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The Vampire Voss

Colleen Gleason



PROLOGUE

In Which an Unexpected Arrival Puts a Crimp in Hazard

London, 1804

"What in the dark hell is he doing here?" Dimitri, the Earl of Corvindale, set his glass precisely on the table, then adjusted it with great deliberation. He still held his cards but was no longer looking at them.

The man in question—the term "man" being a loose one, of course—had walked through the door of the hidden apartments at White's. These rooms were reserved for Dimitri and those of his ilk, and could only be accessed by someone who knew the right thing to say.

It was more than unfortunate that the man in question knew what to say to gain entrance. It was damned annoying.

The newcomer strode into the chamber and scanned the space, which hosted fewer than a dozen occupants on a good night. He was average in height, with thick hair the color of molasses and a square, dimpled chin—both characteristics that made him very popular with those of the feminine persuasion. More than a bit of swagger colored his step, making Dimitri itch to adjust the glass again. Bloody nuisance.

"I haven't any idea what he's doing here," replied his

companion, Giordan Cale, looking up from his cards. His eyes had narrowed as well, and Dimitri saw the hint of red glow emanating from their pupils. He presumed it was due to the new arrival rather than a particularly bad hand. Cale didn't have that large pile of pound notes and coins in front of him simply due to luck. "The last time I saw Voss was…hell. Must have been in Prague—sixty, seventy years ago." Cale's eyes crinkled at the corners. "How time flies when you live forever."

Dimitri didn't respond. There were days when forever was interminable. And days when he found it convenient to know he'd live forever.

Or, at least, for a very long time.

To his great irritation, at that moment, Voss made eye contact with him. Dimitri allowed a warning to flare in his own eyes then banked it. The man wasn't worth the effort.

"I don't believe I've seen the man for years m'self," commented the third at their game of hazard.

"Consider yourself fortunate," Dimitri murmured to Lord Eddersley as the newcomer made his way toward them.

Voss moved with what could only be described as flair and confidence. Despite his long absence, he had the right to be there, in the private, subterranean apartments at the famous White's men's club. The place Dimitri and his ilk considered their own, the place where it didn't matter what they drank or how they found their pleasure. A place where they didn't have to pretend.

Voss lifted an insouciant finger toward the footman in the corner and gestured for his drink to be brought to their table.

His arrogance made Dimitri's grip tighten around the heavy glass, but he kept his expression passive as Voss pulled a chair

over to join them. "Corvindale," Voss greeted Dimitri by his title with a nod, then turned to his companion. "Eddersley."

"Cale, recall Voss. Dewhurst's heir." Dimitri kept his tone bored. "Voss, Giordan Cale."

"Of course Cale and I have met," said Voss as he nodded toward the third man at the table. A curl tumbled artfully over one brow and Dimitri's lip curled. "And, incidentally, I'm now Lord Dewhurst. Father passed on a year ago. Or so the story goes." He gave an arch laugh and even Dimitri couldn't resist a wry smile then.

Such was the sort of artifice to which the immortal of the Draculia were consigned. Constant lies, subterfuge and half-truths.

And, naturally, much relocating. One couldn't stay in one place for more than three decades without facing awkward questions.

"No mourning clothing in sight," Dimitri observed. "Tsk, tsk. Of course, one shouldn't be surprised, knowing how that puts off the ladies."

Voss gave him a half smile along with a flash of eye-glow as if to let him know he was fully aware how annoyed Dimitri was. "Deal me in," he said, dropping a stack of notes onto the table.

Satan's stones. Dimitri was about to rise and toss his own cards onto the table when Voss looked over at him.

His face had lost that languid expression, the deviltry that so beguiled the ladies—and that got him into so many difficult circumstances—dissolved.

"Sit down, Corvindale," Voss said. This time, he showed a tip of fang. "I've news for you. Consider it a gift."

Dimitri's own fangs extended in automatic reaction to the show of provocation. "The last time you brought me a gift, you did nothing but irritate me and cost me a generation's

worth of property, not to mention my heart nearly on a stake." *And helped cause the death of a woman.*

The other man smiled, though it wasn't quite as easy, still showing just a tip of both pointed incisors. "But I thought for certain you would have forgotten that by now. It's been nearly a hundred years since Vienna, two generations past, Corvindale. Surely you haven't been stewing about it for all this time."

Light, light words. But the reality was much darker. And though it had been decades, and Dimitri had come to terms with the fact that it mostly had been an accident, he still wished Voss to hell on a more than occasional basis. Nevertheless, Dimitri didn't rise to the bait. He sheathed his fangs and hooded his eyes, although he wasn't able to resist letting his annoyance glow from them. "Then shall we dispense with hazard and discuss your tidings?" The bored tone had returned to his voice. "Why waste a perfectly good card game."

Voss bowed his head in supercilious acquiescence. "Your command, my lord." He lifted the drink that had appeared a moment earlier and sipped, then nodded at the glass as if in agreement with it. "French. Been running the lines, have you, Corvindale? Or is this not from your private stock?"

The Treaty of Amiens had dissolved more than a year ago and war between England and France had flared again, making it impossible to fill one's cellar with any French vintage or fashion. Unless one had special arrangements.

Dimitri gave him an arch glance that answered the newcomer's question. Naturally it was from his private stock, acquired through illegal means. Not that legalities or governing bodies meant anything to any of the Draculia.

"I approve, for I drink only for pleasure tonight, Dimitri," Voss was saying. "I fed yesterday. A lovely, very promiscuous young woman and her two best friends. A plump and generous

threesome tasting of a hint of rose and coriander." He lifted his square, dimpled chin and smiled knowingly. "Warm and delightful. And *fresh*."

"Country girls, I presume?" Dimitri said coolly, although his fangs threatened to shoot to full extension. Bastard. "What a shame the bourgeois aren't foolish enough to lift their skirts for you. All those lovely white thighs and blue blood."

Pure red burned in Voss's eyes, making even his dark irises glow. "I can't imagine what it would be like to deny oneself the pleasure of a real feeding for decades. To be resigned only to a bottle of pig's blood, or worse. It would certainly make one cold and empty. Unpleasant, to say the least. Slow. And repulsive."

