

Dracula: Volume Two

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Dracula: Volume Two

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Summary

Current work in progress...

Notes

Finished reading Dracula, again, and I must say. I forgot how vicious, brutal Dracula actually was, in the book. Its easy to romanticise him, especially given how the film adaptation did his interactions with Mina. However, the book makes it clear, he is far from gentle, it is not in his nature. Oh, Bram, you have a way with words. Some fantastic quotes in its pages...

Chapter One

"Really? For *fuck's* sake..."

Vanessa smacked her forehead, boyfriend staring back blankly, smell of *stagnant* water hanging in the air.

"I asked if you *wanted* me to wash the dishes, *before* I left for work. You said *no*, that *you* would. You *didn't*, they are in dirty, *smelly* water, have been for two, *damn* weeks, and you complain because I '*didn't wash them?*' How in the actual *fuck* does that make *ANY* sense? *What am I doing?*"

Pacing, combing through silky, *umber* locks, kept tightly bound for too long by elastic, (work rules) Vanessa pulled out the stubborn article, flinging it across the room.

"Still should'a done it. I don't *do* housework. You *knew* that when we got together."

"Then *why* was your apartment clean? BEFORE we got together. Don't try and wriggle your way out of *this*."

Pastel blues closed, *sting* came, brought forth from months of *speculation* bearing fruit...

Grahame smirking *riled* her, he fucking *knew* it would.

"Why do you think? Aren't you *supposed* to be the smart one?"

"Tried *not* to think the worst. *You* knew that. *I* thought *I* knew you." Biting back tears, Vanessa bit cheek, tasting *blood*, pain *barely* acknowledged. "*Okay*. I'm going to pack my things, leave, and *you* can get back to *whoever* it is you are messaging and *Cheshire grinning*."

Snarling, heading to their...(no, *his*) bedroom, woman began packing her things, phone, charger, change of clothes, toothbrush, shower gel, couple of pairs of knickers, socks, intending to stay the *weekend*.

That 'weekend' rapidly morphed into *fifteen* minutes, as she left. No words, *unwilling* to spare glance at her *ex*, Vanessa *ran*, cowardly sprinting down stairs, speed beyond what she thought she could muster, especially given her *current* state.

Athletes would be *jealous*...

Leaving the building, Vanessa's finger hovered above the local taxi firm's number. She turned as she hit call, seeing Grahame's bedroom light turning *off*.

A woman, scurrying past wouldn't have raised *anything*, were it not for the *fact* that his light went back *on*, he opened the *window*, waved her *up*, and left, *presumably* to press the button to let her into *his* flat.

Speeding through where she was, woman tried to refrain from crying a *second* time, sick of it already. Bothering to shed anything over that *love rat* was pointless. He'd (seemingly) replaced her in *ten* minutes flat...

Waiting for her taxi *felt* like hours, seconds pricking needles deep *under* her skin...

We should have remained friends. Christ on a bike...

Vanessa sighed, *everything* in her power utilised to keep from bursting out into fit of hysterics, *hysteria* wishing to bloom fully, *wholly*. The taxi driver tilted his head, woman caught unawares. They were outside her *house*, and she hadn't even noticed...

"Sorry. *Bad* night. *Here*."

She handed him a tenner, telling him to keep the change. He nodded his thanks, and she exited the car, hauling bag, unceremoniously over her shoulder as she went.

Something, somewhere had gone drastically *wrong*, Vanessa *knowing*, understanding *what*, though reticent to admit it.

She and Grahame had been friends since college. Banter and the odd flirty note began wondrous *melody*, their beings melding like clay, sex *fantastic*, for *both*, neither going without.

There was the issue. Woman began *wanting* to make love, *whole* self feeling, moving, the world drowned out, heartbeats thudding *together*.

Grahame, *evidently*, did not want their connection to be *above* the waist. Why he *agreed* to be her boyfriend baffled her, considering *all* signs pointed to infidelity, on his part.

This *killed* her, insides *freezing*, incapacitating organs, one by *precious* one, falling victim to frigidity, becoming *brittle*, blood in her veins *ice*.

