smell the copper on your breath to know you’ve been feeding,” she smirks. “Feels good doesn’t it? Letting the hunger consume you? Letting the blood fill all your empty spaces? You think if you can keep pretending you’re in control, you can fight the beast. Keep the lion in his
cage. Well, guess what, Stefan?”

She pauses and I find myself frozen solid, hanging on her every word.

“You can’t contain the Ripper. Because, ‘The Ripper’ doesn’t exist. That monster you’ve been fighting? He’s you.”

The silence that stretches like solid ice between us shatters into tiny shards, deadly icicles that shred and tear in the explosive blast that follows her words. They ring in the echoing tension, and time stands still. It seems to linger in this pregnant moment.

The shrill alarm of a cell phone I realize now has been practically crushed to barely working pieces in her white-knuckled grip jolts my heart into renewed action, and my eyes shift gratefully away from her stormy blues. They, however, hold fast to me, refusing to relinquish their hold even as she answers.

“Yes?...” I hear a familiar voice answer, but my attention holds too tentative a grasp on it to place the words. “I’ll be right there.” Her gaze never wavers, but the sharpness of their ensnaring focus loosens and I am free.

I seize my moment to escape them.

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Jeremy

My fingers punch harsh and fast on the controller, my face a mask of concentration and the living room filled familiarly with the digital sounds of gun shots and groaning, dying zombies as I blast my way through the abandoned warehouse.

Jenna is off to Whitmore for class, and Elena had barely spared me a passing glance in distant sympathy on her way out the door. And they wonder how I managed to keep my attendance record so determinedly spotty for so long.

“Take that, asshole!” I smile victoriously as I smash a rotting face in with the butt of my gun. I am finding, not for the first time, that killing zombies is a rather therapeutic activity. It’s certainly less violent than the alternative.

I shouldn’t be surprised. My sister may seem guileless as a wet kitten, and she may in fact be the worst liar in the history of the universe, but that doesn’t make her genuine. Even before the accident, Elena’s always been secretive—preferring to confess her uncensored thoughts to her diary and leaving only the tiniest, most carefully edited breadcrumbs for the rest of us.

Whether the preservation of her “good girl” persona was for our parents’ benefit or her own, I never much cared. Whatever party or secret girl drama she hid from prying eyes never much concerned me, and mostly I have always been content to leave well enough alone, despite knowing the information was there for the taking if I were ever really curious.

And it’s not as if she’s been all that discrete about it. She’s been weird and reclusive for months now and she as much as admitted yesterday that she’s known she was adopted for weeks without telling me. But somehow, despite what I know about Anna and what I suspected (now confirmed) about Vicky, I never anticipated this...

Though most of it is some majorly trippy, not a little creepy, description of her ridiculously
melodramatic love life (vampires not withstanding) that I couldn’t skip fast enough...The truth about Anna’s friendship with me (at least initially) and especially Vicky’s death stood out.

“Stefan said he found her biting Jeremy. Feeding on him. She could have killed him! Vicky was a monster that had to be stopped.”

It bothers me, this, but not for the reasons I might have expected. It’s not the thought of Vicky as a vampire, or even as someone that wanted to hurt me that’s bothering me most (though that plays a large role in it). It’s the fact that I can’t remember. Somehow, selfishly, I think I might prefer this if I could even say for a fact that I “knew” what I don’t know, but the fact that Elena doesn’t really know...that the only person there that night that remembers is the one that killed her...

It’s not exactly reassuring.

So, despite the still burning anger in my stomach at the thought of Elena’s patronizing lies and justifications, I had read every absurd word of her recorded secrets with a voracious curiosity that had my hands aching as the pages trembled in my tightening grip.

On some level, I think I know she only kept all this from me because she thought it was ‘best for me’ or some shit, and quite honestly it pisses me right the fuck off that she has somehow gotten it into her self-absorbed mind that she has any right to parent me like that.

I mean, the whole “tough love” speech from months ago was bad enough, but her relative quiet on the subject had stupidly led me to believe she was finally going back to being my only slightly annoying sister rather than the over-bearing mother role she’d taken on since our parents died. Turns out, she was just trying out a new tactic.

I make it around the graphic corner and spot a rather large crowd of green-skinned dead guys hanging out at the end of the hall. As a group they amble toward me, groaning in comical hunger and I cock my gun in preparation.

“Die you fuckers!” Digital brains and blood spray in pink and red hues as I take them down one by one.

And I know how potentially catastrophic this last decision of mine may be, but like hell I’m going to sit back and let my sister and her pet vampires run my life like I’m some toddler that needs every sharp edge and loose object sterilized and wrapped in rubber “for my own good”.

Still, I would be a moron if I completely overlooked this last passage:

“...in the short time I've known her, Lia has proven many times over how little she values human life (or any end not hers and Damon’s) but when she said that she killed as a human, that she chose this...she thought it was funny how much that frightened me...I didn’t want to think that people could be born evil...could choose to knowingly, even happily turn herself into a monster that delights in preying on the innocent, that revels in bloodshed and murder, all for a taste of ‘power.’”

“Shit!” I groan as the zombie I had missed in my distraction takes a bite out of me. I throw the controller on the couch cushion in irritation.

Maybe calling Lia wasn’t such a great idea. I’m not sure why I did honestly except that, according to Elena, she’s the only one that wasn’t involved—that was actively looking out for Vicky. I need those memories. A vampire took them away, so it stands to reason one could give them back, and I can’t ask Anna for obvious reasons...For some strange reason I can’t begin to understand (despite
or perhaps *because* of Elena’s words on the subject) some part of me wants to trust her.

Besides, whatever she told Elena, whatever she’s done in the past, she’s always been nice enough to me and she’s the only one I can ask for help with this. Call it a move of last resort.

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**Elena**

These past few months have been hard. Hard for a million reasons. A million tiny reasons that fall like grains of sand with every new and varied facet of this absurd reality that has become my life. Facets that fill me with a thousand terrifying secrets I can’t release until I feel I will explode under the incredible pressure. Until I feel ready to burst in a million lethal directions, taking everyone I love with me.

When I first saw Bonnie in Ric’s class this morning, I felt something akin to relief. It was as though a hundred-pound weight had been lifted from my chest and I could finally take the breath I had been holding in for weeks. Her eyes were hard and somehow closed to me, but in my self-absorbed relief I failed to notice.

This was swiftly followed by a selfish desperation when the only look I received from her was one of regret. It’s that desperation that has me chasing her down the hall against the crowd.

“Bonnie!” I call out breathlessly, when I feel the barest tips of my fingers brush her shoulder. My heels land heavily on the concrete and my momentum almost carries me past her in my haste.

“Hey,” she greets, but the look in her eyes is upsettingly reluctant as they meet mine. She’s less than thrilled to see me, and there’s a pang in my chest at this realization.

“Hey. I, um—” I start nervously. “I tried to catch you down the hall, but I guess you didn’t hear me. How are you? How’s your family?”

She’s looking at me with a cold expression I can’t hope to decipher, but the grief in her eyes is painfully familiar.

“We’re dealing. It’s been hard,” she admits, and all I can do is nod in understanding hoping to express with my eyes the sympathy I have no words to speak.

“Everyone here really missed you.”

“Yeah,” she sighs, her eyes pinching in discomfort. “I just had a lot to deal with after Grams’ funeral, and, honestly, after you told me the tomb spell failed, I just didn’t really want to come back.”

The obvious pain in her eyes sparks a hot flush of shame, especially as I never wished to cause it even if I can’t understand the how. Having Bonnie gone for so long has been hard for a number of reasons, not the least of which is my guilt at the cause.

I know intellectually it isn’t my fault she lost her Grams, that given the circumstances there was no way I could have known. That she made her own choices and the consequences aren’t on anyone directly. But it’s hard to tell that to my heart and the missing space in my life that my best friend used to fill.

Worse still has been the radio silence between us in a time we should be most dependent on each
other. I’d be lying if I said it was entirely selfless, however. Yes, I desperately wish I could be there for my friend knowing what she’s going through, but I’ve missed her for myself too. She’s the only person in my life that knows the truth about everything, the only one I could have talked to without sinking further into the supernatural swamp I’ve been drowning in.

Trouble is, it seems she hasn’t hated the distance nearly as much as I have. Judging by her expression now, she might even prefer it.

“I hope you understand why I called,” I try hesitantly, feeling nervous at the distance in her eyes. “I wanted you to know before you came home.”

“I understand why,” she agrees, though her eyes pinch in discomfort. “I just wish I didn’t know.”

My own brow furrows at the difficulty of this exchange. I hate that it suddenly feels so wrong between us. This is my best friend. So, why does she feel like a stranger?

“I know it’s been really hard—

“Bonnie!” a familiar voice calls from across the hall as a frenzied rush of blonde hair and bright smile tears her gaze from mine.

“Thank god you’re home!” Caroline gushes, and the genuine warmth of Bonnie’s smile fairly breaks my heart. “I know we talked every day, but I missed you. How are you doing?”

“Better. Just better. You know, glad to be back and try to keep myself busy,” she tells the blonde, my presence all but forgotten. I suddenly feel like an intruder on their friendship for the first time in our lives, and I can’t help the stab of jealousy in my stomach at the thought.

“Well, I can help with that,” Caroline chirps, oblivious. “Major wardrobe confab needed ASAP. You need to help me pick the perfect dress for the Founder’s Court.”

“The Founder’s Court?” I interject, confused. They both turn to me sharply, as if startled by my continued presence. “Did I miss something?”

“The Founder’s Court,” Caroline repeats obviously. “You know, Miss Mystic Falls. They announced it today, and, um, you and I are both on it.”

“Oh my god, we signed up for that so long ago. I completely forgot,” I say. After months of supernatural mayhem and devastating discoveries, it seems surreal to even talk about this.

“Yeah. So, are you dropping out then?” Care asks.

I consider the question a moment. It’s true I feel no real desire to spend a week in dress up and dance lessons, despite how important it all seemed before, but that’s just it. Before.

“I can’t,” I murmur, thinking of my mother and her relentless excitement what feels a lifetime ago now.

“No?”

“Her mom is the one who wanted her to enter,” Bonnie explains for me, honest sympathy and understanding in her eyes, and suddenly she’s my best friend again.

“Ok, enough moping!” Caroline declares a moment later with her usual forced cheer. “Today after school, the three of us are going shopping and we are going to find the perfect dresses for the
pageant. We can plan our hair, do mani-pedi’s, full on Miss Congeniality make-over.”

“I don’t know Care...” Bonnie starts, but she’s looking right at me and I know she can see the silent pleading in my eyes.

“Oh come on guys, it’s been forever since we’ve been together,” Caroline whines. “We can try on every ridiculous dress we can find, make a runway show out of the dressing room...Plus, I don’t know about you two, but I’m in need of some serious girl time.”

“Oh,” I say, mind made up. She makes a compelling argument. It has been forever.

“Yes?” Caroline confirms, eyes alight with excitement.

Bonnie seems to agree, smiling softly as she nods.

“Yes! This is perfect, and I know just the thing.”

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Nadezhda

Stupid fucking Stefan. And stupid fucking Slater for texting me in the first place. If I hadn’t been so pissed off about the monumental clusterfuck that is the Katherine Pierce Bounty Hunt, maybe I wouldn’t have broken that ugly ass piece of 1950’s home décor and we wouldn’t have had to deal with each other at all. I was doing just fine in my Stefan-free self-exile thank you very much. Ugh.

I’ll admit, I was pathetically relieved to get that phone call. No matter what bizarre turn of events has Jeremy Gilbert calling me of all people, if it gets me out of that goddamn fucking boarding house and Stefan’s increasingly schizophrenic presence, I am up for anything. Honestly, I would gladly strip naked, light my hair on fire, and streak through the town square belting out the lyrics to Taylor’s latest single, if it would get me out of that room.

Like I can’t see the blood in his eyes, the almost imperceptible shifting of thirsting veins, the hunger as it tirelessly seeps and claws its way into that infuriatingly self-righteous head of his using guilt and self-loathing as a foothold. Like we don’t both of us know he’s fighting a losing battle.

In truth, he’s already lost. He just won’t admit it yet.

A part of me is perversely delighted by the prospect—revels in having knocked him off that hypocritically high horse to watch him drown in the red sea of his own crimes, knowing he’s the only one that can hate himself as much as I do. It’s the sweetest sort of vengeance.

Unfortunately, I had not accounted for the ensuing flood of grief and guilt that I would feel looking into those hateful green eyes when I could finally see the shadows of my own remembered nightmares echoed there. Now that he shares those memories, meeting that gaze means seeing Irina’s eyes staring back at me, accusing in their vacancy.

I stare expectantly at the front door as I wait for the Littlest Gilbert to let me in on today’s drama, my eyes glancing over the cozy front porch in all its tragic glory. It’s been a while since I’ve been here. Elena only calls in times of crisis, and even then I’m at least third on the list, so this is a nice surprise.

“You know, if you’re really worried about that English grade of yours, I got to tell you showing up
for class every now and again might be a good start,” I tease the moment his eyes meet mine across the threshold.

His lips hardly twitch at the joke despite the evident gratitude in his eyes at my presence...Still, something in the falseness of his smile tells me this is not a social call. He hesitates a moment before waveling me inside with a wordless gesture, and, in that single beat of tense silence, I know what this is about.

It’s no wonder to me then when the first words to leave his lips are, “I know what you are,” and I manage to retain a look of bored indifference in the wake of them.

“Anna tell you that?” I ask, tossing my jacket carelessly over the back of the couch.

“Elena’s journal actually,” he answers shortly, but the tone is belied by the swimming confusion in his eyes.

I snort. Because why wouldn’t you leave a full account of your sordid supernatural affairs lying around for a nosy sibling to find?

“Well, it’s about time, kid,” I say and he stares at me with some surprise, though he nods in agreement. I can well imagine how pissed he must have been about it to have called me.

“Let me guess, this is about Vicky.” It’s not a question, but the clenching of his jaw confirms it all the same. “What exactly do you know?”

“I know that Stefan killed her in front of me, and that Elena had Damon wipe my memory. I also know that you were there, and you were the only I could ask about this,” he says this last almost accusingly, but I can see the desperation in his eyes.

“So...you want your memories back, is that it?” I guess, but he doesn’t have to say a word for me to know I’m right. I huff in irritation. “Sorry, kid. Can’t help you.”

“Oh so you can bring people back from the dead, but you can’t unlock repressed memories? Why do I find that so hard to believe?” he scoffs.

My lips twitch in wry amusement, but my head is already shaking in denial. “It’s really not that simple. Besides, why do you even want them back? From what I remember, you were a traumatized mess. You really want to go back to that? I mean, isn’t it better this way?”

“Look, those are the last memories I have of her. There’s been this...I don’t know, hole inside me since it happened and I never knew why. I just—I have to know.” There’s a desperation to his plea that makes me want to agree, but I am far too aware of the heartache he’s courting here to give in so easily.

“Sometimes knowing is worse,” I warn.

“I don’t care.”

I consider him for a long hard moment, my eyes scanning his face and posture for any hint of doubt and finding none. “Yeah...” I sigh in resignation. “Fine, but I wasn’t lying before. I really can’t give them back to you. Damon has to do that. He’s the one that took them. That’s how it works.”

“So...”

“So,” I say, turning a probing eye on his determined ones, “if you’re sure about this, and I mean
really sure...I’ll handle it.”

He squares his shoulders, a stubborn look in his eye I am beginning to recognize as a Gilbert specialty, as he says, “I am.”

I nod a little sadly, not having expected any other answer. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

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**Stefan**

It takes less than a mile-long sprint down the road for the anger to set in. What the hell does she know, anyway? She and Damon have spent their entire undead lives submitting to the beast within, making nice with the bloodthirsty demon as they dance naked in the red light of their heedlessly slaughtered victims until it was no longer an act. They became their monsters; they revel in their evil. But that doesn’t mean I have to.

I will not be a slave to my hunger, but neither will I take pleasure in it. I can find a middle ground. I can find a way to keep this life and this renewed strength without handing it to the Ripper to play with. I have to, because this feeling? This thrilling rush of fire and energy thriving in my satiated veins, the thrum of living blood pulsating through every nerve and fiber of my being, I will not surrender.

She was right when she said it felt good, that letting the blood consume and fill every aching crevice felt right. The guilt and pain and self-loathing just wash away on the crimson tide, and I can smile, I can laugh, I can dance in it without falling to pieces under the strain. For the first time in decades, I feel good.

I want to share this newfound happiness with Elena too. I want to show her that I can be fun and exciting and unpredictable in all the best ways. I want to enjoy my time with her, show her what she’s missed amidst the brooding heaviness of all those crippling emotions. I want to feel good, I want us to feel good. Together.

I’m outside the school by the time the sixth lunch bell rings, and suddenly I am surrounded by them all. The thundering din of a thousand pounding hearts and the sweet, tangy smell of their enticing blood overwhelms me for a moment as they wrap around me. There’s a growling in my chest and salivating yearning in my gums, but I swallow it down. I am in control.

The scuff of rubber on concrete and the heavy fall of a tripping body sounds a moment before the scent hits the air. Through the tattered barrier of torn flesh, my hunger lurches forward. My eyes see only red.

A foreign hand grips my shoulder and I nearly rip his throat out.

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**Alaric**

I had spotted him across the parking lot on the way to my car. Funny I would be thankful now that my idiot self had left those papers in the back seat. If I had spotted Stefan’s hungry prowl even a moment later, that boy’s scraped knee would have been a bloodless lump across the court.

Still, throwing myself between a lethal predator and his prey may not have been my wisest course
of action.

“Ngh, Stefan!” I choke around the hand squeezing like a vice around my throat. He glares at me with darkened, angry eyes and my heart jumps in my chest. I hardly recognize the person looking out of them.

A moment later, he releases me, and I nearly hit the ground in my relief. I watch as rage and hunger turn to confusion in his eyes, and suddenly I fear for him. “Are you ok?”

“Yes,” he gasps unconvincingly, eyes shifting with a telling anxiety. “I’m sorry,” he says, his body shuffling backwards in his uncoordinated haste. “I was just feeling a little sick. I’m fine.”

His fleeing form blurs slightly as he retreats, and suddenly I’m more than worried. I’m certain. This can’t be good.

Bonnie

It started out fun, Caroline’s natural effervescence and energy sweeping us up in a happy bubble of warm smiles and easy chatter that made it impossible to do anything but follow her lead. And maybe it’s her still preserved ignorance or just some innate gift of hers, but I feel as though I’ve been catapulted back in time to when things really were this simple between the three of us. For a moment, all the vampire drama, the strain between Elena and I seemed distant and ridiculous.

But, of course, it couldn’t last.

Despite Caroline’s neurotic perfectionism, she always knows exactly what she wants and it didn’t take her long at all to find “the perfect dress”: A long satin green gown with just enough of a spring-time shine to bring out the natural sunny glow in her complexion. She was a golden goddess.

Elena was more difficult. Not due to indecisiveness so much as what Caroline considered a ‘disturbing lack of enthusiasm’ that had her pondering a variety of lackluster options which had eventually led our blonde friend to seize control out of sheer frustration.

The first Caroline-approved choice had been a taffeta gown with a sweetheart neckline and a mermaid style skirt that fell in soft, billowing folds below Elena’s narrow hips. The deep, rich auburn color glowed as the heart of a roaring flame that seemed to light Elena from the inside and spill out in the warm olive/bronze of her skin.

She looked like a princess and Caroline had immediately declared it ‘her color’. Unfortunately, she said, it was more ‘ball room’ than ‘show room’ which I took to be Caroline-speak for ‘save it for prom’.

Presently, she has Elena holed up in a dressing room with options 3 and 12 (and another I think I saw the brunette sneak in earlier) while awaiting Care’s final judgment. She steps from the dressing room next in a rather delicate looking lilac gown that instantly has Caroline reeling in distaste.

“No, no, no! Definitely not.”

“Why? I thought it was pretty.”

“Well, there’s your first mistake,” Caroline snaps with feeling. “We’re not going for ‘pretty’,
Elena. We’re going for ‘Wow’!, ok? And secondly, that color is all wrong for you. You’re an Autumn, not a Summer. Now, get back in there and try the blue one.”

“Taking this a bit too seriously, Caroline?” I say with a teasing smile.

Her eyes widen in affected innocence. “What?” she asks obviously. “If I want to win fair and square, I can’t have my chief competition getting laughed off the stage.”

“Nice.” My eyes twitch with annoyance though I barely contain a smirk at her predictable response.

Caroline smiles a little sheepishly at my implied reprimand before turning her attention to the shadowed blur beyond the thin fabric curtain. “So what’s going on with you ‘Lena’?”

“What do you mean?” The feigned ignorance in Elena’s response is almost as transparent as the dressing room curtain she hides behind, and Caroline shoots me an annoyed glance in agreement.

“Don’t give me that,” she says, rolling her eyes. “You’ve barely spoken two words to me in days. Something is clearly bothering you, so spill.”

Elena may not be able to see it, but we both know that tone of voice. Caroline will happily hold us both hostage until she gets her answers. There’s rarely any point in arguing with her.

I can hear the resignation in her voice as Elena comes to the same conclusion. “I’ve just been dealing with, you know, Stefan stuff,” she admits reluctantly and I nearly flinch in revulsion.

Not that it’s exactly a surprise, but I so don’t want to think about that. Especially not after what I saw a few nights ago. The thought of her with him—with any of them....I shudder internally.

“Yeah, I noticed he hasn’t been in school for like a week. What’s up with that?” Caroline prompts, oblivious to my distress and careless of Elena’s.

“He’s just been...dealing with some things.”

“What kind of ‘things’?” Caroline prompts mercilessly, an eyebrow arched in challenge.

Plastic rings scrape against the metal curtain rod as Elena, thankfully, chooses that moment to unveil her next selection and conversation is immediately lost amid excited chatter. Elena is a vision in royal blue satin as she stands before us under fluorescent light that does nothing to detract from the happy glow in her bright brown eyes. The color lacks the warm flush of heat of the red dress, but the sapphire bright blue is the perfect complement to the brown of her gaze. They seem to gleam above it.

“That’s the one! Definitely!” Caroline exclaims. “Elena, you look perfect!”

I nod my agreement, smiling with nostalgic warmth as I watch the happy glow light up her face. It’s a look that has become far too rare these days, and I feel a small twinge of shame for whatever part I’ve had to play in it.

“Really? You think so?” Elena confirms, spinning to catch a glimpse of herself in the mirror behind her. She doesn’t bother to fight the pleased smile on her lips.

“Absolutely,” Caroline agrees, before her tone returns to its previous demand. “But don’t think I didn’t see you dodge that question, missy. What exactly has Stefan so busy he’s been MIA for over a week and has you acting so cagey? What, is he like a closet junkie or something?”
“Let it go, Care. It’s obviously personal,” I interject, noting the discomfort on Elena’s face and wanting to halt this line of questioning as soon as possible. As much for myself as for her.

“Ugh, fine,” Caroline groans exaggeratedly. “But, I mean...what’s got you in such a funk?”

“Just...everything,” she murmurs, her eyes momentarily hesitant as she mulls something over in her mind. Seeming to come to a decision, her mouth sets in a determined line before she says, “Actually, I recently found out that my birthmother was Alaric’s wife—

“What?!” we both exclaim in shock. Care’s excited, mine horrified.

“Wait, does that mean she’s...” I question vaguely with a glance toward the oblivious Caroline.

“Yeah, and I mean then Jeremy with Vicky, and...it’s been hard seeing him like that, you know? And then my Uncle John showed up so the house is a war zone. I just...don’t want to be there right now. So, I’ve just kinda been...”

“Spending a lot of time with the Salvatore’s,” Caroline finishes for her, traces of jealousy and annoyance in her tone. My own shoulders immediately stiffen in response.

“Yeah, actually Lia went with me to visit Isobel’s—my birthmother’s—friend a few weeks ago. Helped fill in some blanks.”

My teeth grind together harshly as I bite back the words threatening to explode from my throat. Just hearing that name makes my blood boil.

“Lia?” Caroline repeats, confused. I have to admit I’m as curious as she is when she asks, “Well, where was Stefan in all this?”

“He’s just been sort of busy with...stuff. But, yeah, she and Damon have been around, and really they’ve been nice enough about it so...” she admits a little nervously. “And with Stefan and all...”

“Wow, so you’re like a real part of the family now, huh?” Caroline challenges, the slight envy still apparent in her voice.

Elena shifts uncomfortably, shrugging a bit, but offers a sort of sad half-smile in answer.

“I can’t believe he’s just leaving you to deal with all this on your own. And with Damon?!”

“Damon’s really not that bad, Care,” Elena snaps with a barely concealed irritation that sets my teeth on edge. Caroline, for her part, seems insulted by the tone as well as the implication. “At least, lately. He’s been pretty great actually. And I already told you, Stefan’s had a lot to deal with.”

“Yeah, but you’re his girlfriend—

Nope, I decide suddenly. I can’t deal with this.

“Yeah, I’m gonna go,” I say before I can think better of it.

Blonde hair whips about in shock and not a little disappointment as Caroline says, “What? But you just got here!”

“I know. Sorry. There’s just, uh—there’s something I need to do.”

“Fine,” she sighs. “But you’d better call me later. I wanna hear all about this weekend!”
“Yeah, of course,” I agree, inwardly cringing at her lack of tact. I’m not ready for Elena to know about that. “I’ll see you later.”

My steps are sharp and clumsy as I navigate my way over the rough terrain along the forest floor, occasionally stumbling over charred rocks of long forgotten ruins or tripping in the sudden death-trap of a grass-covered hole. Between my various (quite literally) waking nightmares and the recent tragedy of that night, Fell’s Church is not exactly on my favorite list of historic sites.

I haven’t been back here since my Grams died and I had hoped never to be again, but honestly? At this point I would rather brave this reminder than the one swimming in Elena’s sad eyes.

I know my coldness is confusing her, and I know she’d be heartbroken in guilt and empathy if she knew my thoughts, but I just couldn’t stand it anymore. I know it’s unfair of me to blame her for what happened. In truth, she’s at the bottom of the list in that department, but neither that knowledge nor my genuine desire to forgive detract from the festering resentment in my gut when I look at her.

I can’t help but think of them every time I meet her eyes, and hearing her speak their names with such obvious affection—hearing her defend them?—I couldn’t listen to that. I don’t want to.

So, here I am. Meeting with a relative stranger in the middle of the woods in the hope of any and all magical guidance since the death of my last mentor. In the place of her death, no less. Sure is great to be back.

I spot her tall form across the crumbling remnants of the desolated landmark, leaning a shoulder casually against the single standing wall, long before she seems to register my presence. There’s something about her (maybe just the family tie?) that assures me I can trust her, but it doesn’t make her any less intimidating.

There’s a way about her—an aura—that just screams power. Strength and confidence, really. Yet, as much as it humbles me, it also thrills me. I’m drawn to her despite myself.

A twig snaps beneath my heel, and Lucy whips around to face me, instantly on her guard. The intensity of her gaze alarms me at first—freezing me in my tracks—but it fades as quickly as it came, replaced by a warm smile.

“Hey there, cos’” she greets, seeming genuinely pleased at the sight of me. “I was beginning to think you weren’t coming.”

Am I only imagining the reproach in her eyes?

“Sorry,” I mumble in apology. “I, uh, got caught up in something.”

“Hey, no sweat,” she shrugs, unfazed. “I’m just glad you’re here.”

I blink at her once, still frozen mid step, as I glance warily about the familiar ruins. I wonder briefly if it’s only me that feels this ominous cold that seems to breath from the mouth of the tomb. It feels alive. Evil in its eerie consciousness.

Lucy’s eyes pinch in concern as she appraises me. “You, uh, ok? You look a little spooked.”

My mouth twitches in a small smile, grateful for her concern. “Yeah, it’s just, uh, this is where—” I stutter with difficulty, “this is where my Grams, um...”
“Oh, God,” her eyes widen in understanding. “I’m sorry. I didn’t realize....My aunt told me a little. Said it was a spell gone awry.”

I can’t help my skepticism at this last. Magic isn’t much discussed, let alone accepted on my side of the family. I can’t imagine who could have told her this.

“How’d she hear that?” I ask, voicing my thoughts.

“We’ll get to that,” she smirks briefly. “How much do you know about the vampires in this town?”


“Vampires,” she says with an almost wistful understanding. “Always draggin’ us into their messes.”

“Is that what you’re doing here? Vampire business?” I challenge, my eyebrow quirking despite myself. I knew this was too good to be true.

“Something like that...So I take it you know the Salvatore’s?” She tries to sound nonchalant, but she’s not half as good at fishing for gossip as Caroline is. Nor half as subtle.

“Yes, and I want nothing to do with them,” I state firmly, my boot already pivoting in rocky soil as I turn to leave. “So, if that’s what you’re after—

“Relax, Bonnie,” she says, her hands flung out in supplication as she looks to reassure me. “I’m not after anything. Just want to talk.”

“...Well, yes,” I admit reluctantly. “I know all three of them far better than I’d like to, but I don’t want to talk about it.”

“That’s fine,” she agrees with an easy smile, her eyes drifting suddenly to the bag at my shoulder. A spark of anticipation alights in her eye as she catches sight of the spell-book slung there. “Besides, there are far more interesting things we could be doing. Like teaching you how to use that grimoire.”

A smile of pure delight bursts across my face.

Jeremy

I hear the front door slam shut from my seat on the living room couch, as two ranting voices echo mid-argument. “You can’t be serious about this.”

“As a stake in the heart.”

“Which is exactly what’s gonna happen when Elena gets wind of this...What are you doing?”

I finally make it to the entrance hall to see Lia sat cross-legged on the floor, patterned fishnets peeking through the ripped fabric of her ragged skinny jeans, propping an elbow on her knee in a thoughtful pose.

“Just regretting all the poor life choices I must have made to lead me to this point,” she sighs with mock sobriety. “How could I possibly be friends with such a pansy?”
“What’s that supposed to mean?” Damon returns, looking offended. I bite my lip against a smile.

“It means,” she snaps, flashing instantly to her feet, “you’re pussy-whipped and you’re not even dating the girl! It’s pathetic.”

“She’s kinda right,” I add with a small smirk.

“Shut up!” they chorus and I can’t help but chuckle at the petulant pout on Damon’s face.

“Fine. I’ll give him back his memories,” he reluctantly agrees, an odd stress on the last word that I can’t begin to understand. “Will that make you happy?”

Lia nods immediately, pleased and, if I’m not mistaken, maybe a little relieved. Huh.

But in a moment, all thoughts flee my mind as he transfers those eyes to mine, and I am immediately caught by the clear, bright light in them. My mind goes dark and blank as they hollow me out. They are ice blue and wickedly sharp, driving into me through my own widened, helpless eyes. I feel like the rabbit caught mid-flight in the wolf’s hungry stare, frozen in fear.

When he speaks, it is with a velvet softness that seems to wrap my trembling mind in a sinister warmth. What ear had made crisp and bright, his voice made soft and blurred at the edges. The only thing that exists are those glowing eyes and his command.

Distantly, I hear the words as the will of them overwhelms my own.

“You’re going to remember what happened the night Vickie died.”

A barrage of memories assaults my mind with a blast of light and movement—images racing behind my eyelids like too quick flashes of a movie reel, but colorless and silent. I can see, but only as from the outside. Like a dream, I hover over my own body and past self’s fleeting thoughts, indistinct as a ghost on the breeze.

I watch helpless and insubstantial as Vickie creeps in through my open window, as she smiles in genuine pleasure at the sight of me. Though I can’t access it, I imagine my own smile matched it, second only to my relief that she was there and whole. By the look on her face, this must have been swiftly followed by confusion and alarm. I see her lips form the words, “Jeremy, I have to tell you something.”

A beat passes and I know I asked, “What Vickie? You said on the phone it was something big. What’s going on? You’re kinda freaking me out.”

“No, no, don’t freak out. You don’t have to be afraid. Please don’t be afraid,” she says, and her eyes seem to brighten and darken at once, pulling my past self into their depths. It’s alarmingly familiar, and all at once I understand. She didn’t know.

My past self watches in forced complacence as dark veins overtake her face, spilling blood in her eyes, and her canines sharpen and lengthen into fangs. She wears a version of the demon’s face I have come to recognize, but I sense no fear in the air. She looks as shocked by the revelation as I am.

“I’m a vampire,” she tells me, but I don’t even flinch.

“Whoa,” I say in awe, eerily calm.

“You’re not freaking out,” she muses, looking disturbed.
“You told me not to,” I hear myself say dumbly, and suddenly I understand.

“You’re really not afraid of me?” she wonders aloud, relief warring with joy in her still bleeding eyes, and in my present body, my stomach rolls. She didn’t know.

I watch with a sort of hopeless dread as she throws herself into my arms, clinging desperately and obviously close to tears as my arms wrap woodenly around her thin frame. The rest is as horrifying as it is tragic. Her fangs had not yet retracted when she kissed me, and the blood they drew was as helpless to resist her pull in the end as I was. I watch the guilt and panic clear her eyes as she throws herself from me, but the predator in them tracks that single spilled drop every inch of it’s wet path down my chin and zeroes in on my throat.

“Go ahead,” I tell her, just as I had done with Anna weeks later. I can’t help but wonder if even then I had been caught in Vickie’s eyes. “I want you to,” I urge again, and this time, just like Anna, she bit.

“It wasn’t her fault,” I say aloud as the world fills once more with color and my eyes open on theirs.

“What?”

“What did you see, Jeremy?” Lia asks, her voice much softer than Damon’s demanding tone as she looks on me with sympathy.

“Just...” I can’t find the words to explain. So many things to process, but no emotional context. See, but not hear. Think, but not feel. How can I begin to digest this? Well, maybe I don’t want to. The empty pit of stolen heartbreak so long lodged in my chest remains there, but for the first time I am glad.

No, talking out the tangled mess of my forgotten, imagined, and realized emotions is most definitely not appealing. But you know what is? Ganking some freaking zombies.

“You want to play COD?” I wonder aloud, because why the hell not?

They exchange another hard look and once again something passes between them—a thought almost tangible in the heaviness of the air. I wonder briefly if it is possible for vampires to read minds.

Damon shrugs.

“...What the hell?”

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**Elena**

“Hey, ‘Lena,” Jenna asks with a certain exuberance as I round the corner into the kitchen to find her propped against the counter top, half-empty wine glass in hand. But that's hardly surprising. What is is the company she's keeping. “Back so soon? I thought for sure Caroline would have you locked in a dressing room while she held the store manager at gun point for at least a few more hours yet. Did you find a dress?”

“Mm hmm,” I hum in response, my eyes flicking confusedly between our guests’ twin smirks of amusement. “And yeah, well Bonnie bailed so I managed to convince Care to let me off the hook.
What are you guys doing here?”

An odd look passes between the vampires at this last sentence, but whether it’s in response to my question or the comment preceding it, I can’t begin to guess. It wouldn’t surprise me if the mention of Bonnie caught their attention, but my confusion at their presence isn’t feigned. Not to mention, they’re looking rather chummy with my brother...

“Nice to see you too, Elena. I’m really feeling the love,” Lia says, affecting a wounded expression.

“Well Baby Gilbert back there needed help with some English paper of his, and Z volunteered to help. I came along for...moral support,” Damon shrugs with a teasing smile.

“Oh, please,” Lia snorts, rolling her eyes. “You just came by because Stef’s busy chasing the white rabbit and you bore easy.”

“Oh maybe I just missed the enchanting company of the lovely Miss Somers here.”

Jenna is just drunk enough to find his flirting endearing. I think it’s time we cut her off. Still, I can’t deny the treacherous flutter in my stomach when he turns that seductive gaze on me. Judging by the smug smirk on his stupidly attractive face when he winks at me, I’m half afraid he can hear it.

“He’s so full of shit, Jen,” Lia says. “Don’t listen to a word this idiot says.”

“Nice.”

“I just tell it like it is, D,” she shrugs with a breezy smile. “Not my fault you can’t handle it.”

“Remind me again why I hang out with you?” Damon frowns in mock annoyance.

“Um, because I’m awesome,” she says. “Obviously.”

And standing there in my crowded kitchen with two bantering vampires, a smiling little brother, and a more than tipsy aunt, something finally clicks into place. It feels like home.

Damon

Somehow, I find myself piled on the living room couch with Jeremy playing Call of Duty: Zombies an hour later, firing digital bullets at cheesy cartoon monsters while my best friend and my brother’s girlfriend giggle conspiratorially in the background.

How this little twerp got me playing video games with him, I will never know. I blame the Gilbert eyes. Apparently, I am powerless against those big brown doe eyes even when she’s not around to see it.

God, I am pathetic.

Still, seeing her there with big brown doe eyes full of misplaced guilt and dewy compassion, it’s impossible not to want to buy her a whole damn pet store just to make her smile. So, if all she wants is a few extra Thumpers from Mystic Woodland’s rapidly diminishing fur-ball population shoved down my brother’s ungrateful throat, I am happy to give it to her.

I won’t pretend I’m not a little concerned about him myself. I mean, can you even imagine the
brood-fest I’ll be in for if he actually hurts someone? I might actually consider calling Lexi for one of her decades long sadomasochistic “detox regimens” if that happens. I can hardly handle Stefan’s martyr complex as is, let alone blown up to spectacular self-flagellating proportions. Ugh.

But that’s the dead to last resort. It’s down there with Plan Y as far as I’m concerned. I have zero interest in even pretending to tolerate my brother’s self-inflicted torture via starvation, let alone enabling it.

My thoughts wander to Z briefly as I consider what she might have to say on the subject. I can’t imagine she’s inclined to disagree. Then again, her behavior has hardly been predictable as of late. There’s no telling what she’s thinking these days.

I can hear her laughing from here, open and effortless, as she listens to another of Jenna’s endless slew of failed relationship stories. A glance over my shoulder confirms it, but I know her laugh—her real laugh—and this ain’t it. She sounds genuine and charming, casual as the messy sweep of her blue-streaked hair, but I can hear the falseness of it.

Z is many things, and a fantastic actress is one of them, but I know her far too well to let her fool me.

It’s odd seeing her there in a loose grey sweater and faded blue jeans, the usual dark edge of her wardrobe subdued and overly casual. She seems diminished somehow. Smaller. And it’s not as though she had the inches to lose as it was.

It’s unusual, but her fashion sense does typically have a direct correlation to her general emotional state, and if I had needed more proof of her obvious distress after this weekend, this would be it.

I know she hates showing her vulnerability more than almost anything—that the idea of talking about her feelings is right between karaoke and boiling her own eye-balls in a pit of lava on her ‘No fucking way’ list of activities—and it’s one of the reasons our friendship works the way it does, but I’d be lying if I said it didn’t bother me in times like these.

I hate that she seems so fragile right now, but more than that I hate that she won’t tell me why. I’m not stupid; I know she said no more secrets and I know that she would tell me if I asked, but the thing is, I don’t want to have to ask. I want her to want to tell me.

God forbid I examine that thought too closely. It’s possible I’ve been spending too much time with Elena’s touchy-feely monologues humming in my ears. Though, that’s kind of Z’s fault too.

Still, seeing as whatever it is that’s going on with her is obviously the direct result of something my brother has done or said, I can’t help but think I have the right to know.

Well, there it is then. I am deciding right here and now I am getting the truth from her tonight. One way or another.

“So, are you in to my sister?”

“What?” I ask dumbly, pulled unceremoniously from my thoughts.

“Because, dude, I gotta say, you may wanna stop ogling your own if you want to stand a chance there. Take it from me, I have read her diary, and apparently the whole incest thing is not a turn on.”