Dimitri accepted the slur; it was nothing new. The others feared him, keeping their distance, interacting with him only when necessary, pretending to be his comrade whilst whispering behind his back. Within the Draculia—those who bore Lucifer's Mark identifying the crack in their souls—it was common knowledge that Dimitri hadn't fed on a living human for more than two generations. He'd taken up that abstinence not long after the events in Vienna.

The exception to the divide between himself and the wary deference of the others was Voss, who had only this sort of insolence to show, and Cale, whom Dimitri considered his only true friend.

Unlike Dimitri, Voss wore his dissociation from the other Dracule like a mantle of pride—mainly because it was of his own making. Voss, now the very wealthy Viscount Dewhurst, amused himself by seeking and collecting information that could be sold or bartered and, Dimitri suspected, he did so also in order to insulate himself from the others.

Dimitri, on the other hand, didn't care what anyone thought of him and did nothing to challenge long-held perceptions.

He simply wanted to be left alone with his studies and occasionally emerge to the gentlemen's clubs for a game of chance or a midnight horse race. Or perhaps a bout of pugilism at Gentleman Jackson's.

"If you have news, I suggest you share it. Sooner rather than later," Dimitri said at last.

Voss's contemptuousness seemed to evaporate as he leaned toward him, as did the anger in his eyes. For a moment, Dimitri sensed a sort of hesitation, perhaps, or doubt, from the younger man. Younger in years on the earth by perhaps a generation, but not in physical appearance. To an ignorant mortal, the two men would appear to be in their thirties instead of well over one century old.

Voss's fingers traced idly over the sides of his cognac glass, giving him the appearance of being relaxed. But his face was intense and his voice pitched low enough for only Dimitri to hear.

"Narcise Moldavi has disappeared."

Next to him, Cale stilled, and Dimitri flickered a glance at his companion. The man's face was passive, his eyes flat and dark as he lifted his glass of wine. He remained silent.

"Cezar Moldavi can't keep control of his own sister. Why is that such great news?" Dimitri's tone was flat and bored. Yet, his attention sharpened. He had a bad feeling about this.

Voss sipped then returned his drink to the table. "You're not a fool. You know Moldavi will eagerly blame no one other than yourself for her disappearance. Regardless of any evidence—or the lack thereof."

"Again, you bring me no information that I don't already possess," Dimitri replied, annoyed at the reminder that Cezar Moldavi continued to disfigure the face of the earth after two centuries. He forced his fingers to release the glass, slowly and deliberately. "You've interrupted my game for naught."

"From the looks of it, Cale is the one with the largest pot. Perhaps you ought to thank me." Voss settled back in his chair, once again looking like the rake he was well-known for being: heavy-eyed, half smiling, relaxed. "But here is the information you likely don't possess."

Dimitri didn't care for the smile twitching the corners of the man's mouth. What the hell had brought Voss back to London anyway? Surely not this sort of dancing, parleying conversation. Probably the women. It had always been the women, the pleasure, the hedonism for Voss and others of the Dracule. And for a time, Dimitri had tried to enjoy it as well, and had even promoted it through his establishment in Vienna. A renewal of annoyance flushed through him, and he pushed it away. It wasn't worth the effort.

Standing, he swiped up the handful of notes and coins he'd won in the game and folded them neatly. "I find myself bored with the company and conversation. Carry on."

As he turned, shoving the winnings into his coat pocket, Voss's parting words came to settle on the back of his neck, as if burned there. "Chas Woodmore was last seen in Paris, with Narcise. He's gone missing, as well."

Woodmore was gone? With Narcise? Bloody damned bones of Satan. Woodmore was supposed to *kill* Moldavi, not run off with his sister. Dimitri didn't pause but his gut tightened. That pronouncement meant a variety of things, but by his personal estimation the worst was what it meant to Dimitri, himself.

It meant that his well-ordered, if monotonous, life was about to turn upside down. It meant that his solitude, his studies, his very existence was about to be invaded by the trio of silly, giggling, frippery-happy Woodmore sisters. Including Miss Maia Woodmore.

Why in the name of the Fates had he ever promised Chas

Woodmore he'd watch over them? Why did Woodmore have to do something so blasted foolish? He should have left Cezar Moldavi to Dimitri to handle.

Damn it all to Lucifer.

Dimitri curled his lips and darkly considered his predicament. He had a few days to put things in order before the girls would invade his home. They couldn't stay at their residence, not with Cezar Moldavi coming after their brother. But Dimitri wasn't about to have them under the Corvindale roof until he was prepared to be overrun.

Damn and blast and burning bones.

He'd have to set some guards to watch over the girls until he was ready to have them to Blackmont Hall. *Damn the Fates.* What the hell was it going to be like with three young, *mortal* women in his house? Hell, he'd probably have to have Mirabella come in from the country. And a chaperone to keep it proper.

Grinding his teeth, Dimitri poured another glass of whiskey, then tossed it back with a big swallow. When he glanced up, Voss, the bastard, was watching him with a smirk.

He knew exactly how annoyed Dimitri was. And the man was enjoying every moment of it.

Damn it to Lucifer.

1

Wherein Miss Woodmore's Services are Engaged

Voss adjusted the shoulders of his coat, aligning the seams, then smoothed the lapels and hem. Having been alive for more than a hundred forty years, he'd seen his share of fashions come and go—and some of them had been horrific. Thank the Fates that the wigs and long, swinging coats that had been in fashion during all of the upheaval around Charles II had given way to shirts and neckcloths and pantaloons. The tailoring was much more attractive, and showing one's own hair was much preferred after decades of wigs and powder.

But Voss's mind wasn't, for once, wholly on his appearance or how he was going to find a nice plump thigh or two to sample…along with, of course, a bit more intimacy. Instead he was still mulling over the expression on Dimitri's face two nights ago in the back rooms at White's.