Open relationships were perfectly *fine* to Vanessa. All she cared about was that *honesty* was present, trust, that those involved were consenting, *responsible* adults.

When trust was *missing*, honesty *distinctly* missing, and responsibility *lacking*, problems arose.

If Grahame wanted more than just *her* company, Vanessa would not have stayed with him. She was *monogamous*.

He *could* have said *something*.

He *chose* to *remain* quiet.

That *hurt*, icicles melting, *everything* liquefying, pouring from eyes, pillow thoroughly *soaked*...

Chapter Two

Two months later

Vlad saw *her*, less than hundred yards away, *youth* radiating from cheap low light stall lamp above her. She held wooden elf in hand, eyes sweeping over it, as if it were piece of *gold*. Seemingly *riveted* by various Christmas Market trinkets (man knew *different*) she placed it in her basket, paying vendor, using silly quips, making him smile, and vendor laugh.

Usually, Vlad would have *turned*, hidden smile behind black curtain of hair turning to *smirk* over shoulder. He found most women were *simple* creatures. Praise them, they gave you their most *intimate* details, and got on their back, *if* he made the effort. Men were *supposed* to be base, purely driven by the brains *under* their clothes.

Vlad found women far more *sexual*, seeking pleasure, they tended to be *subtler* with their intentions, that *single* difference.

Beauty was, *indeed* a virtue, but brains, mind of *her* own, *wicked* tongue, dark sense of humour, able to rival his *deviancy*, sensual desires in her *eyes*?

This woman held more than intrigue, eyes, purest blue pearls *sharp*, mahogany tresses slipping down her back like *waterfall*, errant waves falling over woollen scarf.

He had seen many women, over the centuries the *image* of his late wife.

None *were* her, they wouldn't ever come anywhere near Justina's level of grace, *wit*, elegant yet *decisive* ways, mind *razor* keen, able to keep him, the *strategist*, master of *warfare*, alchemist, warrior *on* his toes.

Whilst he *schemed* during the *day*, maps so large, they encompassed entire *tables*, Justina *schemed* at *night*, Vlad's *form*, his mind *her* map.

None had managed to *tame* the Dragon, *after* her, they dared, dare not *try*. They ran *before* they got burned, sheer inferno *terrifying*, heat immense.

Why the man effortlessly approached this woman was *unknown* to Vlad, until a little while *later*.

Her *gaze* knocked him for *six*, would have thrown him off-kilter, had he lacked *fluidity*, svelte musculature to *distinct* advantage...

Vanessa picked up cup of *warming* mulled wine. Though not her *favourite* Winter beverage, its *hit* of heat, *kick* of spice and *festive* cheer were *lovely*, heat cascading down throat, chest, fingers, insides *toasty*.

"Would you like some?"

Woman glanced at man wryly, grabbing second cup.

"Don't worry, washed my hands. If *I* get antsy when I have contact with *other* people, I ought to keep my hygiene *up* to par. *Beyond* it, really..."

"No, thank you," Vlad declined, "I don't drink *wine*."

She snorted reply.

"*Neither do I.*"

"*Why do it, then?*"

"*Social construct?*" Vanessa laughed. "*Fuck*. No. I do because its *Christmas*, I'm *alone* and, to be honest, my *nips* may just fall off, its *THAT cold*."

Vlad's eyes honed in on her when she *swore*, woman praying he did not come out with archaic '*women aren't supposed to paint the air blue, they should float about and only speak when spoken to*' shit...

"*Cupcake? Break the icing?*"

Vlad shook his head, Vanessa on back burner. She, *audaciously* faced him, iced chocolate, vanilla sponge treat in hand. Looking him up *and* down, she, evidently, *approved* of the view.

"*No*, you don't look like you eat things like *this*. In *fact*, you are rather *slim*. My *arse* is wider than your *entire* frame. *Oh no!*"

Feigning upset, irises hazed, *decadent* sweet in hand, Vanessa swirled icing and ate, *sugar* rush delightful.

"These occasions are *rare*, for me, ones I am able to attend *freely*, not for *work*. I travel *frequently*, the holidays celebrated in different, *vibrant* ways, traditions and the like. I appreciate what *differentiates* cultures. Here, people *wish* for snow to fall, *resenting* when it does, for it causes *chaos*."