An involuntary snicker escapes me as I shove him across the couch, “Shut up, you little shit.”
From the pocket of the studded leather jacket laid beside me, Z’s phone rings shrilly in my ear. She’s lucky Jenna’s too far gone to notice, because she very nearly reaches vamp-speed in her haste to answer. I’m immediately suspicious, and in a moment I know why.

**Stefan**

Even covered in plastic and ice, the smell is overwhelming—intoxicating. It’s nothing like the sudden spike of lust at the scent of fresh blood, or the thrill of pain and fear in a human heartbeat, but it tugs at me all the same.

I’m as full as I can stand to be—more than I remember in decades—yet still I am hungry. It’s unbearable, this need, but the alternative is far worse. I would rather take this thirst, knowing it is only temporary, than return to that perpetual state of near starvation I had been existing in for so long. How I denied myself all those years is a mystery to me now. The why even more so.

An eye out for staff, I gather an armload of bagged transfusions to my chest—careless of the type—and my bag. Quick and silent. This time of night (in this town no less) it’s only a matter of time before someone stumbles in here looking for supplies, and the last thing I need is some compelled nurse on my hands when I’m holding a sack load of stolen hospital goods.

Besides, even with this much blood in my system, it’s been decades since the last time I could really use that skill reliably and (though I am loath to admit it) I am not confident enough in my present abilities to risk it.

The moment my feet hit the hall floor, I know I have made a grave mistake. The smell of it is so much stronger, richer, fresher out here. It’s all I can do to keep my fangs and eyes in check as my feet turn immediately toward the source of it.

Even in motion, I shut my eyes as I await that familiar flood of guilt, pain, regret that has become so achingly familiar to me, but it never comes. Instead, what washes over me is a hunger so intense it seems to cover me from head to toe in a thick, cloying sweetness flowing unabated in lush crimson rivulets down the backs of my eyelids.

Swiftly on the heels of that gnawing hunger, anger follows with its own vicious lust. I had fled here to avoid just this temptation. I had tried to do the right thing. Tried to keep my distance—to hold the beast at bay—and they are baiting him. Baiting me. They are dangling that rich, tantalizing nectar just out of reach and yet so very very close. How can they expect me to refuse?

On silent feet through shadowed corners, I follow the smell. I watch the hustle and bustle of doctors, nurses, and bleeding, tempting patients wheeled about, raced to and fro past me in every direction, before being tucked away behind closed doors and surgical masks. But the smell goes on.

I can sense it, practically taste it, calling me on—beckoning, and I have lost all will to resist the pull. My vision swims with the telltale slithering of dark veins, my fangs pierce my gums just beneath the skin, and my nails bite harshly into the flesh of my palms, but somehow I find myself alone again.

I am the lone conscious mind in a secluded room, silent but for the steady beeping of a heart monitor, empty of all but the light scent of disinfectant, sterility, and the ever stronger smell of flowing, pulsating, mechanically stabilized life.
Attached to the bed by a tangle of tubes and wires, lies a young woman in a paper-thin hospital gown. My attention is immediately drawn to the IV tube in her left arm, tracking against the crimson stream to its source. The bag hangs tauntingly close, the blood screaming in ears suddenly ringing with the strain, the need.

Still, watching the steady rise and fall of her chest, the thumping of her heart beat both within and without—beeping and pounding at once—I am utterly captivated by that flow. I can almost see it as the tube releases it into her veins, machine and muscle in tandem pulling it in, pushing it out, controlling the tide, the ebb and flow. I want it so badly it hurts.

I know I swore I wouldn’t feed from a human, that I would keep myself to the bags. I told myself if I never hurt someone, if I never gave into that hunger for living blood, for the hunt, that I could still call myself the good brother. What a joke. Not killing this girl now does nothing for the countless others that I have ripped apart. Not feeling the guilt of her pain doesn’t cancel out theirs. And the guilt of wanting it so much is always with me regardless.

Except, I admit to myself, when I let the blood wash it all away. What good is all this pain when it solves nothing? Why do I want to torture myself with it when it is so easy to let it go? Why not?

Of its own accord, my hand wraps gently around her limp wrist, my thumb stroking lightly at that captivating line, and my nostrils flare in anticipation as I remove the IV. My parched mouth fills with saliva and my fangs elongate at the sight of it, dripping and trailing down her pale arm. My tongue darts out to catch it and I am lost in euphoria. My teeth sink into her skin and I am in a blood-red nirvana—higher than life, it is transcendent.

“Stefan!” For the second time today, I have my kill wrested from me. And for the second time today, I feel the predator’s rage boil hot in my veins. All at once I thirst for the blood of whoever dares to steal what is mine. I want to tear them apart.

Looking into her shocked and challenging brown eyes, I recognize the deceptively young looking little vampire: Anna. Despite knowing she is older and a fair bit stronger than I am even on human blood, the frustrated predator in me couldn’t care less as I snarl and strain against her constricting hold.

Fending me off with all the vampiric strength in her small frame, she somehow manages both to heal the still comatose girl and wrestle me from the building in less than minute.

When we reach the cover of a darkened alley a safe distance from prying eyes, I turn on her.

“Why did you do that?!” I seethe, still fighting the urge to attack her in my anger.

“Me?!” she hisses incredulously. “Feeding out in the open, in a hospital! Have you completely lost your mind?!”

Somehow the anger and condemnation in her eyes—the shock, but bizarre sort of understanding too—snaps the world back into focus, and I back away in horror. She watches me calmly as my fingers twist at the fabric straps of my bag, clutching desperately at the knowledge of its contents I can only be grateful to have retained, and blur into the night.

I don’t stop running till my feet hit the forest floor, leaves crunching and twigs snapping beneath careless strides, and the night air goes quiet around me. I can finally breathe.

The ringing fades at long last to a distant buzzing and the answering echo in my pocket makes its presence known. The blinking of the device signals a new voice message and helplessly I bring it
to my ear. No matter how unbearable the distance, I have to hear her voice.

“Stefan, it’s me. Again. I don’t even know if you’re listening to these, but...ok, whatever. Look, there’s this thing at the Lockwood’s this weekend. The Miss Mystic Falls pageant and I sort of need an escort. So, if you think you can come out of hiding by then, I’d like it if you’d be there...God, Stefan, just...please be ok.”

It’s only now when the fight seems long lost and the struggle futile that I remember the answer. The reason. Elena.

Nadezhda

“He didn’t...you know?”

“No. Thankfully, I stopped him in time. Look, I don’t know what’s going on with you three, and, really, I don’t care, but if Stefan’s getting back to his sloppy ripping self...well, let’s just say this is possibly the worst time and place to do it.”

“You’re telling me,” I grumble. Stefan’s taking all the fun out of screwing with him, and this shit is getting old fast. “Thanks, Ann. See ya.”

“Well, fuck me.”

I turn to face him as the phone falls silent, and the unbelieving betrayal on his face cuts me to the quick. How can he make me feel so guilty? It’s not even my fault!

“Damon...” I start, but I have no idea how to finish that sentence. Anything I say will only be an excuse in his eyes.

“Did you know about this?” he hisses, though it’s clear he already knows the answer. Despite myself, my back stiffens defensively. “Well, I might have suspected,” I admit reluctantly, “but come on Damon! It’s not really a surprise, is it?”

“Surprising that my brother’s off the deep end again? No, not really. Surprising that you knew about it, and didn’t tell me...” he stares at me with glowing blue eyes that feel like icepicks in my chest, and he stills. “What did you do?”

“What makes you think I did anything?” I deflect, but I know he sees right through me. Damn him for knowing me so well.

“Surprisingly that my brother’s off the deep end again? No, not really. Surprising that you knew about it, and didn’t tell me...” he stares at me with glowing blue eyes that feel like icepicks in my chest, and he stills. “What did you do?”

“What makes you think I did anything?” I deflect, but I know he sees right through me. Damn him for knowing me so well.

“Serious?” he scoffs, his laughter harsh and humorless. “Because you’ve been tense and weird since we found him that first night, and I’ve been playing Marco Polo with the two of you since the last time you spoke to him, so I’m thinking there’s a good chance someone’s up to her old tricks.”

“My old tricks? Are you shitting me?!”

Because I’m the only dream-walking douchebag in the room. Right, my bad.

“Hey, takes one to know one,” he shrugs, smirking, as he correctly reads my thoughts.

“All I did was show him the truth. It’s not on me if that scares him shitless.” I state defensively.
“Please! You knew exactly what you were doing,” he sneers back, but I think I see his eyes soften if only a little.

Well, I’ve always said the best nightmares contain the most truth. He should know that by now.

“Do you have any idea what’s happening right now?” I hear Jenna whisper, and I suddenly recall our audience. Could he have picked a worse place for this argument?

“Not a clue,” Jeremy answers, having wandered into the kitchen at some point, no doubt drawn by our raised voices.

Damon briefly turns his attention to Jenna to explain, as usual unable to resist the opportunity for a biting insult. “Basically, my ‘sister’ here is a fat, ugly troll that gets her jollies fucking with people already on a goddamn bender.”

I almost smile at that. Almost. “Take that back, dick for brains!” I yell, but the anger has mostly fled, leaving way for a twisted, entirely inappropriate amusement that I know was exactly his intent. His ice blue eyes dance with a teasing sparkle that looks a little like mischief and a lot like forgiveness and the sharp pain in my chest eases as it bubbles with repressed laughter.

“Not in this life-time, Elvira.”

“You’re one to talk, you metrosexual douchebag,” I scoff venomously, gesturing to his perpetually unchanging uniform. “You have a closet full of the same fucking outfit!”

“Well, at least I can wear adult sizes, Smurfette,” he parries, sizing me up with his eyes and flicking my blue-streaked ponytail pointedly.

“At least Smurfette was hot!”

“What, and I’m not?” he snorts incredulously.

“Don’t be stupid,” I answer with an almost audible eye-roll, “but two seconds ago you were calling me an ugly troll and now you’ve named me after a tiny blue bombshell, so thanks!”

“You’re fucking welcome!” he shouts back, his statement punctuated by the telltale crunch of chips to my right. I glance over with mild amusement to find Jeremy perched on the counter, a bag of Lay’s in hand as he observes our shouting match.

“Although,” I muse as my brow furrows slightly with a new thought, “I might be a bit miffed that you’ve effectively equated me with the tropic ‘token female’ whose singular purpose in series was to act as sex symbol and occasional damsel in distress.”

“What are you talking about? She totally had purpose,” Damon argues, immediately catching my drift. “She got to save the other Smurfs a time or two herself. Plus, she started out a bad guy, which is always awesome. Remember in the beginning? She was like a little femme fatale.”

“Yeah,” I gripe sardonically, “invented by a moronic mad-scientist to use as a mindless pawn until Papa Smurf, another man, turned her into a ‘real girl’ and she finally found her true purpose in life: the quintessential love interest and female quotient!”

“What, you’d rather I’d gone with Buffy, Miss Girl Power?” Damon says. “She was tiny.”

“And hot,” Jeremy adds from the peanut gallery. A quick glance confirms his unabashed enjoyment of our bizarre comedy. Somehow, our fights always go this way. It’s like we can’t stay
seriously focused on one topic even in the middle of an argument.

“Yeah, and a cheerleader. Ew,” I shudder, ignoring the indignant huff from the kitchen. “Please, kill me if I ever make that personality shift.”

Although...I think about it for a moment. The Whedonverse is not a bad comparison, really.

“Then again, this place does bear a striking resemblance to Sunnydale,” I remark, voicing my thoughts. “Church ruins, Hell mouth, what’s the difference? Plus, Stefan does a spectacular Angel impression.”

“And whose fault is that?” Damon retorts, bringing us full circle.

I refuse to respond to the absurd accusation in his question and instead say, “Well, it’s certainly not due to some soul-snatching gypsy curse. That’s for sure. I seriously doubt Elena’s that good in bed.”

“Hey!” the girl in question yells, obviously insulted.

I shrug good-naturedly, “No offense.”

My clear amusement does nothing for the tension in her shoulders. She’s in full on indignation mode. “Some taken!”

“Sorry,” I mouth as my lips fight a smirk.

Damon’s soft entreaty breaks through the tense air between us, seeping between the cracks. “What did he do to you?” he asks, eyes alarmingly discerning.

“What?” I say dumbly, eyes skittering away in discomfort.

“What did he do to make you hate him so much?” he prompts, unwilling to be swayed from the point. He makes his slow path toward me, sharp eyes leading the way.

“I’ve always hated Stefan, D” I scoff. “You of all people should know that.”

“Yeah, and I never questioned it because I thought it was just— ” he pauses, gesturing vaguely between our bodies, “but this is obviously something else. It’s personal.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I deflect, though I shift nervously beneath his knowing gaze.

“Come on. You think after all this time I don’t know when something’s bothering you?” he challenges, expressive eyebrows quirked incredulously. “Spill it.”

“There’s nothing to tell!” I retort, but the anxiety in my pose belies the exclamation.

“Sure there isn’t,” Damon frowns, unfazed.

“Hey, you don’t know,” I rant. “Maybe I’m just hormonal. That could totally happen. Maybe I hit a cat this morning. Maybe, it has absolutely nothing to do with that Edward Cullen wanna-be at all.”

“Nadia.”

That single word stops me cold. Damon never uses my real name. Not unless he really means it. The softened glow of his eyes confirms it as he fixes me with dewy eyes filled with genuine
compassion and a rare sobriety that steals the air from my lungs. My heart makes a heroic effort of leaping from my chest, and the vein at my temple throbs maddeningly. I hate that look.

“I’m your best friend,” he murmurs soothingly, crossing the few feet of kitchen tile between us. His hesitant posture as he curls a gentle hand around my shoulder speaks volumes about how well he knows me. “If you can’t tell me, who can you tell? You know I’ll always have your back.”

I can hear a century’s friendship and loyalty in his whispered words, as his thumb draws small circles on my shoulder-blade.

Finally surrendering to the warmth that floods me at his caressing touch, I drop my head to his chest and sigh, “I know.”

The palm of his right hand cups the back of my neck and I am engulfed in Damon. The affectionate heat of his breath on my hair, the familiar scent of bourbon and leather on my tongue; he feels like coming home. My eyes sting at once with traitorous tears and I swallow hard against them. I will not break down, damn it!

He’s wrong, though. For all the fights, the violence, the sarcastic mockery, I have never doubted his friendship once in all the time that I have known him. Damon’s loyalty, once won, knows no bounds. It’s his loyalty to Stefan that I question.

“Good” he murmurs, and I can hear the teasing smile on his lips. “Now let’s cut this scene before it gets anymore chick-flicky than it already is, and Jeremy starts growing girl parts.”

“Why’s it gotta be me?” the boy in question garbles around a mouthful of potato chips.

“Because I am way too studly for boobs, dude,” Damon retorts, no doubt with that familiar superior smirk I both love and hate so much.

“I hate you,” I sniffle, burrowing my face into his chest.

He huffs in amusement, his fingers combing through the ends of my hair. “Back at ya.”

How do you look a friend in the eye and tell him that the brother he has spent a century and half trying so hard to hate, might actually deserve it? I won’t pretend to believe it won’t be devastating news. But that’s just it, isn’t it? I’m afraid.

I’m afraid and I don’t know which possibility scares me more. That this discovery will finally break whatever fragile thread still holds their fraternal bond together, or that it won’t. That the news will break his heart and mine along with it, or that he will find the strength there to forgive him. To choose his brother over me and break my heart regardless.

It’s a rejection I am all too familiar with, and not one I look forward to experiencing again. Far better then to keep schtum on the subject. For everyone.

Trouble is, I don’t think he intends to leave me a choice.

He jumps suddenly, finally noting the damp spot beneath my infuriatingly insubordinate tear ducts.

“Oh, God! Not the Varvatos,” he whines with predictable dramatic flare. “Those mascara stains will never come out!”

“Asshole,” I snort.
“Yeah?” he teases. “What does that make you?”

“I’m about to be the boot up your—”

Damon’s hand muffles the end of my taunt.

“Jeez, even when they’re sweet they’re insulting,” Jenna remarks, apparently near enough to the end of that wine bottle to find us amusing.

“Just part of their charm,” I hear Elena say. See? I knew she liked us.

Well, if push comes to shove I fear I will have to tell him and let the chips fall where they may. After everything we’ve been through, I owe him that.

“You know it,” Damon says, as much in answer to my current thoughts as Elena’s words.

“Don’t they seem a little close for siblings?” Jeremy asks in a mocking stage-whisper.

Wordlessly, we both flip him the bird.

Lucy

“She’s hiding out with the Salvatore’s,” I say, kicking the door shut behind me.

“Perfect! Now all we need is a little witchy spying and we’re good to go.”

“No. Not happening,” I disagree immediately. The heavy book is a dull thunk on polished wood as I drop my bag to the dresser on my left. “She’s not getting involved in this.”

“Why not? You said she’s friendly with the doppelganger. All she has to do is make nice for a little bit while we work out her weak spots and then...well, you get the picture.”

“Because she doesn’t deserve to be dragged into all this,” I argue.

The cool relief of hardwood meet over-heated skin as I toe off my shoes and settle barefoot to the floor, kicking them carelessly beneath the bedframe.

“You don’t think after what happened with the tomb and her grandmother, she already has been?” I can practically hear the catty arch of her brow as her voice takes on that particular lilt. She’s baiting me. This girl is far too used to getting her way.

“Well, that’s just it, isn’t it?” I retort, not in the mood for her games. “We get Bonnie involved, and your precious boys are next on her shit list.”

“I have a plan for that.”

“Of course you do,” I huff, unsurprised.

“You don’t think she deserves a little payback?” she presses again, so sure of my answer. And maybe she has reason to be. If it were anything else.

“Come on, Kat. You know that’s not fair.”
“Well, what about mine? How’s that for fair?” And there it is. The real reason. Much as I love her, Katherine never does anything that doesn’t benefit her first.

“And you’ll get it. I promise,” I assure her seriously. “We just have to find another way.”

There’s a moment of tense silence in which I fear I may have over-stepped my bounds on this one. Kat’s a great friend as long as you’re useful to her, but the moment that ends...well. I bite my lip in growing anxiety as I resist the urge to back down.

“...Fine,” she says finally, and the easy tone of it does nothing to calm my nerves. On the contrary, it’s all the more terrifying. “Whatever. Keep your baby witch, I’ll figure something out.”

“What—”

“No, no,” she cuts me off breezily. “You drew your line in the sand. I’m respecting that. I’m sure I’ll think of something.”

I reel back at that, suddenly envisioning forest fires and hosts of bloody limbs. That would be less ominous than the calculating sound of her tone. “Wait a sec—

“Bye now!” The receiver clicks abruptly and I am left with nothing but silence for company.

What have I just walked into?

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**Elena**

Emerging from mine and Jeremy’s joint bathroom, I rub vigorously at my still damp hair as I towel it dry. When I flip the roughened end of it from my eyes, I am startled by the leather clad form sitting comfortably in my window seat.

“Damon,” I greet, in both surprise and confusion. I thought for sure after tonight’s festivities he would be too busy hammering out his issues with Lia to answer a phone call, let alone turn up in my bedroom. Strangely though, I can’t be bothered to mind.

“Hey,” he answers, seeming almost as off kilter as I am at the moment.

“What are you—what are you doing here?” I ask, confusion giving way to alarm as the silence grows. “Is everything ok with Lia? Stefan?”

“Z’s fine. Or she will be anyway.” A dark look passes over his face and the night air seems to drop several degrees at the coldness in eyes at this mention of Lia, but I don’t think it’s her death he’s fantasizing about. God help that someone when Damon finds them.

“So, what’s going on?” I ask again, eyes narrowed in curiosity.

“Normally, I would have a completely different outlook on what I’m about to tell you, but since it could really inconvenience me, I’ll...squeal,” he answers with obvious reluctance and not a little discomfort. He doesn’t exactly seem thrilled about this visit, and I’m terrified of what that might mean.

“What are you talking about?”
His jaw tightens as he seems to come to a decision. “Stefan’s till drinking human blood,” he tells me bluntly. Not one to sugar coat things, this one.

“What?” I gasp.

“Yeah,” he confirms, as though to forestall my predictable denials before I can gather the will to present them.

“A month ago, I would have rejoiced,” he says a little wistfully, but I’m not sure I believe him. “But with the council back on the alert, it is not a good time for him to fly off the handle.”

“I know he’s been a little edgy, but he said that was normal,” I say, searching internally for something—anything—that could disprove this claim.

Damon gives me a flat look that seems to cut through all my churning thoughts with ruthless precision. “He almost drained a coma patient tonight after robbing the hospital blood bank, Elena,” he says mercilessly.

“Oh my God.” I need to sit down, I think as my trembling legs hit the mattress and I nearly fall to the bed.

“He has no idea what normal is. His entire existence isn’t normal,” Damon continues through gritted teeth, each word cutting away one more fraction of the gilded dream I have been living in. “Normal to a vampire is drinking human blood, but he’s spent all this time fighting it when he should have been learning how to control it. And now it’s controlling him instead.”

“I can’t believe this. I mean, it’s Stefan that we’re talking about here,” I scoff, though even to me the argument is unconvincing. I can’t quite muster up the strength to disregard it.

“It’s Stefan on human blood, Elena,” he explains harshly. “He’ll do anything. He’ll say anything, because he’s not gonna want to stop.”

I ponder his words a moment, disbelieving eyes staring into the empty night beyond my window, before the knot in my throat relaxes enough for a reply. Gathering myself, my hand clenched in determined fists at my sides, I return to my feet and meet Damon’s eyes.

“So...what do we do?” I ask with as much strength of will as I can find.

His hands fumble briefly with the inside pockets of his leather jacket, and when they reemerge he holds a syringe of familiar pale yellow liquid.

“You are going to take this,” he tells me, proffering it toward me. “Keep it on you at all times. Just in case.”

I eye it warily for a moment, unsure how to respond.

“What?” I say dumbly. “Where did you even get that?”

“It’s a gift from the Teacher,” he answers simply. “Consider it his contribution to the cause.”

A stab of relief flares hot in my chest at the thought, but it is met by a long-standing wall of stubborn conviction and I banish it just as quickly.

“No, no that’s crazy,” I protest, as eager to convince myself as him. “He wouldn’t hurt me. He couldn’t.”
Damon shakes his head in obvious frustration. “You’ve never seen him like this before, Elena,” he argues. “There’s no telling what he’ll do.” By the tense set of his shoulders and the near desperation in his tone, he is willing me to understand. But he’s the one that doesn’t understand.

If I take this, it is as good as admitting that I have lost all faith that the boy I fell in love with can find his way back to me. That he can’t—won’t—resist this, when I know how hard he’s fought with every fiber of his being not to let the blood consume him. I saw in his eyes how devastated he was when he thought however briefly that I doubted him—that I was afraid of him.

Taking this dart then, no matter how fleetingly it might comfort me if I allowed the thought to form, would be a betrayal of the worst sort.

“No. He won’t. I don’t need this. I can’t do that.”

My resolve is unwavering, and I am at least as stubborn as he is.

“Fine,” he growls roughly, his frustration evident as he advances on me. I almost flinch in anticipation, hardly knowing what to expect of him in his obvious agitation. My eyelids fly open in shock when all he does is catch my face with gentle hands, and snare me with his eyes.

“If you won’t do it for yourself, do it for all the people I’ll probably kill if anything happens to you,” he murmurs with a sweetness that belies the statement, stroking a thumb softly along my cheek.

Despite the violence of his words, his eyes are soft. I have no doubt he means every word, but somehow the thought doesn’t disturb me as much as it probably should. The sudden jolt of my heart has nothing at all to do with fear, and neither does the heavy warmth that settles low in my gut.

“Take the damn vervain, Elena.”

Soundlessly, my eyes lost in the icy tempest of his eyes, I take the damn vervain.

His eyes close momentarily in exaggerated relief as his entire body seems to relax at the gesture.

“...Thank you,” I mutter.

He looks surprised by my gratitude, his brow furrowing in confusion as he breathes, “For what?”

I smile sadly at his expression. “For caring,” I say simply.

If possible, he seems more confused than ever by this declaration. He looks at me as though I had just informed him that the earth was round. Like the answer is the easiest, most obvious thing in the world. “How could I not?”

His hands never cease their soothing movement as he pulls my face to his, pressing a soft, gentle kiss to my forehead.

I am confused by the feeling it sparks in me—this sweet gesture. It’s the most alarming mix of excitement and disappointment that terrifies me even as it draws my gaze like the most irresistible magnetic pull toward those full pink lips. My heart feels bound to burst from my chest and my stomach fills with a fluttering tension I can’t hope to ignore as his presence consumes me.

He seems as surprised as I am by my reaction, freezing briefly as his dazzling irises flit searchingly between mine, looking for the slightest hint of hesitation. He finds none. At least, not enough to
halt this inevitable end.

My eyes locked on those succulent lips, I watch as with the slowest possible movements he brings his mouth to mine.

*No wait, what am I doing? I shouldn’t do this to Stefan. I—*

The moment his lips touch mine, all thoughts of his brother scatter like leaves on the wind, and the glass vial slips through my suddenly weak fingers. It is probably the most chaste kiss I have ever received, the softest, barest brush of lips, yet somehow there is an intensity—a depth of feeling—that simmers beneath the surface.

He pulls away after only a moment, and my fingers tighten reflexively on the fabric of his shirt where they had found themselves, holding him to me as I stare, wide eyed into his handsome face. My lips tingle, skin buzzing with electricity that seems to crackle in the air around us, and what little breath I had left in my lungs is stolen by the blazing icy fire of his eyes.

Lost in the moment and each other, neither of us sees the shadowed figure lurking beyond my open window.
Ok, here’s the deal with this one: this next chapter was meant to detail my altered version of 1x19 from start to finish, but about halfway through the outline it became clear just how massive it was going to be. So, I’ve decided to split it into two chapters instead. Consider this part one. The second should be up within the next week or so.

Please Read & Review

(Reference: 1x19 “Miss Mystic Falls”)

Elena

My lips are still tingling. After Damon left, I spent half the night pressing fingers to my lips atop a giddy smile. The second half, I’d spent worrying about Stefan—what he was doing, feeling; what all this meant for him, for us, for me—and spiraling into a guilty/happy whirlwind I couldn’t escape.

Suffice it to say, I hadn’t slept a wink.

I’m already half way across the student lot when I see it—the classic red Porsche sliding almost smugly into the open spot—and my heart gives a single panicked jolt. I can hear the vain emissions of upbeat alt rock giving a muffled shout behind the thin windows of the old car, and the rare smile on its driver’s face has me swallowing painfully against the sudden tension in my throat.

I paste a smile on my face, forcefully relax the cutting grip my fingernails have had on my palms, and hesitantly make my way toward him. If I thought my feelings confusing before, they are unfathomable now.

I reach him just as he closes the driver’s door with a careful but firm thump, as though concerned to damage the priceless antique with a more typical show of force. It’s both a cautious and a prideful move at once, and it makes me wonder at the motivation. After what I’d heard last night, I can’t help my immediate suspicion of its source.

“Nice car...” I say, shielding my eyes to hide my inner turmoil from his cheerful gaze.

He glances back toward the vehicle, smirking slightly. “I thought it was a waste to leave it sitting in the garage,” he says. He shifts his weight forward, leaning in as though to embrace me, and before I can think better of it I step back.

“I—I didn’t know you were coming back today,” I hasten to explain at the flash of surprised hurt in his eyes.

They swim with silent questions, but he seems to accept my answer for now. He smiles brightly, some of that earlier cheer I had spotted through the windshield leaking into his voice as he tells me, “You know, I woke up this morning, and I was feeling great, and I figured it was time for me to get back to things.”
“Does that mean you’re ok now?” I ask, doubtful though attempting to hide it. “With all the... cravings?”

He doesn’t seem to notice the suspicion in my eyes as he agrees easily, “Yeah, I mean the worst part is over.” His posture seems to take on one of expectation as he says with genuine affection, “So...now all I want to do is spend as much time with you as possible.”

“Hmm,” I hum noncommittally, unsure how to respond to this Stefan. It would be cruel and not entirely accurate to say that I preferred him beneath that perpetual cloud of guilt and haunted memories, but at least I knew what to expect of that Stefan. This version scares me, if only for his strangeness.

I can’t help but hear Damon’s words echoing in my mind ‘He’ll do anything. He’ll say anything. Because he’s not gonna want to stop’, but those thoughts come with their own rush of guilt, fear, and a lingering pleasure that serves to reassure me at the same time it softens my eyes on the man before me. I’m not being fair to him. He deserves more than this.

“Something wrong?” Stefan asks, brows furrowed in warm, loving concern as genuine compassion fills his forest green eyes, and I smile softly. This is my Stefan.

“No, nothing. Just...happy to see you,” I tell him honestly, watching that familiar swirl of emotion in his eyes.

“Me too,” he says with an echoing smile. This time, when he leans in for a kiss, I let him.

“We’re gonna be late,” I say when he pulls away a moment later.

I gesture back toward the school building, my eyes glancing over my shoulder in its direction, and when I turn back, something in his eyes has shifted. The warmth—though not entirely absent—has grown somehow reticent, as though it’s focus has turned inward and his mind left the present moment.

“Ok, um, you know what?” he says, gesturing jerkily back toward the car. My eyes pinch in confusion...and unease. “I’ll catch up with you. I’m gonna grab my stuff. I’ll be right behind you.”

“Ok.” I agree, but his easy smile has lost all its charm, and it brightness is suddenly too sharp for comfort. I maintain a slow, natural stride as I make my way inside, but the moment my feet hit linoleum, I practically race down the hall.

Fortunately, I seem to have caught the brief window between the warning bell and the hall monitor’s shift as I duck into the girl’s bathroom. It’s a stroke of almost unbelievable luck that I find it empty.

With shaking fingers, I retrieve my phone from my jacket pocket and type out a message to my most recent contact.

[To “Damon”: Stefan’s here.]

Before I can even move to close the screen, the phone is already buzzing in my grasp.

I glance nervously about the empty restroom for only a moment before pressing the button to accept. “Are you ok?” he demands immediately, the urgency in his tone somehow calming mine. “Did he do something? You know what? Fuck council business, I’m coming to get you.”

“No, Damon. No!” I respond, my racing heart already slowing with the reassurance of his voice. I
tell myself that I had only needed him to know that his brother was alive. He may have been a little off, and I’m not quite ready to dismiss my suspicions as to his dietary choices, but it’s surely not worth this near panic. He’s not so far gone that he can’t be trusted. He needs to know we—I—still trust him.

“He’ll know something’s up,” I argue, cluing Damon in to the turn of my thoughts. “Besides, he actually seems...ok this morning. Happy. Are you sure he’s still...”

“Trading kittens for soccer moms?” he finishes with his usual dark humor. “Yes. That brooding forehead comes from more than just his emo personality, Elena. If he’s doing cartwheels instead of shame spirals, it’s just further proof he’s caught himself a bright red dragon. Believe me, he is flying high.”

I consider this a moment in silence, my eyes drifting involuntarily to the pocket of my bag housing the vervain dart. My free hand curls over porcelain and sharp plastic edges as I lean over the sink, meeting my own gaze in the mirror. For a second, I allow myself to remember what it felt like yesterday, shopping for dresses with my best friends.

I had felt like a real teenager—myself, as I had been before all of this. Before the vampires and tomb spells and adoption revelations. Before my parents died and I discovered my existence was due to some kind of mystical phenomenon—that I was merely the supernatural copy of some long dead ancestor the universe saw fit to punish for all eternity.

I wonder if she ever felt the way I do now. If she knew what it was like to feel your life torn in two opposing directions. To cling desperately to memories of love and family while the world threatens to rip you away in a frenzy of fangs and blood. To strive to hold the fraying ends of yourself together while brutal hands threaten to tear them into tiny shredded pieces. Your heart between two men...No. No, I can’t think like that. I can’t allow myself to be swept away on this rampaging storm of emotion. I need to be strong here. For Stefan. For myself too.

“So...what do I do?” I ask finally, noting the stubborn set of my jaw as my eyes blaze with renewed determination. I can do this.

“Much as I hate to say this...just act natural,” Damon sighs. I believe he genuinely regrets the termination of his ride to the rescue. The thought brings the whisper of a smile to my face. “You were right. Tearing in there now would only spook him. No telling what he’d do.”

Something in his tone, or perhaps the sound of his voice alone, comforts me. Maybe it’s the residual butterflies in my stomach at the memory of last night’s stolen moment, maybe it’s the week of tirelessly reassuring phone calls and text messages in Stefan’s absence. Perhaps this is the natural culmination of our burgeoning friendship, but something tells me my thoughts are safe with him. I feel compelled to repeat them.

“This is all so surreal,” I gasp, knowing he understands. “It’s like a nightmare. I mean, it’s Stefan.”

For a moment there is only silence. A silence that quickly and exhaustively fills with every thought, every repressed emotion, every muffled word and secret look that has passed between us—all of us—and I hear the words even before he speaks them. I feel every single one of my own confused, violent, and desperate emotions echoed in the velvet softness of his voice.

“I know,” he says.

It’s enough.
Damon

Standing in the Sheriff’s office with our resident vampire detector extraordinaire, I struggle valiantly with my own impatience while Liz imparts the latest damning discovery threatening the lives of law-snubbing immortals everywhere. I find myself almost alarmingly disinterested as visions of a blood-soaked little brother and a building full of dismembered body parts dance circles in my mind. It’s been an hour since Elena’s phone call, and by this point I’m fairly convinced my fingernails have clawed permanent half-moons into my palms that even vampire healing can’t fix.

Strangely, it’s not my own self-serving concern or Liz’s disturbing information that tunes me back in to the business at hand. Rather, it is the anticipatory gleam in Uncle John’s eye and the smugly threatening curl of his lips that garners my limited attention. I don’t like the look of it.

Days ago, I had likened John Gilbert to a wolf in sheep’s clothing, but I think I would have been more accurate to say he’s like a terrier trying to be a Rottweiler. He’s so convinced of his own toughness that he’ll look the real wolf in the eye and bare his teeth. It’s that kind of attitude that’s going to get him ripped to shreds.

I can hardly wait.

“There was a disturbance at the hospital blood bank last night. Some of the supply was compromised,” Liz tells me, fear and worry swimming in her eyes.

“Compromised?” I repeat, effortlessly slipping into my own role, though my concern is hardly for the townsfolk. From the infuriatingly smug look on John’s face, he’s well aware of the turn of my thoughts. “You mean, stolen?”

“We almost missed it,” she admits almost apologetically. Her eyes seem to plead for my reassurance. It’s clear the past few months have cast me the Council’s resident savior. The irony of it is disconcerting to say the least. “The inventory records were altered, but when the night manager was questioned, he had no recollection of changing them.”

“Meaning the vampire who stole the blood used mind control to hide the theft,” John concludes in his typical tone—arrogant and condescending.

“I know what she meant,” I retort with a tight smile. I remind myself murdering him right here would do little to help my present cause. Unfortunately, for the moment at least, he’s worth more alive than dead.

If it weren’t for Katherine...

“We wouldn’t have noticed had John not alerted us to recent discrepancies at other hospital blood banks in the county,” Liz says, reluctant admiration lending a sympathetic glint to her gaze as she returns my smile.

“How lucky for us we have John,” I return in the same tone. It’s obvious to the room my feelings toward the man in question. Little do they know, it’s not John I’m internally railing against.

Fucking Stefan. I swear I’m about half a second away from bashing his skull in with that emo-journal of his (just so it doesn’t end too quickly). Then maybe I’ll shove a squirrel down his throat and do it all over again. After an hour of screaming and 3 bottles of vodka, I had managed to get the rest of the story from Z last night, and let’s just say that after yesterday’s slip-up, I’m not in the mood to cut him any more slack.
I swear, my brother’s going to get us all killed if he keeps this shit up. Maybe we should lock him in a metal straight jacket and toss him in the basement cell to rot. That or hook him up to a vervain IV and watch him squirm for a few decades. Maybe both.

“We’re stepping up security at the hospital,” Liz continues, oblivious to the turn of my thoughts. “Giving the guards vervain to prevent this from happening again.”

Deliberate movement to my left marks John’s approach as his smug voice cuts in. “Sheriff, might I offer a suggestion?” he says, casting a side-long glance in my direction. He’s obviously up to something, and I know already I’m not going to like it. “Why don’t Damon and I put our heads together? We can track down whoever’s doing this.”

Yep, I don’t like it.

“Truthfully, I could use the extra hands,” Liz allows, very nearly wincing in sympathy as she turns to me. “Is that something you’d be willing to do?” she asks and her obvious understanding for my distaste endears her to me all the more.

“Of course,” I say, attempting to convey my exaggerated compassion with my eyes. “I mean, if it’ll help.” She nods gratefully, reassured.

“I think we’ll make a good team. Don’t you, Damon?” The froggy little bastard is practically skipping with glee at his apparent win.

My teeth grind in irritation, but I paste a sickly sweet smile on my face when I say, “John, whatever I can do to help keep this town safe, even if it means spending time with you.”

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**Stefan**

Elena’s gaze is indecipherable. Expressive as always, her beautiful brown eyes echo with every tendril of thought, every fluid emotion that writhes and snares at that tangled thread. Even these too quick flashing glances should be enough to open her mind to me—no matter how quickly they skitter away, she makes no effort to hide her heart from her eyes—but somehow her thoughts remain a mystery.

There are simply too many feelings—too many contradictions and shifting transformations—as they twist and coil together in an incomprehensible knot, alternately fighting and converging one upon another in an endless loop. A Gordian Knot, and me without my scythe. Still, through all its teeming, shadowed mass, one light shines through: Hope.

It’s enough to reassure me of what I already know; Elena will be my salvation. I was right to seek her out.

I realize now that last night’s failure was due to more than flagging will power. More than hunger even. It was because I had forgotten the one pure and simple thing I had already—the tether to my humanity, to the man I want to be. The man I can be even on human blood. All I need is her. Elena. When I feel myself begin to slip, to lose my hold on solid ground—when I begin to forget all faith in myself—I need only look in her loving, compassionate, trusting eyes to find it.

I know better than to think I deserve such a gift, and I have little doubt that Damon and Nadia have had their own malignant hand in its preservation, but the joke is on them. They may think her ignorance now will ensure her shock-fueled revulsion later, but I know by that determined hope in...
her eyes that they are wrong.

Because I will not give them what they want. I won’t give up the blood, but I will learn to master it. Any doubt or past deed they attempt to strangle that light with will ultimately fail. Because she loves me. Because I will prove myself worthy of it.

By the time she learns the truth, it won’t put a dent in that trust. I will show her once again who is the better Salvatore. My past does not define me, and I won’t let anything—or anyone for that matter—shape our future.

The thought sends a spike of vicious anger through me; it bites with sharp nails and grinds teeth between the hardened clench of my jaw as a burning hatred glares daggers at this morning’s substitute.

She’s wearing black today. A little black dress with a borderline scandalous neckline and a cut that threatens to cross the line between professional and provocative with the brazen gall of the eternally irreverent. She looks dangerous—treacherous. It suits her.

I am momentarily gratified to find Elena’s posture as rigid as my own in the seat beside me—eyes flickering between us before returning to the poorly hidden phone beneath the desktop—but it flees just as quickly when I recognize its implication. Who else would she text in these circumstances?

For all my undead life, Damon has been my personal demon. His name has been almost comically appropriate for the way he has shadowed my life, storming through with all the tact and subtlety of an Infernal hurricane—sowing discord into every thread, and tearing it apart at the seams.