Dimitri still hadn't forgiven him for that night in Vienna, and Voss supposed he couldn't wholly blame him. The incident in 1690 that had caused their rift had been a combination of misjudgment and unfortunate happenstance. Voss had long written it off to his inexperience and having only been Dracule for six years at the time. Nevertheless, he should have realized

that whatever sense of humor Dimitri had had long been lost after becoming Dracule. Or perhaps he'd never even had one, growing up the son of an English earl during the dark times of Oliver Cromwell and his stark Puritan ways.

But that occasion in Vienna had taken place so long ago that the Plague had still been a threat, and unfortunate as it was, the resulting destruction of Dimitri's property and the death of his mistress had been an accident. Most of the blame was, and rightly should be, laid at the feet of Cezar Moldavi—who'd also been in Vienna.

But however the blame had been distributed, the fact that he'd infuriated Dimitri all those years ago made it more difficult for Voss to get what he needed from him. And the fact was he needed Dimitri's cooperation now that Woodmore was gone. They weren't precisely enemies, Voss and Dimitri—but neither did they fully trust each other. It was more as if they were two dogs circling, eyeing each other balefully. With Dimitri doing most of the baleful eyeing, if one was to be wholly honest.

Voss frowned, adjusting the cuff of his shirt. Even if Chas Woodmore—who was not a member of the Draculia—wasn't dead now, he would be as soon as Cezar Moldavi found him with his sister. It was only a matter of time.

"Bastard's as cold and frigid as a dead mortal," he muttered to himself, thinking of Dimitri and his decades of self-denial of the most basic of needs. Whether it stemmed from the incident with Moldavi and Lerina that night in Vienna, or maybe because of his previous mistress, Meg, he didn't know, but Dimitri's choice was an abstinence worse than chastity. Neither of which were the least bit attractive to Voss.

"Beg pardon, my lord?" said his valet, Kimton, turning from the wardrobe. A variety of rejected neckcloths hung from his fingers and over his arms.

"Nothing," Voss replied, picking up his hat and gloves. He paused one last time to admire the cut of his steel-blue coat and gray, gold and midnight patterned vest. His shirt was crisp and white, and the chosen neckcloth a rich sapphire. He'd chosen to stud it with a black jet pin in the shape of an X.

Or, if looked at from a different angle, a cross. But no one would recognize the irony of that except another Dracule.

He smiled, admired the glint of his fangs as they eased smoothly out to press against his lower lip and flashed a bit of that alluring glow from his pupils. Tonight was going to be a delightful challenge. He wondered which of the Woodmore sisters would fall prey to his charm first. Another game, of course. It didn't really matter which one did, as long as one of them succumbed and he could get the information he needed—namely, which of them had the gift of the Sight.

After that, it would be a simple matter to coax the information he wanted from the chit, and then he could be on his way before Woodmore was any wiser. The biggest concern was, however, whether Moldavi knew yet just how valuable the sisters were. The last thing Voss wanted was for Moldavi to realize he could procure his own information from the girls, for it would decidedly deflate Voss's leverage with him. And it would take all of the amusement out of things.

If nothing else, Voss appreciated pleasure and amusement in his life.

After all, when one lived forever, and one was rich as sin, one had to find entertainment and pleasure in order to keep things from becoming mundane. Unfortunately his attempt at amusement and puzzle-solving was precisely what had driven the wedge between him and Dimitri more than a century ago.

But then again, a simple life without pleasure, diversion

and the matching of wits would be tedious. Especially when it stretched on for eternity.

Voss ignored the internal rumble of discontent and reached for the handkerchief that Kimton had neatly folded, tucking it into a pocket, giving himself a last critical once-over in the mirror.

It was a relief to return to civilization after spending the majority of the last generation in the Colonies. The man who'd been installed as his father, Lord Dewhurst, had retired from his post—which was to say, he'd been paid off to live the rest of his years in the mountains of Romania or Switzerland—and Voss had been able to reinstate himself as Dewhurst after a forty-year exile. During that time, he'd managed brief trips to Paris, Vienna, Rome and even London, of course, but he couldn't remain there long and still draw on his accounts.

It was too difficult and certainly impolitic to explain why Viscount Dewhurst never aged, disliked going outside when it was very sunny and preferred the warm rich taste of blood to any vintage or, Luce forbid, the rot they called ale in Boston. And if anyone noticed the extreme resemblance between every other generation of Lord Dewhursts, it was merely written off to a strong family tree.

Voss smiled as he pulled on his own gloves. A strong and quite unique family tree indeed. The fact that he and Dimitri, as well as Cezar Moldavi, sprang from the same widespread branches was merely an irritation in the grand scheme of things. It was fortunate to Voss's way of thinking that *his* Draculian ancestors, as well as those of Dimitri, Cale and a limited number of others, had found their wives among the British and French peerage and thus had conferred upon them their titles and estates throughout Western Europe. Moldavi's roots, on the other hand, were firmly entrenched in the cold, uncivilized mountains of Transylvania and Romania. Drafty

castles and mountainous estates located leagues from anything resembling civilization would not be to Voss's liking. Perhaps that was part of the reason Moldavi was so intent on growing his power over mortal and Dracule alike, and why he'd established himself in Paris, trying to create an ally in Bonaparte.

At the bottom of the stairs of his James Park residence, Voss found his butler, Moross (whom he privately called Morose for obvious reasons), waiting at the door.

"Your carriage, my lord," the man intoned. It wasn't time for his once-a-decade smile, so he merely looked down his long bloodhound face.

"Where's Eddersley? And Brickbank?" Voss asked, glancing at the clock in the foyer. Nearly eleven. They'd been expected by half past ten, and he thought he'd heard voices below as he finished dressing. Everyone in the household knew better than to interrupt him in his toilette.

"Here!" trilled a voice. A very happy voice—rather a bit high in pitch to be comfortably masculine—which belonged to Brickbank. From the sound of it, he'd been into Voss's private vintage in the study. Blast. He'd only been back in London for three days and already Brickbank was becoming an annoyance.