Vanessa *snorted*, picking up *accent* in man, *not* unpleasant. She wouldn't make *guess*, merely *keep* him talking, hope her inane *attempt* at 'conversation' proved acceptable, *conducive* for actual, *meaningful* conversation.

"You are *right*. Pardon," she held up *unoccupied* hand, "I *forget* my manners. *Vanessa*."

Vlad shook it, *challenging* her, silently.

Hold my attention, with something other than hoisting breasts and pouting. I tire of those. Bore me and I will leave. Simple.

"Vlad."

"Not a name you hear regularly. I will refrain from *usual* pleasantries, given I have only just made your acquaintance. I tend to *avoid* events like this. Christmas markets are charming, though they attract *crowds*, which, in *turn* bring out the 'pushers,' people who I, am seemingly *invisible* too. I can't *stand* impatience. I *get* it. Life *is* hectic, *busy*, we all have our *struggles*, time *constraints*. That doesn't give someone right to be a bastard, *bulldoze* their way around. Call me pedantic, *cynical*, but I'd *rather* be alone than *forced* into cramped situations, nose in someone else's *armpit*..."

"*Romanian*, and *manners* died horrific, *slow* death decades ago, *my dear*."

"Its *Vanessa*." She *corrected*, unspoken issue for challenge *accepted*. "What would you like to know, seeing as I am, *clearly* 'fascinating?'"

He shook her hand firmly, tad *too* much, woman's pupils widened, in slight *alarm*.

"Dominant. *Bold*," she smirked, questioning why, *milliseconds* later, "considering we've *just* met."

"I was taught *frankness* is best policy. I *won't* claim to be *kind*, I take issue with *false* pleasantries."

"Do you think *me* false?"

"You show your *face*, use of language *colourful*, let others view *personality*. I respect those who go *against* the grain. *Tell me of your story*."

Vanessa refilled her cup, inhaling wafting *nutmeg*, contended *hum* leaving mouth...

"I work in *confectionery*, baking cakes for events, *sweet* tooth applicable. Whitening toothpaste *and* mouthwash hides *multitude* of sins...You mentioned *travel*? *Sounds* wonderful. Do you do that for work?"

Vlad nodded.

"*Payed* to visit stunning cities, *vast* countries, eat *delicious* food, *delightful*, I *assume*..."

"Assume? Speak directly, *freely*."

Vanessa tilted head curiously, eyes open, questions brightening blue.

"Why do I feel that, if I *were* to speak freely, as you request, you'd *dislike* me? I can tell you wished to pull me up on my use, *butchering* of the English language. You didn't because you *respect* me."

Statement *weighty*, again, man *agreed*, corner of mouth quirking upwards, moustache *twitching*.

"As I stated earlier. I cannot promise kindness, make such *affiance*, though I can respect, *loyalty*."

"Oh...?"

Glancing around, cake *forgotten*, vivid orbs saw same but *hazy* shade looking at her. The *rest* of the world did not factor in.

Not the *dancers*, in the *tightest* leotards she had seen, sinew, nipples, bulges and mounds *clear* view.

Nor the moon, *full*, cloud *quartz*, clarity *gorgeous*, occasionally blotted with ink spots, paper *splashed*.

She hadn't had the (pleasure?) of being *gazed* upon prior.

Not as something to *play* with, dangle from *strings*, screw until wires *snapped*, then *dropped* to the ground, *left* in a heap.

Vlad actually seemed interested *in* her, as a *person*.

Not holes, nothing *external*.

Merely, her *mind*, its machinations.

"I *value* loyalty, it *is* important. However, I have been told that *before*, and it turned out to be a *lie*. Whilst I, certainly would not presume *you* a liar, I am *sceptical*, for reasons, *personal* to myself."

"A *man* betrayed you, took your *trust*, burying it deep, beneath *layers* of deception. *He* matters little, *your* outlook is clear, it *shines* through. The past is just *that*."

"And I thought myself *elusive*..."