But if Damon is the nightmare itself, Nadia is the weaver of them. She makes my brother seem positively kind by comparison. Where Damon had merely playacted my fears, making them reality in the most gruesome of ways, he had given me a focus for my hatred—himself.

He has become the blackened mirror to my recollection, the foil to my own past deeds, and its warped illustration has always cast its brightest light on me. In a sense, he had sacrificed himself for my misery. His own guilt was a small price to pay.

Nadia, however...

She too provides a mirror, but in hers stands only one subject. The demon’s face it reflects is my own.

I hate her for this. More than I ever thought possible. More than my father in the hour of his death; more than Katherine when I realized her duplicity. More even than my brother for all the innocent lives he’s taken just to cause me pain.

I hate her for holding up the harsh light of reality above my own forgotten memories, for holding me captive in the mirror’s sight while shadows danced across my face and blood dripped from my lips. I hate her for showing me the truth. I hate her most of all for forcing me to face it.

It’s not a sin I’ll soon forget.

The fifth period lunch bell hardly registers through my focused mind, and it is not until Elena’s small hand brushes my shoulder that the world outside begins to brighten the darkened hallway of my thoughts.

“Stefan?” she prompts. “Are you coming?”
My eyes remain glued to Nadia’s smirk as the outside world retakes shape and sound to my buzzing senses.

“In a minute,” I whisper in response. In the corner of my eye, Elena glances hesitantly between us, biting her lip nervously, but seems to recognize the inevitability of the coming exchange. Sighing, she hikes her bag on her right shoulder and leaves us to it.

Nadia watches me with flat grey eyes of stone—empty and cold—as I turn back to her. Barely the hint of a smirk emerges beneath the onslaught of my blazing hatred. She remains unmoved.

“What are you doing here, Nadia?” I demand.

Her lips twitch with amusement as she perches casually on the desk’s edge. The mug sat on the polished wood behind her reads, “Ready to Write” and scrapes softly with the sounds of porcelain and plastic as her hip knocks against it. She gives it a passing glance as her fingers toy idly with the contents. Her thumb rubs softly across the worn pink of an eraser as she speaks.

“Well, I was bored and I found myself wondering, ‘What can I do to annoy Stefan today? Oh, I know. I’ll behave like a productive member of society and show up for work!’” she exclaims with mocking enthusiasm.

“The question you should be asking is, ‘Why the hell am I here?’ Nearly mummifying the ICU not enough for you, Stef? Are ignorant teenagers more your style?”

“Did Damon put you up to this?” I demand, my brow furrowing with steadily building irritation.

“No, seriously, the two of you are like gnats. Why don’t you both back the hell off? I’ve got this under control.”

“Really?” she asks, her own brows drawing inward with the pursing of facetious lips. “So...you can’t hear them then?”

She drops the false confusion in the same moment her boots flatten along the tiled floor. A familiar and loathsome phenomenon overtakes me as her blue-grey eyes spear me with a quelling look. Straightening but never moving from her position, she seems to grow taller in my eyes.

“You can’t hear their heart beats pounding away in your ears?” she hisses, her words the only movement in the silent room. “Teeth aren’t aching at the mere thought of all that warm, rich blood just pulsing beneath the surface?”

Her words wrap around me—whispering, cajoling—and dark serpentine veins slither out to greet them; blood boils in my veins, in my eyes, and the heat of my desire sparks and crackles across my skin. The images—the memories—she conjures are all too real and they surge within me, fill my mind, and leak out through the points of my fangs. No matter how I try to shut them out, they seep through the cracks of my will power like oil—viscous and black. Consuming.

“Your skin’s not burning to feel it pour over your chin, your throat?” she taunts, and the voices breathe with the phantom sensation. I can almost taste it. “To see it dripping from your hands?”

“SHUT UP!” I scream, hands pressing to my temples. The whispers still echo between them. I can’t escape them.

She only chuckles with sinister mirth, her amusement egging me on as much as her words, and says, “You’re telling me you don’t want a little taste?”

I growl—equal parts frustration and desperation—and the world gives way to a vicious haze of
anger as the dark force of my rage propels me forward in a burst of reckless speed and gnashing teeth, and I hurdle toward her. I never make it.

Only empty air and a whisper of fabric meets my scrabbling reach before my throat ignites with a flaming sword of pain that rakes scalding claws down sensitive flesh and tears twin wounds beneath my jaw. My back slams against linoleum tile, sending another excruciating jolt through my body on impact.

Flying to my neck, my trembling fingers find lead and rubber protrusions at the ends of the burning wood which lights and blazes like kindling in an immolating fire. Thick, hot blood sprays and pours from the wounds in gushing bursts as my mouth and lungs gurgle and bubble with liquid life, power and energy fleeing from my body with every choking gasp.

I rip the wooden daggers from my throat—blood and pencils scattering with arterial projection across the floor—and squeeze my eyes and teeth against the pain while skin cells bite like fire ants as they stitch themselves together.

“Howm,” I hear a moment before my eyes alight again on that cold steely gaze. They twinkle with malice and brighten with a twitch of her lips in amusement. “That looks painful,” she taunts. “Still sure you’re not hungry?”

Her words seem to summon that very feeling, the ravenous desire licking up the cracked flesh of my ashen throat, mouth filling with salivating thirst as my fangs descend, and I am suddenly undeniably aware of the need they recall.

She nods once, watching closely as the hunger gnashes angry teeth in my eyes, before turning her back. “Go home, Stefan,” she warns with paradoxical nonchalance, already so certain of my answer. “Before I do something you’ll really regret.”

Only the creak of an empty doorway follows me.

**Damon**

In his desperate flight toward the basement fridge, Stefan is entirely oblivious to the brush of my boots across the dusty stone floor. Apparently, even a week’s worth of human blood is insufficient to break my brother from a century’s learned negligence of proper vampire behavior. Typically, this sort of thing would piss me right the fuck off. I mean, is it really that difficult to use his ears every now and again?

Still, leaning casually in the shadows of the open basement doorway as I observe his crazed and frantic gluttony while he twists the bag between shaking hands and hungry, bleeding eyes, I am grateful for it. I wait until the euphoria of the feed takes hold of him, throwing his head back in macabre bliss, before I speak.

“How was school?” I ask, startling him from his momentary blood haze. He flinches, but recovers quickly. His tense stance shifts from surprise to undisguised annoyance with impressive speed.

“How funny thing,” he muses, lips curling downward in a telling grimace. “Nadia came to visit. Odd, I thought she’d given up the teaching profession.” He speaks with a mocking tone and an arrogant expression that somehow manage to fuel my anger to still greater heights.

In the hundred and forty-five years we’ve spent together in our undead existence, there have been
dozens of times I have wished to rip my brother’s heart from his chest. But, hearing her name spoken so casually—so dismissively—with what I now know, I don’t think I’ve ever come so close to doing it.

“You’ve been wandering around town like a strung out heroin addict,” I bark, body tense and tightly wound in barely restrained violence. “Had to do something to keep you in check.”

“So you send your little spy to stake me in the neck with a handful of pencils?!”

Though my muscles refuse to relax their tension, I can’t help the surprised grin that image inspires. “She staked you?” I repeat, unabashedly pleased by the words. “Give that girl a gold star when she gets home. Mm.” My mind is already conjuring up a dozen possible scenarios, each as amusing as the last.

He has no idea how lucky he is to be my brother. Anyone else would be staring at their unraveled intestines in a pool of their own blood and bile right about now, so if the most I could do for her was grant her a little non-fatal payback, what right had I to deny her?

Besides, she really is the only one I can trust to do this. She’s proven her undeserved loyalty time and again, but to set aside her own need for vengeance in favor of my friendship? There are no words to describe the weight of that sacrifice. This is the least I can do for her. I only wish it were enough.

“You know, don’t you?” Stefan murmurs. The words are more statement than question, but I can hear the surprise and perhaps the slightest remnant of guilt in them.

“I know,” I confirm, my eyes cold and unforgiving. The shadows of half-forgotten remorse mean less than nothing, and he’ll get nothing more than this from me for them.

“Surprised you haven’t let her kill me yet.” The words seem distant—unconcerned—but there’s a flicker of fear in his dark eyes that betrays his weakness. It makes me cruel.

My own eyes stare sharp and unwavering through shifting forest green, pinning him to the floor, when I assure him, “Oh, I still might.”

He stares at me with surprising calm and a sad understanding as he watches my thoughts rage in my eyes. He only manages this a moment, however, before his eyes are drawn inexorably to the liquid nirvana bagged and hoarded in the open freezer. I can only imagine the current of his own mind. Blood, blood, blood, blood, like the slow but steady beat of his inhuman heart—the eternal metronome counting the excruciating seconds between each and every fix. He’s worse than a newborn like this. He’s kidding himself if he thinks he can control it.

“So...when were you gonna share?” I ask, forearms crossing as I give the fridge a pointed look.

“Go ahead,” he offers. “Help yourself.” His hand follows my line of sight in a twitchy gesture that fails miserably in its attempt at nonchalance.

“No no no. I’m talking about the fact that you’re a closet blood junkie.”

“So, I’m drinking blood again,” he shrugs verbally. “You’re the one that shoved it on me. What’s your problem? I have it under control.” Between his defensive posture and the jittery distraction of his glances, he’s really the text book image of a strung out junkie. I’m half surprised he hasn’t lunged at me yet for daring to step between him and the object of his addiction.

It’s obvious to me, him, and the fucking wall that his words are forced and faker than a double D
cup in Beverly Hills, but I can hear that familiar lilt in his voice that says he’ll stick to that story till his fangs run away with him and he turns this town into a blood-fest that could make the Texas Chainsaw Massacre look like a picnic in fairyland. Still, I can’t help trying to talk him out of it.

“Under control??” I repeat, pissed and beyond frustrated at his obstinate idiocy. “You robbed the hospital. You attacked a patient!”

“So, what’s your point?”

Ladies and Gentleman, allow me to present my brother: The King of Denial.

Through gritted teeth and a clenched jaw, I paste a smile to my face and shrug. This is how forced nonchalance should look. I have it down to an art by now. “Fine, whatever man. Drink up. Just remember we’re trying to keep a low profile. Why don’t you just walk up to Sheriff Forbes, ask her to tap a vein?”

“Have my actions negatively impacted you?” he taunts. “Ooh. I can’t imagine what that must feel like.”

I’m so enraged by his moronic attitude about this that I can’t even muster up the energy to roll my eyes at his unsubtle jab. Irritated and out of ideas, I try the one tactic that has any hope at all of success.

“Yeah,” I smirk with cold eyes, “what’s Elena think about the new...you?”

“Nothing’s changed,” he responds immediately. “I’m still the same person.” He wears Saint Stefan’s face like a marble mask—slick and smooth. Nothing sticks, no light escapes but for the hollows of his eyes where the eerie calm of ‘the ripper’ seeps through.

“Clearly.”

Therein lies Stefan’s perpetual struggle. He really hit the nail on the head with that one. See, regardless of the guilt trip he gives himself after each and every so-called slip, the truth is that Stefan doesn’t recognize this hunger in him for what it is: a natural and permanent facet of his personality. He is a vampire. He’s not a human with special abilities and a weird diet, and pretending so does far more harm than good. I understand how tempting it is to dissociate oneself from the darkness—the Ripper in his case—but that’s not even half the story. The Ripper isn’t a separate entity, he’s a part of who Stefan is. There’s no escaping that.

Try telling that to Elena though. From all the angry texts she’s sent me today, you’d think Stefan was the injured party in all this. How dare I ask the only other person in town with a snowball’s chance of success to help stop her strung-out boyfriend from diving teeth first into her friend’s vital arteries? My bad.

She’s worse than he is about this shit. She wants so badly to believe that the Stefan she met first—that she apparently fell for, though God knows why—is the “real Stefan”, that she’s convinced herself every ‘out of character’ action and word is due to some alter-ego. That the blood is eating away like cancer at his true self. But, here’s the thing, ‘Saint Stefan’ that she thinks she knows so well isn’t ‘real Stefan’ either. That guy died from a bullet in the gut back in 1864 and he hasn’t returned since. This one is a vampire, and he’s going to drink blood, and he’s going to kill people. It’s the natural order of things.

The sooner they both realize that, the better for all of us.

“Elena doesn’t need to know anything yet,” Stefan insists, but that too calm lull of his voice is all
the assurance I need that I was right to tell her.

I sigh, exhausted by this circular argument, but unwilling to abandon reason just yet. “You’ve been off the human stuff for years, Stefan. If you’re having trouble controlling an—

He’s already shaking his head in denial before I’ve finished the sentence. “I’m not having any trouble.”

“Who do you think you’re talking to?!” I snap. “I know what it’s like. That Jekyl and Hyde feeling. There’s that switch, sometimes it goes off and you snap. Right now is not a good time for me to be worried about you snapping.”

His palms press together as he leans into me, as arrogant as ever and twice as annoying. “I know that it pains you to see this....

I barely resist the urge to roll my eyes as my lips twist in a wry smile. “Mm.”

“but I’m fine. Ok? I’m fine. So please, do me a favor and back off.”

With that he spins on his heel and stalks away. Damn it.

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Nadezhda

I crouch in the shadows of my own darkness, heels burrowed deep in drifting sand, as the glass walls of living air trap me beneath the crushing weight of the ocean—beneath the weight of that other world. I am surrounded on all sides by murky, ominous shadows of the sea’s other creatures. Formless and black, they wait in the oppressive silence for my acknowledgement—for the touch of immortality my gift provides—so that they too can peek behind the panes of glass to haunt the other side.

It’s a phenomenon to which I have grown accustomed over the centuries—from the moment that first drop of human blood entered my veins—but never once in the first 750 years of my undead life had I ever been so terrified to face one.

I can’t say I’m exactly surprised by their sudden presence—I have no doubt the constant preoccupation of my recent thoughts has called them here—but the reason for their easy obedience is hardly reassuring.

Summoning a spirit I have known in life is as easy as a fleeting thought and a puff of air on the breeze, the ghostly answer as recognizable as a firefly’s light in the blackness of the night sky. It’s the banishing of them I find so difficult. I cannot gather the will to say goodbye.

Grief gores my heart with fear and guilt, the landscape of the living world turns grey and dim—the edges frayed and worn with the long cast shadow of eternity—as the veil closes in around me, and still I cannot dispel them.

“Georgia? You’re sure?” I ask, stubbornly ignoring the shrouded figure in the periphery. I would turn my back to it if I didn’t equally fear its companion teasing hauntingly in my other eye.

“That’s all I could dig up. It’s like she just vanished into thin air. Like—

“—magic,” I finish for him, grimacing as he confirms what I already knew. “Yeah. That’s all
you’ve got? What about Isobel? Did you find her?”

“That I can help you with,” Slater responds with boyish excitement. “I tracked the phone history on that number you gave me. Turns out your hit man was receiving calls almost daily from the same number.”

“Isobel,” I say, grey lines drifting away with the new direction of my thoughts. “Could you track it?”

“No dice. It’s untraceable, but I can tell you that she made a call around midnight last night to a new number.”

“Could you track the recipient?” I ask, an odd mix of resignation and tentative hope in my voice.

The sigh that prefaces his next statement does nothing for the latter. “You’re not gonna like it, but...it’s an inn owned by a Ms. Flowers...”

“In Mystic Falls.” Of course it is. Why would anything ever go our way?

My eyes flicker nervously about the room—mind cautiously still—as I search for the fading forms of my recent companions. Noting their distance and the brightening crispness of the air about me, I breathe a sigh of relief. Thank Hades for small favors.

The phone beeps once in my ear as my thumb presses absentmindedly on the button to end the call, and my swirling thoughts begin to take shape.

So Isobel has a minion here. Or, more accurately, Katarina does. Well, I suppose that’s not much of a surprise. We already knew about John. Trouble is, I know for a fact that Uncle John is staying with the Gilbert clan.

No, the only reason John—if it even is John—would be in need of a rentable living space is if he required privacy for something. Secret meetings, perhaps? Privacy to host conversation away from prying eyes? Or maybe it isn’t his room at all. Who knows? He may not even be aware of its inhabitant. But then, the question remains, whose room is it?

Which means that, no matter how you slice it, John has a mystery ally.

As always, Katherine is ten steps ahead. Damn it! Just once, just once, I wish things didn’t always have to fall to shit around me. That I didn’t have to be constantly waiting on the edge of my seat for the other shoe to drop. But, I suppose, when you’ve lived a life as long and...colorful as mine, the world is bound to go to hell once or twice.

BANG!!

The heavy basement door echoes with a petulant slam. Even through multiple stories and solid stone walls, I hear Stefan’s barely restrained tantrum as he storms upstairs. It’s the familiar clink of glass and the slosh of pouring liquid, however, that brings the wry smile to my face.

Damon’s piercing eyes find me the moment I enter the parlor, pinning me in place with an unspoken question. My lips twist unhappily, head shaking in answer, as I recall the disappointment of that phone call. For all Slater’s digging, he only managed to discover more questions. And, I think, eyes flicking to the corner of ceiling barring Stefan from view, now is hardly the time to pose them.

Instead, I flash to Damon’s side of the room, settling myself against the armrest and holding my
hand aloft in expectation. He rolls his eyes at my antics, but complies regardless. In less than two seconds, I have a tumbler of cloying red liquid in my grasp and a pleasant hum in the back of my throat. He joins me a moment later with one of his own, along with the remaining bottle of decent bourbon for good measure.

It joins several empty ones atop the newly acquired coffee table and the scattered remains of last night’s binge and purge. I doubt there’s a single drop of vodka left in the house.

Damon tracks the flick of my eyes as they gesture toward his sulking brother. “Made any progress there?” I ask, voice pitched low enough to slip beneath the weight of air and architecture covering Stefan’s inattentive ears.

“He has dance rehearsal in an hour,” he whispers unhappily, his frown only softening for smooth glass and bourbon as he takes a generous sip.

I stare at him in shock, mouth agape in unconcealed horror. “Wait a minute...You mean to tell me he’s still doing that?” I demand. Surely he’s not that stupid. “Does Elena know?”

Damon purses his lips at my tone, taking another gulp of bourbon while he calms himself enough to answer.

“She suggested it,” he finally says, tone harsh and clipped in obvious frustration. “Said she doesn’t want him to ‘think she’s lost faith in him’,” he quotes in a mocking tone, vocal pitch rising comically though neither of us smiles. He drains the glass in a single swallow, and pours himself another.

I watch him for a moment—eyelids flickering gratefully at the familiar burn, shoulders tight with the predator’s vicious anger—and I recognize the signs. This is about more than Stefan’s bloodlust or his increasingly vexing new attitude.

“Even after last night?”

It’s an interesting reaction I observe at these words. They recall for him a memory—a happy one if his wistful smile and last night’s outright giddiness are anything to go by—but still there remains that twinge of doubt, of fear and impotent rage, that marks his brother’s latest devolution into insanity and bloodlust. He doesn’t need to speak the words for me to hear them. I recognize his thoughts in every shift and jerk of his body, every grimace and smile on his face, in the stormy glacial wind of his eyes. Most of all though, I feel it in my blood. I know him as myself. As he knows me.

“Especially after last night,” he retorts, breaking me from my reverie. My brow furrows in confusion as he thrusts his cell phone into my palm.

The screen displays at least an hour’s worth of text messages between them, but it’s the last that catches my eye—that sends a jolt of panic, anger, and sympathy all at once through my racing bloodstream.

[From “Elena”: If you can’t trust him, then trust me. Please, Damon. We have to try. He deserves that much.]

Oh, god fucking damn it. She had to use the P word. Shit.

“Does she not realize what a spectacularly bad idea that is? Haven’t you told her?” I know last night’s confessions surge as violent and brutal in the dark red swirl of his thoughts as they do in
mine. I can very nearly see it in his eyes. He must know this is not the time to succumb to those Bambi eyes of hers.

“No!” he snaps immediately, dashing all my hopes to the ground in a single syllable. “And I’m not going to, ok? Not until I have to.”

Gods! Does he hear himself right now?

“And when will that be?” I bite back waspishly. “When he finally snaps and rips her head from her shoulders?!?”

“That’s never going to happen.” The meaning and intensity with which he says this make it obvious he’s not espousing confidence in Stefan, but rather lethal determination in himself. And, it’s not that I doubt his commitment or even his vicious efficiency when it comes to defending his loved ones, but even he is not infallible.

“Damon...you may not always be there to stop him,” I murmur. Gentle and soft, my sympathy and understanding reaches out to soothe his boiling rage.

He shakes it off. He prefers this anger. It’s certainly easier than the alternative.

“Watch me,” he snarls, a threatened wolf with bared teeth and hard eyes locked fierce and ruthless on his enemy. The glass shakes and screams in protest at his tightening grip.

I rest my hand along his arm, catching his blazing gaze with my own dusky one and plucking the straining tumbler from his flexing fist. “Even you have to sleep sometime.”

The tempest still rages in his eyes, but his muscles loosen slightly beneath my palm. “Well,” he says with only a hint of his usual humor, “that’s what I have you for, isn’t it?”

He offers me the ghost of a grateful smile, but I find that it’s enough.

“In more ways than one,” I assure him, eyes serious even as my own lips curl in answer.

Unfortunately, our momentary calm only lasts a moment before the legitimate urgency of my previous concerns invades it. His smile drops in time with mine. “Besides, what happens when some bigger, meaner threat comes to town? Like Katherine? Or Klaus?”

His jaw tightens again, and I can see my words challenge his spoken confidence as they wrestle with hidden doubts, but he says nothing.

Sigh. Looks like I’m back on guard duty.

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**John**

I’m still not certain it’s the best idea to come here. Despite what I may have implied earlier, I really am no more anxious for this vampire’s company than he is mine. Less, probably. And honestly, my reasons for doing so are more than reckless in their own right. If Katherine found out, or even Lucy for that matter, I—

But I won’t go there. Can’t go there. Fear is a useless emotion that only stops one from doing what is necessary. The risk may be great, but the gain is well worth it. For myself and Isobel both. If I
can free our daughter from a life with vampires, it may mean absolution for us both. No matter what happens afterward.

We had a golden opportunity with those tomb vampires. One in which the creature who might have been our most dangerous enemy became our most powerful ally. One which would have secured our plan until the moment of its completion. No one—not even Katherine herself—would have seen it coming.

It’s a rare day indeed I find myself bemoaning the deaths of more than 2 dozen vampires for the sake of a few.

According to Henry, the vampire thief I need is perhaps the only one of them left alive. This is either a stroke of incredible luck, or the product of a plot so intricately designed it’s more likely to see me bleeding out on the boarding house floor missing a ring finger and certain vital arteries. It’s Gilbert tenacity and family loyalty that have driven me to this door, but I’m not without my doubts.

Still, it’ll be a cold day in Hell when a Gilbert man runs from a blood-sucker. No matter what the odds.

Drawing my well-worn mask of brash confidence and hidden knowledge about me, I climb the steps of the Salvatore residence, not bothering to knock as I throw open the heavy wooden door to greet my enemy. He’s pacing the front hall, drink in hand, as the sunlight spills into the darkened foyer.

“Hey, partner,” I announce with a cheerful grin. The murderous glare he shoots me is almost enough to weaken my nerve. I smirk instead.

“What do you want?” he demands, making no effort to disguise his displeasure. I appreciate that. I’m not stupid, nor am I blind. I know how badly he wants to kill me. How happily he would tear into my throat—vervain or no—and watch me choke and gag at the taste of my own blood as it escaped me. I know too how much my unflinching gall in light of that threat enrages him.

He wants me to be terrified, to cower and blubber before him as I spill each and every one of my secrets. This would put him at ease. He’d likely be far less hostile toward me, but it wouldn’t make him less likely to kill me.

On the contrary, though he may not realize it himself, it’s this attitude and my tight-lipped stance atop illusory omniscience that will keep me safe. As long as he believes I hold the key to some unlocked mystery he can’t find elsewhere, I am more valuable alive than dead.

“You haven’t returned any of my calls,” I taunt, eyeing him warily as he turns his back to me and saunters deeper into the cavernous space. There’s a long wooden bench behind the couch in the parlor, the polished surface lined with elegant crystal decanters all but one filled with varying amounts of rich amber. None of these hold more than 3 finger widths of liquid, though it seems a fairly recent development if the scattered bottles and empty tumblers that litter every surface of the grandiose room are any indication.

However, this last, with its rich crimson contents which shine in stark red streaks against the back drop of brown and gold, bears a line high enough to paint pale and helpless flesh in the vibrant hue of its own demise. I can only hope he’d robbed a blood bank.

The clink of glass on glass, and the sudden flash of sunlight through decorative crystal tears my eyes from it, and they dart as though magnetized to Damon’s bright blue. “Most people take that as a hint,” he sneers, but if he had noticed my preoccupation he doesn’t acknowledge it.
“Where do we start looking for vampires?” I taunt, the tone jeering and cavalier as I survey the space with a critical eye. It occurs to me I am unconsciously mimicking the witch’s tactic, but it seems to have the desired effect nonetheless.

“Why the act, John?” Damon snaps with a tight smile. “I mean, you obviously don’t care about catching vampires. You’re here talking to me.”

“Actually, I care very much.” My gaze drifts from him again as I brush past him, movement and attitude as calculated as they appear casual. As I round the corner at the end of the hall, however, the hidden side of the parlor finally comes into view, and I see something that alarms me just as it confirms my darkest suspicions.

Several empty liquor bottles and glistening high ball glasses cover the coffee table, and while I am unsurprised to mark more than bourbon and vodka among their number, there are more here than there should be. Dark red drops cling in the intricate crevices of hand shaped glass, and my stomach turns. I know from Henry of the Salvatore’s disparate eating habits, and Damon has hardly made any secret of his views on the subject, so one glass can only be expected. But there are two.

“If what you say about the tomb vampires is true, I can only conclude that the culprit is one of your housemates,” I say lightly, and though my back is turned to him I feel him freeze behind me. It’s all the answer I need.

“Sheriff Forbes mentioned a sister?” I prompt, turning to face his tense expression with an arched brow. “You don’t have a sister, Damon.”

In the moment of thick silence that hangs between us in the wake of this statement, I realize I’m not likely to learn a thing from his own lips on the subject. Good thing it’s not this question I need answered. Still...I hesitate briefly as I feel the rush of this reckless impulse—the solid weight of my own life as I take it boldly in desperate hands—as my lips frame the next one.

But it needs to be asked. “Maybe...she also mentioned a woman—Pearl—that was new in town. Does that name ring a bell?”

I watch him closely as the name leaves my tongue, and the spark in his eye tells me more than his words ever could. There is no mistaking it. He recognizes that name. He knows her, but he’s not telling.

He studies me with narrowed eyes, the glacial blue driving into mine with shrewd precision. A smirk pulls at the corner of his mouth as he seems to come to a decision. “I’m not playing anymore,” he declares, turning his back as he waves me toward the open doorway. “Get out.”

“I beg your pardon?” I ask, genuinely shocked. I knew it would take more than a few carefully chosen words to secure his help, but I thought my threats had had some impact. He can’t be serious.

“You know, I only entertained this little black mail scheme of yours because I thought that you and Isobel could lead me to Katherine. But now I know, you have no idea where Katherine is because, if you did, you’d know that Katherine and Pearl were best friends. See? You don’t know everything, do ya John?” he challenges, calling my bluff.

My control is slipping rapidly, and all at once real fear pulses in my bloodstream. “I’ll tell the entire council what you are,” I warn, clinging desperately to that arrogance even as it falls from my weakening grip.
“Go for it,” he shrugs, and the malicious promise of his smile has nothing on the cold steel in his eyes. Until this moment, I don’t think I truly saw this vampire for what he was—Dangerous. “I’ll kill every last one of them. Then I’ll sever your hand, pull your ring off, and I’ll kill you too. Do you understand that?”

My heart doesn’t start again until my feet hit the pavement.

Elena

“Honor your partner,” Mrs. Lockwood instructs, her voice bouncing off tile and plastic as it carries above our heads in the nearly empty cafeteria. She circles the six of us, heels clacking in time with the clichéd waltz sounding through stereo speakers, as we awkwardly obey.

My curtsy is wobbly and not a little embarrassing in the attempt, but Stefan’s bow is anything but and he eases into the dance with a confidence I envy. Although, I have to admit, I admire it too.

He moves with grace and charm—some old world elegance—that betrays his true age even as it lends to every step a youthful exuberance, and a sparkle of mirth to his dancing eyes. Forest green shines with a warmth and affection suddenly brighter than I have ever seen them, free from the shroud of regret and memories that have always haunted them.

I’d never noticed the weight of those shadows until they were suddenly gone. The green is clear and bright as they burn into me. But even as I am warmed by this new light, I can’t help the sudden chill at the reason.

It’s impossible looking up into his smiling face to reconcile this gentle, loving boy with the fangs and blood I know lie beneath the surface. Even seeing it with my own eyes has done little to convince me in this. I simply cannot imagine him a monster. No matter what stories I hear to the contrary.

Still, Damon’s warning echoes in my skull, knocking every pleasant thought those dancing eyes inspire with a ricochet of guilt and anger that pounds within my heart. I can hardly meet his gaze without cringing beneath the assault of them, and I know he’s bound to notice. If he hasn’t already.

“Let’s focus. Right hand around,” Mrs. Lockwood calls, prompting the first segment of the dance. Six palms rise to hover an inch from their partners, and we circle each other.

“Flirt with your eyes,” she chants, and a playful smile quirks my lips as Stefan shoots me a teasingly “smoldering” glance with a grin of his own. Hope bubbles like happiness in my lungs and I barely restrain the urge to laugh. “Left hand around.”

I should be wary of this newfound energy, his mood so different today than the last I saw him—than I’ve ever seen him before Frederick and the tomb vampires. Before the rescue mission that ended in blood, fear, and a face that still haunts my nightmares.

But his eyes are kind and happy, clear in a way I’ve never seen them, and I can’t quite bring myself to believe it. I can’t accept that this might be the price of his happiness. More than that, I won’t treat him like a criminal for what I did to him. It’s not his fault, and I know that despite everything he may have done, he’s still a good man. I know how badly he wants to win this fight, and I won’t give up on him. If I—we, really—can’t believe in him, how can we expect Stefan to?

So, with a mental sigh, I release the mounting tension of my churning thoughts and surrender to the
blissful hope his eyes invoke, and a genuine smile touches my lips. I see it reflected back at me in his eyes.

“This is ridiculous,” I joke, rolling my eyes. And it is ridiculous. This whole dance is so archaic and foreign that it feels entirely absurd to be performed by a handful of 21st century teenagers in a high school cafeteria and a decade old stereo on a Wednesday afternoon. That’s not even accounting for the vampire in the room.

“Both hands!” All twelve fly up in surrender and we circle again.

A mischievous glint hovers in Stefan’s normally sober eyes, and he teases, “You’re only saying that because you don’t know how to do it.”

“Sorry only one of us was around when the dance was invented,” I retort with a smirk of my own, thoroughly enjoying the all too rare banter between us. It’s been too long since we’ve been this relaxed with each other, and I suspect it’s been longer still since Stefan smiled this easily. I admit to myself I don’t want to see it fade.

“Oh!” he cries in mock hurt, and before my feet can register the movement, he grasps my hands in his and pulls me forward, dipping me low in a playful move reminiscent of that last school dance—the last time we danced together in this building in fact.

As he sweeps me back into his embrace—both of us giggling like the love-struck idiots we’ve always been—some shifting movement beyond Stefan’s shoulder snags at the corner of my eye. It’s gone as quickly as it came, but the shock and urgency sparked by its presence remains.

“Oh no, no, no,” Mrs. Lockwood chants, prying us apart with a hand on our embracing shoulders. “There’s no touching during this part. It’s about the simple intimacy of the near touch.” She says it with such wistful romance in her tone, that I immediately understand her appointment as dance teacher even as my mind drifts elsewhere.

My brows pinch together as my eyes scan the empty air for that mysterious form. In the hall, I catch a glimpse. Nadia stares with hellfire in her eyes at Stefan’s back, and even from this distance I can see the prowling blackness of grief and vengeance shifting through it. They dart to mine, and in our brief connection I see her pain. I saw the echo of it last night in another’s. This was what he meant.

Black/blue hair and a wicked smile are all she leaves me with as she blurs away, but they are all I need to send reality crashing down around me. To crush the fragile, painted glass of my comfortable bubble beneath its weight. I stiffen in his arms.

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**Caroline**

Caroline Forbes: Miss Mystic Falls, 2009. I can see it now. The sash, the crown, mom smiling proudly...well, maybe not that last one. This kind of thing never meant much to my mother when she was my age, and she’s given me no reason to think that’s changed much in the meantime.

God, the whole thing must seem so trivial to her. Just another of vapid Caroline’s inexplicably shallow interests that she has no respect for. And maybe she has a point. I certainly can’t explain to Bonnie, or even Elena these days, why I’m getting so worked up over a beauty pageant. Why just the thought of having that sash and title draped over my shoulder fills me with such pride and
accomplishment.

How could they, really? How could Elena, the girl who has never known a day in her life that she wasn’t the favorite? Bonnie, whose popularity was only ever a by-product of her friendships? Who never cared what people thought of her?

How could I possibly expect after all these years learning better that my mother, the Sherriff, could place a stupid little high school pageant over her work? Her work which has always been the most important thing in her life. Always. Certainly, more important than my silly interests.

No, they’d never understand how much it would mean to me to officially—historically, even if only this one time—be everyone’s first choice. The whole town’s. To have my name recorded permanently beside that title for generations to see. Indisputable. Just once. To just this once know that I was good enough, worked hard enough, was the best. I don’t think I’ve ever wanted anything more in my life.

I’ve been dreaming about this since I was seven years old in my puffy pink dress and my little plastic birthday tiara, and Aunt Helen told me I was another Miss Mystic to be. To always remember that. It’s what I’ve been working toward all year, and it’s so close to happening.

“The Fell cousins don’t have a shot. And Amber Bradley is only on the court so it looks like the pageant isn’t Founding Families only, which of course it is,” I recount, as Bonnie listens with a vague smile. “So that leaves Elena. She totally has the sympathy vote since her parents died. How can I compete with that?” I can’t stand it if she wins again. I just can’t. Though, I guess, I should be used to it by now.

Bonnie’s steps come to a grinding halt at this, and I spin back to face her. She shoots me a disapproving frown. “Very nice. Very sensitive.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” I apologize immediately, feeling a sudden a stab of guilt at her words. Jesus, Caroline. Selfish much? “This must sound really unimportant in light of...everything.”

“It’s ok. I get it,” she reassures me, a smile lighting up her face. “You wanna win.”

“Well, my grandmother was Miss Mystic,” I explain, encouraged by her easy forgiveness. “And both of my aunts. My mom’s the only one who didn’t get the gene, and I want this. And I actually deserve this.” It’s the one thing I know I should win. I am Miss Mystic Falls...I just hope the judges agree with me.

“Bonnie, hey!” we hear to the right. Elena and Stefan approach us with matching expressions of confusion and wariness. Elena approaches Bonnie with the caution of a lion tamer, as though afraid at any moment she will strike. It seems absurd given the long-standing friendship between them, but glancing now at Bonnie’s face I think I understand her concern. She looks less than pleased by their presence. In fact, she looks pissed.

“Hey, how are ya?” Stefan greets, looking unconcerned by the anger burning in her hazel eyes. I can’t tell if it’s arrogance or ignorance, but there’s something there I don’t like.

“I begged Bonnie to fill in for Matt,” I explain with my typical breezy tone. No sense raising the alarm until I know the score, is there? “He had to work today.”

“Bonnie, do you have a minute?” Elena asks carefully, those big brown Disney eyes of hers brimming with sincerity and hurt. I know from years of experience that almost no one can say no to those eyes.
Mine turn to Bonnie though, struggling to maintain my impassive expression when she says, “We only have thirty minutes for rehearsal.” What exactly am I missing here? And why am I always the last to know?

“It’ll only take a minute. Please?”

Like a champion, Bonnie resists those eyes for a solid 30 seconds before she inevitably gives in. Puts the rest of us to shame, really. I won’t pretend to myself that I’m not unbearably curious about the contents of that conversation, but I suppose I’ll have to settle for the alternative: Grilling the boyfriend. Lord knows, he’s got some explaining of his own to do.

“So, guess Elena managed to talk you into this after all. Wasn’t sure you’d make it,” the words may be casual, but I leak just enough sass in my tone to show I mean business and my expression brooks no argument. It’s my tried and true method of gossip extraction. Elena has her ways, I have mine.

“What do you mean?” he asks dumbly, but I’m not buying it.

“Well, come on, Stefan,” I say, my eyebrow rising with the challenge in my voice. “You haven’t been in school for almost two weeks and from the way Elena talks about it she hasn’t seen much of you either. Though she wouldn’t tell me why...” My lips purse in mock thoughtfulness as I eye him sharply. He can deny it all he likes, but there’s a story here and I aim to find it.

“I’ve been a little preoccupied, yeah. But I’m back now. Nothing to worry about,” he says again in that too casual tone, attempting to dismiss my unspoken accusations with transparent deflection. I almost groan out loud at the sight. He may not realize it yet, but I am doing him a favor. He needs my advice if he thinks this is acceptable behavior for a boyfriend.

This is Stefan, the nice guy, and he’s doing it all wrong.

“For two weeks?” I prompt, growing more frustrated by the minute. “What, were you hiding out in a shack in the middle of the woods skinning rabbits? What takes two weeks?”

I can see him growing irritated with me, but, as usual, I am indifferent to his agitation. He doesn’t have the right to be annoyed with me. I’m just looking out for my friend, and it’s a legitimate question anyway.

That’s when something strange happens. Strange and nightmarishly familiar.

A shadow—an uncanny darkness—slithers through the brightness of his sharpened eyes, and despite the usual warmth of those forest green irises, a shiver of dread runs through me.

It’s Damon looking out.

Just as with his brother, my silence is cruelly satisfying to him and a smirk that is all sharp teeth and dark promises settles across his suddenly unrecognizable features.

“What?”

Elena’s voice breaks the tension and I blink, a little dazedly, back at her. Stefan shoots me another smile as he wraps his arm about her shoulders and leads her away, suddenly looking every inch the kind and caring gentleman we’ve known him to be. But my stomach remains knotted and coiled like a rousing python, and I barely resist the urge to shudder.

“Do you think she’s alright with him?” I ask Bonnie as she stops at my elbow, her eyes tracking
“Their departure same as mine.”

“What? Why?” She sounds almost scared by my question, but I don’t know what to tell her. It was only a flicker really, but...what if it was more?

“Just a feeling.”

All I can see behind my eyelids are flashes of a charming smile and cold, sadistic eyes. I don’t want that for her.

“Well...I think that’s for her to decide,” Bonnie states firmly. She gestures toward the temporary dance hall as she turns away. “Come on, Care. We’re gonna be late for rehearsal.”

“Yeah...” I follow, but my eyes are still drawn to their now invisible backs as I walk. My thoughts and feelings are a swarm of confusion, unease, and most of all fear. I don’t know why, but I am suddenly afraid of Stefan Salvatore.

That thought gives me pause. Afraid? Why should I let him scare me? He doesn’t get to do that to me. Not again. Never again. Just as suddenly, my skin flushes with anger, and fear bubbles over into rage in my veins. I will not be cowed again. I won’t be that helpless little girl too scared and insecure to stand up for herself. Especially since this time it’s not just me I’ll be defending.

If they think they can just sweep in with their sexy smiles and brazen arrogance—suck us into their game, use us, abuse us, and spit us back out when they’re done—they’re wrong. These Salvatore’s have another thing coming.

Nadezhda

A shoulder leant casually against the doorframe, I openly leer at his all too handsome form. Black on black looks good on him, and I release a shrill wolf-whistle in loud appreciation.