Yes, Voss was more than ready to make the rounds in Society and take advantage of any offered—or coaxed—opportunities therein whilst going about his more urgent business, but there was a time for play and a time for business. To quote a book that he was only vaguely familiar with.

In most cases, however, Voss found a way to combine both business and pleasure.

Brickbank cared for little more than charming a few debutantes in a dark corner to see how far down their gloves would slip. Although Voss wasn't averse to those challenges himself, he had a bit more on his mind than that. With Moldavi riding

his tongue along Bonaparte's arse crack, the Draculia cartel in London would be well served by preparedness.

And Voss was in the position to accomplish just that.

The door to the study opened and out tottered Brickbank, his eyes bright and his nose tinged red. Behind him strode Eddersley, his mop of thick dark hair a mess as usual and a bemused expression on his face. Voss met his eyes and Eddersley shrugged.

"Shall we?" Voss asked coolly, resisting the urge to look at the condition of his study. Morose would see to any disruption with pleasure. "The ball should be in full crush by now."

"You're certain the Woodmore chits will be there?" asked Brickbank, bumping against him as they both moved toward the front door. "Abhor stuffy crushes."

"By all accounts they will. At least, the two elder ones. Unless Corvindale has locked them away already," Voss replied, stepping back so that his clumsy friend could precede him through the front door.

Eddersley gave a short laugh. "Dimitri likely hasn't yet met them. He'd be in no hurry to accept his responsibility as their guardian, temporary or otherwise. That would mean actually speaking to a mortal—and a female one at that—and removing himself from his study."

Voss nodded, smiling to himself. He'd given Corvindale the news only two nights ago; even he wouldn't have moved that quickly to get the girls under his roof and safe from Moldavi. And that was precisely the reason he was taking himself off to the Lundhames' ball tonight.

There were rumors about the Woodmore girls and their abilities, of course—which was why Dimitri had become ensnared in a mess that he surely would prefer to be left out of—but whether those rumors about the sisters and their secrets had yet reached the streets of Paris, and thus the ears of

Moldavi, was uncertain. Since the war and the new Emperor Bonaparte's subsequent buildup of brigades ready to invade England, even those who were Dracule had a bit more difficulty with expedient communication.

Chas Woodmore had done his best to keep his sisters and their abilities under wraps while at the same time making himself indispensable to Corvindale and other members of the Draculia. It was too bad Woodmore didn't trust Voss enough to turn the guardianship of his sisters over to *him*, instead of Corvindale. That would have made things much simpler.

The three men climbed into the carriage and Voss settled himself on the green velvet seat. Eddersley and Brickbank found their places across from him, and he rapped on the ceiling. The conveyance started off with nary a jolt and he peered out the window as they drove through St. James. As they rumbled along, the wheels quick and smooth over the cobbles below, Voss found himself less interested in the conversation of his companions than the sights outside the window.

A new moon gave no assistance to the faulty oil lamps illuminating the streets, exposing little but the shadows of random persons making their way along the walkways. The houses and shops, cluttered and clustered together in a jumbled-together fashion so unlike that in the sprawling Colonies, rose like unrelieved black walls on either side of the street. The only texture in that solid dark rise was the occasional alley or mews, just as dark and dangerous.

To mortals, anyway.

Voss felt oddly prickly tonight, as if something irregular were about to happen.

Perhaps it was simply that he'd not been out in London Society for years, although he would never ascribe his unsettled feeling to nerves. A one-hundred-forty-eight-year-old vampire simply didn't have nervous energy…even when he

came face-to-face with his own weakness, which, in the case of Voss, was the unassuming hyssop plant.

Each of them, each Dracule, had a personal Asthenia—an Achilles' heel or vulnerability, or whatever one wanted to call it. Other than a wooden stake to the heart, a blade bent on severing head from body or full sunlight, the Asthenia was the only real threat to a member of the Draculia. And even then, the Asthenia caused only pain and great weakness—which often allowed for the stake, sword or sun to do its business.

Not that the Dracule ever discussed or even disclosed this frailty. It was a personal thing, akin to having a flaccid member at the most inopportune moments. Never spoken of, never acknowledged, never dissected. There was, as Giordan Cale had once said, honor among thieves, pirates *and* the Draculia.

Yet, in an attempt to keep his mind occupied and in a bid for personal amusement as well as leverage in the event he needed it, Voss had made a sort of game of it to determine the Asthenias of his Draculian brothers. He considered it nothing more than each man's unique puzzle, and by craft, cunning or mere observation, he had determined the weaknesses of many of his associates.

It was nothing he hadn't been doing for years, for Voss had long been a trained observer. He'd grown up the youngest child and long-awaited heir, and he spent much of his youth eluding tutors and spying on his five elder sisters.

At an early age, he discovered that information was power and that secrets were leverage. His sisters doted on him, spoiled him and easily succumbed to his manipulations, paying him in sweetmeats or playtime when he threatened to divulge who was kissing whose beau, sneaking into the barn with a footman and "borrowing" another sibling's clothing and shoes. The price became even higher when said beau belonged to another

sister, or when the gown in question mysteriously reappeared in the owner's wardrobe, torn or stained.

He considered it all in good fun, and as a result, Voss ate plenty of jumballs, candied rosemary and rosewater fritters as well as earned games of chess or backgammon from his sisters or their beaus.

When he turned fifteen and went off to school, Voss realized that his tendency toward observation and manipulation was no longer a simple matter of entertainment, but personal security, as well. The upperclassmen at Eton leeched almost immediately onto the pretty blond boy who tended toward the scrawny side, tossing him into the privy on his second day of school. That shock, after having been petted and fussed over for his young life, caused Voss to look at the world of men quite differently.

Although he spent more than seven hours in the privy that first week, it took Voss no longer than that to skulk around the college, spying and observing and gathering information. He learned that the biggest and most fearsome of the upperclassmen, Barding Delton, had a terrible secret that he could not allow to be divulged. When Voss approached him and indicated that the next time he was thrown into the privy, he would be more than pleased to share with the entire school that Delton couldn't raise his prick to pleasure a woman no matter how hard he tried and how much he boasted about doing so, Delton decided to find someone else to toss into the muck.

