

*Eins zwei drei vier Eckstein*, I thought to myself as I slipped through the tunnel. *Alles muss versteckt sein*.

I wanted to smile at the thought, but my lips didn't move. Maybe couldn't. It had been so long since I smiled that I wasn't entirely sure I remembered how.

But I would smile after tonight.

Creeping onward, one foot sliding in front of the other, every movement as slow as honey in the winter. My body was utterly still except for the movements I chose. The ceaseless machinery of the human body, the pumping of the heart, the bellows of the lungs, the slow churn of stomach and intestine, had all come to a standstill. A reminder that I wasn't human, as if I needed one.

How long had it been since I breathed? I couldn't remember that, either. A little longer than since I smiled. I knew that.

One arm stretched out, reaching for the latch. A tendon creaked in protest, having not moved in hours. I stopped moving, but there was no caught breath, no sudden rush of fear or pounding heart. Just stillness.

Moving more slowly, more delicately, I reached out again. This time the movement was silent. I grasped the latch and twisted, slowly so as not to elicit any squeaks or groans from the mechanism. Just as slowly I pulled the door open and looked outside.

The world was grey, a pale and lonely grey moor beneath a pale and lonely grey sky. The city was only a mile to the west, but I was facing east, and in this direction there were no other buildings for twenty miles or more.

I saw the light on the horizon, and almost smiled. I took a step, then another, out onto the moor, not looking away from the horizon. *Soon*, I thought to myself. Soon I would see the light one last time, and I would finally be able to smile again.

And then a hand clamped on my arm, firm and implacable as steel. I spun, snarling without breath or sound, and saw my sister standing beside me. Her face was as blank and cold as mine, but there was something very different lurking in her eyes.

"How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is to have a thankless child," she said in a voice that wasn't hers. "That will be another week in the pit, daughter dearest."

I tried to resist, to fight back, but a moment later I felt a presence slither into my mind, cold, dark, and ancient. My sister let go of my arm, but I didn't continue out into the moor to await the cleansing fire. My feet turned towards the door instead, a broad smile curving my lips.

All of us had certain abilities, or so I had heard, although I couldn't have guessed what mine might be. This was the master's. He could control other vampires, twisting them to his will and compelling them to do his bidding. All vampires could do that with their own creations, Hrafn had said,

but the master was different in that his control extended to vampires other than his own spawn, and he could even exert his powers through the vampires he was controlling. It could have made him a very powerful man, had he chosen to exert himself, but he preferred to remain in his home and send out minions to bring back food.

He walked me back inside, my sister closing the door and locking it behind us. We proceeded down through the tunnels to a deep, dark corner of the lair, where my hand opened another door and I stepped inside without hesitating.

I fell awkwardly, clumsily, the master abandoning me halfway down. I made no effort to break my fall, and when I hit the ground thirty feet below things broke. I felt no pain, only a distant awareness that my body had been damaged.

Thirty feet above me, my sister swung the door closed and locked it.

I lay there in the dark and waited. Half an hour later, when the sun was risen fully enough to take me from consciousness, I went gladly.

"The question," the man asked as my fangs slid into his throat, "is what next? That, right there, is the question you need to ask yourself. What next? What do you want more than anything else in the world? What would you do anything, sacrifice anything, to make happen?"

He was prey, but interesting prey. Few humans engaged me in conversation when they felt my fangs seeking their veins. I held myself back, restraining myself there, rather than drawing out his blood and his life.

It was hard to control myself like that, when I hadn't fed for nearly three days. But, in another way, it felt good. It was a reminder that I *could* control my urges, that I wasn't yet so far gone as to be a beast. Nearly, but not quite. And then again, the hunger itself felt good in a way. The desperate mental noise of my hunger was loud enough to dull the voices, from my former self and the master alike.

I sat and waited for him to continue, his blood flowing over my teeth. I didn't feel boredom. I wasn't sure whether I was capable of it, anymore, but I didn't feel it now, in any case. My life was one of waiting, punctuated by occasional, undesirable activity. At least now I was waiting for something interesting.

The man spoke up again after a few seconds. "Is this the life you want for yourself?" he asked, as though the conversation had never so much as paused. "This half-life, waking only to feed, living at the whim of another? Do you aim no higher for yourself than this?"

I shrugged. The movement must have hurt him, with how deeply embedded my teeth were in his throat, but he didn't move or cry out, and the pace of his heartbeat remained the same.