“Damn, do you know how to work a suit!” I declare, looking him up and down while he smirks cockily at my approach. “If that doesn’t have her drooling all over you, we may need to schedule the girl for a CAT scan. Sure sign of brain damage.”

He watches me with amusement as I finish straightening his tie, the concern in his eyes only faintly present and thus tolerable for the moment.

“You’re looking rather lovely yourself, Morticia.” I can’t help it. I preen under his gaze. I’m rather proud of this outfit actually. Dusky corset dress, steam punk heels, and matching lavender eyes, I’m feeling more myself than I have in weeks.

“Really? You don’t think it’s too macabre for an afternoon affair?” I ask with mock concern, gesturing to my elbow length gloves. “Bit ghoulish perhaps?”

Easily adopting Gomez’ manner, mischief dances in his eyes. “Grisly,” he assures me with an eely grin as he takes my laced hand in his. “Downright lethal in fact.”

“Oh, mon cher;” I simper when he presses a light kiss to my bare finger tips. “You always say the sweetest things.”

He smiles a moment longer, that playful glint in his eye holding determinedly still before it fades
away beneath his not so hidden—and even less desirable—worry. I hate when he looks at me this way. I am not some delicate fucking flower, and I am not going to break.

“How are you doing?” he asks, and I barely resist the urge to growl at him. I’m fucking fine, goddammit! He levels me with an unimpressed glare, his brow rising skeptically. “And don’t give me that bullshit ‘I’m fine’. You are not fine.”

“Damon...” I sigh, fully prepared to repeat my thoughts, but he doesn’t seem inclined to drop this shit anytime soon. Why must we do this? Seriously. Why? Is it not bad enough I’m being haunted by the ghosts of my tragic past that I am too pathetic and weak to send away? Do we really need to talk about it?

“No. Look, I get that you’re pissed at Stefan,” he says, cutting me off before I’ve even begun. “You should be, but you and I both know he’s not what’s got you spiraling right now. Talk to me.”

A grey shape hovers and shifts in the air behind the floor length mirror, seeming to draw strength from the reflective gateway, as cold dead eyes bore into my hidden gaze. Damon’s shoulder is a shield, but something about this one beckons my eyes. I want so badly to look.

“It’s my fault, Damon,” I tell him, at once proud and sickened by the steadiness of my tone. “They’re dead because of me. She’s—”

“How do you figure?” he snaps, obviously frustrated by my self-pity. I stare at him in surprise, my face twisted in incredulity at those words. Is he kidding me? Obviously, this is my fault.

“If I hadn’t been so wrapped up in my ridiculous infatuation with that faithless harlot...”

“Yeah, tell me about it,” he grumbles, and I see my verbal escape route in his thoughts.

“Slater lost her in Georgia, you know?” I watch him stiffen with the confirmation of this news. “Says she’s completely off the map. Though, apparently, she has another friend in town. Not Isobel.”

“Fantastic!” he exclaims, mouth wide in a facetious grin. “Seriously, that’s exactly what we needed. Uncle John’s throwing his weight around town, threatening to expose us to the Council every five minutes, and Isobel’s hiding in the bushes while she whispers cryptic secrets in his ear, but this is definitely what we were missing. Katherine masterminding the whole thing from some invisible lair. Who knows what that bitch is up to?”

I watch him rant and rave, shoulders trembling with barely restrained rage, as I consider my next words. In a careful tone, I muse, “Well, actually, this may not be the worst thing.”

“Come again?”

“Well, think about it, Damon,” I say, meeting blue eyes gone wide with shock and skepticism. “If nothing else, it means she’s close. It means she’s about to make her first move. All we have to do is make sure we’re a couple steps ahead.”

He scoffs at this, tone clipped and bitter. “And how exactly are we supposed to manage that when we have no idea what she’s planning or even who she’s planning it with?”

“Let me worry about that for now. I may have a few ideas,” I say mysteriously, mind already drifting to the possibilities.

“Why does that not reassure me?”
“Ah, ye of little faith,” I taunt, frowning sadly. “When have you ever known my plans to be anything less than spectacularly brilliant?”

He doesn’t bother to answer this, but stares at me with unblinking eyes that seem to say, ‘Seriously?’

“Oh, point,” I concede to them. But that other time was hardly my fault. I couldn’t possibly have predicted that nightmare even if I had cared enough to try. Besides, he can’t tell me he didn’t enjoy it on some level. Who wouldn’t want to spend half a year chasing a crazed wraith about the countryside?

“Speaking of which,” I say, gaze sharp on his for any sign of even passing sanity on this issue, “you do know this whole Stefan thing is not going to resolve itself, right?”

His eyes shutter closed on that brew of emotion, expression deliberately impassive, as he turns a blank stare of feigned ignorance on my too shrewd eyes. His tone is flat as he asks, “What exactly are you suggesting?”

It’s my turn to throw him that look of irritable incredulity. Please. As though I’m going to fall for the dumb act. What world has he been living in that he thinks that will work on me? More than that though, has he been watching the same show the rest of us have? Because, the hands off approach has hardly done well for us in the past, and I really doubt it’s the appropriate solution to our present problem. Still, no one said he had to be the one to fix it.

“No. No, we are not going there,” he refuses the moment he catches my thoughts. “He’s annoying enough as it is. The last thing we need is a Dominatrix Barbie around to beat him back into sainthood.”

I roll my eyes. Lexi and Stefan’s bizarre dynamic is so not the issue right now, but I don’t see anything else working out in our favor. And letting him loose on the townsfolk seems like a seriously bad idea.

“What do you suggest then?”

“I’m working on it,” he says, aiming for mysterious and diabolical, but all I hear is a petulant toddler unhappy he isn’t getting his way.

“Uh huh,” I say doubtfully.

He purses his lips in annoyance at my tone (pouts, that is), and turns his face, thoughtful eyes gazing out into empty space. Well, as far as he knows anyway. I’m barely able to tear my own away before the shade steals my figurative heart. I feel it give a painful throb somewhere in my throat.

“What if that’s not enough for me?” Damon asks suddenly, apropos of nothing.

I meet his eyes again in dazed confusion. “What?”

“You know, whatever Katherine’s planning, one way or another it’s going to bring Klaus here,” he explains, clueing me in to the turn of his thoughts. I feel my chin rise, the ‘Oh...’ loud in my mind, as I begin to understand. “Klaus, who would like nothing more than to kill you only possibly after he sucks Elena dry.”

Still, this is hardly news. Klaus has been gunning for me and the doppelgangers for a millennium, and it’s not as though I have ever been the sort to plunge into battle without a weapon. Damon
knows this as well as I do. Besides this, even if he had been content to spend the last 80 years in blissful ignorance (which he had not, I might add), last night should have answered all his questions.

“What do you think we’ve been doing here, Damon?” I ask, voicing my disbelief. “I told you all this years ago. We’ve spent decades preparing for this even before you knew what ‘this’ was.”

“Yeah, well the difference is, now I do know,” he retorts, words swift and firm with the rapport of a gunshot within my skull. “Maybe my answer is different this time.”

I stare at him, stunned. I am quite literally at a loss for words. “Are you saying...”

His glacial eyes meet mine, determined and thoughtful at once. This is not a decision he has made lightly. He nods.

Pulling at the chain around my bare shoulders, I draw the pendant into the light it so seldom sees. The iron circle fits neatly in my palm as I brandish it between us, the arms of the kolovrat dance beneath the snake’s cyclical movement in the flickering grey of the veil. The ghosts are drawn to it like moths to a flame, and I feel them closing in on its irresistible pull. The coldness of death chills the air. The amulet straddles the barrier between our worlds, and it is as much a part of them as it is of me.

What Damon is suggesting here is no small matter. Were I to grant his request, he would belong to it—to me—as much as they do. Though still consciously blind to its secrets, he would brush a foot across the line between, tying his own life to mine and vice versa. It’s a permanence and a sacrifice he has never been willing to make before, so I have to wonder.

“You’re sure about this?” I question, concern in my voice. “You know the story. It wasn’t exactly a picnic the last time. Besides, aren’t things getting weird enough as it is? We do this, it might get a little...awkward.”

Decades of increasingly significant blood shares and a century’s intimacy have combined to produce a bond so strong I’ve never known another to compare. Not even Irina. The only comparison I can draw, in fact, is the last attempt I made with a Childe to create this thing, and that did not end well. The forced closeness wreaked havoc on his already fragile mind, and he became like the rabid dog that must be put down.

“I’m sure.”

Obviously, this is not and never will be an option with Damon, and it worries me that he is willing to take the risk despite all my goading in the past. Still, our bond has been gradual, methodical, subversive, and far more natural than that I had with Zephyr, and Damon’s will is already far stronger than most—fortified with time, experience, and the gift of my power through every exchange. If anyone can attempt this and survive, he can. Still...

“What’s different now than the dozen other times I’ve asked?”

“Maybe...” he murmurs, lost in memory and thought, “maybe it’s that this time I have something to lose.”

Ah, yes. The lovely Elena. I should have guessed. Damon, despite the tough exterior, is a romantic at heart and he will do anything for love. Even Katherine’s betrayal could not hope to tarnish that intensity, because he knows now in his heart that she was never truly his. That it wasn’t real. Now that it is (and words cannot express how thrilled I am by this turn of events), how could I have
thought for a moment that there was *anything* on Earth or Hell below he wouldn’t risk to keep her safe?

He looks at me with steady eyes, and a passionate storm of love and determination that I know better than to question. His mind and heart are set on this, and he will not back down.

It’s all the confirmation I need. Taking his hand in mine, I wrap my fingers about the pendant—the serpent’s wicked tongue thirsting for blood—and in a single sharp bite, I slice the tiny blade across his open palm. His blood spills from the wound, and the serpent drinks it all. I feel its power as the iron grows warm in my hand, and my lips mimic its movements, licking up the excess as the bleeding line closes beneath them.

I meet his eyes then, the piercing blue of them sending a searing line of icy fire through my blood as I press the amulet flat over his heart, and begin to chant the ritual words that will bind us together forever.

He smiles as the thrum of immortal power flows through him, resonating through his very marrow. The bond wraps almost tangibly around us and a sensation like life itself licks at my heels where they stand planted in death. The spirit world blazes about me, and the world fills once more with color.

It is complete.

**Elena**

There’s something soothing about the soft slide of satin beneath my open palm—something pleasant about the cool touch of it on warm skin—as I slip it between the open teeth of the garment bag and zip it in. Standing in the shadowed room of my walk in closet, shielded by the blinders of six-foot painted wood, my heart slows.

The adrenaline that has been rushing with my racing pulse for what feels like weeks has faded, and my body is left drained and exhausted by its absence. The fear and stranglehold of determined hope fall away as my tense muscles sigh with relief, and I can finally catch my breath.

With a final wistful exhale, I unhook the bag from the rack, draping it over my left arm, and step beyond the tentative solace of my hideaway. Absentmindedly, my fingers comb through loose hair, brushing it back over my shoulder as I walk back toward the bed and my half-packed bag.

“Elena—“

“Holy shit!” I jump, hand flying to my throat as my heart gives a panicked jolt into it. “Jesus, you scared me.”

He at least has the decency to look apologetic, but it’s doing nothing to calm my sudden fear. Something about this feels wrong.

“What are you doing here, Stefan?” I ask, sounding callous even to my own ears. “I thought we were meeting at the Lockwood’s.”

If he thinks anything of my coldness, he doesn’t show it. Rather, that naked adoration I had once found so appealing shines in his warm green eyes, as he murmurs lovingly, “I know, but I just couldn’t wait to see you. I missed you so much this past week. Even another hour felt like an
eternity."

It’s sweet really. Well, it should be anyway. Sweet that he missed me so much while he was away. A few days ago, I’m sure I would have returned the sentiment with equal feeling. A few days ago, Stefan was the star-struck lover of my dreams that had been torn from me by tragedy and circumstance. A few days ago, he was my boyfriend and I was very much in love. I take a moment to consider why things feel so starkly different now...and what dreams have taken their place.

“Oh, I missed you too, Stefan,” I tell him, feeling like the worst sort of liar even while I acknowledge the truth of it. “It’s just, I told Jenna I’d ride with her and Ric. I mean, there’s still so much to do to get ready...”

His eyes catch on something behind me—seeming captivated by the open duffle atop my mattress. I watch with some trepidation as his brows furrow and his eyes darken with anger.

“...What is that?” The question sounds innocent, but his tone is anything but. I hear the cold fury of a barely concealed rage building in his voice, and it chills my blood.

Warily, I glance over my shoulder, already afraid of what I will find there. Sure enough, my fears are confirmed and I stare with horror at the visible syringe peeking through the barely open flap of a side pocket. Harder than I ever thought possible, my heartbeat pounds in my ears. I can hardly hear my own thoughts for the screaming.

“What do you mean?” I ask, voice quivering as I search desperately for an explanation that will satisfy him.

“Elena. That’s a vervain dart,” he tells me, voice careful and deceptively calm. He’s never given me any reason to fear that voice in the past, but somehow I know this time is different. “Something you want to tell me?”

“What? No, of course not,” I scoff, forcing a laugh that sounds false and ominous in the tension. “It’s just in case. You know with everything going on and the tomb vampires, it’s just—" He advances on me, right hand darting out to seize my arm as I stumble back from him. He drags me straight, but his fist does not release me.

“Did Damon give that to you?” he demands, sounding both betrayed and murderous at once. “How long have the two of you been conspiring behind my back?!"

He presses forward in his still growing rage, and helplessly I shuffle backward as his vice-like grip fairly shoves me across the room. My heels drag across the carpet and I trip and fall to slam back first into the wall.

“It’s not like that!” I shout desperately.

The hand around my arm squeezes so tightly, I can feel my arm go numb beneath it even as he pulls me up to face him squarely. His free hand crashes into the wall beside my head, boxing me in much like his brother had before. This scene though, could not be more different. I can feel my body trembling at his closeness. This is Stefan. This is Stefan, and I’m terrified.

“No? So you weren’t planning on stabbing me in the back?” he snarls accusingly, fury laced through every word. “I should have seen it when he sent Nadia after me at the school. He had to find out somehow. Were you in on it?!”

Hot skin drags painfully against the deadened, pinching flesh of my upper arm, and a whimper
escapes my knotted throat.

“Stefan, you’re hurting me!” I cry, tears of pain and fear brimming treacherously in my eyes, but Stefan is too far gone to care.

Dark veins writhe beneath his skin, his lips curl back with the sinister snarl of fatally sharp fangs as he looms over me. I can feel the dampness of his hot breath on my face as he pins me to the wall beneath those cold black eyes. It’s no longer Stefan’s affection I feel burning out of them, but his hunger. His inhuman, rapacious, blood lust overcomes him—steals his face—and burns out his onyx eyes. The heat enflames my skin, and I turn my face away, unconsciously baring my throat to those vicious teeth, and squeeze my eyes tight.

Surrendering entirely to his need—humanity and restraint a distant memory—the vampire strikes.

(To be continued...)
Pursuit

Chapter Notes

A/N: Ugh! Finally, here’s the second half. I think this chapter killed me. Am I dead? I’m pretty sure I’m dead.

Aaaaaanyway, this is a good one. This chapter right here (*cough cough* Miss Mystic dance *cough*) is literally the only reason I’ve followed cannon for as long as I have, so I hope you enjoy reading it as much as I did writing it. (LIES! All lies. It was murder, I tell you! MURDER!!)

Reviews are love

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jeremy

The entire scene seems cut from “28 Days Later”—a post-apocalyptic landscape teeming with the decaying remnant of a once thriving civilization stripped down to bare bones and rotting meat. The emaciated flesh of once proud walls falls freely from the bones of urbanity, exposing black iron skeletons that shake and hiss with the howling cries of the dying city. Below, sensible only by virtual sight, cement crunches and scrapes with the eroding steps of a thousand dead men as they wander through the barren cityscape in the hunt for living flesh.

“Fuck! Fuck! Shit! Damn! Fucking—Fuck!” comes barreling through the headset. A smirk pulls at my lips as I watch my teammate attempt to fend off a throng of zombies with the ceramic base of a garden gnome. He’s the youngest and by far the least valuable addition to the team so, being the fair and democratic individuals we are, we’d appointed him this round’s gnome bearer.

Unfortunately for Chris, this made him Tom’s de facto body guard as the guy insisted on following him around like some moon-eyed fan-boy while our fearless leader attempted to depopulate the city one undead corpse at a time. I wonder about that guy sometimes.

The two had been separated from the team in the fight, their tag-team act forcing them to make their own way through, while Chris tried to outmaneuver their overwhelming numbers. Predictably, the little shit had been less than helpful in that task, and the two have since had to take shelter in a nearby convenience store while the seemingly relentless horde closed in. The situation is less than ideal.

Unflappable as ever, Chris chuckles, “How many times do I have to tell you, Tom? Screaming unimaginative obscenities at the screen will not kill a zombie.” His excited laughter rings loudly through the group call as his character steps inside the door frame to the back room, using the empty space and Tom’s useless gnome for cover as he showers the walkers in a haze of bullets. They crumple to the floor, one exploding jaw bone at a time.

“Shut up, Chris.”

Shouts and laughter play in surround sound between the audible groans and explosions of the digital reality—far louder than the muffled silence of my empty bedroom—but I still manage to
catch the whisper of my sister’s voice beneath them. Through layers of foam, plaster, and the virtual barrage of machine gun fire, I hear her speak his name. The tone is one of surprise—perhaps a little fear—even as it settles quickly to relieved silence. But the sound of the word alone is enough to make my blood boil.

While, rationally, I know how that scene must have appeared to him, all I can see when I close my eyes is Stefan’s ruthless precision and a splintered chair leg lodged deep in my girlfriend’s chest as her blood coats the floor. The image is burned into my retinas and my mind. I can never unsee that, and I have Stefan to thank for it.

It makes me grateful for the recent strain in my sister’s relationship, if only because it’s kept him away from her and the house besides. There’s no telling what I would have done if I had had to face the sight of him kissing Elena good morning, or brushing his teeth in our bathroom mirror. No telling what violent urge I might have given into since I learned the truth.

Perhaps I only have myself to blame for those recovered memories, but the result is the same either way. There’s not one single part of me not aware of how very close he is on the other side of our bathroom door—not screaming bloody vengeance in my ears—and I catch my eyes drifting toward the chair in the corner. It’s a perfect replica of the one that met its end in Vicki’s heart, and my hands itch to break it apart.

I manage to tear my eyes away just in time to watch Chris go down in a spray of blood and guts as Darrel leaps from the alleyway, gun still poised to fire.

“What the fuck, Darrel?!” he screams through the speakers as he hits the ground. “I’m on your fucking team!”

“What?! It’s a legitimate strategy.” I can hear the verbal shrug in his voice as my own character rushes to the rescue in a blaze of glory and virtual gun shots.

“Yeah, for you maybe,” I snipe, beyond tired of this bullshit. Every fucking game, I swear. “Remind me again why we let this loser on the team?”

Tom extends a healing hand while I fend off the starving masses, and Darrell makes smug excuses for the tactical merit of friendly fire. Asshole.

“Because Chris has a hard on for chumps,” Tom quips, apparently unaware of the irony.

“Yeah? And what does that say about you, Squeak?”

“Give me that,” Chris barks, pulling the healing gnome from Tom’s grasp and thrusting it toward Darrel’s.

“What? Hey!” he whines, as Tom steals his now available gun.

My eyes are focused on the geysers of blood spewing beneath machine gun fire, but the banter in my ears begins to fade as new voices take their place.

"It's not like that!"

“Take the fucking gnome, Darrel. So help me God, I will shoot you in the face. I will log off, raid my redneck neighbor’s gun safe, drive to fucking Idaho, and shoot you in the face.”

Muffled as they are, their voices make it through the barrier...
"So you weren't planning..."

“Yo, J! You gonna fire that thing at some point?”

“What?” I ask dumbly, suddenly aware of the stillness of my digital self as my thoughts drift...wait, what was that?...Shit.

"Stefan, you're hurting me!"

My sister’s voice raised in panic sparks some rare protective instinct in me as I throw the headphones to the floor, racing toward her call. I burst through the door to find her pinned beneath the demonic face of her crazed boyfriend and I find my feet in motion before my mind registers the danger.

The only thoughts in my head are red and violent as hatred roars in my chest and tackles him to the floor. He manages to twist and speed from my weak human grasp as I crash into hardwood, flashing to his feet in the blink of an eye. Black eyes and lethal fangs snarl viciously down at me, but the gasp of relief to my right is more than enough to satisfy. He is at least a few steps back from my cowering sister, and my body lies between them. At least my reckless stupidity accomplished something, then.

Pressing my palms flat to the hardwood floor, I lever myself to my feet as I stare him down. Maybe it’s the Gilbert stubborn streak, but I’m not about to let this asshole scare me.

“What the hell, man?!” I demand, open hands shoving him back by the shoulders. He barely sways, but I feel the muscles tense beneath my palms as a growl rumbles in his chest.

Perhaps sensing the coming fight, Elena pulls me back. “Jeremy, don’t!” she shouts, as her small frame wedges between ours as she attempts to shield my body with her own. I would be pissed off by the mom-routine if it weren’t for the fear I can still see churning wetly in her eyes. She’s terrified, but “protecting” me gives her the strength to fight back. Who am I to take that from her?

The move is more effective than I might have expected as, even through the haze of rage and bloodlust, Stefan seems to arrive at the same conclusion. He reels back almost instantly, shock and guilt warring with the demon in his black eyes, and his face clears. He looks like Stefan again, but I know better than to buy it. If Elena’s diary and my newly recovered memories have taught me anything, it’s that this vampire is a lot more than meets the eye. None of it good.

“Oh, God. I’m sorry, Elena. I—I have to go.”

“Wait!” she calls after him, but he’s no longer there.

In a gust of air, he flashes out the window, the curtains left fluttering on the unnatural breeze. At my inferior human pace, I fly after his blurred form, bracing my hands on the ledge as I futilely track him with my eyes. Too slow. Damn. He’s already gone.

“Jeremy, what you just saw—

“Shh!” I hush, waving away her useless concerns. This is so not the time for that conversation. My eyes focus intently on the phone in my right hand, fished hastily from my pocket, as I scroll through my contact list in search of her name.

“Wait, Jer. What—what are you doing?” she stutters, eyes staring wide-eyed at the phone as though afraid it will burst into flames any moment.
My brow furrows incredulously. I should think the answer to that question was obvious. “I’m calling Lia,” I say, words slow and deliberate as I watch understanding dawn with horror on her face.

“What?! No! No, you can’t!” she shouts, lunging hands first at the cell in my grasp. I tuck it to my chest out of her frantic reach.

“Why not?”

The genuine fear in her expression stops me short. Not out of sympathy, but annoyance. Is she serious?

“Elena—” I start, praying mentally for patience in the face of my sister’s willful naïveté, “you just almost got eaten by your rabid boyfriend. This is not a kiss and make-up kinda situation. You get that, right?”

Reason doesn’t make a dent on stubborn compassion, I see. “She’d kill him, Jeremy,” she whimpers, eyes glistening with unshed tears.

“So?” I return immediately. After what I just saw, I’d hardly blame her! Elena seems less than impressed with my reasoning however, and somehow I just can’t bring myself to say it. “Well, what do you suggest, then?” I offer instead.

“Elena, are you coming?!” Jenna shouts impatiently from the hall. “We’re gonna be late!”

My sister’s eyes follow the sound of her lifted voice, obviously desperate to escape this conversation and the reality emerging within it.

“Elena?” I prompt, unwilling to grant her that comforting denial. From what I just witnessed, it’s gone on far too long already.

“I’ll handle it, ok?” she snaps, but my eyebrow rises skeptically at the quickness of it. “I promise. Just please don’t tell anyone, ok? Promise me.”

She’s got that look in her eye now—one I am unfortunately very familiar with—and I know there’s no changing her mind. Arguing with her now would only be pointless and exhausting. I sigh.

“...Fine. But if I see him again—

“I know! Ok,” she assures me, gratitude frank and open in her voice as she retrieves her bag and dress from the bed and makes for the door, turning back once in the frame. “Thank you. It’ll be fine, I swear. I’ll figure it out.” The sincerity and apparent confidence in her eyes tempts me to believe her, but I know her too well to fall for it. Those words are as much for herself as they are for me. Still...

“I hope you’re right.”

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**Alaric**

“Kinda harsh back there don’t you think?” I ask, the smirk threatening at my lips barely hidden in profile as I stare forward through the windshield.
“To John the Jackass?” she remarks skeptically. “Please. I went too easy on him.” I almost laugh at the vehemence in her voice at that.

“No, to Jeremy,” I assure her, this time smirking unchecked as her face brightens at the joke. “He’s the one you stuck with him. Poor kid.” She smacks my arm in mock reproach, but her smile is bright and sunny in the shadowy interior of the car. It’s quickly becoming my favorite sight, that smile.

I didn’t think there was a single thing Jenna could do to make me like her more, but once again she’s proven me wrong. I had to bite back a snicker at the look on John’s froggy face when she delivered that parting line, and the slack shock of his cheeks as we filed out the door. That was priceless. Who knew such a casual insult could have the power to do me in?

Jenna is radiant. Sitting there in my passenger seat as the sun plays affectionately with the red in her caramel hair, the brightness of her smile as she catches me staring, and the sparkle in those green eyes when she winks my way; she takes my breath away. It’s getting harder and harder to keep my secrets.

Secrets I see reflected in Elena’s brown gaze like glistening fragments of broken trust and patchwork lies as our eyes catch briefly in the rearview mirror. They gather there together, brimming in her desperate loyalty—her naive fear—as they band against my frustrated honesty.

“You doin’ alright back there?” I ask, knowing the answer, but needing to hear her say it. Maybe she too needs to hear that admission. Lord knows denial’s not doing her any favors.

It occurs to me to wonder why I continue to deny that impulse, why I let those unshed tears drown out my confessions even as they gather on my tongue. Why I continue to hide and rewrite entire passages of my past and present from the woman I am sort of dating and certainly falling for, all to satisfy this teenage girl’s overwhelming and delusional compassion.

“How?” she mutters, voice distracted and light, but her eyes are alert and sharp on mine. I know she heard my real question. “Oh, yeah. Fine. Just, uh—just nervous.” She’s still unwilling to admit defeat even now, and it’s beginning to take its toll on the people around her. I’m not sure how much longer I can stand to keep this up.

By all accounts, this is as much my life as hers. Isobel was my wife, not only Elena’s mother. Damon, both mine and my wife’s murderer, not just her boyfriend’s brother. And my vampire slaying days belong far more to me, than they do to her history teacher. So why does it seem I am under some contractual obligation to do as she wishes? Who made Elena Gilbert the heroine of this drama?

“You’ll do great. You’ve got nothing to worry about,” Jenna assures her from the passenger seat. She’s unable to see the look in her niece’s eyes as she pleads silently with me to keep my silence.

Glancing at her now, it’s hard to reconcile this timid girl with the warrior princess I know her to be. Her eyes turn inward as her entire body seems to cringe into the seat, back pressing harshly against soft leather rippling about the indents of her shoulders. More than anything, it’s the fear I spot there that disturbs me.

I’ve seen firsthand the determined fire of her optimism, her sometimes irrational loyalty, and knowing what I do about our latest brush with disaster, there’s only one conclusion I can draw: Stefan’s finally managed the impossible. He’s frightened Elena Gilbert. He’s shaken her faith, and we should all hit the deck. The shit is about to hit the fan.
Anna

I spot him in the courtyard immediately, looking every inch the burgeoning Gilbert scion as he stands shooting the breeze with his genocidal uncle. His face twitches toward the porch, seconds away from spotting me, and, like the pathetic little girl that I am, I run away. Or rather, I try.

“Nadia?” I gasp, catching my balance as I nearly run her over. Jesus, you’d think she’d at least attempt to act like a human. She seems to guess at my thoughts, if her smug smirk is any indication, she finds my reaction amusing. Bitch. “Is this about Stefan? Because I told you I want nothing more to do with it.”

She chuckles at my obvious annoyance, but soars quickly at the words. It’s no secret between us how Nadia feels about Stefan, even if I’ve never heard the story.

“I know,” she assures me, eyes burning with distant anger. Whatever he’s been up to, the youngest Salvatore has made himself a dangerous enemy. He’d best hope it isn’t Nadia that stops him. “And, yeah, he’s still as unstable as ever,” she grumbles, “but that’s not what I wanted to talk to you about. It’s Jeremy. He knows.”

I’m thrown by the sudden change in subject, blinking a bit dazedly as my mind catches up.

“He...what?”

“Yeah,” she says by way of answer, lips twisting in a wry grimace. “Says he read Elena’s diary. Evidently, she’s as bad as her boyfriend in that department.”

“Jesus,” I breathe, my heart rate speeds impossibly as it leaps in my chest. I always knew it would be his sister that eventually dropped the bomb on all my secrets and omissions, but I never expected it this way. I never thought it would be Jeremy’s distrust that would break us apart. How naïve was I? “But that means—

“Yep. Though, for what it’s worth, I don’t think you need to worry too much about it. He seems way more bothered by Elena’s lies than your former plans.”

That’s something of a relief, I suppose, but it doesn’t really reassure me. That’s hardly our biggest problem now, is it? Wait. Hang on, “Why would he tell you all this...?” I ask, brow wrinkling tightly in confusion. Since when do these two even know each other, let alone discuss their relationship drama? I know she’s his English teacher, but...Oh, god. “What did you do?!”

“Nothing,” she shrugs, but the amusement in her eyes says it all.

“Ok, correction,” I snap, a bestial growl fighting its way up my throat. “What did Damon do?”

She chuckles, hand waving dismissively at my alarm. “Relax,” she says breezily. “I think he just compelled him to trust me or something equally innocuous.”

“Why?”

She does a double take at that, surprised by this question. The look she turns on me then is one that can only be described as amused disbelief. Her eyes seem to read, ‘Seriously?’ , and I resist the urge to groan. “Why does Damon do anything?!”

That’s what I’m afraid of.
Elena

I can’t stop thinking about his eyes. Even the sight of my own reflected back at me in the vanity mirror turn my stomach as brown invariably turns to sickening green in my mind. Green mired and lost in black hunger, rage blazing brighter and hotter than either. The mere thought of them makes my heart race. If Jeremy hadn’t come in when he did...

I don’t know what would have happened—what I would have done—if he had actually bitten me. I know he wanted to, and what scares me more than anything is that I can no longer trust that he could have, 

would have, resisted. There’s a part of me that just wants to hide behind Damon, let Lia loose on Stefan, and shut my eyes till it’s over.

But that part of me is also singularly terrifying, because what kind of person would I be to just give up on someone I claim to love? How can I even consider dropping his hand and letting him sink beneath it all, when I know I’m the only thing keeping him afloat? That I could stand on the shore—safe and dry—and watch him drown? How can I possibly bear the weight of that again? I don’t think I could survive it.

The curling iron pulls gently at my scalp as Jenna pulls it free of another perfect coil. She’s quiet and calm, but I can feel the emotion coming off of her in waves. There’s someone else present here in both our thoughts, and I can’t believe I’d almost forgotten. “Thanks for helping me,” I tell her, watching the sad smile of remembered grief and happier times brighten slightly at the words.

“Don’t thank me until you’re sure your hair isn’t gonna burn off,” she jokes with characteristic humor, but the sadness never quite fades from her eyes.

“Hmm.”

“Hey, what’s wrong?” she prompts, immediately catching the turn of my thoughts. No doubt for their similarity to her own. “Not getting cold feet are you?”

“No. No, I was just...” I pause, unsure whether to voice the absence we both must be feeling. I know I’m not alone with these thoughts. “wishing my mom was here,” I finally finish, the guilt dull but present as I watch grief spring again in Jenna’s eyes. “This all meant so much to her.”

It might be naïve of me to think it, but if I can do this one thing—something that I know would have made her so proud—maybe somewhere out there, I can make her smile again. I might feel closer to her, just for a little while.

“Well, I’ll tell you one thing,” Jenna teases, sadness veiled in loving memory. “Your hair would have a better chance if she was.”

I smile gratefully, turning to face her outside the confines of the mirror. Feelings pass like whispered words between us, but neither of us speaks. We don’t need to.

“Oh, I should go put my dress on,” I say finally, tension lifting as I take her cue. It’s amazing what relief even a reluctant smile can bring in moments like these. “Be careful with that thing. Don’t hurt anybody.”
Jeremy’s face is the picture of petulance. He stands beside me in obvious discomfort, his suit jacket bunched tightly around his growing shoulders, as he glowers childishly at the ground. Even his hair seems wilted in misery.

“You look miserable,” I tell him frankly, only barely restraining the urge to laugh at the familiarity of the scene.

“Huh,” he grunts, not disagreeing. “Is there really a month of these events that I’m supposed to show up at?”

I shake my head in dim sympathy, but he doesn’t know the half of it. It’s a family legacy passed down through the generations, and, as boring as it might seem now, it’s a point of pride for all of us. This is barely an inconvenience compared to the rest.

“You can fight it if you want, but it’s part of being a Gilbert,” I chide, though not without sympathy.

I can see by his frown that he doesn’t find this answer to his satisfaction, but I have every confidence he’ll learn with time. He’s young yet. They both are. Too young to see this clearly. These creatures...they know how to seem human, to mimic humanity—love even. And these two kids are lost and lonely teenagers ripe for the picking. Elena especially.

She’s just a teenage girl, right at that age that believes in true love and Disney princess happy endings. She’s just lost both her parents, the only stability and permanency she knew at the age she was most in need of it. It wouldn’t have been long before Gray and Miranda would have told her everything...but they never got the chance.

She’s had to suffer through her loneliness, her questions, the confusion of her age, with no guidance at all. Little wonder she’d fall for someone that seemed to promise safety, eternity, the thrill of the forbidden—a love for the ages as they say. I don’t fault her for it, but my daughter’s heart is her own worst enemy. If we aren’t careful—if we don’t play this exactly right—she’ll go the same way as her mother.

Something in my tone or choice of words seem to spark some interest in him suddenly, and his entire body seems to wake up with the light in his eyes. It looks like curiosity.

“Yeah, you uh, you mentioned you know a lot about the family,” he says, trying and failing for casual interest. I’m not fooled, and it makes me wary. “Do you know anything about our ancestor Johnathan Gilbert?”

“Prolific writer, crazy inventor. Why do you ask?” I prompt, careful to keep my own disquiet from my voice. It wouldn’t do well to tell him yet.

Despite my reticence, he seems more intrigued than ever. Yet another thing he owes to his family line. Gilbert tenacity, I should have expected it. “Well, I read his journal.”

“Is that right?”

“Yeah. I actually found it in all Dad’s stuff.”

Ah, of course he did. Jeremy’s interest hardly surprises me then, and I don’t doubt he’s smart enough to question Jonathan’s account. It’s only a matter of time before he works it out. And, what with his sister’s fraternization, and the unknown element of mystery vampires (one of which may
even have infiltrated his school), that could prove dangerous.

Jeremy’s safety lies in his ignorance. In that, the Salvatore’s secrecy and his sister’s loyalty to them have been a blessing. If I can keep him out of this entirely, all to the good. If I can’t, the least I can do is see him prepared. Gray would want it that way.

“Well, that’s surprising,” I say then, still determined to downplay this discovery. It may only prompt his continued investigation and prove ultimately futile, but I have to try. “Most of them are locked away.”

“There’s more of them?” he asks excitedly, much to my chagrin.

“Johnathan Gilbert journaled his whole life,” I tell him, surprised to find myself somehow emboldened by his perseverance on this issue. There may be hope for him yet. “Right down to the bitter, insane, drunken end. Guy had a lot of demons.”

It’s possible my affected disinterest will only fuel his determination to find the answers, and some part of me thinks he may be entitled to them if he does. He’ll have more than earned them.

“And did you read ‘em?”

“I browsed, yeah,” I nod, still nonchalant.

“What did you think about what he wrote?” he urges, a tad sharply. He’s growing frustrated. Good.

I wait him out a moment, meeting his gaze steadily as I take his measure with my eyes. I watch excitement and curiosity war with disappointment there, the latter desperate to extinguish the flame, but, even when they still, his eyes burn.

I blink once to shield my own. “Crazy ramblings of a mad man, of course,” I say, and watch the flame ignite.

“Yeah,” his voice trails off as though disheartened and defeated, but I know that stubborn streak when I see it. Jeremy has it in spades. I watch his focus shift just as suddenly over my shoulder, and I follow his eyes. On the back platform of the old manor, two petite women stand in close contact. One dressed in a knee length strapless and a punk-rock hairstyle that fairly screams for attention, but it’s the other girl that’s caught my nephew’s eye. And I can see why.

“Well, she’s very pretty,” I comment to the smitten boy beside me, watching all his focus zero in on that fragile beauty just as her eyes shift to his. Unlike the soft admiration in Jeremy’s eyes, the girl’s turn to stone in sudden anger. Her entire body tenses as she pivots on her heel, leaving her friend behind.

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“Yeah, yeah. She’s a, uh, a friend of mine,” he mutters, but he’s already yards away in his mind even before he steps away. “Excuse me.”

I’m not sure what to make of this development, but something about it disturbs me. I track their movement with my eyes, watching as my nephew moves as though to chase her retreating form only to veer away in the opposite direction. What’s going on here?

It’s then I notice the other girl, her eyes locked unblinkingly on me, and I flinch at her intensity. She winks.
Damon

Keeping a suspicious eye on Uncle John Gilbert where he poses smugly in the courtyard, I stand in the corner of the parlor where the shadows flicker unobtrusively over my dark suit in the afternoon sun. I watch long enough to see Little Gilbert chases Anna back indoors, and I smirk to myself at the alarm in his gaze when his eyes settle on Z. I can just imagine the game she’s playing with him now.

My thoughts are interrupted, however, by the surprise of movement in the corner of my eye as Jeremy makes a sudden shift in direction toward me. My eyebrow quirks at that, but the moment I see him I know something is wrong. It’s in the tightness of his jaw, the burning fear in his eyes, and I know what it means.

“Damon,” he greets, and the obvious relief makes fear almost palpable. “Elena—"

I’m gone before he gets another word out. Heedless of the clueless masses and their empty, distracted expressions, I rush through the manor. A beat later I stand outside the dressing room door. I can hear the solitary heartbeat through the wood. Even silent and alone, its pattering away like the panicked pulse of a frightened rabbit. He must have seriously scared her. The thought sets my teeth on edge, and I’m through it in a single stride, nearly tearing the door off its hinges in my haste.

She spins at the sound—hands flying to her chest as lungs seize on her panicked breath—and I am hit at once with the full force of her terror. It seeps out her eyes, through her trembling lips, and resonates through the air between us. Not even her relief at the sight of me can dim its power.

There are tears in her eyes, gathering together in unshed concert above her waterline. One blink and they would spill over the edges, drowning us both. As I take her flushed and frightened face between my palms, my eyes seize on them—counting every cursed drop another mark against my damned brother. Every glistening tear twists the knife in my chest that little bit deeper, and my hatred just that little bit hotter.

The homicidal rage nursed long and devotedly at my brother’s blood-soaked altar, so tentatively restrained these past few months, gives another frantic lurch at the rapidly fraying leash. It’s never been strong in the first place, but this may be the final straw. I thought I had known hatred before, but it was nothing compared to this. In this moment, I think maybe for the first time, I could actually kill my brother.