And so it went. The mathematics professor who tried to coerce Voss into dropping his breeches for him in a dark corner was deterred by the threat of exposure to his wife and father. The priest who couldn't remember where he'd put the consecrated hosts after a serious drinking bout was induced to

give Voss the highest marks in Latin, even when he refused to attend class.

The most attractive of women fell prey to his seduction as well, long before he had the ability to enthrall them with his vampiric eyes. The wife of his science teacher, the sister of one of his classmates who'd been promised to another—even the mistress of the city's mayor—all found themselves sharing a bed with him.

And that was even before he finished at Eton.

When he became Dracule and realized that each one of his "brothers" had the penultimate secret of a life-threatening Asthenia, Voss found it an amusing pastime to learn what it was for as many of them as possible. He used whatever method it took—deduction, trickery or bribes—and for this reason he found himself all but ostracized by the rest of the Draculia. They simply didn't trust him.

The ostracization was unfair, if not highly amusing to Voss, for he'd rarely sold the information or otherwise utilized it. Nor did he intend to—unless his own life was at stake. The collection of knowledge had become a personal triumph. Some men collected horses or women or wine. Voss collected information.

He was rich, titled, handsome, powerful, could bed any woman he wanted whenever he wanted and he was never going to die. What else was he to do with his infinite amount of time?

What else?

Voss pursed his lips as the carriage trundled along. His companions were conversing about some twilight horse race in which he had no interest, while he must consider wooing a Woodmore sister out from under the Earl of Corvindale's nose.

Just another challenge. Just another puzzle.

Now, Voss's eyes narrowed as a movement in the shadows caught his attention. The carriage rolled speedily along, but he could see well into the dark recess of the alley and he straightened in his seat as they went by. The flutter of a skirt, a tall, bulky figure swooping. His eyes narrowed and he rapped sharply on the vehicle's roof to signal the driver to stop.

Pleasure rushed through him as he sprang from the conveyance before it came to a full stop. Ignoring the exclamations of his companions, Voss was out the door and streaking back down the street toward the long, dark passage between two close-knit buildings.

It was a matter of a breath before he arrived in the engulfing shadows that, nevertheless, appeared to him only like green haze mottled with gray. Although the details were obscured, he could still clearly see shapes and some texture in the dark. His fangs he kept retracted and he knew his eyes glowed faintly, but he didn't allow them to burn very hot. Not yet.

The muffled sounds of struggle filtered through the silence and Voss smiled in anticipation. Just a bit of a diversion before the propriety of the ball.

He moved so silently and quickly that the man had no sense of his presence until Voss closed his fingers over the scruff of his jacket and hoisted him up and away from his prey. Nearly twice his size, the attacker flailed with a meaty arm, attempting to whirl about as Voss propelled him through the air like a child's ball. He landed against a rough brick wall with a satisfying thump as Voss turned to the woman.

Blood scented the air—thick and full and tempting. It had, after all, been two days since he'd fed. Voss drew in a breath of pleasure and looked down at her. In the greenish-glowing dimness, he took note of her wide eyes and her dress—a frock that he could see was of decent quality. The daughter of a tradesman perhaps, or a servant, but certainly not a beggar

or even a whore. Her clothing and grooming were much too nice.

She gaped at him, staggering back into the wall behind her as she stumbled away, clearly frightened of everything, including her rescuer.

Voss heard the noise behind him as the heavy man struggled to his feet, but he ignored it and instead spoke to the woman. "A bit dark down in here, isn't it, m'dear?"

Her neck and the expanse of her bosom gleamed pale in the dimness and he saw blood trailing from a cut on her cheek. It was still fresh; glistening and raw and its scent teased him. A young woman's blood, cut with fear, rich and sweet. He could already taste it.

Her mouth moved but nothing came out, yet Voss stepped closer, reaching for her arm. "Come," he said. "You don't want to stay here." He turned just as she gasped in alarm, his arm whipping out to crash solidly into the other man, who'd lunged at them.

One effortless slash against the attacker's gut, then an elbow smashing into the side of his head, and this time the man collapsed like a stone. The aroma of his blood filled the air, heavy and metallic. And plentiful.

Voss wasn't even tempted.

During this additional altercation, Voss hadn't loosened his grip on the woman's arm, and now he turned back to coax her. "Come now," he said again, leaning closer to get a better whiff of her bloodscent. Lovely. "He won't bother you again. Let's get you somewhere safe."

She made a whimpering sound, and he banked the glow of his eyes. He'd kept his fangs sheathed all this time; there was no reason to frighten her any further. He had other methods, and he preferred an at least somewhat willing partner. Once

she understood that pleasure awaited, she'd be willing and ready.

He'd already stripped off his gloves, and now, with a bare finger, he reached out and swiped the blood from her cheek. His skin seemed to heat as the liquid touched his flesh, and he brought his finger to his lips. A delicate taste, just there on his mouth…warm, but a bit thin. Not as sweet as he'd expected, or hoped. But pleasant enough. It would do.

She was still gaping up at him with frantic eyes and Voss tugged her closer. "You're safe now," he murmured, and deftly shifted so his foot brushed against hers.

So simple, so easy. He allowed his eyes to shift and beckon, and felt her tension ease as he captured her gaze, just enough to take the edge off her panic. Even in this dim light, he could find the center of a mortal, he could tug and coax and lead.…

She stumbled a bit and he moved closer, still holding the eye contact. "I want to taste you."

Her breath stuttered and she stared at him, her hand trembling against her throat. Her lips parted but nothing came out.

"May I?" he asked, but he was already moving in. Closer. The warmth of her breath puffed against him, buffeting his mouth, the smell of bloodscent filling his nose. He smiled. Then he released and loosened the thrall he had cast upon her so that she knew what he was about to do.

So she would feel the pleasure.

She softened and her eyes fluttered.