"Think about it," he said. I could feel the muscles in his neck moving, tearing the holes wider around my fangs, but he didn't seem to care. "With your power, you could change the world. In a small way, maybe, but that's more opportunity than most ever have. With my guidance, you could shape the world to your will. I could teach you so many things."

I withdrew my fangs, then slid my hands up to caress his face, his cheeks. His skin felt feverishly hot against mine, but I knew that was an illusion. The temperature variation went the other way; my hands were as cold as those of a corpse.

My hands *were* those of a corpse.

I held him close like that for a moment, then twisted suddenly, with inhuman strength. His neck broke, and then some, shattering, as I turned his head in a full circle. I let go a moment later, dropping the body at my feet and walking away.

The master had said similar things, so long ago. My sister and I had been captivated.

I had learned my lesson. I would satisfy my hunger elsewhere tonight. People like that weren't worth even the dignity of feeding from.

I looked back as I reached the edge of the alley, and paused.

The body was gone.

"Where were you before you came here?" my sister asked, picking at the food on her plate.

Hrafn grunted thoughtfully, gnawing at a rib. "Prague," he said. "Before that was Kiev, and before that Moscow. And before *that* was Iceland, Norway, even England for a while."

"You've traveled a long way," she said.

He shrugged. "I go where the Norns will," he said simply.

"Norns?"

"The ladies who choose our paths," he explained. "They say the Norns chart our path from birth to death, though it's seldom a straight one. Fate can be a cruel mistress."

"God chooses our fate," she said.

Hrafn laughed. "I am older than your southern god, little girl," he said indulgently. "Or at least older than his name is here."

"It doesn't matter," the master said from his place at the head of the table. As always, the room went silent as he spoke, no one even daring to breathe. "I choose your path now. Not any god, northern or southern."

He fell silent, going back to cutting the bloody steak in front of him, and everyone except me let out an instinctive sigh of relief. Some instincts are harder to break than others.

I didn't breathe, and I didn't feel relief as I stood at the stove, finishing the preparations of another meal that none of us would eat. I felt nothing more than a blunted curiosity, a detached interest. I couldn't have said what it was, and wouldn't have drawn breath to say it if I could, but even at the time there was something about that exchange that struck me as interesting.

"Have you thought about it?" the man asked. "Have you considered what your answer is?"

I spun, and he was standing right behind me, impossibly, undeniably alive. The same man as before, whose neck I had broken, except that now he looked perfectly healthy.

"The greatest weakness, in my experience," he said, stepping up beside me, "the thing holding most people back is not a lack of ambition, or of power. It's a lack of *vision*. If you can't see what you want, what you *really* want, then how can you hope to seek it? If you can't see how your actions will affect the world, how can you hope to achieve your goals?"

I looked at him. He didn't look too remarkable, his features no different from any number of people in the crowd around us. But there was something about him, about how he carried himself, that was different. He was confident, self-assured; he walked like he expected the world to get out of his way.

I had seen nobles who carried themselves similarly...but nobles died when you broke their necks. This man was something else entirely.

"The reason I'm talking to you," he said, "the reason I picked you out of all the vampires in the world to have a conversation with, is that I think you have the capacity to overcome that weakness I described, that lack of *vision*. But you've been trained, you've been taught, not to think for yourself. So I asked you that question, the most important question you can ask yourself. Because how can you achieve your goals if you don't know what those goals are?"

I drew in a breath for the first time in nearly thirty years, and only the third time since I left my humanity behind. "How?" I asked. There was still no pain, but there was a very clear awareness that my throat had been damaged by the action. It had been so inactive for so long that breathing, speaking, these things *hurt* it.

To his credit, he didn't pretend that I was playing along with his rhetorical questions. "How am I alive, you mean?" he asked. "Well, I assure you, if I were *that* easy to kill, someone would have done the job long before you were born. If your question is how I know as much about you as I do, that's a more interesting question, but the answer is much the same. I make it my business to know about people who have potential, and *you* have a great deal indeed." He smiled. "But really, this is all beside the point. This conversation is about you, child, not about me."

I wanted to object to being called a child; I was older than I looked, and even if I weren't, I would hardly be a *child*. But that was a waste of breath.

And besides, there was something about this man, the way he carried himself...I thought he might be being fair calling me that. The master was a few hundred years old, after all, and from what Hrafn had said he wasn't the oldest vampire in the world by far. This man might be as much older than me as I was older than a human child.

Seen in that light, this question became something else. It became *important*. So, before I answered, I actually thought about it. What *did* I want, more than anything else?