She seems to read all this in the heat of my gaze, the curve of my palms, and I hear her heart slow in answer. She may not know it yet, but my touch has calmed her where his has only terrified. It can’t be only me that notices. She smiles sadly—sympathetically even, though God knows why—as she wraps small fingers about my own, and draws my hands from her cheeks. She clasps them between her palms, pulling away even as she brings them to her heart. Even that small, but deliberate distance sends a rush of cold air down my spine, and I grit my teeth as guilty tears spill out her eyes.

“I’m sorry, Damon,” she whimpers, and I can hear the self-loathing in her voice. Even now, she’s crying for him. “He just showed up in my room. I was packing and he—he saw the vervain, Damon.”

Fuck. This is worse than I thought. I hold this beautiful girl with her far too compassionate heart within my grasp, watch her fear and self-loathing pour down her too pale cheeks as she whispers to me of her darkest secrets, and it’s him she’s worried about? She blames herself for this?
It’s yet another strike against Saint Stefan the self-righteous blood junkie that his martyr-complex and suffocating self-pity has let this brave girl shoulder the burden of his choices. Even if he claims the responsibility of them in his tortured little heart, he’s still to blame for this. All of it. I won’t let her take that on alone.

“Damn it. No. No, Elena. Elena, it’s not your fault, ok? It’s not your fault. I’ll look for him, alright? He can’t be far. With you in that dress...” I say, letting my eyes scan the length of her flirtatiously. It may be wildly inappropriate, but the flattered blush that stains her cheeks says she doesn’t mind. It’s a testament to her emotional state that she doesn’t even bother to disguise it.

That fucking tool-bag is going to be here if I have to haul his ass back myself. He is not leaving her alone with this. “My brother would have to be the world’s biggest ass-hat to stand you up. I’ve got your back. I promise.”

My spoken confidence has the desired effect. I feel the fear and anxiety leave her body as she relaxes into my tentative embrace and, despite the black turmoil of my own sinister thoughts, I smile. For her sake.

He doesn’t get to run off to his dark and seedy corner to moan and brood about his unjust damnation while the rest of us scramble to pick up the bloody entrails of his mutilated victims. He most definitely doesn’t get to hide away in the dark recesses of his own mind, while others shoulder the guilt. Not even the Ripper gets credit for this one. Not this time.

Anna

I can’t believe I fell for it. The boy I found in that library was young, lost, and so impressionable. He was the perfect victim. I couldn’t have found a better sacrificial lamb if I had bred and raised one myself. Then he looked at me with those puppy dog eyes and that sweet smile, and I believed it. I dropped my guard. I let him in, let myself trust him—care for him. Convinced myself he meant it when he said he wanted to turn; that the promise I barely let myself entertain was justified—mutual. That he wanted to be with me.

Turns out, he’s just another Gilbert. Another generation, another agenda, but a Gilbert all the same. My mother was right all along. I am a stupid child.

When I round the corner to the right, I expect the rush of air behind me that signals his pursuit...but all that moves behind me is empty air.

My shoulder tingles with the expectation of a touch that never comes—that almost painful sensation of disappointed certainty, as though the skin is literally vibrating in frustration. Though I had told myself I’d stormed off to get away from him, his failure to chase after kind of pisses me off.

I spot him across the parlor with Damon, huddled in the shadowy corner beneath the stairwell. Seems he went left when I went right. Their conversation lasts mere seconds, however, before the elder Salvatore flashes off in a blur of movement, and Jeremy’s attention returns to me. I barely contain my pitiful relief at that. It’s not fair that he can still have this affect on me even now. I hate that he’s made me so pathetic. I’m no better than the damned Salvatore’s. I’m disgusted with myself.

“Anna!” he calls, sounding for all the world that same genuine guy he’d pretended to be. But I
Tamping down harshly on the treacherous butterflies in my stomach, I demand, “What is it?”

“Oh, come on,” he sighs, eyes almost rolling with exasperation. “Don’t be like that.”

“Why not?” I snarl, more pissed off than ever. As if he has the right to complain. “You were basically using me to turn you into a vampire so you could be with someone else.”

His head is shaking in denial before I even finish that sentence. “No, I wasn’t using you.”

“Really?” I challenge facetiously. “Then how would you like to define it?”

He sighs again. This time exasperation ends with a disapproving frown and reproach in his eyes that reminds me I’m not entirely innocent in this. “Look, I don’t think it’s any worse than becoming friends with me so that you could give your mother my blood.”

Thanks to Nadia’s earlier warning, the revelation fails to put a dent in my anger and I say accusingly, “Elena’s diary tell you that?”

He’s clearly taken aback by my lack of shock at that if his wide-eyed silence is any indication. Good.

For a long minute we regard each other in silence, each sizing up the other for a hint of apology or accusation, but eventually both turn simultaneously to resignation and I relent.

“How much do you know?” I ask finally, gaze softening as the anger slips from my fingers. There’s no use anymore.

“Everything,” he whispers, eyes giving me all the answer I need. “I know everything.”

“Miss Tina Fell, escorted by Bartholomew Whitmore!” the announcer calls from the top of the staircase. We can’t see them from this corner of the hall, but I’m not too bothered personally. I’d much rather stay here than watch yet another archaic town spectacle I’ve seen a hundred times before.

Still, I wouldn’t expect the same attitude from Jeremy. It is his sister after all. “You’re missing Elena’s introduction,” I comment, half expecting him to take off in the other direction now he’s won my forgiveness. It would serve me right at this point.

“I don’t care.”

He really seems to mean that too. I stare at him with some surprise, but there’s a sort of contentment in his eye that mirrors mine. He seems no more anxious to leave this spot than I am. The knots in my stomach loosen a little.

“So she has no idea you read her journal?”

“No, but after this morning, she’s bound to know something’s up. I did sort of walk in on her with her fanged out boyfriend, so...”

Ah, Elena. I may not know her well personally, but from Jeremy’s stories and my own observations, it’s clear to me that she and Stefan share a few of their more annoying traits. Self-righteous nosiness, for one. To her credit though, at least she’s not a slobbering undead psychopath with a penchant for dismemberment. Still no idea what’s happening there, but I really don’t want to
find out.

“Yeah, well I can’t imagine she’d be too thrilled to hear your spending time with me,” I grumble, my annoyance leaking into my voice. “Bit hypocritical, don’t you think?”

“She can think whatever she likes,” Jeremy responds easily. “It’s not like she has a leg to stand on anyway. I’m not the one that almost got eaten today.”

He doesn’t say it like an accusation, but that doesn’t stop me hearing it. Somehow now, despite my earlier thoughts, I feel the need to explain myself. That was such a long time ago.

“When I met you? You were just a part of my plan to get my mother back, but then things changed. All the time we spent together. I would never do anything to hurt you. Not now. You know that, right?”

He locks eyes on mine, his open and trusting as he stares unflinchingly into my gaze and I hear his answer before he speaks it. “Yeah, I know that.”

Good, because I mean every word. And I’m not going anywhere.

Caroline

As always, I was right. She looks beautiful. The blue dress really was the perfect choice. Long, sweeping lines of sapphire satin drape and cling to her curves, highlighting the delicate complexion of her olive skin in perfect complement. She looks every inch Miss Mystic, and I am more certain than ever that she will be.

Still, for some reason it doesn’t bother me so much anymore. Ever since I heard her and her aunt talking in the dressing room, I can’t stop thinking about how awful I’ve been this past week. Like always, I let my shallow, selfish ambitions blind me to everything else. Somehow I’d almost forgotten to consider everything that’s happened this year, how much Elena’s been through. She has just as much right to this crown as I do. Maybe more. I’ve never lost someone like that, but I can only imagine how much this could mean to her. For her mom.

Although, presently she looks more like a large feline trapped in a tiny cage, than a pageant queen. She’s pacing the landing above the balcony like she’s desperate for escape, peeking over the railing as though prepared to jump for it. It’s unnerving. “Do you see Stefan down there?” she questions when she catches my concerned eyes on her.

Already half-certain of the answer, I check anyway. As predicted, no Stefan. “Nope. Just my boring fill-in escort.”

This at least seems to momentarily snap her out of her panic as she turns to me, confused. “What happened to Matt?”

I sigh, still annoyed about it. “They wouldn’t let him out of work.” That’s when the implication of her search finally hits me. What does she mean he’s missing?

No. He did not. No freaking way.

“Wait, what happened to Stefan? Did he ditch you again?! Ugh, I’ll kill him!” I fume. There should be steam coming out of my ears with the anger I feel at this. I can’t believe him!
She seems confused by the fury of my outburst, and I remember she has no idea what really happened to me—neither do I really, which is all the more terrifying. She doesn’t understand the trouble she’s in.

“It’s fine...”

“No, Elena. It’s not fine,” I tell her firmly. How can she think like that? “He doesn’t get to treat you like convenient arm candy, and then toss you aside when he’s done. That’s not ok. You deserve better than that.”

“...Thanks, Care...”

She forgives me easily, as she always does. Even when I want to hate her, I just can’t. She’s just so goddamn nice. All the more reason she needs my help. Maybe even before she realizes it.

“Sorry,” I relent, a little ashamed of myself for ranting like that. It’s hardly her fault she can’t see this for what it is. I know I didn’t. “Do you know where he went?”

“No, I don’t know. He just disappeared somewhere. I don’t know,” my eyebrows furrow with worry as I watch her grow more and more hysterical by the second. “What am I doing? I never should have gone through with this.”

“What do you mean?” I ask, the slightest edge in the question betraying my irritation.

“I need to find Stefan. This isn’t me. I’m not this person anymore.”

“Oh, no, no, no, no, no way. No,” I reject, barring her exit. “You had your chance to drop out. And, believe me, I was all for it because there’s no way that I can beat you. Elena, you’re doing this because it was important to your mom. Besides, fuck Stefan if he doesn’t get that.”

She smiles, more sincerely this time, and I can see the gratitude shining in her doe eyes. Maybe she’s not so ignorant? Though somehow, I think that might be worse.

“Ms. Caroline Forbes and her escort, Jeffrey Lockwood Hamilton,” the announcer’s call breaks through our moment, and I sigh, conjuring up a smile for the audience and Elena both.

“See you down there.”

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Elena

I’m not sure what I expected to find at the foot of the stairs. Stefan, standing tall and elegant with his warm smile and his soft eyes—that other vampire banished for good. Or perhaps bound and gagged at his brother’s feet, awaiting my judgment. I can’t deny that both options have their appeal, but what surprises me is that the best of all possible sights is the one I never let myself consider: Damon.

My breath catches in my throat. He’s so beautiful. Perfect skin ivory smooth against the black fabric of his suit and the onyx sweep of his hair, full pink lips tempting me with their soft promise and recent memory, but those eyes...They glisten as he watches me—mesmerizing in their icy shine—so light a blue they shouldn’t exist, and they whip through me with all the force of a wintry gale. In the suspended moments between each descending step, their frozen winds threaten to tear my feet from solid ground. Out of fear and desperate necessity, I seize on the singular feeling that
may anchor me against the tempest.

“Where’s Stefan?” I ask him as my feet reach the hall floor.

Damon manages a stiff smile for the witnesses. “Off being the world’s biggest ass-hat” he bites out, jaw clenched and angry, but his eyes are still soft when they look on me. The kind of soft that sets butterflies fluttering in my stomach, and my cheeks flush warmly beneath his gaze.

Dark lashes frame those impossible eyes, fanning outward as they widen in awe. I don’t doubt my own are equally as thrown. I can hardly believe the raw admiration in his gaze as he looks at me. He comes here looking like that and he thinks I’m worthy of his time? He’s so out of my league, and somehow he doesn’t seem to care.

“What do we do now?” I ask when I can finally find my voice.

He takes my hand in his, placing it gently on his arm, and guides me to the dance floor.

“Right now, we just have to get through this.”

Despite all he’s done, all the people he’s hurt—continues to hurt—all the reasons I should never dream of looking at him this way, there’s something about him...something consuming—magnetic—something in him, in those eyes, that draws me in with the gravitational force of a black hole as it pulls the universe into its vortex.

I can feel it in the space between our hands, pulling us together even as we hold ourselves apart, and my palm tickles maddeningly with the electricity between us. And when his hand settles at my waist, I swear I can feel the warmth of it rush through my entire body, every cell ignited with the pleasure of his touch.

I watch green twine with sparkling blue—the glacial medley dazzling in the sunlight—enthralling me as I stare, and we dance. It feels like spinning in place—twirling in his arms at the center of a crystalline globe—the universe shrunk to this single captured moment. Frozen in place and time as colors, shape, sound swirl and sparkle around our heads, a shimmering glow veiling all else from sight. We are the only two people in the world.

It’s terrifying, captivating, and should be repellant. I should be stronger than this, better able to resist it. I shouldn’t want him like this...but I do. And all that’s left is to cling for dear life to things that hold me steady—that tether me to myself—for as long as I can. Because I know eventually—inevitably—I will surrender, his darkly encompassing power will tear me apart at the seams, and I will be lost to it. I can’t hope to survive him.

Still somehow in this moment, as the sunlight dances merrily in the crystalline blue of his eyes and my body flushes with the heat of his touch, I can’t bring myself to care.

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**John**

The sight of it turns my stomach. Seeing him put his hands all over my daughter awakens something in me that heaves and growls with gnashing teeth against the clenching of my itching hands. I want nothing more than to take a match to a fallen oak tree and drive it through his chest myself. I’ll watch him turn to ashen grey as his body burns at my feet.

“You stare any harder, he may burst into flames,” remarks an unfamiliar voice at my elbow. I turn
to face the source of it, and find Anna’s punky friend from before with her eyes glued still to the
couple in front of us. The top of her head is a blue/black line of coiled ringlets, elegant and edgy at
once. I think this is what they call a faux hawk. Add that to the rather gothic seeming platform
boots, and she couldn’t look more out of place if she were wearing bubble wrap. Who is this girl?

“One can only hope.”

“I take it you’re not a fan,” she teases, though her eyes never stray from the dance floor even as she
speaks. “What did he do? Kick your puppy? Seduce your girlfriend?” There is a fond smile on her
pale face that sets my teeth on edge. I’m not yet certain why.

“Escorted my niece,” I say shortly, not particularly in the mood for banter.

“Ah,” she nods, eyes flicking to me briefly before returning to the dancing couple. “You must be
John. Elena said you were in town.”

My eyes pinch in confusion and not a little suspicion. Something about that sentence
seems...wrong. “You know Elena?”

“I subbed her English class a few times. Also, she’s become rather fond of my housemates so...”
she says, one shoulder shrugging toward Damon. My head whips so fast on my neck, I nearly
wrench the muscle as I turn to stare at her in alarm.

My attention now entirely focused on the woman beside me, I shift my weight forward to catch a
clearer view of her face. Her eyes sparkle, but they still resist my own.

“The Salvatore’s?” I question, already certain of the answer as I watch the light play in her blue-
grey eyes.

“Mm.”

Up close, the truth seems obvious. In her twilit eyes shine a thousand untold secrets, centuries of
infernal wisdom. She is a lovely frozen corpse sealed in living blood, and the demon breathes
eternity. I know the moment she notes my recognition of her, for those eyes turn colder still—
steely grey and onyx hard—as they pin me to the floor.

“You’re Natalia,” I declare, remembering Liz’s earlier mention of a Salvatore sister. I’d known
what that meant the moment I heard it, but I don’t think I felt this sure of it till now. I also know
the risk I may be taking in confronting her, but Gilbert’s aren’t known for their caution and I’m
twice as determined as most. “Or do you prefer Nadezhda?”

At this she finally meets my gaze, her eyes’ uncanny brilliance pierces through me as she stares me
down. “...Now where did you hear that name?” she wonders aloud, but with the sinister edge to her
expression and the wheels I can see turning behind her eyes, it sounds far more threat than
question.

She squints at me, head cocked in predatory focus as she assesses me with her eyes. Her
unflappable calm sends a chill down my spine. “Who’s pulling your strings John? Katherine...no,
Isobel,” she guesses, smiling as she catches the alarm in my gaze. “Wonder what that means...”

Gathering my stubbornness and my resilient anger around me like a shield, I meet that knowing
smile with a smirk of my own. “Who says anyone is?” I deflect. “Maybe I just did my research. My
family’s been hunting your kind for generations after all.”

She blinks at this, biting her lips against the mocking laugh I can see covered by her slim fingers.
When she turns back, she fixes me with a look that is two parts sympathy and eight parts threat. “Because I can count on one hand the number of people in the world who know that name, and none of them would part with it lightly,” she informs me, still utterly unfazed by my mysterious knowledge. That scares me more than I’d like to admit.

“No, your puppet master is up to something. And that means...” she trails off, eyes turning inward as she pauses in thought. I see the moment she works it out as her eyes brighten in understanding, and an arrogance that drowns the rest of the world in ominous silence.

“Say hello to your witch for me Johnny-boy.”

Shit.

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**Caroline**

“It is now my honor to announce our very own Miss Mystic Falls, Caroline Forbes!”

Even as Mayor Lockwood speaks the words, I can hardly believe them. The cheers and applause, Elena’s genuine smile, none of it quite manages to breach the stunned silence of my mind while I stare in momentary shock. It all seems so surreal. Like a dream come true. I half expect to jolt suddenly awake at any moment, but the minutes pass and the scene remains.

“I actually won!”

As the dam breaks, and my lips curl upward in a wide smile, the world finally breaches the quiet and the sun seems to shine a little brighter in the afternoon sky. I actually won.

The rest is almost a blur, the handshakes and congrats, the happy smiles, as I move through the crowd with the sash and crown I’ve been dreaming of for a decade. It’s better than I ever imagined.

“Congratulations, Caroline,” Carol Lockwood says, as she places a maternal hand on my arm. Her smile is bright and kind, but her hidden socialite still lurks in her cold eyes. Even that doesn’t bother me today.

“Oh, thank you, Mrs. Lockwood,” I reply with all the gratitude I can muster. Not even she can dim my smile.

“I’m sure your grandmother will be so proud to have the title back in the family,” she says, and, despite the warmth of her voice, I know a backward compliment when I hear one. It’s a bit of a specialty of mine. “Speaking of your mother, where is she today?” And there it is.

“Um. She—she had to work,” I stutter, the twinge of disappointment I’d felt on that stage returning in full. “You know, keep the town safe and all that.”

“I’m sure,” Mrs. Lockwood agrees with another catty smile. Despite my own resentment toward Liz Forbes at the moment, I can feel the angry rant swelling in my chest at Carol’s insult to her. Maybe I would even unleash it if it weren’t at that very moment that the day’s headline couple caught my eye.

Seeing Damon with Elena earlier...disturbed me. It would be easier if I could say it was just fear and concern for her that did it, but...no. No, it was jealousy. Jealousy that someone like that—that
used, abused, and dismissed me so easily—was looking at her with such open admiration in his eyes. Somehow, even while the sash lays heavy across my shoulder, and the tiara gleams on my elated smile, I still feel second best. How messed up is that?

Over the heads of founding matrons and town officials, I spot him. The sharp cut of his jaw in profile fixes sharp and fiercely on his brother’s face—Elena’s open smile like the heavy slam of the gavel in the stillness of the air—and the afternoon sun drops ten degrees at the predatory gleam in his eye. Like a starving vulture he waits, patient and bloodthirsty, for the signal. The slightest dimming of her smile would suffice, and he can swoop in for the kill. But whether it’s his brother or his girlfriend that he threatens is anybody’s guess. They should only be grateful to avoid it.

An involuntary gasp flees my lips when his head whips back, eyes snapping immediately to mine, and I am paralyzed by the darkness I see there. That’s not Stefan. It can’t be. And, yet, I know better than to doubt it.

Somewhere deep inside—buried beneath a mountain of insecurities and fear—I find that single residual spark of anger, brandishing it like a shield in my eyes as I stare him down. Scared and weak I may be, but I will not let another Salvatore bully me. More than that though, I won’t let him bully her. No one fucks with my friends and gets away with it. No matter how cute they are.

This is why, when he turns away—leaving me with nothing but a disdainful snarl and a burning, boiling rage—and leaves the courtyard, I feel compelled to follow.

“Caroline, honey. Where are you going?”

“Oh, sorry. I—I think I see my aunt back there,” I mumble, waving off her questions as I push past her. “I should probably say hi. Excuse me.”

He’s gone by the time I make it through the crowd, but I can see the open gate where he slipped out and I follow closely behind, picking up speed as I rush after him. My spike heels stab jarringly on the concrete, impact rocking all the way into my hips, as I give chase.

I can see his perfectly gelled hair from here, and I know by the slight turning of his head that he can hear me, but he refuses to acknowledge my presence. As though he thinks ignoring me will chase me away. Like Hell!

“Hey! Stefan Salvatore!” I shout after him. His shoulders tense in response, but he keeps on moving. He’s practically running from me now. Asshole. “Yes, I’m talking to you. Don’t you run away from me. Are you seriously just going to ditch her like that?”

At this, he comes to an abrupt stop, spinning around to face me in a flash of speed I barely catch. I nearly run him over before I skid to a halt a foot away, jamming my heel in the pavement.

“Back off, Caroline,” he growls. “This is none of your business.” I see another flicker of that earlier darkness in his eyes, but this time I’m not backing down.

“The hell it isn’t!” I snap, my hands clenched in biting fists at my sides. “Elena is one of my best friends, and I am not going to let you or that dickhead brother of yours mess her around like this. You don’t get to treat her like that.”

“Caroline,” he warns with a sinister whisper of breath as he stalks toward me, “if you don’t back the fuck off right now, I can’t be held responsible for what I do next.”

The black fury I spot in his eyes sends of spike of cold fear through my chest, but it’s got nothing on my own anger. Somehow, despite every instinct in me telling me to run the other way, I can’t
seem to stop.

“Ooh, so scary,” I taunt. “I’m really shaking in my stilettos. Screw you, ok? I hiked out here in a $300 dress, and some seriously uncomfortable heels to give you this speech, so you are just going to have to shut up and listen, got it?”

He glowers at me with a power and a darkness that cold, clawed hand seizing on the thin chain of my necklace so quick and I harsh I don’t even see it coming, until he rips it from my neck. The metal drags and scrapes along my bare skin as it breaks free.

I stare at him in shock and pain as he grips my arms bruisingly tight above the elbows. “What the hell—

“Actually, I think you’ll find you’re the one that needs to shut up.”

Pain tears through me with the searing bite of a dozen glowing knives—the red hot metal cauterizing the gaping wound even as it slashed through flesh and memory. Raking angry glistening lines down my frozen vocal chords, a scream scrabbles desperately for purchase, but no sound escapes them.

With every terrified cell in my body, I fight him. Teeth, nails, and flailing limbs, but he blocks them all, swatting me away with careless hands and a grip like iron shackles at my elbows. All my weakening objections are nothing to the power of his hunger, and he steals my life in gulps. His will is all that keeps me standing as I fall slack in his hold.

As my body fills with heavy sand and grains of darkness cloud my vision, something shifts. I feel the softness of pillows and the hovering weight of a charming monster above me. He wears betrayal and stupidity in his smile. The image lasts only a moment—hazy and dark though it is—but it is the last coherent thought in my mind.

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**Stefan**

*So sweet,* I think as hot, rich nectar coats my tongue. I feel it slide thick and pleasantly warm into my throat, painting the walls in its vibrant crimson hue as euphoria thrills in my veins. She struggles frantically against me, writhing and jerking in my arms as she fights to pull her neck from my fanged hold. I growl a warning, sinking my teeth deeper into her tender flesh until blood fills my vision and my nose burrows wetly in the sucking wound.

As my eyes fall closed in bliss, I see them there—dancing, *smiling.* I see the flirtation in his eyes as he winks at her, the adoration in hers, and my blood boils. My veins heat with the savage anger of my bloodlust, and my teething bite becomes a vicious frenzy. How dare he? How dare she?! Elena’s love is mine. It *belongs* to me. Damon’s not *allowed* to steal it away. Not this time.

My brutal hands twist harshly at her elbows, squeezing tighter and tighter as she pulls at them. I can feel the skin pinching, the bones creaking in protest to my bruising fists, and for a moment it steals my concentration. I am present enough despite my blood-soaked vision to loosen my clenching grip at least slightly. If only to avoid a repetition of this morning. That girl had fought at least twice as hard as this, and in my hunger I had forgotten my own strength. I’d had to bury the arm separately.

But no matter how much I consume, I never tire of this. Caroline’s blood is still the sweetest
ambrosia I have ever tasted solely because it’s here and now. Her blood fills my lungs with living air and jolts my heart into action as my teeth sink in to that raw and bleeding meat.

I want nothing more than to bury myself inside it, gnaw into her crimson essence—blood pouring down my chest and blanketing the forest floor at my feet—until her head topples from her shoulders and there is nothing but an oozing stump to mark my claim. This one is mine.

Bonnie

“Stefan!” Elena shouts, rushing toward him. I am frozen in my tracks, bile rising in my mouth, as I watch him bite at my best friend’s throat, her blood coating his chin as he moans in macabre ecstasy. She isn’t moving.

“Stefan! Come on, get control of it,” Damon soothes, palms up in surrender as he attempts to reason with his crazed brother. Stefan’s eyes are hard and oily black, and he doesn’t even blink.

“Come on. It’s ok. Come on. Breathe through it, man.”

The moment Damon comes within lunging distance, Stefan moves. Wordlessly, he hurls him into a tree.

“Stefan, stop it!” Elena cries, fear and shock in her voice as her dance partner slips to the forest floor. He’s up in an instant, but it’s Stefan that draws my eye. Crimson drips from his wicked fangs and blood spills from his snarling lips—I see the demon in his eyes. He’s laughing.

In his blood-crazed frenzy he doesn’t seem to recognize her. Despite the concern and compassion I know are pleading in Elena’s wide brown eyes, the demon writhing beneath his dark red eyes bares his teeth, and suddenly I am afraid for her. As he stalks toward her, I summon all my fear, my rage, my revulsion, hone to a dagger of mental steel, and drive it into his skull.

The air rings melodically in my ears—a sweet and perfect note resonating through the air into my tingling fingertips and through my piercing eyes. I can feel their awed looks on me, and I am satisfied. He falls to the ground, agony erupting in his brain, as I boil the vessels—bursting them one by one over and over again until he is a quivering mess at my feet. All is still.

“It’s ok. Stefan.”

He stares at me in shock as the pain fades from his eyes, and I watch as the veins recede with his retracting fangs and green shines again through viscous black. He’s Stefan again. And in the moment I recognize him, he runs away. All three of us stare in fading horror at the rustling trees shake and flail at his inhuman speed.

“Someone’s been practicing their witchy woo.”

I spin around to find her watching me with uncanny eyes full of cruel mischief and a million dark suspicions. My heart squeezes painfully in my chest at the icy grip of them, but what scares me more than anything is the knowledge I see there—the understanding. I don’t want to be known by this creature. I am nothing like her. I can’t be.

She smiles wider, as though she’s heard my thoughts and found them amusing, sidling up beside me as she casts an eye about the scene.

“So, what did I miss? Is that Caroline?” she asks, and my stomach drops. My god, I’d almost
Spurred by the question, Elena drops to her knees beside Caroline’s crumpled form, her gentle hands catching the dark red drops as they stream from the gaping wound. Her palms struggle desperately to staunch the flow, to plug the hole even as tears stream from her eyes. Tears that gather in my throat and burn behind my eyes. But I am…numb.

“Damon, you have to help her!” she cries, desperation a veritable scream in her tears.

What? NO! Is all I can think as the vampire descends on my bleeding friend, and I search inside myself again for that psychic blade and its ringing beauty as I thrust into his mind. Wait—what is this? This…wall. My blade glances harmlessly off its impenetrable side, scraping jarringly across its smooth surface and falling into the empty space between us. My eyes widen with fear and my heart gallops in my chest again at the look in his gleaming eye.

“Did you just try to mind whammy me?” he asks, bemused and not in the least bit afraid. My heart drops into my stomach and the world falls away into the vacuum of my terror.

“Why didn’t that work?” I breathe, backing away from them and their haunting, demonic grins. I can hear Nadia chuckling evilly behind me as the menacing smirk flashes across Damon’s darkly handsome face.

“It doesn’t matter right now,” Elena snaps impatiently, no room in her at all for sympathy as she focuses solely on the dying blonde. “Damon, please!”

As the vampires’ attention shifts from me, the pressure releases, feeling returns to my limbs and I seize me chance. Nadia’s mocking laughter follows me all the way home.

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**Elena**

I hardly recognized him. Standing there in the woods, bestial and terrifying in his anger while Caroline’s blood soaked his shirt collar, he looked every inch the monster he had once described. Only, despite the other’s warnings, I had never seen his face when I thought the word. Even as the blurred and nameless ‘vampire’ haunted my nightmares—even as the extent of my ignorance chipped away at my comfortable world with every new discovery, every unsubtle taunt—I had never quite brought myself to believe it. Those two faces could not be the same.

Maybe that was naïve. Maybe it was stupid to think his determined disavowal of his other nature, his rejection of human blood and all its ramifications, preserved him from that darkness. Perhaps to think this Stefan was only the beast that had consumed mine when I fed him with my blood was unfair to both. I don’t know. Maybe I never will. Maybe I don’t really want to.

One things for certain though, whether this Stefan—the vampire—is a parasite on the man or merely his partner in crime makes little difference in the end. What matters most in helping Stefan is the same thing that will almost certainly tear him apart. Stefan can’t control himself. And that means anything could happen.

I watch as Damon cradles Caroline in his arms, holding his wrist to her mouth as she wakes just enough to drink, and the knot in my stomach loosens just a little. She’s going to be ok.

But she’s not our only problem. “So what happens now?” I ask, desperately needing Damon’s air of certainty right now. I need to know that someone has a plan, even if it’s likely to fail. I can’t
imagine a good ending to this.

“Now,” he grunts as he jumps to his feet, lifting my unconscious friend in his arms, “I take the princess home to her tower and we both pray she doesn’t go hunting anymore savage beasts in the next 24 hours. One immortal blonde is more than enough for me, thank you.”

“I meant about—

“Oh, of course!” he finishes, eyes flaring dangerously. “It’s Saint Stefan you’re worried about. I see. Because taking a bite out of your best friend just isn’t enough to shake Elena Gilbert loose.”

His predictably misplaced anger sparks the same in me, and I bristle in offense and irritation. He can be so impossible sometimes. Just when I think we’ve reached some kind of understanding, he has to throw a wrench in things.

“That’s not what I meant, Damon!” I snap, beyond fed up with that line. “I know it’s bad, but he’s out there all alone. He could—

“What? Stub his toe? Trip over a rock and land in the quarry? That’ll be the day,” he grumbles, his anger unfazed by my attempt at reason. Can’t he just for once listen to me?

“Hurt someone!” I finish, and finally he falls silent. “Damon, he could hurt someone.”

He watches me, mouth unmoving and eyes sympathetic, as he considers his next words. No matter what he says or does to convince me otherwise, I know he cares about his brother just as much as I do. And I know he’s just as scared for him now.

“...Z’s gone after him,” he says finally, gesturing toward the empty clearing behind us. I wonder how I missed her exit. “She won’t let anything happen.”

“You’re sure about that?” I ask, skeptically. I still haven’t heard even half of their story, but if I know one thing I know this: Nadia hates Stefan. It would give her no greater pleasure than to drive a stake through his heart, and after this week, I’m not so sure Damon would stop her.

“You can trust her. She hasn’t let me down yet.”

Right.

Damon

My feet easily retrace the familiar path of the Forbes’ cozy home, leather heels scuffing lightly at the wooden floorboards, as I approach her bedroom. Shouldering the door aside, I carry her gently over the threshold and into the site of her nightmares.

She stirs in my arms—hair bright as polished gold against the dark fabric of my suit jacket—and the innocent way she curls into me awakens a feeling long buried and longer denied. Somewhere in the hollow pit of my damned soul, something black and cancerous gives a yawning stretch and threatens me with its glowing eyes. Sleek and powerful, it pounces, trapping my heart between vicious teeth and an iron jaw—ensnaring me with guilt.

As I lay her lightly on the once blood-stained sheets, my mind flashes with the memory of those carnal nights and savage mornings. I remember how I’d seen myself in this fragile human girl—
seen some spark of the man I had once been, when I was hopelessly in love with death itself and the beautiful mask it beckoned me with. I had been as helpless to resist that trap as she was. Perhaps it’s why I often carry nothing but disdain and loathing for her. She’s far too like me in all the worst possible ways, and I hate her as I hate that self.

We’ve both taken Death by the hands, and followed it barefoot through the moonlight as it fed us to the darkness. A darkness we came to crave even to our own destruction. The light through the window catches at a single remaining drop of blood that mars her pale skin, and all I can think is that it seems inevitable now. You can’t court death and darkness as we have and expect to escape it unscathed. In our own separate ways, we both have a price to pay.

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**Stefan**

I can’t get it out of my head. With the thrill of new life rushing through my undead limbs, the world seems brighter, sharper, and more present than ever. I swear I can feel each microscopic drop of human blood as it trickles and twines with my own, igniting every cell and nerve with an intoxicating energy that consumes me in its darkness even as it bathes the world in light.

But the whispers...the ruby drops fill my mind with a thousand hissing voices—needling and prodding at my hunger with the sweetest brush of air breathed about the shell of my ear...I can’t block them out. They’re everywhere. They own me. How do I make them stop? I have to make them stop. I can’t—oh, God Caroline. I can’t believe I almost did that to Caroline. What’s happening to me?! And Elena’s face when she saw me, the look in her eyes...God, I am a monster. I should let her kill me.

I hear her behind me, gliding along the forest floor as she chases me with her own inhuman speed. Speed that is light-years ahead of mine, speed I can’t possibly hope to match let alone out run. She’s closing in. I know what she wants. I know why she nips so close at my heels, why she lets me stay ahead. She lives for the chase, lives for my fear, because she knows in the end she’ll have the pleasure of my blood on her hands. I’m considering letting her.

Yet somehow still, despite my thoughts, my feet run. My body belongs to him now, and I have always been powerless against him.

Suddenly, the path ahead disappears behind the image of a tiny vampire in a lilac dress. My heels scrape and slide through loose dirt as I grind to a standstill. Seems she’s tired of the chase after all. “Stop running, Stefan,” she says, fangs faintly glowing in the pitch black night. “It’s embarrassing for both of us.”

Inside, my heart is pounding—my mind a haze of guilt, fear, and desperation—as I face my death before me. I know how this ends. I want to fall to my knees and beg for it all—life, death, redemption—but my voice has other ideas. “You here to kill me now, Nadia?” it challenges. My body is little more than a puppet to him now. His hunger has consumed me.

She purses her lips in mock thoughtfulness, giving me an appraising eye behind her own devil’s face. “Thinking about it,” she admits, and I’m not sure whether I’m relieved or terrified.

“What’s stopping you?” I challenge, the baiting tone almost begging for her rage. Jealousy and hatred pour out of me through that voice. It feels ripped from my core, slathered over my skin like oozing black bile, and whispered into the air.
“Worried what my brother might say?” I taunt, and I feel my face take the shape of it. “I can’t imagine he’d mind too much all things considered. He’s probably tired of playing second fiddle for all eternity.”

“Please,” she snorts. “The fact that you still think that way, Stefan, is frankly more than a little pathetic. Damon’s ten times the man you are, and at least a hundred times the vampire. If anyone’s playing second fiddle—

“How does it feel to watch the person you love fall for someone else?” the beast continues to jeer and taunt. He is relentless in his lust for destruction—hers and mine.

“You tell me,” she chuckles, seemingly unbothered by the accusation. “You’re far more recently acquainted with the sensation.”

“Come on. I’ve seen the way you look at him. How quick you are to defend him. You can’t tell me that doesn’t mean anything,” I scoff, incredulous. She doesn’t really think she’s kidding anyone does she?

“Does this tactic usually work for you?” she asks, eyebrow quirked in cynical amusement. “I can see you’re going for antagonistic badass, but I got to tell you it’s really not doing it for me, hon.”

I feel the Ripper slither backward and inch from my skin, leaving my tongue if only for this moment, and my voice is mine again. This is my last chance and I’m losing ground. I’m growing more frantic by the second. Her expression is inscrutable, and she begins to circle.

“What about your family, huh?” I ask, straining wildly after her hidden fury. Her lust for vengeance. I know it’s still there, just beneath the surface. “After what I did to them? You gonna tell me you don’t want me to pay for that?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t dream of it,” she chuckles, and I see that fury gnashing madly in her eyes. Not so hidden after all. “But I want more than just your life, Stefan.”

“I want your heart in the palm of my hand. I want your blood pooling at my feet. I want to leave your desiccated corpse lying stranded in the open for the birds to feast on your eyeballs.” With each spoken word, her steps tread nearer and nearer. She’s walking an infernal circle so personal, so close, that all she’d need to secure a human lifetime of vengeance is to reach out and take it. Please, Nadia. Please, please take it.

“But, I’m not going to kill you, Stefan. Not today. Know why?”

She stands directly before me now, eyes and teeth sharp as the hatred in her black heart, and I have to know.

“Wh—

Nadezhda

CRACK!

“Because you want it too much.”

I throw him over my shoulder—all 180 pounds of him—and run us both home. As the trees whip
past in a blur of grey and green, I wonder how we got to this point. When did the world fall so completely to shit? I feel like I blinked and the world went up in a haze of blood and fire. I think I let myself fall so completely in the pit of my hatred that I lost sight of everything else. It’s going to be a nightmare climbing out again. Good thing I know just the girl to help with that.

“Welcome back,” Damon says with an approving nod as I make my way toward him and the basement cell.

“Thank God!” Elena exclaims in evident relief. Clearly, there’s been some tension there since I left. Crazy kids.

“Matter of perspective,” I grumble in response to her outburst, tossing Stefan carelessly to the stone floor like a bag of unbroken ice. I think I even hear a few cracks on impact.

“Do you have to throw him so hard?!” Elena asks accusingly, the urge to run to him shining clearly in her eyes.

“Yes.”

She seems to take offense to the shortness of my reply, looking to Damon for support. He shrugs. As he locks the heavy door on his brother’s inert corpse, I can sense the smirk of satisfaction on his hidden face. It takes a moment to work out why that bothers me. There’s something he’s not saying, but I can feel it in my veins.

My eyes pinch skeptically when I recognize it, “You’re not serious about this, are you?”

“Why shouldn’t I be?” he asks, a sharp challenge tight on his face. He’s kidding right? Has he learned nothing?!

“Damon, come on! Even you can’t be this stupid. Just call her,” I demand, flabbergasted by his stubbornness.

“I said, no.”

“...Fine. Don’t listen to me, but don’t expect me to sympathize when he tears her throat out.”

We both know that’s a lie. In fact, I’d say it’s what he’s banking on. He can afford to play the idiot when he knows he has a fail safe, can’t he?

Frustrated and pissed beyond all belief, I speed away, seeking the oblivion of sleep and a bottle of something strong. I may not reemerge for weeks. At this point, I think I’ve more than earned it.

x

The world is drenched in blue. When I open my eyes, this is my first thought. And a strange one it is, because if I were to pick a color to describe this forest, it wouldn’t be that one. Grey maybe, or green, hell even white would be a better fit than blue, but somehow blue feels right. It has the right texture, the right voice. In a place where trees sprout from the ground like carnivorous seaweed—floating in the drink as long tentacled arms haunt the air, thirsting for blood—‘blue’ sums it up nicely.

Those reedy giants beckon the hapless traveler with their hypnotic sway, waving him onward with whispers of freedom and silence. Of eternity...No. As my eyes track the sky-scraping curve of them, drawn inexorably onward till they meet nodding conspiratorially at the center, I realize these
trees are nothing like seaweed at all.