His fangs had emerged and he showed them to her. "It won't hurt," he murmured, lifting her arm, smoothing away the sleeve of her frock. Then in a burst of ferocity, he changed his mind and reached for her shoulders. She muttered and shifted, and he pulled away to look at her. A bit of fear leaped there…

fear and an edge of curiosity and desire. The glamouring, the thrall, was no longer necessary: he saw only clear need and question. He smiled and bent to her neck.

She stiffened and gasped in shock as his fangs sank in, down into the soft flesh.

Ah. The blood, the sweet flood of it, the smell and taste of iron and fear and naked desire poured through him. His veins surged and filled, his body heated and the familiar throb lifted his cock. She trembled, shuddered, her hands against his shoulders. Whether she were pushing him away or merely steadying herself, he wasn't certain. He didn't care.

When he wanted, he took.

She moaned against him, suddenly soft, suddenly pressing her body all along his. The curve of her breasts and the swell of her arse were tempting and he pulled away from her neck long enough to smother her mouth with his. Heat mixed with the heavy iron of her lifeblood. She shuddered beneath his kiss, her lips opening and the warm sleek thrust of her tongue shared the blood on his lips.

That was the way of it. They always wanted more.

And for the Dracule, it was a dual-pronged need: the desire for hot, sweet, life-sustaining blood combined inextricably with sexual desire. One fed the other: the dual penetrations, the heat and sensuality, the sleek, pulsing sensations, the intimate tastes and scents. Although it was possible, a Dracule rarely indulged in one without the other. Why bother?

She shifted so that her hips moved against him, little gasps and sighs coming from deep in her throat as he returned to feeding, to drawing the pulsing blood from her throat in the same primitive rhythm of coitus. The girl shuddered, vibrating with desire, her fingers curling into his arms.

Voss fed, drawing deep and hard. He breathed in her heated scent, felt the tremors in her torso and her weight suddenly

sag between him and the wall. He knew when to stop, and he pulled away. Reluctantly. His cock raged, needing to finish things off.

In response to the interruption, Voss felt the familiar warning twinge on the back of his shoulder.

The girl looked up at him with vacant eyes and he kissed her parted lips in a brief thank you. Then he bent back to the four little wounds on her neck and licked them delicately, slipping his tongue into and around the little indentations to ensure the spread of his healing saliva. After all, he'd just saved her life. It would be a bit of a kick in the face to let her die so soon after.

Just as he was finishing and setting her weak-kneed body up against the wall, Voss heard a noise behind him.

"What in the bloody hell?"

Eddersley.

"Hell, Dewhurst. Can't keep 'em sheathed for more than a few hours, can you?" His friend tsked. Of course, if it were a handsome, muscled young man in the alley, Eddersley would have been unsheathing his own incisors without delay. He'd even looked Voss's way more than once—but that had been decades ago, when they'd first met at one of Cale's parties in Paris.

Voss smiled, still feeling the pleasure. "When the opportunity presents itself, why not? She enjoyed it as much as I. Or at least, that's how she'll remember it." As she tensed, he curled his fingers around her arm so the girl couldn't run off before he was through with her. "You can still join me."

Eddersley didn't look the least bit tempted. "I just visited Rubey's. I'll wait and see what I can find at the Lundhames' tonight. Blue blood's my preference."

Blue blood in a stiff cock, to be precise. "This was nothing more than a bit of foreplay. I've room for more, later, of course."

Voss grinned and dabbed at the corners of his mouth with the handkerchief in case of any errant streaks of blood. The girl was making little gasping noises and he looked down at her. "Now, there, m'dear. It's all over for now and soon you won't recall a thing about it. More's the pity for you."

He turned on his gentle thrall, his eyes glowing full and golden-red, and he stared into the girl's gaze. He felt the moment she released the memory of him and what had just occurred: she gave a little sigh and a jolt and then fear blazed into her face.

Good; she'd remember the attack from the man, but wouldn't have the memory of a handsome tawny-haired vampire to share.

"Go," he commanded. "And stay out of the bloody alleys." He released her and watched as the girl pushed past him, dashing toward the street-end of the alley where a lamp provided the relative safety of illumination.

"I thought you were hell-bent on getting to the Lundhames'," Eddersley said. "Didn't think you had time for such a diversion."

Voss straightened up and brushed the sleeve of his coat. "Indeed. But if I hadn't stopped to intervene, she'd have suffered more than a bit of pleasure and four small puncture wounds. 'Twas only a bit of a delay. The Woodmore chits will still be there, I'm certain."

"Never can pass up a bit of the tip-slip, can you, Dewhurst?" said Brickbank as Voss and Eddersley climbed back into the coach.

"Why should I?" he replied, settling into his seat. He was aware of the sharper ache on the back of his right shoulder as he settled into place.

The discomfort was Lucifer's way of annoying him, of course. Reminding him to whom he belonged. The ache

wouldn't be nagging at him if he'd gouged his fangs roughly into that little chit's chest, tearing the virgin flesh and sucking until she collapsed—and then left her. Or if he'd savaged her assailant, draining him of his blood or even simply pulling him apart. Or even if he'd driven on by without stopping to interfere.

Voss adjusted his arm and tried to ignore the dull throb emanating through Lucifer's Mark. He knew what it would look like at this moment: the slender jagged line that started beneath the hair at his nape and spread like roots over the back of his right shoulder would be raised like tiny, dark veinlike welts. Normally the mark remained nearly flat and simply looked like the tattoo of a shattered piece of glass. But at times like this, it filled and swelled and became an annoyance.

It was the physical manifestation of the crack in his soul, the one that had occurred when Lucifer visited him in his dreams more than a century ago: the sign of his family's liaison with the devil, the indication of Voss's immortality and power.

A cracked or damaged soul meant that he could live forever and never face the judgment of God. He could do what he wanted, when he wanted. He had access to resources beyond imagination: power, wealth, even knowledge. He had no one to answer to but Lucifer, and only if the devil ever called him to true service.

Unless, of course, he met a stake through his heart or someone sliced off his head.

And the only way either of those things would happen was if he came face-to-face with the damned hyssop plant and it weakened or paralyzed him. And since Voss had no intention of dying, *ever*, he continued to build up his own arsenal of protection by learning the frailties of others.