It was an odd way to think. I wasn't accustomed to striving for things, to setting goals for myself. Life was more a matter of survival, of waiting for things to happen. That attitude didn't just go back to when I had become a vampire. It was older than that.

Had I ever really had a goal, in my entire life? I wasn't sure I had.

A few decades earlier, I would have said my dearest wish was oblivion, release from undeath and damnation. That couldn't be it, though, because I could have achieved it if it were. My leash was long enough now that the master couldn't have stopped me if I truly wished an ending.

Which really only left one possibility.

"Revenge," I said. My voice was hoarse, barely a whisper, but it held more emotion than I'd felt in years.

"A good answer," he replied. "Clear, simple, to the point. But ask yourself this. Do you want revenge only on the person who inflicted this suffering on you, this so-called 'master' of yours? Or do you also want vengeance upon those who allowed it, those who stand by and let things like this happen every day?"

I considered the question, then nodded.

He smiled. "I see you take my meaning. Now, child, I'll be on my way. So many things to do, you know. But I'll be watching, if you run into any troubles." He turned and started to walk away.

"Wait," I called after him, tearing my throat further. "What do I do?"

He paused. "Having set a goal," he said, "you have to dedicate yourself to it. You have to commit. Because you won't get anywhere if you aren't willing to take risks, or to sacrifice."

As simply as that, I saw what I had to do. It was so simple, so obvious, that I wasn't sure why I hadn't seen it before.

But then again, I supposed he had already told me. I hadn't been committed to my course, not really. Now I was.

"Who are you?" I asked before he could leave. I was staring at him with wonder, the closest thing to religious awe that I had ever felt.

"Call me Hunter," he said. "And have a good night, child. Have a *very* good night."

"*Eckstein, Eckstein,*" I sang quietly as I walked through the tunnel. "*Alles muss versteckt sein.*" My voice was dry and withered, a mockery of human speech, and it held a similar mockery of human laughter. I wasn't sure what I was feeling now, if there was even a name for what I was feeling now, but it wasn't something to laugh at.

I felt odd as I opened the door and stepped inside. I was almost out of control, but there was an edge of calculation to it. I felt almost like an observer of my own body, like I was watching myself from the outside.

Overwhelming hunger battled with cold analysis within me, producing something that was greater than the sum of its parts.

"You know," I said, "I think I know your secret. Why you made sure to humiliate us, to break us down. Why you tried to take our gods away. Your control is a lot more delicate than you want us to think it is, isn't it?"

"What are you doing?" the master said, standing and facing me. "You are in for a world of hurt if you don't turn around right now, little girl."

I almost did what he told me, out of pure reflex. I might have anyway, if it weren't for the peculiar state of mind I was in. I might not have noticed the edge of desperation to what I said.

"See, that's just it," I said, closing the door. "You beat us down, you keep us worn down and tired, emotionally, because your control won't stand up to a really hard push. If someone's truly committed to something, if they have real conviction, you can't keep them from following through on it, can you?" I laughed, the sound tearing my throat further, but it was worth it to see him flinch. "If my sister were still a good Christian," I mused, "could you keep her from going to church? I don't think so."

"You've never believed in anything enough to challenge me for it," he said with quiet confidence. "Now stand still."

I felt the tendrils of his power invading my mind and stopped where I was. "Maybe not," I said quietly. "The person I was didn't. That's true. But the person you made me? Let's find out."

And then I stopped even trying to control the hunger inside me.

I hadn't fed, hadn't satisfied that hunger, for nearly two weeks. It was longer, much longer, than I'd ever gone before, long enough that I was on the brink of death, and the hunger was so great that I could barely even think.

Which also meant that when I let it go, nothing else mattered. Not what I believed, or didn't believe. Not what he was telling me. Only the hunger.

The world went away, masked by a haze of blood and madness.

When I came back to myself, the master was lying on the ground, the front half of his throat missing. My body was badly damaged, but my stomach was full of his blood, and there was power running through me, power unlike anything I'd ever felt before. The hunger had receded to the back of my mind, satiated and then some with the life I'd taken from him. Life stolen twice, it turned out, tasted even sweeter.

I looked down, and felt almost disappointed at how *easy* it had been. All this time, and all I'd had to do to end it was to let go?

It was disappointing, in a way. But I consoled myself with the knowledge that I wasn't done. Hunter had shown me the light, shown me what I was truly meant for, and my work hadn't ended with this.

"This world offends me," I murmured, "and thus I shall tear it down."

I smiled, and bent to feed again.