No, they are bone dry and rock hard, ashen and firm, and they form the cage that closes over the world. They seal away the torment of the outside, cradle a man in this shadowed and bleeding prison with promises of safety and home...Their bodies hang from the rafters. The deep and steady beating of a single living heart is all that marks their passage. I know where I am now. The locals call it Suicide Forest, and I think I know what it means.

“My love is that you? Oh, it is! Oneira, my queen of nightmares, you have returned to me!”

His voice sounds from somewhere behind me, floating on the empty wind, drifting through the heavy air as it fills my ears, my eyes, my lungs. Until he appears before me—grey and insubstantial, but somehow still more real than the last I saw him.

“Zephyr. What are you—what am I doing here? What’s that?”

In his hand, he holds the cage’s beating captive, the muscle thick and firm as it drips its cloying sweetness in tempting burgundy streams, so dark they’re almost black.

As my vision fills entirely with the sight of that bleeding, living heart, my eyes size it up—measuring every familiar curve, every pulsing chamber, and I can feel it’s weight in my palm. I can feel the grind and scrape of bone as my knife severs her ribcage, her screams as I reached into her chest. Looking down, I find I hold the heart in my own hand.

I glance back toward my child’s lingering wraith only to find empty air in his place.

“Zephyr?”

“Not a day goes by that I do not think of you, zoe mou,” his voice alone whispers, chased away by a new presence.

She moves and shifts through the air like water, but her eyes glow red as burning coal. They make diamonds of her words as she hurls them at me.

“Ah, that’s sweet. He calt chyoo his life. Funny, I thought she’d kilt you Zephyr. She kilt all ‘o us.”

“Lottie—

“My mistress, when you left me, my heart grew dim.” As his distant voice rings in my ears, the heart races. I can feel its pulse expanding frantically, fighting the firmness of my grasp.

“Thanks for that by the way. We’ve been having a swell time.” Another familiar voice calls accusingly. The lovely Nenet steps up on my other side.

“Did you think of us at all after you left?” asks a sweet faced blonde, with sad grey eyes.

“Of course I did, Victoria. I—

“Yeh?” Behind me, the former chimney sweep from London, Benjamin. He wraps an arm around his Victoria as I feel myself shrinking beneath them all. “Bet you though’ abou’ tit every day, eh? Wonder wha’ it was like for us?”

“What he did to us?” Teresa now, with her dark wild hair and her stern expression, joins them.

Somehow I hold my pulsing heart in my own hands, bound together by my clenching palms, and I can see the rotting darkness lodged within. It oozes black bile from its core—every chamber darker
than the last—draining down my wrists, swirling around them, pouring to the ground beneath my feet and sucking me in. I sink into it up to my knees; I am mired in blackness as they circle me.

They are little more than floating words and swimming faces, but their circle swirls around me with increasing ferocity. It funnels from the ribcage, the thick air makes a whirlpool of the blue and I am trapped at the bottom of the funnel. Surrounded by my family as they shower me with hate. Only their words and their names make it through.

“Know what it’s lie’ ta feel yer arm torn from yer body? Ta feel the muscles and sinew snap as they pull free? Yer bones ripped clear from the joint?” Seamus, the Irishman.

“Know what it’s like to lie bleeding and limbless on zee floor, while your friends are ‘roribly, brutally, slaughtered around ‘ou?” The German doctor, Franz.

“Please. Please—

“He caught Irina ferst, you kno’? Strung hur up from the rafters lyke meat on a hook. Said she’d have the perfct fiew. Said he didn’t want her to miss anything.” This one speaks with long, dark vowels, and consonants that seem to bounce atop them. God, it’s Lukas.

“Oh, Veles. Please stop.” I clutch the bleeding heart against my chest, hunching my shoulders as I defend it with my own back—shield it from the words that fall like obsidian daggers of excruciating memory and haunting guilt around us. It cries my grief in dark red tears down the backs of my hands.

“Why’d he do that, Nadia? Did he catch you macking on his girl?” I can’t even see them now through the whipping of furious water, or the pounding in my ears, but I know it’s Chandra all the same. I hear their names like heartbeats against my ear drums as it pulses in my hand.

“Did you make him jealous?” Miyanda.

“Ya knew what Klaus’d do if he found out about us. How did he find out, Nad-jah?” Lottie, who could never get the trick of my name.

“Did Rebekah tell him?” Sayuri.

“You jus’ couldn’ help yerself coul’ dyou?” Charming Seamus once again.

The last face I see is hers, dark and angry. First and last of my tormentors. “How’s it feel ta know it’s all yer fault?”

I’m sorry, Lottie. I’m sorry.

Their words break the surface of my skin, opening it to their assault as they slash and stab the dagger’s teeth into my flesh, exposing the bleeding gateway for their message. They drive right through me, piercing the softness of my hollow chest, and shatter my breastbone in a million cracking shards as they burrow deep inside my dying heart. It’s all my fault. It’s all my fault.

“STOP!!”

And just like that, they’re gone. The Sea of Trees vanished with the loss of their spirits, and I stand alone in a haze of blue and black as my body sinks deeper into it.

“Nadja.”
I know her voice—know her before I see her—but still she takes my breath away. Glowing copper and gold in the darkness, beautiful and bright amidst my grief. My beloved Irina. She giggles girlishly at my joy as I stare at her in wonder. She seems to absorb all my love, my relief, my happiness, and the heart feels lighter for it.

But it can’t last. I make the mistake of glancing down, as though expecting to find the rotting black disappeared from the heaving muscle, but what I find is just as cancerous and toxic as before. In fact, it may even be more so. It feeds on my joy, my love, like the parasite that it is. Fueling all that darkness with every spark of light I find to fight it with. My grief, rage, hatred, guilt, rejection, hunger ebb and flow in and out of that oozing mass, growing and consuming everything else until the wood is caked in blackness and Irina’s laugh turns cold.

Only, I see as my eyes settle on sandy hair and glowing yellow eyes, it’s not Irina. It’s—

**Damon**

I wake up gasping, nearly startling the girl curled against my shoulder on the cold stone floor. I stare wide-eyed in the silence as my sense of self returns. I can still hear their taunting, accusing, hating voices as they circle like hyenas before the kill. I feel her guilt, her helplessness, but most of all her deep, abiding certainty that this is justice. That she deserves this.

Her thoughts flood me and I lose myself in them, but her hold is fading in the waking light. The first thought of my own emerges from my buried consciousness and resounds like a gunshot through my mind.

What the *fuck* was that?!

Chapter End Notes

* Greek transliteration for 'my life'. Term of endearment

^ aka Aokigahara Forest or the Sea of Trees located at the northwest base of Mount Fuji in Japan
So, in a quick summary of the last chapter: Uncle Daddy John Gilbert is still looking for the device of mass vampire destruction; Stefan went completely off the rails and very nearly drained Caroline dry at the Miss Mystic Pageant (though luckily for her Damon and Elena showed up in the nick of time with a few pints of Damon’s magic healing blood); Bonnie helped D/E put him down with her magic mind whammy which she in turn discovered does not work on Damon for some as yet undisclosed reason (te he); and Damon and Z are independently discovering the side effects of their mysterious blood binding ritual. Think that should about cover it. Enjoy!

Elena

The whole world feels warm and fuzzy at the edges. Despite the cozy softness of my bed back home, my eyelids feel about 10lbs this morning. I know he meant well, but once Damon woke me and convinced me to get up off the cold stone floor and find a real bed, my mind had been kick-started into an endless tightening spiral in one singular image.

I couldn’t close my eyes without seeing Caroline dangling there like meat on a hook while Stefan tore into her throat and greedily drained her life. If it hadn’t been for Damon, I know she wouldn’t be alive today. That thought’s the only thing that makes the rest bearable. She survived. Still, it doesn’t make the image any less horrifying or any less enthralling to my subconscious. And without Damon’s presence there beside me, it had settled on nothing else the whole night through.

If I had been naïve enough yesterday to think a single night’s sleep would help push that image out of my mind, last night’s slew of nightmares cured me of it. It had taken everything in me just to step foot inside the boarding house yesterday, and even then I couldn’t bear to look at the basement door, let alone his face. I sure as hell don’t feel ready now, but what choice do I have really? I can’t very well avoid him forever.

Well, if nothing else, at least Damon’s here to keep me company, even if his version of comfort is flirty smiles and sarcastic quips. It beats waiting alone.

As I approach the entrance to the Salvatore boarding house, a sound reaches me that instantly sets my teeth on edge and my overtired mind into overdrive: a woman—moaning. An irrational anger floods my veins and I am marching inside with no further thought than the desire to give that bastard a piece of my mind. It’s an impulse I regret immediately at the sight that greets me.

“Oh my god. Do you have to do that here?!” I screech, resisting the urge to cover my eyes as I stare at her in shock and disgust.

The girl lies flat on her back along the embroidered couch, long auburn ringlets tangling and pouring over the arm, and her left knee hooked atop Nadia’s shoulder as they both stare at me in reproach. Even with blood trailing down her bare leg in dark red lines and a painful-looking bite mark glaring clearly on her skin, the girl looks less than pleased by my interruption. That in itself is disturbing.
Nadia’s fangs dislodge from the girl’s thigh and her right hand from beneath the sheer fabric of her floral skirt as she turns to me with a gleam in her eye. “What? I’m not allowed to order take-out in my own home?” she says in mock offense. “Wow, Elena. Bossy much?”

I stare at her in revulsion, images of Caroline’s broken and bleeding body flashing before my eyes as I shout, “That’s so not the point! She’s a human being, not kung pao chicken!”

How can she not understand that? This is a person she’s turned into her compelled Happy Meal. What part of that is okay?

Locking her smirking eyes on my furious ones, Nadia leans back over the bite and I watch in shock as her tongue darts out to nick itself on her own fangs. She smiles briefly at my blank stare and takes a deliberate swipe of the single trailing line of still dripping blood. I watch in an odd mixture of confusion, dismay, and relief as the wound heals once again to smooth golden skin.

“Of course, how rude of me. Elena, this is Billie. Billie, meet Elena,” she smirks, gesturing between the two of us. “She’s queen of the Salvatore universe so I’d tread carefully there.”

I glare at her in shock and offense as she casually murmurs this last taunt into her victim’s ear. The girl smiles in mocking amusement as she settles back against the couch.

Lia rolls her eyes at my expression. “Oh, relax. Billie’s a friend. She’s not even compelled...” she trails off, throwing a thoughtful glance in the girl’s direction, “well, not about that anyway.”

“What—what?” I ask dumbly, eyes flicking between the two in confusion and not a little disgust as I attempt to digest this information.

Chuckling to herself, Nadia finally takes pity on me as she turns to her companion. “Could you give us a moment, sweetheart?” She meets Billie’s eyes and smiles in dismissal, but the instant focus and subsequent dilation of the girl’s eyes betrays the familiarity of the disturbing exchange. Her easy acceptance all the more so. Not compelled, my ass.

Of all the powers I’ve seen vampires display, that might be the most frightening. That so many people walk around entirely defenseless against it—that it would be so easy to make living puppets of them all...us all, I think as my fingers close around the smooth edges of my vervain necklace...that frightens me.

It occurs to me to wonder at her sudden and blatant antagonism as of late. Even yesterday, when the three of us had by collective intuition decided to distract each other from the starving vampire in the basement and enjoy our single day of drama-free company, I’d caught her glaring at me behind Damon’s back. It makes me wonder what I possibly could have done to piss her off. Especially since we’ve barely even spoken in weeks.

“Well, I’ve been spending a lot of time in college bars lately. Only natural I’d have picked up a friend or two along the way, don’t you think?” I spot a flash of pale skin beneath her loose fitting sleeveless as she tucks her feet beneath her.

“So, she what? Volunteered?” I say snarkily, an eyebrow arched in challenge as my eyes follow the obviously compelled girl as she leaves the room.

“Oh, I wouldn’t say that exactly,” Nadia admits, swiping a half-full tumbler from the wet bar, and her smirk turns smug, “but she’s not complaining about the arrangement. That’s for damn sure.”

Frustration at the limit, I snap, “I just don’t understand why you can’t drink from blood bags like Damon does.”
“I think the better question is, ‘Why should I?’”. Besides,” she says casually, reclining back against the seat, drink in hand, “if you’re going to be around here all the fucking time, you’re going to have to get used to seeing things you don’t like. My advice? Get over it.”

Her words are infuriating, and I can tell by the glint in her eye that they are meant to be. She’s waiting for me to rise to the challenge so that she can shut me down again more savagely than before. I refuse to give her the satisfaction.

“Where’s Damon?”

She smirks at that as though she’s read the turn of my thoughts and been delighted by my lame attempt at deflection. It makes me uneasy, because despite the scarcity of these interactions in the past, I know well enough to know it means she’s just getting started.

“Wrangling chipmunks in the forest like a third class predator,” she says breezily, watching closely for my reaction.

I blink in surprise. “I can’t even imagine that,” I admit wonderingly.

She huffs in agreement. “You shouldn’t have to. It’s embarrassing.”

She pauses a moment, seeming to consider her next move, and I brace myself for the coming blow. “You know, I’ve never understood that,” she says finally, relaxing heavily against the cushions as she takes another sip of bourbon.

“What?” I ask in confusion, not sure of the reference.

She winks at me, undoubtedly pleased by her ability to throw me—again.

“Why that somehow makes it better. It’s still human blood,” she says, shaking her head with a wry smile. “And, actually, it’s worse because stealing from the hospital depletes their supply. When they invariably have a patient in desperate need of a blood transfusion, you’re actually more likely to be killing someone. Indirectly, granted, but still…”

That...actually makes a startling amount of sense and, disturbed that I’m even contemplating such a perspective, I seize on the only other topic in my mind.

“Right...When’s he coming back?” I ask again, slightly ashamed by the desperation even I can hear in the question. I’m not sure how much longer I can survive this verbal spar with the scariest Salvatore ally.

“Why?...” she asks, shit-eating grin alighting her face once again. “Elena Gilbert, am I making you nervous?” Yes.

“No!” I deny immediately, even though we both know it’s a lie. “It’s just—Are you mad at me or something? You’re acting weird.”

“What?! Of course not. How could I ever be mad at you, Elena?” The sarcasm is so venomous that I am slightly surprised I don’t drop dead on sight. It’s unsettling, confusing, and even a little frightening. So much so that suddenly prison detail sounds more appealing, and I’ve been dreading that all night.

“I think, I’m gonna go...check on Stefan,” I stutter as I make my way toward the front hall and the basement cell around the corner.
“Fine!” she calls after me, a dark chuckle floating just beneath her words, “but stay outside the door alright?! I think we’ve had enough Elena Gilbert heroics to last a lifetime!”

Her mocking words chase after me, as I happily leave them behind. Spending too much time with that particular vampire never ends well. That knowledge is enough motivation to push my feet that final distance to the basement door.

The moment my feet hit the stone though, that desperation vanishes and I am left with nothing but ice cold dread. How do I do this? How am I meant to face the man I loved—do love?—knowing what he did? Knowing what he did to my best friend? He almost killed her. He would have if we hadn’t gotten there when we did. If Damon hadn’t been there to save her...

Worse still, I looked into his hungry red eyes twice yesterday and, despite all the desire in me to deny it even to myself, I know that more than anything he wanted. In that moment, blood was all that mattered. How am I supposed to deal with that?

As stealthily as possible, I approach the window, peaking through the bars to catch a glimpse of that unrecognizable monster now wearing the face of my nightmares—starring in my darkest dreams.

He lays curled atop the cot with his back to me, arms and legs huddled together as he balls himself in misery and guilt. The briefest pang of sympathy breaks through my fear and simmering anger, but it’s gone in an instant as his face appears at the bars.

I jump back, gasping in shock and fear, tripping over my feet as I stumble back hard against the opposite wall.

“Elena?” he asks, face clearing to reveal the sickly pale image of my once perfect boyfriend. The exertion seems to have cost him as well, and he sinks weakly to the floor below.

Still more carefully this time, I peak back through the window, meeting his gaze head on where he blinks up at me, once again the helpless infant. I’m not falling for it this time.

“How can you even stand to look at me right now?” he asks in the smallest voice I’ve ever heard. It pulls weakly at my heart strings, but resilient anger still festers in that raw and aching wound, and I can’t quite reach my usual compassion.

“I don’t know, Stefan,” I say honestly. “Maybe because, despite everything, some part of me has to believe that this isn’t really you. That it’s just the blood.”

He seizes on this admission like a cat on a wounded bird, pouncing on my weakness. “You have to know, that I would never do those things if it weren’t for this—hunger inside of me. It’s like I just couldn’t control it. But, I never wanted to hurt you.”

He sounds so sincere, the words so exactly right to touch that tiny spark of hope in my aching heart, that I almost believe him. If this were any other day, any other place but this, I would. But behind my eyelids Caroline’s body still lies limp and bleeding in his arms—his teeth still buried in her throat—and I just can’t. It’s not to this vampire that I’m speaking then, when I tell him, “I know, Stefan. I know that.”

“You can forgive me. Can’t you, Elena?”

His eyes are so gentle, so green, as he pleads for my understanding. I catch a lingering glimpse of my Stefan there, buried beneath bloodlust and violence, drowning in the darkness of the monster’s face, and my heart breaks for him. I can see those haunted shadows swimming again in his familiar
eyes, and I want to give it to him, but something holds my tongue.

“I want to, but...You hurt Caroline, Stefan. Caroline!” I wield her name like a mirrored shield, hiding those eyes from myself even as I force him to face hers. It feels cruel and unjust as I watch his body crumple to the ground, but I owe it to her not to waver.

“I know. God, I know. And I’m so sorry. The blood, it just—it’s like this switch just goes off and I can’t—I could see myself hurting her and I wanted to stop so badly, but I just couldn’t.”

Despite my still very present anger—his betrayal—this last makes it through. Because if what he says is true, if he really was ‘possessed’ by blood and hunger, if this monstrous version really has been nothing but a cancer on my Stefan, then none of this was his fault. It was mine.

“What am I supposed to do with that, Stefan?”

“Let me out. I swear to God, Elena, I’ll never touch another drop of human blood again, just please...”

My brow creases with reluctant sympathy, but somehow I manage to leave him behind.

Caroline

“Mm,” I groan as I am rudely dragged from blissful unconsciousness. “Shut up ——Urrgh! It’s Saturday.” I roll over to bury my face in the pillow and drown the blazing red behind my eyelids in smothering black. The stupid freaking inconsiderate birds continue to chirp merrily in the background. Why do they have to be so freaking happy in the mornings? Ugh.

Acknowledging that I’m not likely to get much sleep with those pests twittering away outside my window, I reluctantly open my eyes.

The world slowly comes into focus, darkness fading in fragments as sunshine lights up the room, and an unfathomable sensation of displacement washes over me. I recognize the interior of my own bedroom, the feminine pattern of my comforter across my body, but there is something distinctly unfamiliar about it. It takes me a moment to work it out, but when I do my brows furrow together in confusion and worry.

I’m wearing an oversized T-shirt and a pair of shorts I haven’t seen since freshman year, and I have no idea how they got there. What little I do remember comes back in hazy, disjointed fragments—small snippets of memory that fit together like misshapen pieces of a larger puzzle. None of it seems quite real. It has the foggy quality of a dream memory and about the same degree of sense.

It comes to me in flashes. I remember winning. And, boy, does that ever bring a smile to my face. I remember hugging Elena and verbally duking it out with Carol Lockwood (fake socialite smiles and all). I remember sneaking a glass of champagne to celebrate, and I blush to think how many glasses followed that one. I might have flirted a little too outrageously with that waiter for his help. Thank god for Elena, or I might really have embarrassed myself. Although, I’ll admit I’m surprised no one else noticed. I was the center of attention after all.

Still, that was a day for the history books, and I smile to myself at the thought. Hell, even Damon was less of a dick than usual. Then again, that might have been Elena’s influence. Why else would he have offered to drive me home? I do wonder where Stefan got off to though, and I’ve got half a mind to beat the answer out of him myself, but...I guess that’s Elena’s problem to deal with. I just
hope she knows what she’s doing there.

I grab my phone off the side table, thumbing it open to check the time. Wow, I nearly slept the day away. It’s almost 2! Guess I really needed the rest.

Without even checking, I can tell my mother’s long gone. Not only does the house feel familiarly empty, but there’s no way she would have let me sleep in this long if she wasn’t. Besides, she’s been in ‘Sherriff mode’ for over a week now, seems like the entire department’s in a tizzy over some new case. I’d have been more surprised if she was home. Some things never change.

A loud knock on the front door echoes down the hall, breaking through my thoughts. My brows furrow in confusion. 2 o’clock on a Monday? Wonder who that could be...

John

She turns away when she sees me coming. She thinks I don’t notice the flash of motion as she spins to face the coffee pot just for the excuse to put her back to me, but I’m not as oblivious as she likes to think. Then again, maybe she doesn’t care if I see. She hardly goes to much effort to hide her supposed disgust. She couldn’t be more transparent if she tried. It’s a well-documented habit of hers, to act especially hateful to anyone with the ability to get under her skin. It just proves how much I get to her. Or, rather, how worried she is that I will.

“Good morning, Jenna.”

The face she turns on me is so full of contempt and skepticism that I have to bite my lips against the smug grin I feel creeping there.

“If you say so.”

She grabs the largest coffee mug available—a cereal bowl with a handle really—and fills it full to the brim with steaming fresh brew, leaving less than a healthy swallow’s worth for me. The smirk she shoots my way dares me to say a word in protest. I roll my eyes and search the cabinet for the coffee grounds.

“Elena left rather early this morning. Seemed in a bit of a hurry,” I say as I fit a clean filter in the machine and return to the bag for a fresh scoop.

“Guess so.”

I hear the plastic rustling of the bread package behind me and the click of the toaster as she presumably sets a couple slices to burn. For a long moment neither of us says a word. The tension in the room is palpable as the silence grows. I decide to cut to the chase.

“So, uh, who was that girl I saw Jeremy with yesterday?”

That girl had been rather chummy with our resident vamp/witch enemy number 1 and a tad too close for comfort to my nephew. Now I suppose that could be mere coincidence (the vampire is posing as a high school English teacher after all), but I have read and seen far too much about those creatures and this town to put much stock in coincidence. It’s certainly not an observation to be taken lightly.

“Who, Anna?” she asks, brow furrowing a little in confusion, immediately suspicious of my
interest. Although why she should be, I’ve no idea. Is it really so unbelievable that I might care with whom my nephew is spending is time?

“That her name?” I say, feigning the disinterest she seems to expect from me. “What’s her story?”

She drops both pieces of predictably burnt toast on her plate, spinning to look at me. She stares at me then, frowning up at me while her eyes search my face warily. “Why so nosy, John?”

“Just curious,” I shrug, smirking lightly. “He really seems to like her.”

Her lips purse doubtfully, clearly not buying this answer. In the next moment, though, she relents, apparently deciding an explanation is harmless enough. “She’s new in town, I think. She and her mom, Pearl.” She pauses then, reproach back in her eyes as she glares at me. “The family you’re so rudely trying to prevent from buying Grayson’s building,” she finishes, and my stomach swoops in reply.

“Her mother’s name is Pearl?” I repeat, fighting to keep the shock and sudden rush of excitement from leaking into my voice.

She nods once, eyes blank. “Yes, so?”

“Well, I believe I already know all about her.” Seems that family heirloom might not be so far out of reach after all. Looks like I have business in town.

Anna

I spot him through the crowd, hair floppy as ever. He may feel out of place, but he doesn’t look it. If it weren’t for my pathetic attachment to him, he’d slip easily from sight into the throng of teenage humans. It occurs to me that this too is something I want. To just...I don’t know, blend in I guess. To feel like a part of something even if it’s a lie.

I’m not denying my nature—I’m not Stefan, thank the lord—but there’s no denying this life gets lonely. It’s why my mother and I have always clung so tightly to each other. We’re all either of us has. That’s what makes this move of mine all the more pathetic. I know I’m now playing the role of love-struck idiot traditionally left for the Katherine addled and less dignified undead, but I can’t seem to help myself. More than that though, I’m tired of trying to pretend he doesn’t affect me the way he does. It’s exhausting, mortifying, and utterly fruitless. I’ve failed one too many times already. Time to give it up.

“Hey, surprise.”

“Hey” he greets when he spots me, and the wide grin on his face sets butterflies aflutter. I really am a cliché. “What are you doing here?”

“Picking up this,” I answer, waving the paper in my hand as I bask in the warmth of that smile.

He studies it briefly, gaze all wary confusion and tentative hope. “A class schedule?”

I nod, careful to keep my own expression clear. Just because I’ve decided to surrender to my pathetic puppy love doesn’t mean I have to be obvious about it. “Starting tomorrow, I’m officially a student here.”
His face falls slack with shock. “Wait. You’re kidding me, right?”

“No,” I smile, playfully punching his shoulder. “I finally beat my mom down.”

Even I can hear the fine trembling of nerves in my voice as I speak. I’m really not sure how he’s likely to respond, but after the Vicki fiasco—Well, the point is I won’t let it stop me.

“But, why would you want to go to high school?” he asks, still completely lost. “It blows.”

My nervous smile drops as I shoot him a flat look. “Do I really need to answer that?”

Thankfully, he reads the obvious answer there, though he looks no less shocked for his understanding. “You’d suffer through all this just to hang out with me?”

Moment of truth, Anna. Play it cool and take it slow? Or jump right in and get your answer here and now? “Yeah. I would.”

“That’s um...” he trails off, and I watch his eyes closely for any sign of his thoughts.

“Stupid? Pathetic? Old lurky me?”

“It’s awesome. It’s awesome.”

_Really_? I ask silently, chest filling with a dangerous hope as his eyes smile down. I think I was prepared more for his rejection than acceptance...

He leans down toward me, a new and beautiful spark in his eye, and I am on my tiptoes to reach him sooner. He may have kissed me in the past, but this feels like a first kiss. As he presses his lips softly to mine, I can feel it in my chest, tingling down my spine, through my stomach and charging in my fingertips that this is different. No dead ex-girlfriends, no hidden agendas, or lies of omission stand between our mouths. It’s a first regardless—the start of something new.

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**Nadezhda**

The quiet is unsettling. Ever since last night’s visitation (hardly a first, but disturbing all the same), time alone with my thoughts has become something of a nightmare in itself. Unfortunately, Damon had been of absolutely no use this morning in that department. I’d barely been awarded a ‘morning before he took off into the forest in search of wild blood-bags of the small and furry variety.

Why he was so anxious for that mortifying prospect, I can’t begin to fathom, though I did sense the slightest hint of unease that might have accounted for it. Maybe he just wanted to get it over with. Who knows? The result is the same. I’ve been left alone to babysit the world’s worst vampire and his obnoxiously dramatic girlfriend. Lucky me. But, hey, at least I have Dani and her generous offering to keep the voices out. _For the moment anyway_, I think as I hear a car door slam in the driveway. Guess I’ll have to entertain myself some other way.

Speak of the devil.

I hear the scuffing of her converse on stone steps and I flash immediately to the bar in search of a much needed refill. I’m going to need all the help I can get for this conversation if I want to keep Damon’s new lady love scratch-free. She stops just past the corner of wall behind me, no doubt scanning the scene for a dead and bloody brunette. She confirms this for me when the first words
from her mouth are, “Where’s Dani?”

The liquid sloshes against the glass walls of the tumbler, rocking slower and shallower the higher it rises until there’s little more than an inch of transparent glass. I smile to myself. This is gonna be good.

“I gave her a pat on the head and a lollipop and sent her home,” I quip, finally turning to face her with my full high ball glass in hand.

When I note the dewiness of those expressive eyes, I nearly groan. Seriously?

“Oh, no. Please don’t tell me you bought that bullshit back there.”

She may not have the facts yet (thanks for that, Damon), but surely she’s seen enough these past few days to know he’d say anything for his next fix right now. He’s little more than a desperate junkie staring down the barrel of withdrawal...

It’s the hunger talking.

I settle back against the couch, careful not to spill my drink as I nearly flop back on to it, and she makes her way further into the room—eyes beseeching.

She looks like a child come to beg mommy for a hug and a place to sleep after a bad dream, but she has come to the wrong vampire if it’s molly coddling she’s after. I’m not in the business of false sympathy, and she’s got a few things to learn if she wants anything even halfway resembling it in the future. The Salvatore’s have been entirely too gentle with her in that department. That changes now.

“Look, you can’t blame yourself for what your boyfriend gets up to in his time off,” I say, determined to make at least this break through her thick skull. I’m not sure how much self-pity I can handle. “Human blood or no, those are his choices, ok?”

“But the blood, it—How can you say this isn’t my fault?”

“...You did what you had to in the moment to save both your lives,” I say and watch the gratitude and hope swell in her eyes just enough to wreck with a fatal jab.

“Granted, your lives wouldn’t have been in danger in the first place if you had just stayed in the fucking car like you were told, but I digress.” She looks completely baffled by this much to my chagrin, but I steamroll over her questions before she can pose them. Time for that later.

“My point is that it’s not the blood that makes your boyfriend cuckoo for coco puffs. He does that just fine on his own. And also, that performance down there was all junkie Stefan reprising his starring role as Disney’s homicidal Eeyore in the hopes you’d take pity on him and offer him a new dismemberable Barbie doll. You get that, right?”

If anything she looks more confused than before. Like a kicked puppy. Hurt and baffled by my cruelty. It pisses me off. Predictably though, it only lasts a moment before she’s glaring angrily at me in true Elena fashion. All puffed up on self-righteous indignation and the certainty that she knows best.

“But, I’m the one that got him out. If I hadn’t showed up—

My drink slams loudly into the bar-top as I cut her off, “Damon would have vamp-speeded him back to the car, packed him in with you and Alaric, and sent the three of you on your safe and merry
way out of Tombpire Forest, while we polished off the rest of them with bulk-bought cardioectomies,” I rant, feeling some of the furious tension bleed from my shoulders with every word.

“Or did we not explain that sufficiently to you before?...oh, no. No, wait a minute. We totally did.”

“But...” She looks so lost and betrayed standing there that I almost feel guilty. Almost. Maybe I would if it wasn’t so fucking satisfying. But these are the words I’ve been holding back for weeks. It feels damn good to finally say them.

“But, as usual, Elena Gilbert is deaf as well as brainless when she wants something. God forbid anyone bring logic into the equation, let alone the word ‘no’.”

I watch her eyes...she looks this close to running away with her tail between her legs. Her eyes keep flicking to every exit, her body faintly trembling with the urge to move, but something is keeping her still. Pride or stubbornness, it’s unclear, but I can see the slightest spark of anger taking root behind that wounded expression. It won’t take more than the slightest push to get it going. That’ll kill a few hours. And staying awake all day and night alone is boring.

“Is Damon coming back soon?” she prompts, and I can hear that spine of steel lending a new edge to the question. She’s finally getting angry. Frustration will do that to you. She’ll never admit she’s in the wrong, but there is absolutely nothing she can say to defend herself. It’s borderline hilarious and I hope Damon takes at least another hour losing ground to the fluffernutter cavalry while I enjoy it.

“What?” I taunt, rolling my eyes so hard I think I caught a glimpse of brain back there. “Is he the nice parent?”

I watch her entire demeanor change in cartoonish proportions...

I can’t help myself at this point. The cackle that’s been bubbling and burning in my chest spills up and out of my mouth and I am very nearly crying with malicious mirth. If this is what I have to look forward to for the next thousand years, I might not mind Damon’s infatuation so much after all.

“Ok. Ok!” I gasp between breaths as the giggles slow, though I can’t quite resist a chuckle here and there. That look on her face is not helping. Sometime during my laughing fit she graduated from pouty toddler to scolding mother, and I just can’t. “I’m sorry.” No, I’m not. “I’ll stop.” For now. Shit, I hope Damon’s engaged in a full-on guerilla war out there. Stay away forever, my dear friend. I shall entertain myself endlessly with your lady love.

I school my features to the very picture of sobriety, even going so far as to set my drink aside, and give her the sincerest expression I can. “What’s really bothering you? Come, sit, tell Grandma Salvatore all about it.”

She looks a tad skeptical at first, but I think she’s determined enough to regain control of this conversation that she’s willing to give me the benefit of the doubt. Sucker.

“Do you ever regret it?”

Ok, random.

“What? Being a bitch to you?” ‘Cause that would be a big fat...maybe. But only sometimes.

She glares at my response, but pushes on. “Turning,” she says simply.
I stare at her in surprise and confusion at the unexpected question. “What brought this on?”

She glances nervously over her shoulder in the direction of the basement cell though the move is almost too quick to catch, and cringes into the seat.

“What, His Ascetic Highness down there?” I cry incredulously. “In case you haven’t noticed, he’s not exactly a model of vampire behavior even on his good days. It’s either Gandhi or Leatherface. There is no in between. Please don’t judge the rest of us for his insanity.”

“But can you really blame him?” she responds stubbornly, a hint of that earlier self-righteousness leaking into her voice. My god, she’s insufferable. “If the blood makes him so crazy...”

“The blood makes him crazy because he refuses to control it,” I snap, beyond exasperated with this perpetually repeated argument. How many times do we have to go through this?

“What do you mean? What has he been doing drinking animal blood, if not controlling the hunger?”

“De-ny-ing, E-lay-na,” I say slowly, carefully enunciating every syllable. “He’s been denying the hunger, not controlling it. Vampires drink human blood. That’s how it works. It’s natural. Being an anorexic Prom Queen about it doesn’t change the fact that the natural, not to mention perpetual—state of a vampire is hungry. Ignoring it won’t make it go away. It just means that when he eventually slips (which he always does), it’s about a thousand times worse.”

As always, she refuses to recognize the logic in my explanation, instead sticking fast to her moral outrage and glaring at me with all the heat and judgment in her willfully naïve little heart. “But they’re humans,” she stresses, as though she expects this to simple word to give me all the argument I need. “People. How can you sit there and condone feeding on them?”

“Umm, because, in case you haven’t noticed, I’m not human,” I return, all blithe indifference and merciless rationality. “So, why am I supposed to care?”

Her jaw flexes angrily, no doubt grinding her teeth in impotent frustration. “You don’t understand,” she huffs.

“No you don’t understand,” I bite out, my own teeth gritted in irritation. I am at my wit’s end with this conversation, and I just need her to shut up. Even if (perhaps especially if) it means scaring her into silence.

“To you they’re friends, family, and apparently some fallacious metaphor for innocence which is entirely incomprehensible to me. To you, it’s murder. To me? It’s dinner. And I’ve always enjoyed a good meal. Would you really deny me that simple pleasure, Elena?”

Lucy

It blossoms like a flaming paper rose at rapid speed, burning inside out and backwards to appear at the center of my candles’ flickering circle. Smiling proudly, I pluck it from the floor and flatten the note against my thigh. In my cousin’s loopy script, it reads, “Told ya I could do it” and I chuckle lightly at the cocky tone of it.

It wasn’t so long ago she was pushing through nosebleeds and silently seething at her enemies across an empty dancefloor, so, premature as it may be, I won’t deny that I’m enjoy her growing
confidence. Though, if this weekend’s disturbing encounter is anything to go by, it may not be too healthy for her. That is, if I can’t help her back it up.

I hear the scuff of her shoes on the old stone steps a moment before I see her, and I watch with wry amusement as she fairly prances to my side. “Who’s the bomb?” she asks with a proud smile. “Oh yeah. Me. I’m the bomb.”

I roll my eyes, chuckling at her antics. “Yeah, ok, hot stuff. You ready for a *real* challenge now?”

Her eyes narrow in a half-hearted glare at my jab. “Bring it,” she dares, walking through the space between the candle flames and coming to sit cross-legged in front of me.

I nod, satisfied by this response, and reach behind me to remove the weathered old grimoire from the bag at my back. The dusty leather spine crinkles and cracks as I spread it open before us, turning immediately to the spell I’d marked for today’s lesson.

As promised, this one is certainly challenging. Challenging—and dangerous. I’d debated for weeks the wisdom of sharing this with her, knowing from personal experience the doors I would be opening with this. I’m still not entirely certain whether I’ve made the right decision, but after what Bonnie’s told me of these vampires and what Kat has warned about her old friends, I don’t think the alternative is any safer. I’ll simply have to trust in my cousin’s ability to choose the right path for herself. She’s certainly better suited to it than I am.

Bonnie leans over the open book to look curiously at the spell written there, finger brushing the yellowing pages as she reads. “A binding spell?” she asks, eyes meeting mine beneath her brows and an unspoken question in her voice. I nod wordlessly, observing her confusion with my silent gaze.

Accepting this as my only answer, she returns to the spell book, again skimming the page and its seemingly straightforward incantation. “Seems simple enough,” she says, lips pursing doubtfully.

I chuckle mirthlessly. “Yeah, ‘seems’ being the operative word. You’d be surprised how much energy a spell like this can take under the wrong circumstances.”

Her brow furrows in thought, now eyeing the page with suspicion. I reach out with upraised palms to take her hands in mine, and her eyes brighten with anticipation. “Lucky for you, that’s not a problem,” I smirk and watch as the cocky grin reclaims her features at the reminder.

Teaching her to channel was only the first of many discoveries I have helped her to make these past few weeks, but it was perhaps the most important of them. Without that simple skill, she would almost certainly have killed herself by now in her determination and overconfidence, so it was only right and natural that we expand it. No matter what her Grams might have said.

Despite its general reputation among ‘good’ and ‘right-minded’ witches, there is no denying expression’s ability to open the deepest and darkest of doors within the craft. Power is only the first of them, and I have no doubt that Bonnie will take to it like a fish to water. Like a Bennet.

“Besides, what I have in mind is the easiest of circumstances. Shouldn’t be too difficult for ‘the bomb’ to handle.”

She scrunches her nose at my lame comment, sneering teasingly, before clasping my hands firmly with her own. Her eyes slip closed a moment before mine, and I already feel her energy reach for mine before we’ve even begun.

“What am I binding?” she asks, voice calm and low as she settles into her power.
I feel my lips quirk in slight amusement as I reply, “Us.”

She doesn’t respond to this, or argue with my easy answer, seeming to understand with this one word what it is I want from her, and we both fall still as she begins to chant. The words are slow and steady as she recites the short spell, easily recalling the words from her recent memorization and filling the tomb with their power. Outside, echoing through the stony passages of our underground chamber, the wind howls. I can hear it whip and tear through the trees, the grass, the leaves; through Nature herself in a frenzy of living energy as it rushes through the air and squeezes between the palms of our hands.

Her eyes snap open, spearing straight into mine, and the wind stills. All is quiet.

“Done,” she says. Short and simple, but final in her certainty.

My brow arches quizzically, a challenge in my eye as I ask, “You sure?”

“Done,” she repeats, some slight annoyance in her voice at my question.

I hold her gaze firmly with mine, silently commanding her to watch as from the pocket of my bag, I draw a knife, letting the sharpened edges of it shine in the flickering yellow of the candlelight as I brandish it between us. She watches with some fascination and not a little concern as I drag the blade across my skin, blood pooling in my upturned palm.

“What are you—OW!” she exclaims, alarm and startled pain filling her eyes. They widen with a horrified awe at the bleeding cut now sliced through her own hand, and stares at me in shock.

“Hmm,” I hum, lips pursing in mock surprise as I fight to hide my smile. “Guess you were right.”

_Damon_

I crouch in the shadows. The brightness of the mid-morning sun casts darkness beneath the giants of the forest, giving them an air of menace and savage, sinister promise. Weaker creatures cower before their predatory stance, from the unknowable danger that lurks within them.