He would never again be the scrawny fifteen-year-old kid who'd spent more than two hours in the depths of the privy

his first week at Eton—on three different occasions—because his upper classmates thought he was too pretty and spoiled.

Regardless of the fact that it was true: he always had been pretty and spoiled.

Perhaps that was why Lucifer had chosen him to be Dracule.

Not for the first time, Voss was thankful that his Asthenia wasn't something common, like tea leaves or silver. Amman Gilreath, poor bastard, had had an Asthenia of pine needles, which had led to an early end for him, thanks to Chas Woodmore.

The thought of Moldavi steered Voss's mind back to where it should have been, instead of on things he couldn't change. His family's deal with the devil had been made in the fifteenth century. Voss, Dimitri, Eddersley, Giordan Cale—all the members of the Draculia, even Moldavi—were the result of Vlad Tepes's, Count Dracula's, desire to rule Romania with an iron fist.

And centuries later, random members of the broad family tree were still paying the price of an unholy covenant negotiated by Vlad the Impaler.

"I should like to engage your services, Miss Woodmore."

Angelica turned to the pretty young woman, who'd spoken to her through the leaves of a large potted lemon tree settled in the corner of the Lundhames' ballroom. A bit out of breath from the quadrille she'd just finished with the very energetic Mr. Clayton Beemish, Angelica smiled and edged closer to the large plant, allowing its branches to flutter in front of her—the better to keep the conversation unnoticed.

Fortunately Mr. Beemish had taken himself off to fetch a cup of lemonade for her. It would be a while before he returned, she was certain, and as long as none of the other

young men noticed that she was unattended, she would have a few moments to talk to this new acquaintance.

That was, except for Lord Harrington. She hadn't seen the handsome young man yet—and as he always made a point of finding her if he was in attendance, she presumed he either wasn't coming or hadn't arrived yet. But if he did appear, she'd certainly choose the pleasure of dancing with him over a possible business transaction.

"Do you have a reference?" Angelica asked, for she was careful with whom she divulged her ability.

"Chastity Drury told me about you. I'm Gertrude Yarmouth," she whispered. One of the green spikes from the lemon tree had caught in her hair, and she pushed it away as she offered a coin to Angelica, gloved hand meeting gloved hand behind the sturdy tree trunk. "Will this be enough for you to tell me about Baron Framingham?"

Ah. Framingham. The man who laughed too loudly and who seemed to be unable to retain a valet, if his attire was any indication. Angelica looked down at the gold crown that had just been slipped to her and resisted the urge to smile in delight. Her reputation was certainly growing, as was the small pouch of coins in her chamber. As soon as she could slip out of the house without Maia bothering her, she would deliver it to St. Anselm's orphanage, where the ladies who ran the home would put it to good use.

"I must have further information before I agree to take you on as a client," she warned, for the services of Angelica Woodmore weren't for the fainthearted. Nor for the destitute.

"Has Framingham asked for your hand?" she continued, for she hadn't heard, nor read, any announcement of a betrothal. And if the man were betrothed, the engagement certainly hadn't affected his interest in other young women since arriving at the Lundhames' ball. Including Angelica herself.

"Yes, he spoke to my father only today. My father approves of the match."

"Have you accepted him, then? Are you certain you wish to engage my services?" Angelica watched the girl closely.

"I have asked my father to allow me a day to think on it—a request which he granted reluctantly. I knew you were going to be here tonight, and I didn't want to make a decision until I learned what you had to tell me. Chastity said you helped her."

Angelica nodded. Now for the most telling question. "Do you wish to accept Framingham? Are you in love with him?" She would return the coin in a moment if the young woman were. She'd come to accept that the very thing which made her so different, and which burdened her in ways that no one else understood, could also be put to good use. Her "sight" could be intriguing, amusing and profitable for certain charities—but not in every case. She'd learned her lesson after what happened with Belinda Mayhew and no longer blindly accepted clients.

"I hardly know the man," Miss Yarmouth said, her voice rising and her hand buffeting the aromatic lemon leaves. "He is… He's nearly forty, and his teeth are so yellow and crooked and all he speaks of are his hounds. Always, his hounds. But he has over thirty thousand a year, and this is my second Season. Papa is annoyed that I've been out for so long and I've only received one other proposal. If I don't accept him, he won't be pleased."

Definitely not a love match, which would make it easier to deliver unpleasant news if that was what it happened to be. "Very well. Consider this—" she held up the coin "—a down payment. You will owe me another one after I give you the information." The orphans at St. Anselm's seemed to grow out of their frocks and pants weekly. Angelica eyed

Miss Yarmouth, who gulped but nodded firmly. Then Angelica tucked the crown into her reticule and, after a glance to determine Mr. Beemish's whereabouts (still across the room, in line for lemonade) continued, "You must provide me with something that Framingham has touched with his bare hand. And you understand there is only one thing I can tell you about him."

"Yes, of course. Chastity explained how you helped her. You can tell me only how he will die," Miss Yarmouth said, her voice pitching so low at the end of her speech that the music fairly drowned it out.

"After a fashion. I can only see a person in a still image at the moment of death. And the only reason I am willing," Angelica said, her voice and expression becoming vehement as she tried to ignore the fact that that was no longer quite true, "is to enable you to make a knowledgeable decision as to whether you wish to accept his hand in marriage."

She ruthlessly pushed away the flash of memory from the grisly dream she'd had last week. It had only happened once. Surely it meant nothing.

Miss Yarmouth's eyes were wide and she nodded fervently. "Yes, of course," she said again.

Despite the other woman's assurances, Angelica launched into her standard lecture. "We of the fairer sex have little to say in regards to our marital matches and our lives. If I can offer a piece of information that might tip the scales a bit in our balance, then I am happy to do so."

"I do wish you'd cease this ridiculous game," a voice suddenly hissed into Angelica's ear. "We've got other things to be concerned with tonight."

Angelica pulled her arm away from her older sister's firm grip. "Stow it, Maia. At least one of us ought to enjoy our-

selves," she muttered, "and it best be me. Heaven knows you don't know how. Have you even danced *once* tonight?"