I see him there, hiding in his corner, looking scared and nervous as he awaits the pounce of his enemy. He’s desperate—terrified—clinging to life as only the hunted can. He’s prey and he knows it, and what am I if not the perfect hunter?

“Gotcha!” I shout, lunging for his furry little throat. Faster than possible, he streaks away, climbing the nearest tree with a speed and sleekness that puts me to shame.

He titters at me from his branch, taunting little voice crying witness to my mortification. _Ooh, that little shit is going down_. I cannot _believe_ I have stooped this low. How does Stefan _do_ this? I think I’m finally beginning to understand the meaning of the word ‘squirrely’. These rodents are _fast_.

“Fine. You wanna play that game, you little fucker? How ‘bout I just murder all your friends instead? Got plenty of room left,” I taunt. Pitifully little blood sloshes against the plastic as I wave a half empty water bottle in the air between us. There really isn’t much to go around when you’re draining rodents dry. No wonder it takes Stefan so long to eat.

I hear rustling in the bush behind me and excitement piques. Sounds like Thumper to me. Perfect. More blood in those anyway. I shoot Rocky a look I know is all practiced menace and cruel
mischief, but the little guy’s got balls of steel and he doesn’t even flinch. Just stares me down with those beady little eyes like he’s silently daring me to try it. Pfft, he thinks he’s so scary. He’ll be singin’ a different tune when I finally wring his scrawny neck.

Stealthily, silently, like the supernatural predator I am, I creep up behind our bush-dwelling friend, parting the leaves with the softest of touches and catching the barest glimpse of fur and ears before I strike.

“Aha!” I shout in triumph as my hands close firmly around the compact body. Without even glancing at the rabbit, I turn back to Colonel Screwy with a taunting smile. **Wait, where’d he go?**

“Ow!” I yell as little rabbit claws rake down my face. **Killer rabbit? Really?**

Unfortunately, the shock of being fucking mauled by a goddamn Disney character loosened my grip enough to let him free and Peter Cottontail scurries off back into the bush. Genius, he is not.

Without a moment’s hesitation, I dive after him, but all I get is an eyeful of fluffy white and a face full of noxious fumes.

“Oh God, that’s disgusting.” I cough, eyes watering as I fight the urge to gag on the smell of my own tongue. I see the bushy streaked tail of a skunk as he waddles off, squirrelly’s laughter the only sound in the background as he presumably pounds his little fists against a distant tree. Damn it.

“I’m not the one that eats you fluffy little turds. Why don’t you gang up on my brother next time. Shit.” God, I’m never getting this smell out am I?

Speaking of smells...

Despite the still overwhelmingly rotten odor clouding the air, another tickles pinching fingers at my consciousness. The irresistibly tantalizing scent of blood charges through the air, but the ‘smell’ pulls at more than my nose. I can’t begin to place it or even how I can sense it, but it seems reasonable to assume it’s yet another side-effect of Z’s damn binding ritual. One I’ll have to tell her about if my suspicions are true.

Sure enough, I can make out the faintest echo of witchy chanting in the distance. Not one voice either, but two. When I creep close enough to make them out, I realize one voice is alarmingly familiar. Seems Z was right about little Bonnie after all. But this is not what unnerves me most. Faintly—so faintly that it seems imagined—I can feel the ebb of life as it flows toward their chant. Can sense the barest hint of what must be incredible power as it rushes toward them...and the soft plunk of a tiny body as it hits the forest floor.

*Well, this can’t be good.*

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**Nadezhda**

Goddamn, these Founders were a boring lot. I’ve been through 3 of these journals today and not one of them varied from the now well-established formula of whine-whine-whine-ineffectively cower and hide from the evil creatures of the night-whine-Stefan chomp-and die. It’s exhausting honestly. But, I’ll admit to being mildly entertained by the limited historical relevance.

For instance, according to Honoria Fell (apparently something of a gossip monger amongst these Mystic Falls elite) her husband let slip, that George Lockwood told him that, despite the official
record on the subject, when his and Giuseppe Salvatore’s grandfathers migrated to this settlement in the late 1700s, they were not in fact the first to do so. No word yet on the nature of these original settlers in Mrs. Fell’s hand, but I have a feeling the answer will be particularly interesting.

Anyway, it beats awkward small talk with Queen Gilbert over there, and it has the fringe benefit of prolonging this uncomfortable silence into oblivion. I can tell she’s been dying to say something for the last half hour while she lounges, curled like a cat in Damon’s favorite armchair, eyes glued to her bio textbook braced against her knees. Well, pretending to be anyway. I haven’t heard her turn a page in at least half an hour. I’ll admit to taking some sadistic pleasure in torturing her with the quiet.

With a frustrated huff, she gives up the ruse, throwing her unread textbook to the floor and once again attempting to engage me in conversation. I bite back a smirk, keeping my eyes on the page before me. “Seriously, where’s Damon?” she demands, as though I haven’t already answered that question half a dozen times. I suppose she’s grown too accustomed to having at least one Salvatore at her beck and call 24/7 to know what to do with herself.

Or maybe I spoke too soon, because before the question can even register as annoyance, it swiftly turns to concern. Beneath the fan of my lashes, I watch her bite her lip worriedly as she says, “You don’t think—

“He’s fine,” I answer, cutting her off breezily as I casually turn the page.

I don’t even have to look to know her jaw just clenched in annoyance, and she presses on doggedly, “Yeah, but how do you—

“I just do,” I say, snapping the soft-bound journal on my forefinger. My eyes flutter closed briefly as I send the universe a quick prayer for patience. I will not kill the doppelganger. I will not kill the doppelganger.

If she notices the irritation in my tone or the suddenly homicidal turn of my thoughts, she ignores it in favor of her usual obnoxious tenacity. “Can I ask you a question?”

I sigh, shaking my head at the useless heavens, and finally meet her eyes. “Is it going to piss me off?” I question archly.

She nods seriously. “The way we’re going, probably,” she says, a smile flickering around her lips that I can’t quite help but return.

“Shoot,” I relent. Apparently vague amusement is my weak spot.

“Do you know what happened back there?” she asks hesitantly. “With Damon and Bonnie, I mean.”

“Sure you want to know?” I ask, brow quirking in challenge. I’m hardly thrown by the question. With Elena’s perpetual curiosity in addition to her violent intolerance for any secret we dare to keep from her, I figured it was bound to come up eventually. What I am surprised by (though I really shouldn’t be all things considered) is the brazen gall she has to ask me.

“I wouldn’t have asked if I wasn’t.”

“Hmm,” I smile, inexplicably pleased and proud of this response. “There may be hope for you yet. You remember that time a few months ago? After we learned Katherine wasn’t in the tomb? You walked in on Damon and me when we were...well.”
“Ugh! Enough details!” she shouts, waving her hands before her eyes in disgust. My amusement piques at the display. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“Well, I’m sure you noticed the red and sticky evidence. Probably got some in your hair when you were hugging him.”

“So...you what? Bit each other?” she asks, grimacing unattractively in obvious revulsion.

“Don’t make that face at me,” I chide, biting my cheek against the smirk. “You have no idea what you’re missing. Anyway, let’s just say there are several perks to that besides the obvious.”

“Like...?” she prompts, grimace still present but steadily losing ground to her growing curiosity.

“Like an exchange of energy,” I explain succinctly. “A power boost if you will. And, for Damon, a little extra resistance to certain witchy parlor tricks.”

“Oh,” she nods, biting her lip thoughtfully. Her brow creases again as another thought occurs to her. “So...what do you get out of it?”

I smile at her quick understanding. Despite her sometimes suicidal tendencies, the girl’s not dumb. But that doesn’t mean I’m prepared to answer that question. “The pleasure of watching overconfident baby witches lose their shit when their mojo falls flat,” I shrug. “What more do I need?”

It’s more than that, and both of us know it. The deflection is blatant and unapologetic, and her eyes flitting shrewdly between mine say she’s well aware of the lie. Still, she doesn’t call me on it. It seems she finds whatever answer she sought in my gaze.

Elena studies me closely, her eyes taking on a softness I’ve rarely seen directed my way. Though, in this instance, I think it’s more the topic of our conversation that’s won that look from her. With characteristic insight, she tells me, “You must really care about him.”

“He’s my best friend, my family,” I say obviously. “Of course I do, but you’re no stranger to that emotion yourself.” She gets that deer in the headlights look of wide-eyed panic at the implication of that sentence, and I roll my eyes at her posturing. “Yeah, yeah, yeah. I know. You can’t go there yet. But you will.”

She turns away from me then, eyes looking out over the bend of her hunched knees, and she sighs. “Why would you even want me to?”

I consider the question seriously for a moment. For all the qualities that I despise about this girl and all those that I adore about my friend, for all the fighting and the heart break I am certain will come of this growing connection, why do I want so badly for them to catch each other?

“Because I see the way you look at each other when you think they can’t see you, and I support all roads that lead to Damon’s happiness,” I answer, the words escaping me even as I think them. I can feel the truth of them in my gut, but I can’t resist a final jab. I seize her eyes with mine, regarding her flatly. “Even if I’m not always thrilled by his choice of companions.”

I hear the grass crunch softly beneath his boot, the scuff of concrete, and a creak of old wood in the distance, and by the time the air rushes with the open door, my head has whipped around to find him. He props an elbow on the study’s archway, all cocky smiles and sexy black leather, but there’s a wariness in his eyes that belies the act. The icy blue blazes at me from across the room, all but screaming at me for a distraction. Easy enough.
“There’s our King of the wild frontier,” I announce, smiling widely at the gasp of surprise to my right. Poor little human ears. “Victorious I see, but where’s your fur hat, Davy?”

“Alarmingly mobile and probably mocking the taxidermist,” he grimaces, pushing off from the wall with an elbow and making his way toward us with his usual sexy saunter.

“Aww did the big bad chipmunks fight back?” I tease with mock sympathy, scrunching my nose as that odor creeps closer to my sensitive senses. “Is that why you smell like road-kill?”

“Fuck off,” he laughs, but the look on his face says he’s as disgusted by it as I am. Predictably, he makes a beeline for the bar, pouring himself a drink as he speaks. “You girls have fun without me?”

“More than you it looks like,” Elena taunts, her eyes scanning the length of his torn and dirtied clothing. And, if the fingers pinching her nostrils are anything to go by, I’d say even human senses have failed to miss that smell.

“Oh, god, Damon. It was horrible,” I gripe, already cackling internally at my next words. “Elena just would not shut up about you the whole time. She kept telling me how hot you are, how funny, how you’re such a snappy dresser. She said that all she has to do is think about you to start...

“Nadia!” Elena shouts, eyes wide and horrified at my unsubtle taunting.

I shake my head at her reproachful glare, schooling my expression to one of faux-innocence and sincerity. “Drooling,” I finish, and bite back a smirk as I watch her shoulders relax instantly. God, this is too much fun.

I turn to Damon, explaining in earnest, “So then of course I told her that if it’s just her chin that’s getting wet, she’s obviously not using her imagination.”

He gasps, feigning shock and outrage with a hand on his chest. “Elena, is this true?” he asks, looking so genuinely concerned and scandalized that I can hardly breathe for holding in my laughter. “Is dream me not living up to my standards?”

By this point, poor Elena’s face is so red I’m afraid she’ll burst a blood vessel, her fists shaking with equal parts mortification and outrage as she splutters unintelligibly. With a huff and a growl, she wrenches the bottle of blood from Damon’s hand, and stomps back down the hall. Evidently, even the Ripper is preferable company.

Still smirking lightly, Damon flops down on the couch beside me, free arm hooked over the back and his feet in my lap. He wrestles the throw pillow from behind his back, picking off a long auburn hair before tossing it aside. His brow quirks at me in amusement, no doubt easily recognizing its origin, and I shrug.

Taking another sip from my own drink because I have a feeling I’m going to need it, I cut to the chase. “So what did you want to tell me? And make it quick because that smell is making me nauseous.”

He rolls his eyes unsympathetically, ankles crossing over my legs. “Please, like you haven’t smelled worse before.”

“Yes, but at least then I had the pleasure of killing someone first.”

He doesn’t bother to respond to this, though he does shoot me a brief smile, before getting right to the point. The wariness returns in full. “I had some unexpected company in the woods this
morning.”

“You mean, other than the fire-breathing rodents?” I taunt, unable to resist.

“Wait,” he gasps in mock surprise. “You were there too?”

“Ha. Ha.” Shit, I walked right into that one.

“It was Sabrina the teenage pain in the ass actually,” he corrects, and despite the tone of his words I can sense the worry in them, “with a surprise guest appearance from her aunt Hilda.”

My brow furrows, immediately suspicious and not a little unnerved myself. So far, there’s only one other witch we know of in town, and it seems fair odds there’s not a third. “Did you get a good look at her?”

“No, but my money’s on Uncle John’s magical assistant. The alternative is a little too Mr. and Mrs. Smith for my taste.”

“What?” I ask, snickering in bemusement.

“You know...” he says, rhythm a little thrown now I’ve failed to get his joke, “army of assassins, the neighbors are spies?”

I stare at him.

“No?” he says, pouting a little.

“No,” I confirm, shaking my head and frowning sympathetically.

“Well...” I pause, considering this new information. It’s no great surprise Bonnie would have family willing to teach her now her Grams is gone. Lineage is everything to these witch bloodlines, after all. It doesn’t necessarily spell trouble for us to let her. “She can have the baby witch. Good riddance, honestly. Not like she’s much use anyway.”

Damon remains unconvinced. His feet rest still and heavy across my thighs, all traces of playfulness gone, and I can feel the tension in his shoulders from here. “I don’t know,” he says, concern etched in every line of his handsome face. “This felt...different. Off somehow. It’s like I could sense it.”

At this, he eyes me with reproach, not having asked for the unwanted invasion of magic on his precious senses. As though I hadn’t warned him. Ugh. But Damon’s childish resentment is not what concerns me about that sentence. We did that spell days ago, and he’s been avoiding me just as long. He’s hiding something.

“What else can you ‘sense’?”

____________________

Jenna

The house is quiet when we get there. Like it always is these days...

My heels clack lightly along the hardwood floor and ceramic tile as I make a beeline for the fridge. Screw dinner, there’s still a Sara Lee cherry pie in the freezer. I could do with something sweet right about now. Lord knows dinner will be anything but. Why did I decide to do this again?
The barest hiss of leather scratches against plaster as he drops his briefcase to the floor in a muffled thunk against the carpet, and an involuntary flush of pleasure heats my skin before I hide it in the chill air of the open fridge. I am literally a blushing school girl. How embarrassing.

Oh, right. That’s why.

“I’m warning you now, you have no idea what you’re getting yourself into here,” he tells me from beneath the counter. “My cooking expertise is limited to cereal and microwavable dinners.”

There’s a clatter of metal and Teflon below the island as Ric rummages through the cacophony of cooking utensils, pots and pans. He flashes me a charming smile when he catches me staring, and his green eyes sparkle with happiness. My heart jumps in my chest.

“No worries,” I assure him with a teasing smile. “My over-cooked pasta can put anyone’s to shame. Between the two of us, I think we can handle it.”

“Alright, then put me to work spaghetti master. I am here to serve.”

“Hmm. You can do the garlic bread.” I instruct, handing him a serrated knife and pointing to the French bread on the counter. I set a stick of butter pointedly on the island beside him, and go to grab the garlic salt, pasta sauce, and box of dry noodles from the pantry.

Setting my discoveries on the counter by the stove, I fill the larger pot with water and set it to boil while I go to work on the jar of pasta sauce. It’s still fresh sealed from the grocery store, and I can already tell it’s going to be a tough one.

The thin metal lip slips and slides in my palm as I wrestle with it. I can already feel the skin bruising with the effort and I am two seconds from smashing it on the ground when it’s taken from me. Ric gives it a single, seemingly effortless twist and the seal pops as it releases its death grip on the jar. My eyes tighten with irrational fury and he smiles sheepishly, handing jar and lid back to me.

“You must have loosened it. Really, you did all the work.”

I glare half-heartedly at the now open jar of sauce for a moment before we both break into fits of laughter. I catch another glimpse of those dancing eyes as he turns back to the bread. Man, he’s cute.

“Are Elena and Jeremy joining us later?” he asks from behind me as I turn back to the now boiling water.

I smile a little sadly to myself, knowing he can’t see me. “Jeremy will probably drop by to stuff his face in a bit, but who knows where Elena’s off to these days.”

He says nothing to this. The only sounds in the kitchen are the quiet sawing of the blade through bread and the bubbling of water on the stove, but the silence is companionable rather than awkward, and suddenly I feel brave enough to ask.

“You haven’t noticed anything...off about her lately, have you?” I say hesitantly. I know his wife is a touchy subject, but I just have to know. I spin around to look him in the eye when I clarify, “Has she said anything to you...about Isobel?”

He seems genuinely surprised by the question, which is in itself a little worrisome. Surely, the shock of that discovery (that his wife is in fact the mother of his student and his girlfriend’s niece) shouldn’t have faded this quickly. He can’t really be surprised I would ask about it, can he?
Or...does he know more than he’s letting on?

“Uh—” he starts, clearing his throat nervously. “Um, no. She hasn’t.”

I sigh, disappointed. “I thought for sure that was it...”

“What?”

“Why she’s been so quiet lately,” I confess, turning my back again so he can’t see the sheen of tears threatening to fall from my eyes. Am I just the worst guardian in the world or what? “She hardly speaks to me except on her way out the door, and she barely even mentions Stefan anymore. I thought maybe this adoption thing was still eating at her.”

That gets a more appropriate reaction at least. Though alarm and irritation weren’t the emotions I had hoped to evoke. It does tell me one thing however. He is hiding something. He and Elena both, and more than likely the Salvatore’s. It’s insulting and infuriating both that those two would hide something so obviously important from me. What could possibly be so bad they have to hide it? From me? One things for sure, that won’t last long.

“Hmm.”

“Well, maybe it’s the Salvatore’s then,” I say, an odd mix of hope and suspicion in my voice. “I have noticed she and the twins have been together much more recently, and I know there’s little love lost between them and Stefan. Maybe that’s why she’s been there so much recently. Playing peacekeeper.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

Awful though it is, I find myself hoping this is the answer. Maybe it even explains the odd tension I’ve noticed between her and Jeremy lately. Maybe it’s just sibling drama, someone else’s secrets she’s keeping. Maybe it’s not my fault after all.

Stefan

I’m going to tear that little witch limb from limb when I get out of here. I can still feel her power like razor sharp finger nails clawing in my brain, the blood boiling, leaking, flooding behind my eyeballs, the pressure building till I felt certain they would burst. My thumbs are already tense with the desire to return the favor. We’ll see how much she’s worth blind and writhing in her own brain matter. (That pleasure may even be worth my surrender. It seems I’ve lost her either way.) Such a thing would be the end of life in Mystic Falls. The end of this too long sojourn as the ‘noble’ Salvatore, but oh would the ending be sweet.

I feel it waiting for me there in the corner of my mind, lurking beneath billowing curtains and a thousand violent memories. Remembered lust and cruel satisfaction linger amid them, pulling and tugging insistently at my weakening resolve. Good and right have lost all their charm as I lie here in painful, whispering silence as vervain flows with burning sluggish resolve? through my dry, empty veins. How I long for that menacing numbness. How I long to feel nothing at all.

It’s easy to press it really—to slip in and out between silken shadows and my dissonant thoughts, human mask slipping further and further with every passage. To commit to its urging promise would be easy as breathing, effortless as the sigh in my chest.
The scuff of her shoes on dusty stone floors alerts me to her presence, my eyes leaping to the small barred window in time to watch her settle a water bottle full of blood on the ledge. I can smell from here it’s not the sort I want.

“You need to drink this,” she instructs, stubborn as ever. “Can’t survive without it.”

I nearly roll my eyes at her ignorance. Doesn’t she understand I’d rather starve to death than go back to that miserable sack of brooding guilt I was before? Hell, even if I did give in and take this sad excuse for sustenance, I’d still rather die than face her. After everything that’s happened, does she really think we can just go back to that? Surely even she’s not that naïve.

She can’t possibly hope to understand what this is like for me. No one can; not even my brother. And no answer I give her will ever be enough to satisfy her endless questions. No one will ever know what it’s like for me to be trapped inside my own body—a victim to my hunger—fighting day in and day out to hold that darkness at bay.

But it’s like the tide on a stormy night; it rushes the wall, waves climbing higher and more frenzied with each crash. Winds and tempestuous skies railing at the black water, urging its assault until I can no longer contain it and the dam breaks. No will in the world is strong enough to hold it forever. I wonder now if it’s worth it to even try.

Unable to form the words I need to tell her this, I tell her instead, “You know the human blood hasn’t left my system yet. Vervain can only do so much. I could be at those bars in a flash, and you’d be dead.”

The stubborn set to her jaw clenches still more tightly, but there’s no fear in her eyes. “Yeah, you could. But you won’t,” she says confidently. Still so determined to see the ‘good’ in me. It will be the death of her someday.

How I wish it were that simple, but Nadia was right. The monster is me. If I’m truly honest with myself, I’ve always known that. And even if he wasn’t, he would never have existed but for me.

That makes his actions mine to own. Even when I am powerless to stop them. I’ll carry the guilt of them to my grave.

I can still taste it—the golden slide, honey rich and copper sharp as it glides thick and smooth down the walls of my throat. Can still remember the electric thrill of it as it lit a fire in my veins, as power and strength roared to life inside me and her blood sang sweetly in my ears. I still want it—I want all of it, all of them—with a desperation that grows and burns with each poisoned pulse of my heart, as the vervain drains their life from my veins and the ravenous hunger invades my every thought. Each breath is torturous, hot and dry as my lungs fill with sand and my body grows heavy and weak. Madness takes hold. I need it.

“Really?” I question, cold challenge in my tone as cruel hunger seeps forward. “What makes you so sure? Because you’ve got Damon around to protect you now? I don’t see him anywhere.” I make a show of gesturing toward the empty air around us. She’s all alone here with a monster she refuses to acknowledge and not a scrap of survival instinct to defend herself.

“This has nothing to do with Damon, Stefan,” she insists, though we both know that’s a lie. As always when it comes to these women, it has everything to do with my brother. “This about you. I know you won’t hurt me. You couldn’t.”

Tears clog her throat, making her voice reedy and thin in the choking strain, but the fire still burns in her warm brown eyes—a smoking hearth as the embers fade to black beneath dying ash, the heat still glows. I know it always will (no matter how many times she says ‘I love you’ or ‘it’s not your
fault’ I know she will never forgive me. Not for this. She will never see beyond it.) I don’t know why I ever thought she could. She may love the man I was—the man I want to be—but the man I am...Elena is far too good to love that monster. It was wrong of me to ask, and yet I couldn’t help myself. I need her. I need her like I need the blood. Life is empty—dark—without it.

“What happened to you, Elena?” I breathe, confusion, betrayal, and hurt all wrapped up in the strangled sound of it. I may be a monster, and I know I don’t deserve even an ounce of the love she’s shown me, but the thought of her with Damon. It makes even the beast in me sick. “You used to be able to see him for what he is. How did he get to you?”

She shakes her head, brow creased and eyes sad, but I can see the spark of anger there at my accusation. “No one got to me, Stefan,” she denies vehemently. “It’s just...I’m starting to see things a little differently. You shouldn’t have to ask me why.”

“He doesn’t care about you. Don’t you see that?” I shout, frustrated and beyond pissed off. Why doesn’t she get that? “He’s using you to get to me. To get back at me for Katherine. He hates me for what I did, and he wants to see me suffer for it. It’s what he does. “An eternity of misery”. That’s what he promised me. And, boy, has he ever delivered.”

I tell her about my last night as a human. My last night with Katherine. I describe for her the betrayal in her eyes—and in Damon’s—as my father dragged her away. The desperate, reckless rage I saw blazing in my brother’s cold blue eyes as he swore he’d save her, and later to make me suffer an eternity for our failure. I tell her how deeply, how blindly, Damon loved the vampire that destroyed our lives. How he craved her wickedness, surrendered to her completely, took it into himself and vowed to an eternity of the same. I tell her how hopelessly naïve she is to believe him when he says he’s done with her.

“That’s not true,” she insists. Still so naïve. I turn my eyes away from her imploring ones, chuckling bitterly at that. “No, Stefan. It’s not. This isn’t about punishing you. He’s doing this for you. To help you get back in control. He doesn’t care about Katherine anymore.”

“No?” I scoff. How can she be so oblivious? Is she really so blinded by him that she fails to see the obvious? Everything he’s done since he got to this town—absolutely everything—has been about Katherine. Even his hatred is proof enough of that. Violent emotion isn’t wasted on those you don’t care about. “He’s got an awful lot of anger for someone who doesn’t give a damn.”

She gasps, and something flickers in her eyes that lets me know I’ve hit my mark. Something I’ve said has gotten through to her at least. In the next moment, however, I see her jaw clench and her eyes harden with renewed determination and the next thing I know, she’s unlocking the door.

“What are you doing?” I shout as she stomps into the cell. My hands begin to shake with frenetic energy as I struggle between hunger, anger, and fear. “Get outta here,” I warn, barely keeping still.

Too stubborn for her own good, she looks me straight in the eye. “No.”

“You’re taking a stupid risk. I could hurt you.”

I can barely stand to look at her. The emotion (grief, betrayal, anger, disappointment) swimming in those deep brown eyes is too much for my tortured soul and too pathetic for the ravenous beast in my veins. Even as my heart beats painfully slow in my chest, pumping the toxin through my bloodstream, my entire body rebels at the sight. I want to laugh and cry all at once, but first I want to rip her throat out. Even as her beseeching gaze washes over me, and her pity seeps into every pore, all is drowned by the steady thumping of her pulsing blood.
“Then I’m stupid,” she shrugs, thrusting the bottle beneath my nose. “You need to drink this.”

“Elena, get out of here, or you’ll regret it,” I warn, a menacing growl audible beneath the words.

“Drink.”

“I said, Get Out!” I shout, eyes flaring dangerously as veins and fangs threaten to tear this foolish girl limb from limb. The leash I hold on my hunger is barely clinging by a thread. One more word and it will snap.

I can see the passion and the fire in her blood as it flushes warm and bronzed glowing beneath her skin. She’s the very image of reckless determination and I feel nothing but fury as she charges me with it. Frustration and fear turn to blood-boiling anger and my fangs descend as hunger takes me again. How dare she challenge me?! There’s not the slightest hint of fear in her petulant eyes as I lay them bare before her and my mouth salivates with anticipation.

“No.”

In a flash of strength and speed, my body bursts forward, but the only impact is my brittle backbone against the wall. Dust and debris float around in a dusty haze as I once again meet Nadia’s smirking eyes, flipping a blur of glistening metal in her spinning hands. Elena is nowhere to be found.
Elena

There’s a rush of air in my ears and an iron grip about my ribcage as the world turns to a swirling mass of color which blurs and bleeds together like the brush strokes of an impressionist painting. The air whips and thickens around me—howling its objection in my ears—as his body (our bodies) slice through it like a scythe. His arm is an iron vice across my chest, but it drops easily as we land.

The very second my feet hit hardwood floors, I turn on him. The tinkering of crystal decanters by my hip echoes the movement.

“What the fuck, Elena?!” he demands before I can get a word out, glacial eyes blazing with cold fury. “Why would you even think about going in there?”

“We were just talking,” I shout back, exasperated by his overprotectiveness. “You’re overreacting, Damon. If you hadn’t barged in there—

“He would have what? Kissed you on the cheek and sworn to do no harm for the rest of his godforsaken life? Like I haven’t heard that one before,” he scoffs, still beyond pissed even as the lingering fear begins to fade from his eyes.

I know he’s only acting this way because he was scared for me, but I can’t help my own irritation at his caveman tendencies. I’m not some helpless little girl that needs her hand held to cross the street, damn it. “He wasn’t going to hurt me.”

“What?” he says, crazy eyes in full effect as he stares at me. “So the veiny eyes and fangs are just role-play for you two?”

“He was just trying to scare me!”

“Why are you so sure of that?!” he demands, nearly screaming in my face. “It wouldn’t be the first time he tried to take a bite out of you.”

While I’m clenching my fists by my sides in anger, fingernails digging half-moons into the meat of my palms, Nadia chooses this moment to enter the room. She takes one look at the two of us in our tense stand-off, fury etched in every line of our bodies, and smirks in wry amusement.

I can already feel the anger boiling behind my eyeballs before I even notice her hands. She tries to wipe away the evidence on her shredded jeans, but the viscous red fluid still clings to her hands in
telling streaks of rust-red hues.

“What is that?” I ask obviously, teeth clenched as I gesture toward them.

“Hmm?” she says, feigning ignorance before pretending to ‘discover’ the blood on her hands. “Oh, I might have stabbed him a little.” The raging inferno melting my eyes bursts through their sockets as I glare at her. If looks could kill, she would be a hunk of charcoal by now. “Just a little!” she defends, but I don’t miss the blithe smile that flickers across her face when she recalls the memory.

“Oh, don’t even give me that look,” she says, dropping the act at the scowl on my face. “It would have been a hell of a lot worse if we hadn’t shown up when we did. What the hell were you even thinking going down there?!”

I roll my eyes at her predictable reaction. “Damon already gave me this speech.”

“Well, apparently you need to hear it again,” she fires back, working herself up to her former irritation. Seems like a day for it. “God, you really have a death wish don’t you? How you’ve survived this long is beyond me at this point.”

“I’m not an idiot,” I snap, fed up with their ridiculous parenting act. “You don’t have to talk to me like I’m five.”

“No? Well, your actions today would suggest otherwise.”

There’s a growl stirring low in my throat, blind rage coloring my vision, and for a moment I think I can imagine what it’s like to be a vampire. Her mocking face dances a step closer before the bruising pressure wraps about my waist and I am once again hauled from my feet.

“Did you just lunge at me?” she asks, voice wavering between amusement and shock at my burst of violence. Honestly, I’m a little shocked myself. It’s been a long time since I let my temper loose like that.

“Yeah, lesson number two in the Elena Gilbert survival course: Don’t attempt to bitch slap angry vampires,” Damon says, a laugh rumbling through his chest where it presses warmly into my back. “May not end so well for you next time.”

“Not all of us are in love with you,” Nadia smirks.

My struggling stills, anger bleeds from the space before my eyes, and my face falls slack with shock. You could hear a pin drop in the silence. There’s a snarl vibrating in my chest that isn’t mine, and a stony tension in the body at my back. I hardly dare to check his expression, but Nadia seems unconcerned. In fact, she’s looking rather pleased with herself. Bitch.

The only movement or sound in the room is the drop of air pressure as the front door creaks open across the hall. Alaric fills the entryway, and he looks pissed.

“Someone wanna tell me what the hell is going on around here?”

John

She even walks like an ancient. The clothes are right, style perfect, but everything from the curve of her back to the tip of her chin positively screams ‘old world’. It’s a wonder she could ever pass
for human even in the last century. Then again, maybe it was this difference that set her apart and
cought my ancestor’s eye. Perhaps poor John Gilbert wasn’t quite as blind as I thought.

“Hello, Mr. Gilbert,” she greets, eyes cold and knowing as she reaches my table.

“Pearl. What a pleasure. I must admit, I’m surprised that you came.”

“Jenna tells me that you wanted to discuss the sale of the building in person.”

“Still, revealing yourself to me like this, it took quite a risk.”

“I’m not stupid, Mr. Gilbert,” she tells me, mild irritation in her expression. “You knew who I was
when you requested the meeting.”

With only the quirk of an eyebrow, the vampire makes me feel about 5 inches tall. I can almost feel
my body shrinking beneath her contemptuous gaze, but all I do is smile. As they say, information is
power. And, when dealing with the undead, it’s indispensable armor.

“So tell me, what is it you wished to discuss with me?” she asks, gracefully lowering herself into
the chair across from me. “I assume it has nothing to do with your brother’s office.”

Taking my cue from her, I explain bluntly, “There’s a device my ancestor Johnathon Gilbert
invented back in the day. Rumor has it was stolen. By you.”

“Ah, I see,” she says, smirking lightly as her dark eyes gleam with wry amusement. “Well, if you
know that, then I’m sure you realized that I would have no intention of giving it to you.”

“That’s why I wanted to meet you. I’m planning on changing your mind,” I tell her, my own smirk
at least as smug as her own.

“Really?” she scoffs. “How so?”

“With my Gilbert charm. I know that you have a weakness for it. May I buy you a drink?” I gesture
to the server, and he scurries off to place our order.

She remains unimpressed by this response, but I’m not too bothered by the lack of reaction. She’ll
be singing a different tune within the hour. Guaranteed.

“So, tell me, Mr. Gilbert,” she says a short time later, feigning nonchalance. “Why should I let you
have the device?”

“Because I can help you. I’m connected around here. The town council’s eating out of my hand.
They do whatever I say. And I know that you just want to live your life complete with a white
picket fence, and I can help you do that.”

“But the device doesn’t work,” her brow furrows slightly and, despite her attempt to hide it, I can
see her confusion. “Why would you even want it?”

“It’s a family heirloom. Call me sentimental.”

She looks vaguely shocked by this statement, but the calculating glint in her eye remains as she
regards me with suspicion. It’s clear she isn’t fool enough to trust me, but she has no idea what to
make of this request. No idea what that ‘family heirloom’ can do. This is a point in my favor—my
single advantage—and I intend to ride it to success. Me and the Gilbert charm.

“Johnathon was ahead of his time,” she comments, nostalgia in her eyes as she sips her drink.
“I read his journals, they’re very extensive. He actually wrote about you. You were his one regret. He loved you, and he hated himself for what he did to you.”

“You’re lying,” she says instantly, trying and failing to disguise the doubt in her voice.

“No. On his last days, he wrote how sorry he was. You were the only woman he ever loved.”

She tries to hide it, but I can tell by the slightest thawing of her expression beneath that cold mask of haughty indifference that I’ve hit my mark. Centuries old and still as pathetic as a teenage crush. It’s enough to make me sick, and I can’t contain my contemptuous snort in amusement.

“Good, God. You vampires—you’re so emotional,” I chuckle cruelly. “Johnathon Gilbert hated you. His only regret was that he didn’t drive a stake through your heart himself.”

The softness freezes over once more to black ice and cold fury as she towers over me.

“The device was destroyed.”

“What?” I say, dumbly. That can’t be right.

“The night of the Church fire, I lost in the flames,” she tells me, making no effort to hide her glee at my shock. “It’s probably a pile of melted metal by now. If you want it so badly, you’re welcome to search the ashes for yourself. And after that, Mr. Gilbert, may you rot in Hell.”

Her words settle over me and my stomach plummets, shock and fear combine as they churn and grind in a sickening mass of terror/anger/frustration that give way to an impotent rage which burns like liquid fire in my eyes as they follow her out the door. I may have lost this round, but like hell I’ll let her off unscathed. Time to take these arrogant parasites down a peg.

Caroline

I’m driving my car down some old dirt road halfway between home and Grove Hill when it hits me. Or rather, I hit it. The landscape is familiar, if a little darker and eerier than usual though I can’t begin to think why. Something about the tone of my thoughts, and this wordless, rhythmic mantra tapping out it’s command on the inside of my skull. I can’t quite put my finger on the what, but I know there’s something I’m meant to do.

My right foot presses harder against the gas pedal, nearly parallel to the floorboard at this point, and the trees blur in gnarled, ominous streaks outside my window. At this speed, the sparsely populated tree line looks like a single solid wall of wood, and all at once I remember my task.

My hands whip to the side, pulling the wheel hard to the right, left elbow locked into the turn, and the car careens off the side of the road. I watch with wide, determined eyes as the copse of trees in front of me races for the hood, glaring through the windshield with their ruthless, snarling faces, and I know. This is how I die. But somehow, I’m not afraid.

Alaric

I storm through the front hall to find the three of them locked in what appears to be a comical cage.
match between a 17-year-old girl and an ancient vampire. Elena’s face is a picture of rage and embarrassment, Damon’s one of shock and reluctant amusement, as Nadia smirks on. So, just another day in the Salvatore/Gilbert soap opera. Noted.

“Someone wanna tell me what the hell is going on here?” I demand immediately from my stance atop the stairs, glaring down at them as they all turn to face me with varying degrees of surprise. Elena, at least, has the decency to blush and attempts to untangle herself from Damon’s hold about her waist, but all he does is smile.

“Nothing to get your panties in a twist, Papa Bear,” he jokes, allowing her to throw his arm away from her as she huffs with frustration. “Just teaching our little Xena here how to defend herself against the forces of darkness.”

I roll my eyes internally. Typical. “I’m not talking about the boogeyman in the basement,” I say, at the moment not remotely interested in the newest installment of their tragic love triangle. “I meant, what are you hiding from me about Isobel? I know there’s more you’re not saying.”

Damon regards me with a single raised brow as I take the last few steps into the parlor. “And what gives you that impression?”

“Mostly the silence,” I say shortly, addressing both him and his fake sister. “You were both way too interested in the subject from the beginning, so the fact I haven’t heard a word from any of you about it in weeks is a little fishy. I know how much you love your secrets.”

Elena takes my words in with shrewd brown eyes, and immediately rounds on him herself. “Damon, is that true?” she demands, somehow managing to sound both imploring and bossy at once. “Do you know something?”

“Damon,” Nadia growls warningly, but his eyes are still locked on Elena’s. “Tell me,” she begs, and from the indecision in his expression I can guess at the dewiness of those doe eyes. He doesn’t stand a chance. “I have a right to know. And so does Ric. What are you two not saying?!”

Damon seems to struggle with himself a moment, completely ignoring the glare Nadia shoots his way, but eventually he relents. “...We think Isobel is working with Katherine.”

“Ok...” I say slowly, unsure what exactly that means. It’s hardly much of a secret at this point.

“That means she’s with Katherine,” Damon stresses, meeting my eyes pointedly. A disturbing thought begins to form in the back of my mind at the expression.

“Working with Katherine? To do what?” Elena asks, brow creased in confusion.

“Come now, Elena. You’re a smart girl. Figure it out,” Nadia says, annoyance still laced in her tone, but the look she turns on Elena is instructive rather than mocking. “What do you know about Katherine?” she prompts, voice soft and cajoling. “She turned herself to escape the sacrifice. She’s been running from Klaus ever since...”

Those big brown eyes turn inward as she considers this, face pulled in thought, but it barely takes a moment before I see the lightbulb alight in her gaze. “She wants to trade me for her freedom,” she breathes, looking to the blue-haired vampire for confirmation, “doesn’t she?”

Nadia smiles, satisfied. “There you go.”
Elena mimics that smile, before a more disturbing conclusion occurs to her. “So...you think my birth mom wants to kill me?”

“No, Isobel wouldn’t do that,” I say, immediately rejecting this idea.

“How many times do I have to tell you, man?” Damon groans. “She’s a vampire now. Human inhibitions don’t really apply.”

“I don’t believe that,” I say, as I always do. I don’t care how many drunken nighttime confessions and bizarre advisements I have to suffer through with my new bar stool neighbor, I am never going to accept that. The thought is too abhorrent to even contemplate. “I don’t believe that the Isobel I knew is just gone like she never existed. And being a vampire doesn’t give someone license to do whatever they want. There’s still a right and wrong here.”

“Please, spare me the lecture,” he gripes, waving away my arguments before I’ve even voiced them. “I know, I know. Humanity, sanctity of life, innocent until proven guilty. Yeah, I’ve heard it all before.”

“This is getting boring,” Nadia interrupts suddenly, directing her next question to Damon. “Can we tell them about the Brutus Magicus now?”

Elena spins to face her. “What are you talking about?”

Nadia smirks sarcastically. “Turns out, Isobel’s not the only one buying what Vader’s selling,” she says.