"While our brother is quite possibly lying *dead* somewhere?" Maia pressed her slippered foot down hard onto hers, but her sister was nimble enough to pull her toes out before they were smashed, and without stumbling and making a scene in front of her client.

Angelica slipped a sharp elbow into her sister's side as she turned and smiled at Miss Yarmouth. "I shall meet you in the ladies' retiring room in thirty minutes to examine the item you've retrieved from him. Don't be late."

"Thirty minutes?" Miss Yarmouth's lips opened in shock. "But—"

"Yes. Half past midnight. You'll have to work quickly and intelligently," Angelica told her. "My services do not come cheaply or simply, but they are worth it." Then she turned her back on the lemon tree and her client, and faced her sister.

She opened her mouth to tell Maia that she knew Chas wasn't dead…but then closed it. Even now, even to put her sister out of her obvious misery, she wouldn't go on that path. She couldn't allow herself to do so, to open herself—and her family—up to such a Pandora's box.

Nor did Maia understand why Angelica felt compelled to do what she did, assisting the other young women of the *ton*. Maia was affianced to a handsome, kind man for whom she had great affection, but that was only because she had a forceful way about her and because Chas, for all of his constant traveling, loved and cared for his sisters dearly. There were plenty of other young women who made miserable—or worse—matches with men much older than they were. At least Chas wouldn't force any of them into something they didn't want.

Maia was the eldest of the three of them, not counting their

brother. He was older than all of his sisters and, since they had been orphaned for ten years, he was also the head of the family, which, although it wasn't titled, held a lovely county seat in Shropshire and a smaller estate in Derby. This made the Woodmore sisters welcomed in most homes of the *ton,* as well as fine wifely candidates for the bachelors thereof.

Chas was twenty-seven, and Maia was nearly twenty—just ten months older than Angelica. Sonia was only thirteen, and she was currently tucked safely away in a convent school in Scotland.

In addition to their comfortable wealth, the Woodmores were a particularly fertile family. And thanks to Angelica's great-great-grandmother, who, after the death of her older, wealthy husband, had become enamored with a handsome young groom, they also had acquired a bit of Gypsy blood that cropped up every generation or so. Chas and Maia hadn't been blessed (or cursed, depending upon whom one spoke to) with the Sight, but their two younger sisters had.

"And I *have* danced—*twice,*" Maia retorted from between tight lips. "Despite the fact that one of my partners couldn't seem to find a spot on the floor *between* my feet during the entire set."

"So you danced with Flewellington? I warned you about him." Angelica's ire faded quickly, as it often did, and she smiled at her sister in sympathy. It had taken only one set with Baron Flewellington for her to learn the same lesson: avoid the man and his large, clumsy feet at all costs. "At least you didn't sit against the wall like you normally do. And, drat it, Harrington isn't here tonight."

"I haven't seen Corvindale yet, either," Maia said, changing the subject and reaching over to adjust one of her sister's curls. "Hold still. This one is coming undone, Ange."

Angelica obeyed as deft fingers adjusted the little pin that

held one of the curls in place at her temple. "I'm not certain I would recognize him even if I saw Corvindale," she said. "Are you certain he's to be here?"

"Everyone who is everyone is here tonight. I think it's disgraceful that he hasn't made any attempt to answer the message I sent him yesterday. We haven't heard from Chas for a fortnight, and I'm only following his directions in contacting the earl. I made that perfectly clear in the letter."

Angelica had no doubt of that. If nothing else, her sister was exceedingly capable of expressing herself and her intentions clearly.

And despite the fact that she *knew* he wasn't dead, Angelica had to push away the pang of worry for her brother. He traveled to the Continent quite often, for purposes that remained unclear to his sisters, but he always made certain to be in touch with them regularly by post or other message. The aunt of a distant cousin, Mrs. Fernfeather, and her husband, as necessary, acted as chaperone in those instances. But Chas's last letter had given an unusually terse command that if they didn't hear from him in two weeks that they were to contact the Earl of Corvindale immediately.

"I'm not certain why the earl needs to be brought into the situation," Maia continued. "Chas knows we can take care of ourselves. Don't we always? Mrs. Ferny lacks much in the way of her chaperone skills. And from what I've heard, Corvindale's a… Well, he's not particularly kind or generous. But Chas trusted him and has always spoken well of the man." She'd finished attending to Angelica's hair and was now standing next to her, shoulder-to-shoulder, back to the wall, clearly scanning the large room and out into the grand foyer. "I recall him being very tall, and so it should be easy to spot him if he were here. But I don't see anything of him at all."

The skirts of their frocks, made of the lightest, frothiest

silk imaginable, pooled around each other's slippers in delicate swirling crinkles. While the bodices were tight, tied or gathered just beneath the bosom, the remainder of the fabric fell loosely to the floor, which gave them relative ease of movement. Angelica's gown was spring yellow, in deference to the Gypsyish undertones of her skin and her dark hair and eyes. Maia, who had more of a classic, Roman goddess look to her beauty, had a fairer, peaches-and-cream complexion that looked lovely when she wore pale blue.

"But Corvindale needn't be rude about it all," Maia said. She redonned the glove she'd taken off a moment earlier to fix Angelica's hair and patted the sapphire and pearl earbobs she wore, as if ensuring they were still hanging there.

"If you do see him, you can't simply walk up and start lecturing him, Maia."

Her sister frowned, her pretty heart-shaped face sharpening with determination. "I certainly can. It could be a matter of life and death. And aside of that, I'm betrothed. It's not as if I'm a young debutante in my first Season, looking for a husband."

Angelica opened her mouth to argue, but Maia continued, "I can, but I'll be discreet or subtle about it. But I will if I—Oh. Is that him?"

Angelica looked over toward the threshold of the ballroom, where it met the foyer, and saw three gentlemen standing there. "Isn't Corvindale dark? They aren't…"

Her voice trailed off as coldness curled around her heart. She recognized one of them.

The man from her dream.

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