My eyes pinch at that. “If this is about John—

“It isn’t,” she assures me, cutting me off with a shake of her head and a humorless smile. “He’s a Gilbert. He’d have been trying to kill us even without the Katherine influence.”

“She means the witch,” Damon translates at my questioning glance.

Elena gasps in horror. “Bonnie?!”

Nadia throws her a look, but refuses to comment on her evident shock. To be fair, we really should have seen that coming.

“Damon saw her in the woods this morning with some unknown magic expert,” she explains, eyes on mine. “I’d be willing to bet Damon’s right testicle that someone is the source of the blood magic I sensed hanging around the night a certain teen witch got back to town. It’s only gotten stronger since then.”

I wince a little at her choice of words (I really could have done without that image), but ignore it in favor of the point. No need to encourage her continued attempts to gross me out. “And you think this other woman is working for Katherine?”

Damon grunts in agreement. “Seems a safe assumption given the circumstances.”

I look between the two of them, their gazes weighty with unspoken words and turned on each other, and I ask, “So what are you suggesting?”

Nadia answers for them both. “That we put a stop to their alliance.”

“Wait, wait, wait,” I protest, immediately reading the danger in that suggestion. Neither of these
two is exactly known for their impulse control, and we don’t need more trouble than we’ve already got. “If this witch is as dangerous as you say, what makes you think she won’t retaliate?”

“Not planning on giving her a chance,” Damon answers mysteriously. I narrow my eyes at him, a silent question in the air, and he smirks, drawing a finger across his throat in an unmistakable gesture.

Elena recognizes the glib humor in this silent response as quickly as I do, but she’s the first to shout her objection. “Whoa! We are not killing Bonnie!” she shouts immediately, glaring heatedly at both of our resident psychopaths.

“Relax,” Damon says, sighing dramatically. “Aunt Hilda’s up first this round. Bonnie can wait her turn.”

Again, Elena is the first to react, brown eyes warring with blue as they fire at each other. Despite mine and Nadia’s presences in the room, the air all seems to flock to their private glare-off as they stand locked with angry eyes. “No. No way,” she asserts. “You’re not killing anyone. That’s not happening.”

“This is not some random woman we’re talking about,” he fires back, exasperated. “This is an unknown witch with obvious black magic tendencies and the friendly ear of a certain teenage Bennet rather loudly disinterested in our well-being.”

“So we kill her?” Elena scoffs. “That’s your solution? Unbelievable. Why am I even surprised?”

“What exactly do you think they’re doing out there?” Damon shouts, hands thrown out in frustration. “Because I’ve seen their little garden party, and let me tell you, they weren’t meeting for tea and brunch. You’re ‘friend’ is training to kill, Elena. Whether she knows it or not. And who do you think her first targets are gonna be when Katherine’s little minion is done with her? Do you really want to leave that to chance?”

Finally, I have to interrupt. This conversation is beyond ridiculous. “All I’m hearing is a bunch of ‘maybe’s and ‘might’s, and I’m sorry to tell you that’s just not enough to get the humans in the room on board with cold-blooded murder.”

Apparently taking her cue from my intervention, Nadia groans from her corner. “Veles, there really is no winning with you people is there?”

Immediately, Elena rounds on her, all the fire and anger formerly directed at Damon easily finding a new target. “Well see, some of us have this little thing called a conscience, and we have a little difficulty with the idea of killing random people. Sorry if that puts a kink in your evil plan.”

Immediately, Elena rounds on her, all the fire and anger formerly directed at Damon easily finding a new target. “Well see, some of us have this little thing called a conscience, and we have a little difficulty with the idea of killing random people. Sorry if that puts a kink in your evil plan.”

“Hold up,” I interject, palms up and out placatingly as I attempt to bring back reason and calm to a room nearly exploding with tension. It feels not dissimilar to attempting to diffuse a bomb with a pair of tweezers and my good intentions. “Everybody calm down. Can we all just agree to cool it on the murdering till we actually have something to talk about?”

“She hasn’t even done anything. Just because you suspect she could be working with Katherine...” Elena rants, words flying from her lips faster than her thoughts can keep up. “I mean, how do we
even know she wants to hurt us? We can’t just go around killing people you think might be a threat!"

“She’s teaching her blood magic, Elena,” Nadia snaps, her own frustration more than evident. “Do you have the slightest idea what that means?”

Elena’s temper is a force to be reckoned with all on its own, and Damon’s anger is all protective rage and exasperation, a simmering heat stoked to a boiling tempest at the stubbornness the girl meets him with at every turn, but theirs are nothing compared to the black menace emanating from the smaller vampire. All without a hint of fang. Hers is terrifying.

“No. Of course you don’t, because you’re an emotionally immature, naïve, 17-year-old human with a martyr complex the size of the Grand Canyon who would happily spend an eternity sailing down the river of denial if it meant you got to keep your carefully crafted bubble of sparkling pink delusion!” she raves, probably fortunate she doesn’t have to breathe. “What it means, princess, is that your beloved childhood friend is learning to channel power from blood sacrifice. It’s only a matter of time before she’ll learn to kill to do it. I should know.”

I don’t know if Elena’s brave or suicidal, but she remains entirely unfazed by this tirade. If anything, she only looks angrier. “Bonnie’s not you!”

“No. You’re right. She’s not,” Damon jumps in, as careless as she is of the danger. “She’s worse because she has no idea what she’s doing! She’s letting her newfound friend lead her down a very dark path, and none of us, especially her, have any idea of the destination. Except of course, Katherine’s little plan to turn you over to Klaus to be killed in her stead. Or have you forgotten that little detail?”

Elena rounds on him instantly, easily sucking him back into their all-consuming vortex. The three of them are a thunderstorm of their own making, a huge black shroud gathering over them and locking them into their cosmic feud. I fade quietly into the background, hoping to stay dry.

“But you don’t know that,” she insists. “You suspect she’s working with Katherine whose plan you think you know. So far, all you actually know is that she’s teaching Bonnie to do magic you think incriminates her in something nefarious. Sorry, but that’s just not enough to convince me that killing someone is the right choice.”

“Oh, god. Relax,” Damon groans. “We’re not gonna kill her yet. Not till we find out what her endgame is anyway.”

“She hasn’t even DONE ANYTHING!!” Elena explodes. The room echoes in the silent tension that follows her words. The walls fairly shake with it, reverberating in their endless, audible fury as the storm fades to a quiet, though vaguely ominous, calm.

The three of them glare with mixtures of resentment, exhaustion, and resignation as the rage rolls past. Nadia is the first to recover.

“Fine,” she says, voice cool with calm acceptance though there’s a gleam in her eye I don’t like the look of any more than I trust this sudden about face.

“Whoa, what?” Damon echoes my thoughts.

Nadia shrugs easily. “If her highness wants to gamble with everyone else’s lives, fine by me. Lord knows she’ll never learn the danger of these naïve delusions if she never has to suffer for them. Call it a learning experience.”
Elena glares at that, still stubbornly clutching the fraying ends of her dwindling fury. “Yes, because when in doubt, the first instinct should always be to kill someone. Where did you get that advice? Sociopathy 101?”

“Hey, I’m just trying to keep the damage to a minimum,” Nadia chuckles darkly, hands up in seeming defeat. “The shit’s gonna hit the fan either way. Your call. I’m swearing off.”

“And what about Bonnie, huh?” Damon tries again, directing himself to Elena alone this time. It seems both of them are reluctant to end their feud. “Z just told you this is some seriously dark stuff she’s getting involved in. This is what we call a preemptive strike. So we can stop the shit before it happens. Or do you not want to protect your friend?”

“Screw you, Damon. I am protecting her,” Elena snarls, and once again the world narrows on these two and their battle for dominance. Nadia catches my eye across the room, and I can see by the tiny quirk of her lips that her wry amusement mimics my own. These two are hopeless.

“...Ok,” Damon relents, gesturing loudly with his hands. We’ll try it your way. Wait till her death is ‘necessary’ or whatever. That’s fine.”

My eyes widen at that before narrowing suspiciously at both vampires. Elena looks as taken aback by this sudden agreement as I am, but she only has eyes for Damon. “Thank you,” she says hesitantly.

“Oh, don’t thank me yet. I have a feeling our definitions of ‘necessary’ vary slightly. That witch is on razor thin ice as far as I’m concerned,” Damon warns, invading her space with a few quick steps that have my own hands clenched in protective anxiety. She doesn’t so much as flinch as his hand settles softly on her hair. “But, just so you know, if she so much as winks at you in the meantime, I’ll rip her heart out.”

His voice is soft and full of savage promise, ice-blue eyes boring with an intimidating intensity down into hers, and I see her swallow nervously as she meets him. “Nothing’s going to happen,” she assures him, but the slightest trembling of her breath gives her away.

“We’ll see,” Damon croons, brushing her hair behind her ear while she stares up at him, the fabric of his shirt bunched tightly in her gripping fingers. My eyes narrow at the sight.

“Fine,” she says shakily.

He smirks. “Fine.”

My eyes again meet Nadia’s across the way, and I note the odd expression on her pretty face. One side is scrunched in vague disgust, while the other smirks lightly in amusement. I understand completely.

“...Yeah,” she sighs, eyes flicking between them, “not that I don’t love to watch you two eye-fuck each other, but I’m suddenly in need of a cherry wine cocktail. Peace out, bitches.”

Their eyes flash to her immediately, but she’s already in the front hall with her hand on the doorknob.

“Mind if I join you?” I call after her.

“Not that kinda drink!” she shouts, the door slamming after her as she makes her escape.

I glance between my remaining companions, quickly weighing the pros and cons of this decision.
Which is more revolting? Watching my student and reluctant drinking companion make goo goo eyes at each other, or witnessing my co-worker’s revolting dietary habits? Not a difficult choice in the end.

“Yeah, I don’t care.”

Damon

The second the door closes behind the Teacher, she’s on me. And not in the sexy way either. More the ‘Damon is such a horrible murderous fiend, and how dare he not support my suicidal tendencies while I waste valuable time crying over collateral damage’ kinda way. I should be offended or at least annoyed that she thinks I’m some disobedient puppy she can train to heel on command, but she’s looking at me with such scorching heat in her warm brown eyes. Her cheeks flushed and heart pumping hard and fast as her blood boils with righteous indignation. And I can’t be bothered to mind. She’s the hottest thing I’ve ever seen.

“I can’t believe you, Damon,” she seethes, and fuck me if that doesn’t make me want her all the more. “After everything, you were really just going to kill her?! Isn’t what we did to her Grams bad enough?”

“What we did?!” I fire back, because, yeah, she may be sexy as hell all full of rage and screaming at me, but that doesn’t mean I’m gonna take that shit lying down. “Those back-stabbing bitches were going to leave Z in that tomb to rot! And I seem to remember you being pretty solidly on my side in that argument!”

“She only went in there for you!” she growls, her hands on my chest shoving me as hard as she can in her fury. I humor her by swaying a little.

Also, who does she think she’s trying to kid with this? Sabrina and her grandmother, Glinda the Bitch Witch, promised to help us. They agreed to it. It wouldn’t matter if Z was in there skinning puppies for a new fur coat, that doesn’t give them the right to turn traitor. She can’t seriously think any of that was my fault.

“She went in there for Anna, same as you. I was over it!” I rant, circling her predatorily before I realize I’ve given my feet the right to move.

“Like hell you were!” she accuses, mouth set in a stubborn frown as she attacks. “Stefan told me what happened. The night Katherine was taken? The night you’ve been punishing him for for a century and a half. Even after you found out she wasn’t in the tomb!”

“That’s what he told you?” I scoff. Is she kidding me with this? “That I hated him for tattling?! Sorry to break it to you princess, but that’s the least of your boyfriend’s crimes.”

From the look on her face, I’d say that’s exactly what he told her. And of course she bought it. Heaven forbid Saint Stefan ever suffer the consequences for anything. Of course it’s not poor Stefan’s fault he’s a mass-murdering psychopath with a blood addiction. He’s the good brother. Bullshit.

“G—I can’t believe this,” I say, though of course I do. This is what it always comes down to with us, doesn’t it? “Even after trying to eat half the town like some blood-crazed tweaker, he still casts himself the victim.”
She growls with frustration, fists clenched at her sides. “It’s not about that!”

“No?” I ask sarcastically.

“No!” she sneers. “It’s about you and your revenge complex over a woman you claim to hate!”

What the fuck? Suddenly it’s my fault now? She cannot be serious.

“He almost killed your best friend!” I remind her bluntly. And loudly. “What the fuck does it matter if I still hate him?”

Her eyes blister with white hot rage, her chest heaving as her heart thunders in her chest, and I can already taste the unhinged truth in the air before it escapes her parted lips.

“Because how do I know you’re not still in love with her?!”

Her eyes go wide with shock and mortification as the words echo around us, and she stares at me in horror, clearly terrified of my reaction. My blood is still pounding hot and angry in my ears, filling my own gaze with dark, possessive, heat as I wordlessly advance on her. Tangling my fingers in her long brown hair, I force her lips to mine.

Caroline

The first thing I know is pain. Stabbing, sharp, and searing hot like shards of glass lodged in my chest, burrowing deep inside my lungs and rattling around with every wheezing breath. I feel sure if I look down, I’ll see them poking through my skin and shirt sticky wet with leaking blood.

My eyes itch to check, to see for myself if the rest of me—all glass and nails—still exists, but my head feels miles away. My world shrunk down to the pounding thunder of my brain, as though my eyes had tried to break through crunching metal and glistening shards and my body left behind. The seatbelt dangles uselessly behind me, the airbag snug and safe inside the wheel, and my hands lay crushed between them.

My left arm from shoulder to wrist is useless, torn from its socket and elbow snapped on impact. I can see the bone protruding from my skin and I almost gag at the sight. The bones ache and creak as I reach tremulously for the door with my right, pulling and shoving with all the force my hand can lend to free myself, but I only manage about 8 inches before the door sticks fast in the folded frame. Good thing I’ve always been slender.

I barely get one foot on the ground before my knee gives way, buckling under my weight, and I crash to the dirt below. I swear I can hear the sounds of glass and metal clattering against the shattered bones in my chest as I fall, knocking the wind out of me before I even hit the ground.

Surprisingly though, the pain only lasts a minute. The longer I’m out here in the open air outside the constraining torture of my wrecked car, the easier I can breathe. The agony seems to fade a little more with every breath, and the weakness in my shaking limbs recedes. I climb to my feet.

Fear and confusion lurk at the edges of my conscious mind, but I determinedly ignore them. There’s no time for my neuroses right now, and I’m not about to fall apart in the middle of freaking nowhere. Focusing on the here and now is what I do.
So...first thing’s first, I need a phone. I remember now I left it on my nightstand in my excitement over this random midnight road trip. I’d curse my own stupidity for that one, but that’s getting me nowhere. I appear to be on some farmer’s road outside of town. There may be nothing and no one for miles, but, glancing back at the hunk of scrap metal behind me, I suppose I have no choice. Walking it is.

The air out here is thick with tension, ominous and dark, but for the moonlight shining dimly through the trees. Unnerving flashes of an unfamiliar face and the screeching of rubber on concrete haunt me before it’s silent backdrop, and I shove them determinedly away, focusing instead on this simple task of putting one foot in front of the other.

It’s a feat unto itself, but like a Prada bag in a sea of knock-offs, I spot the fluorescent light of my salvation just ahead. It seems that even in the middle of nowhere, us small town Virginians need our liquor. There’s a tiny store up ahead, and no one in the parking lot. Thank God.

Through the glass paned windows along the storefront, I can see the matronly store clerk restocking wine bottles in the fridge. There’s an apron tied about her thick waist, and a long greying braid down the length of her back where she squats before the open case. She seems to be the only one inside. The doorbell chimes cheerfully as I shoulder the glass door open, and she turns toward me with a bright smile that ends on a horrified gasp and a crash of shattering glass.

“Oh my God!” she breathes, hands flailing concernedly as she rushes to my side, her eyes scanning the length of my body and growing wider with every pass. I knew I looked a sight, but I’m not sure I realized what a gruesome picture I painted until just now. She locks the door behind me, ushering me deeper into the room and pressing me firmly into a stool behind the store counter.

“Sweetheart, what happened to you? What hurts? Can I do anything? What do you need? You need ice? Bandages? Have you called an ambulance? Oh my God, you poor thing!” She flutters about me in a frenzy of maternal fear and helplessness, eyes wide and round with obvious worry, but all I can muster up is annoyance at her hovering. I’m fine.

“Actually, can I just use your phone?” I ask, cutting her off before the old girl gives herself a heart attack.

“Of course!” she gushes, relieved to offer me this small favor. “Of course, anything you need.” She presses the phone into my hand, waiting till my fingers close firmly around it before taking a single step back and continuing to stare.

“I’ve got it from here,” I prompt, waving her off as politely as I can manage. “Thanks.”

“Oh, right. Right,” she mutters, nodding in understanding, and turns back to the mess behind us. I watch from the corner of my eye as she collects a dustbin from God knows where and kneels to pluck the largest shards from their floating pool of wine.

Elena’s number comes easily to my memory, and the dial tone comes swiftly to my ear as I wait. As does my neglected fear. By the time Damon answers on the fifth ring, I’m already toeing the edge into full-on panic that even his dickish teasing can’t chase away.

“Hey, Blondie. Thought you’d be out for the count till at least tomorrow. Guess I owe Elena that $20 now...”

“I need to talk to Elena. I need her help,” I answer, and as hard as I try to keep my voice steady, I can’t help the quivering thread of fear.
“Why? Need her to hold your hair?” he responds, tauntingly. Typical Damon.

“I—I...” I start, taking deep breaths to calm my racing heart as I try to form the words I can’t even think in my own mind. “I crashed my car. I don’t—I don’t think I....”

He seems to get it faster even than I can, because his next words are soft and devoid of all humor. He sounds almost...concerned. “Where are you?”

Momentarily alarmed by the serious note of his question, I stutter, “L—liquor store. Grove Hill Local.”

“Stay right there. We’re on our way.”

He hangs up with no further word than this, and I can feel the terrified tears I’ve yet to voice clogging my throat as I struggle to breathe. Yet, despite myself, I feel comforted. They’re on their way.

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**Elena**

His grip on my hair is almost painful, and the arm he’s hooked about my waist is sure to leave a bruise with how tightly he’s crushing me against him, but I don’t care. God, I don’t care. Not when he’s kissing me like this. With a passion and a frenzy so intense it feels like the world could explode at any moment. Like all sensation—all air—has fled the world but for the feel of his lips on mine, his hands on my body. Not when his iron grip on my hip feels so good and right and perfect as all the warmth and sensation in my body curls hot and wanting in my gut.

My arms loop around his neck, nails scratching at the jet black hair and ivory skin, pulling him still tighter against me. His thumb teases at the hem of my shirt, stroking softly at the skin he finds there, and I gasp as this simple touch sparks every cell in my body with a humming charge of torturous electricity. He seizes the opportunity to take control of the kiss, his tongue invading my mouth as I nearly moan his name.

My entire body is vibrating with need, and I cling tightly to his shoulders as his left hand leaves my hip to trail a heated line down the seat of my jeans, dipping into my back pocket. He breaks the kiss with a smirk and a flash of ice blue eyes as he leaves me gasping for air. Retrieving his hand from my pocket, he waves my cell phone in the air between us, chuckling lightly to himself as I blush with recognition.

“Elena’s phone,” he drawls, cocky grin firmly back in place while he watches me gasp for air.

My hand flies to my chest, laying over my heart like I can keep it from bursting out of my chest. I can hear it pounding in my ears as I fight to catch my breath, and Damon’s voice fades into the background.

“Hey Blondie,” I watch him say, eyes transfixed by those full pink lips I still taste on mine. “Thought you’d be out for the count till at least tomorrow. Guess I owe Elena that $20 now...” His eyes flare in that sexy eye smirk of his when he catches me staring, and, right on cue, my insides melt like warm butter. Damn him.

When I realize who must be on the other line, a breath I didn’t know I was holding bursts out of me in a sigh of relief. Thank god she’s ok. Of course, even that joyous thought brings its own demons,
and I have to turn away.

Finally free from the all-consuming frenzy of his touch, my head begins to clear and my thoughts turn inward, racing a mile a minute, as I attempt to process whatever the hell just happened to me. The desire to throw myself at him is still definitely there, but, as the cloud of lust begins to thin around me, the image begins to take on a far more violent form.

Recent events notwithstanding, I find myself mortified and ashamed of my behavior. I may be none too fond of Stefan at the moment, but he is still technically my boyfriend and he’s currently lying weak and hungry in a veritable prison cell not 30 feet from where I just made out with his freaking brother. What kind of a person does that?

More than that though, I’m utterly humiliated to have just betrayed myself for the pathetic, hormonal teenager that I am. God, we were just fighting about the morality of killing someone and I throw it all away to sexually assault my boyfriend’s brother? After he confessed to giving less than two shits about the value of human life? Seriously?

And it’s not like he’s some innocent victim in this either. I get in a few good argumentative punches and he chooses to shut me up by kissing me? I can’t believe I fell for that!

“Stay right there. We’re on our way,” I hear distantly, but I’m already moving before the words take shape in my mind.

Before I register the movement, my hand is flying through the air in a vicious slap across his left cheek, and my blood is boiling with renewed anger. His head whips to the side, but he only stares at me in shock.

“What was that for?” he asks, looking genuinely confused.

“We weren’t done, Damon,” I seethe, indignation burning in my eyes. “You can’t just go around kissing people when you want to shut them up. Besides that, Stefan’s right th—

He raises a hand, stopping me mid-tirade. “Yeah, we don’t have time for your bipolar tendencies right now,” he drawls, unimpressed by my sudden anger. He waves the recently disconnected phone before my eyes, recalling my attention, and his next words feel like an ice bath over my blistering rage. “It’s Caroline. She’s in transition.”

No.

Lucy

I watch her wander off into the trees again hours later, sparing a single harsh glare for the site of her grandmother’s final spell, and a dark smile for the future she sees promised there. As much as she hates this place, I know how important it is to her that she be here. That this tomb and it’s echoing resonance of power and loss be the source of her newfound strength. The answer in the problem’s first blow. It’s tempting, that power. Enthralling even. And as much as I understand it’s necessity, that doesn’t mean I’m not aware of the risks.

Despite not knowing her for all that long, I find I want to protect her from this—from becoming me. I don’t want her to lose the goodness that I see in her. I want her to have the courage to follow the right path, even when the wrong one is easier.
It worries me though, her claim to self-righteousness. She’ll deny it till she’s blue in the face, but that anger I see in her eyes when she thinks of them isn’t the moral outrage she thinks it is. It’s blood lust. She wants revenge, and she’s willing to push herself however far she must to get it so long as she can claim the moral high-ground. It’s a dangerous habit for a million reasons, but in the end it’s why I’ve chosen to help her. She was halfway down that path already. The least I can do is help her survive it.

But I’m also here for Katherine, and I’m not sure how to do both. I can’t help but wonder whether she’s counting on that doubt. Wouldn’t surprise. Schemes within schemes; that’s her way. The moment you think you’ve got her pinned, that you’ve finally got the leg up on the infamous Katherine Pierce, you find you’ve walked right into her trap. Plans A-Z all lined up in a row and she’s accounted for everything.

Among these? Plan J: John goes rogue.

It’s almost unbelievable to me that he thinks I wouldn’t know. That he apparently believes he is really so far ahead of everyone else (including the vampire who put him up to it, and the witch that warned against it) that we would never guess what he’s been up to these past few weeks. As though anyone who’s ever met that arrogant jackass could believe for one second that he’d give up the task he set his heart on. He’s like a dog with a bone about that damn device, and I could see that from the moment I met him. He never stood a chance really.

He’s been spending quite a lot of time outside his secret second headquarters since he killed the vampire living there, seemingly preferring it as a pseudo-hiding spot for his stash of Gilbert crested weaponry. A little spy-work, some lock-picking magic, and voila. Stealing a single knife and a heartwarming picture of his late family was child’s play after that.

Settling back inside my carefully laid circle of candle flame, I place the picture and the knife beside the open spell book on the cold stone ground, and for the second time today, drag my blade across the meat of my palm. Large splotches of thick red blood drip over the personal items as I recite the words, and my eyes slip closed as the world falls away. They open on a new scene.

I’m little more than a fly on the wall in my present form, but I make it just in time to watch the vampire, Pearl, go down with a bolt of wood through her ancient heart, and the idiotically triumphant smirk of John’s face as he fairly skips into the tree line. Dimly, I can feel my blood boil with anger where my body still sits on the tomb floor, but it fades almost entirely at the sight of what lies in her fossilized hand.

Ah, John. Your arrogance may save us yet.

Anna

I sneak in through the window. Not that it’s exactly necessary, mind. I mean, it had been a rather knock down drag out fight between us, but I’d finally made it clear to my mom where we stood with the whole Jeremy thing, so it’s not like it would have been any great surprise to her to see me coming home so late. But, hey, it’s fun, and frankly at this point it’s almost an unbreakable habit.

Still, I’d expected some kinda reaction from her, so I’m more than a little surprised to be greeted by nothing but silence. The air is still. Too still. And it’s not as though I thought I’d find her kicked back in a tatty leather arm chair with a beer watching Desperate Housewives, but there’s quiet and then there’s...this.
I hear the sound of human footsteps on the grass outside and I’m down the stairs in a flash. What I find there makes me wish I’d never come home.

_No, no, no. It can’t be. She can’t be._

“Mama!” I cry, falling to my knees beside her ashen form. I shake desperately at her shoulders, _willing_ her to wake up. She has to wake up. _She has to_._ I’m sobbing, choking on the tears, and I know it’s hopeless. I know she’s gone, but she just can’t be. I _need_ her. “Please Mama. Please wake-up. Please don’t leave me again.”

The faintest click of air like the spark of wood on flint marks the silence, and some predator’s instinct beyond my grief has me pressed to the wall before it ever catches light. Good thing too, because in less than a second my mother’s empty corpse is engulfed in roaring flame, licking hungrily at the walls as I stare. My final sight before I spin to flee into the cover of darkness is the gleaming shine of gold as the fire consumes her fingers.

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**John**

From outside the rundown cottage with its too old coat of peeling paint, I can hear her rustling about inside. I hear the rough drag of rubber over wooden floors, the crash and thunk of skidding furniture and worthless knick knacks, and the whisper of infernal wind as she flashes between.

For a supernatural predator, she sure makes a lot of noise. You’d think after today’s events she’d be a little wary of retaliation. Or does she imagine her species has mine so cowed that I’d let a revelation such as that pass without response? Well, all I can say is that if that _is_ the case, she has severely underestimated my determination to protect my family from her and her kind.

I won’t lie to myself. That device is a great loss, and I am still struggling with the burden of that failure, but that’s hardly the dominant feeling. More than anything right now, I am pissed off. Pissed off and frustrated that the future I had envisioned and the path I chose to get there have been effectively thwarted by a love-struck vampire, a doomed love affair, and slippery fingers.

Deliberate or not, this is one action I can take. Her mistake may have cost me my weapon of mass extermination, but it’s done nothing to stop my usual methods. I can still make this world the smallest bit safer for my daughter and nephew. One parasite/leech at a time.

Hefting the liberated stake launcher over my shoulder, I duck beneath the stairwell to the cellar entrance, resting knees and elbow against the steps as I line the shot. I see her there in the hall just out of reach around the corner of the armoire, but each pacing movement brings her closer to the doorframe and the imagined scope of my weapon.

She traces the length of the building once, twice, three times collecting clothes, books, and trinkets as they catch her eye, her feet drawing her closer and closer with every pass. A calmness settles over me as I eye the length of the muzzle, sighting down the figurative scope of the weapon as I wait for the vampire to trap herself in my crosshairs.

A little more. Almost...There!

I pull the trigger and the device jerks in my hands as the stake flies unerringly toward the target, and I smirk in triumph as it hits its mark. I watch with satisfaction as the blood-sucker stares in wide-eyed shock at the wood buried in her chest before the color fades from her cheeks and she
falls frozen and grey to the floor. One down.

Climbing out of my hideaway, I walk the length of the porch, heels thumping rhythmically against the hollow wood, as I cross the entryway to lean against the doorframe. I allow myself a moment to smirk in satisfaction at the product of my handiwork and a single twinge of regret that my triumphant face wasn’t her final sight in death, before I turn my back and leave her to rot.

Next on the list, Jeremy’s little girlfriend. If these creatures think they can invade my town, screw around with my family and get away with it, they are in for a rude awakening.

I had left my car at the forest’s edge for stealth’s sake, but my victory lap gets me there in record time. I’m slamming the trunk shut on my new stake launcher within minutes, and I can barely contain my glee.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing here?!”

I spin fast to face the source of the voice, heart pounding as I fight to resettle it from my momentary shock. Lucy Bennet stands behind me tense and frightening in her anger, her eyes blazing with enough power and rage that I am almost afraid of her.

But there’s no way in hell, I’ll let her see that. “Exterminating vampires,” I say with all the arrogant calm I can muster, familiar smirk still fixed on my lips. “Isn’t that what Katherine wants you to do?”

The angry line of her mouth softens a little, but only to huff in derisive amusement. “Yeah?” she taunts. “And how were you planning to accomplish that? By throwing a temper tantrum when the mean old vampire refuses to give you back your favorite little toy?”

I stare at her in shock at this. How the hell could she possibly know that? I told no one!

“Yeah,” she says, and her smile widens, “I know about that. Did you really think I wouldn’t find out? You’re not half as clever as you think you are.”

Yes.

“I was just doing what I had to do to keep my family safe.”

“And how’s that working out for ya?” she chuckles mirthlessly, a brow arching at my conspicuously empty hands.

I frown at the reminder. So, perhaps this evening wasn’t a total success. “Not as well as I’d hoped, admittedly.”

“I’ll say,” she scoffs, sparing me a long flat look I can’t begin to read. “You realize Nadezhda can bring back the dead?” My heart pounds double time at this new information, and though I fight to keep the evidence from my face, I have a feeling she notices.

“Yeah...” she says, still watching me with those dark, unreadable eyes. “You might have just made yourself a formidable enemy. Lucky for you, I think fast on my feet.” She gestures back toward the cabin at this last, and I turn around to watch the distant flickering yellow of a far-off flame and the smoke that rises the tree line. Lucky indeed.

I clear my throat, a little embarrassed by my obvious short-sightedness, as I turn back to her. “So what now then?” I ask, trying and failing for my usually confident tone. “That takes care of one, but there are still a swarm of them crawling around out there. Including your favorite witch/vamp.
What do you propose we do about that?”

Still wearing that incredulous smirk, she scoffs. “There is no ‘we’, John. You’re a loose cannon I can’t afford to babysit. I’ll take it from here.”

She spins immediately at this final word, and I watch her back in shocked offense only a moment before it turns to outrage. “The hell you—

Before I can even finish the sentence, she flings an arm in my advancing direction, sending me slamming into the hard ground. I lay there gasping as my lungs fight desperately for new air, as she arches a condescending brow over me. Lying flat on my back in the dirt, I glare into the hard brown eyes of my companion, inwardly seething as I reluctantly surrender to the implied threat in her gaze. My teeth grind together in frustration and impotent rage as I watch her melt into the shadows.

Alaric

Nadia lounges comfortably in the lap of some beefy frat guy she nabbed and compelled, drinking greedily from his jugular. The heavy fall of her midnight dark hair shields her feed from prying eyes, but nothing can disguise the wet sound of her steady swallows. Not from this distance.

But, disconcerting though this little outing is, I am sitting in a crowded bar surrounded by strangers I will never have to see again and treated to a particularly expensive glass of bourbon, so I can’t complain. Actually, with the amount of alcohol I’ve consumed in the past hour, I am speeding toward oblivion on the tail of a rather nice buzz. I’ve even managed a joke or two.

“And then he said, ‘He’s not an eggplant. He’s retarded!’”* I finish, smiling widely as I deliver the punchline. I’d heard that one at the Grill last week from one of Mystic Falls many devoted day-drinkers between glaring at the bottom of a high ball glass and determinedly ignoring the vampire beside me. Damon had laughed as loudly as I had, and it had turned into a somewhat begrudging bonding experience.

“That’s fucked up,” Nameless declares, apparently oblivious to the teeth in his neck.

The slurping rhythm is interrupted by Nadia’s snort, and she pulls her fangs from the boy’s throat to issue a stern warning. “Did I say you could talk?”* she scowls darkly, but the gleam in her eye is more playful than dangerous. Doesn’t make the sight any less unnerving as she leans back in to lick the trail of blood from the open wound.

“No,” I say, clearing my throat uncomfortably. “No, it just...takes some getting used to is all.”

“Don’t worry, he’ll be fine,” she assures with a smirk. “Besides, he’s enjoying himself plenty. Aren’t you, kid?”

He stares dazedly into her eyes as he sits there bleeding into his shirt collar, clinging tightly to her hip as he holds her firmly against him. I don’t even want to think about why. “Definitely,” he replies.

He looks so utterly captivated by the demoness in his arms, staring longingly at lips still red with
his own blood, that it is honestly making me a little queasy. Still, it almost certainly beats the horror show I would have been subjected to back at the boarding house. Speaking of.

“Think Damon and Elena are ok?” I wonder aloud, maybe a little bit guilty leaving the girl to fend for herself. “Not sure I like how they were looking at each other earlier.”

Nadia snickers, lips twisting uncontrollably as she struggles to stifle her amusement. “I think Damon and Elena are fantastic. Besides, weren’t you the one insisting we had nothing to worry about? I say live and let live. They can clean up their own messes,” she shrugs with a grin.

Perpetual thirst slaked for the moment, she slides from her meal’s lap, popping his collar to hide the bite-mark and sending him on his way with a pat to the neck and a thoroughly wiped memory.

I look away from this exchange, not quite as comfortable with this whole thing as I pretend. I recognize the necessity of it, and I suppose I should be grateful she hasn’t caused the poor guy any lasting pain or trauma, but some residual hunter’s instinct still growls at the base of my throat bearing witness to her casual monstrosity. Only the pleasant buzzing in my head, and a cold iron will keep me in my seat.

She watches me curiously, sharp eyes taking quick note of my rigid posture and the barely disguised distaste on my face, her own expression strangely unreadable. “What are you even doing here, Ric? Don’t you have a girlfriend to fawn over?” she asks, tone neutral, but I am at a loss for words.

What can I say really? That I wish I could be with Jenna now? That I wish like hell that I could just relax into my relationship with an amazing woman and not feel like a liar? That I could actually share my life with her? All of it? We both know that’s impossible. It was impossible even before I learned my wife was still out there, feeding like an undead parasite of the lives of those I’d made it my mission to defend.

If I could only believe that the Isobel I knew—the quirky human woman with all her bizarre obsessions and insatiable curiosity, the woman I loved with all my heart—was still there, maybe it would make all this easier somehow. Simpler at least. But even I can’t convince myself of that anymore, no matter how much I wish I could.

Nadia’s smile turns sympathetic, grey-blue eyes alight with sad recognition, but she only guesses half my mind.

“Ah, I see,” she sighs knowingly. “Can I give you some advice?”

I only grunt by way of answer, taking a healthy swig of bourbon in preparation for whatever pearl of harsh wisdom she’s about to dole out.

Her eyes capture mine, spear ing into them with laser focus, and I read the truth in their frozen fire. She really does understand. I have to wonder whose face she sees when she closes her eyes. “Forget about her,” she instructs emphatically. “Staying emotionally committed to an absentee love interest is no way to live my friend. Take it from me. Especially when the bitch is a lying, manipulative cunt with no greater priority than her own self-interest. She’ll only fuck you over in the end. Trust me.”

Just then the phone rings loudly, drawing her focus and breaking our connection. I take the opportunity to reclaim my drink, tossing the final swallows back in one large gulp. I relish the burn.
Not for the first time comes the unwelcome realization that these creatures—for all their bloodlust and homicidal, ruthless pragmatism—are a lot more human than I’d like to imagine. I see far too much of myself in those haunting eyes. The thought is not a pleasant one, and I’d give almost anything to return to a time unburdened by that disturbing understanding—when the world was black and white and I had no sympathy for the devil I’ve come to know. But, hindsight is 20/20, and it’s far too late to go back.

I watch her eyes now as she ends the call, dusky swirls of color swimming unmistakably with rare concern, and my stomach plummets to the floor. Whatever comes next, it can’t be good.

“Well, that’s my cue. Looks like I’m back on guard duty. See ya, Ric,” she tries to hide that depth of feeling beneath the diamond hard shield of her eyes, but it’s too little and much too late. She nearly blurs in her haste for the door.

I eye my glass consideringly, tracking the bartender as he hovers in the periphery, as I debate the wisdom of another shot. Concerned though I am for whatever new disaster has befallen our tragic heroes, I am entirely certain that Damon and his trusty side-kick are well on their way, and Nadia hardly needs help twiddling her thumbs. Still, surely I can do something even if it’s only distracting Jenna from her niece’s conspicuous absence. I nod to myself, sliding the glass across the bar, and turn to leave.

Only to come face to face with the vision of my waking nightmares.

“Isobel.”

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Caroline

I hang the phone back on the wall and my mind goes blank. Silently, I take in the peeling plastic of the store counter, the cardboard display with all its candies and cheap BIC lighters, the light tinkling of glass as my new friend drops first one shard then another into the dustbin at her knee, and all at once I become aware of the gnawing hunger in my stomach. The dull ache in my gums. Fear had kept them at bay, but now I’ve acknowledged them it’s all I can do to keep from leaping over the counter and tearing into whatever gross, processed snack I can get my hands on. Unfortunately, my options at the moment appear to be booze and spearmint. Not much of an option.

“Shit!” the clerk hisses from her spot on the floor. She holds her finger in her mouth, suckling lightly at the wound as she shuffles back toward me. “Such a clumsy ol’ bat these days,” she jokes, gesturing with her good hand to the counter beside me. I barely spare it a glance. Rather than repeat herself, she winces apologetically in my direction as she reaches around me to fish through the drawer at my hip, wordlessly requesting that I move aside. I hardly even notice.

Frozen in my seat, I stare shamelessly at that tiny bleeding cut. The smell of it fills my nostrils, and I can nearly feel my pupils shrinking as they sharpen to spear-tips on that finger. My tongue darts out to lick at my suddenly dry lips, my teeth catching at the bottom one as saliva fills my mouth. I can almost taste it I am so unbelievably thirsty.

So focused am I on that one single ruby drop, that I hardly notice my own hand reach out to touch it, completely unaware of the woman’s expression as I draw that delectable wound to my own mouth. I’m not sure what I expected when it touched my tongue, but the taste is nothing new. It’s
the same sharp, metallic flavor it’s always been. Only this time, I can’t quite resist a moan. It’s *amazing*.

Almost immediately, that delight turns to agony as my gums suddenly fill with searing pain. It feels like something is slicing right through them, and my hand flies to my mouth as I nearly scream with it. My fingers brush the tender flesh, and I feel them. My teeth. No, my *fangs*.

“Oh, God. What’s happening to me?” I cry, all my pain and terror swimming in the tears that stream down my face, but it’s all drowned out again in the next second by the overwhelming wave of my hunger.

I can hear her heart beat. It’s pounding away like thunder in her chest, her terrified gasps hardly audible beneath the sound as she fights with the lock and the key at her belt to escape the monster behind her. Some tiny, distant part of me knows I should let her, but I can still taste her blood on my tongue, still feel it singing in my veins, and I simply don’t care.

The last things she’ll know in the world are my fangs in her throat.

Chapter End Notes

* For my fellow OINTB fans. I just couldn't help myself

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