Stuffing hand in her purse (the other shoving *remaining* cake in her mouth,) Vanessa grabbed pen, jotting down her number on pastel green notelet.

She kept it in the *bag*, wondering what the in actual, ever, living *Hell* was she doing. Had increasing waves of sugar rush *drowned* rationale? High calorie content swept *logic* aside?

Woman poured over 'facts,' what she'd gleaned...

Vlad *screamed* 'arrogant,' hollered it from the rooftops, boot prints in snow *purposeful*, gait staunch, back ramrod straight.

He was *sure* of himself, sure of *surrounds*, looked to have *vast* amounts of knowledge.

Something *untamed* lay in demeanour, *carefully* honed, shown only in cracks of *whitened* knuckles, minuscule movements of head, like *owl*, wondering, inquiring.

He *wouldn't* be deemed 'classically attractive,' by *today's* standards, but today's *standards* were utterly *ridiculous*, heights unreachable, pointless.

No. *His* looks were *aristocratic*. Slim frame, *wiry* musculature, *svelte* strength, though the way he *held* himself spoke of *readiness*, calm, level-headed.

Aquiline nose, acute *angled* cheekbones, jaw you could slice fingertip *open* whilst *musings*, mood *quizzical*.

Almost *eagle* like, *vicious* in certain light, eyes burning *Aquamarine*, branding, *searing* its way into woman's mind.

And, *damned* if Vanessa wasn't intrigued...

As surreptitiously as *possible* (sneakiness *far* from her forte,) Vanessa stuck the note on the elf, putting it beside Vlad.

Turning, she *tried* meeting his eyes, damning her *cheeks* flaring pink. Hoping *low* light masked *that*, she nodded, walking around him, *exquisite* aftershave filling nostrils as she went on her way...

Don't you know it is recommended not to give your number out to strangers?

Vanessa pulled phone from pocket, snorting.

Are we strangers? Surely not. We exchanged names, and numbers, given you chose to look at the note and keep it, long enough to 'text' me.

You left, conversation wide open. I saw none beside you, walking with you. Again, you chance walking home, alone.

Vlad's reply *confused*, for a time, her heart increasing beats per minute.

And you chose to continue it. Sorry. I'm...out of practise, speaking to people, in general. I work behind the scenes, answering the phone occasionally, but that's it. Should I be concerned? I can handle myself. Are you concerned for my safety?

Vlad, entering lobby of his hotel, for the duration of his stay frowned, attracting *receptionist's* gaze.

Not for yours, per say. For women, in general. I, wouldn't dare question strength of character, or physicality. However, there are those, out there that mean harm, they care little for opportunity, taking any and all. I merely request you take care.

Thank you, Vanessa smiled, I will. Do not fear. I won't accuse you of 'mansplaining,' 'sexism,' god, I hate those words. Highly overused. You speak truth, and speak it quite wonderfully, might I add? Ballsy, I know...

Before he could reply, woman quickly typed, testing spelling and punctuation to their, her limits...

Take care, also. A gust of wind could blow you asunder.

Vlad allowed himself *small* laugh, sound *low* register. Anyone *nearby* would have to crane *neck* to hear it.

Are you implying I am frail? Vanessa, draga mea, ma amuzi.

Vanessa arrived home, wanting to look up *whatever* it was Vlad had just said. Her phone's battery said *otherwise* however, she just *about* plugged in its charger *before* it died on her...

Kicking off her boots, gloves, scarf and coat draped over couch, Vanessa sprawled on bed, feet up behind her.

I don't have a clue what you said. Educated guess? Something 'me,' and 'amuse?' You're laughing at me right now, aren't you?

I am. I shall leave you with that. Sleep well, and see to it I do not make an appearance in nightmares.

He couldn't resist *that*, needing *some* sort of merriment, passing *time*, whilst blood bag *heated* in microwave. He *starved*, the *entire* time he and Vanessa spoke. How she'd *hadn't* heard stomach *voice* its anger, seen him *wobble* slightly, sight *blurry*.

He would have looked *tipsy*, had he not left, soon *after* her.

With that face? Chiselled by Gods, I tell you, carved by deities! Hah! I must be delirious. Since I can count, on one hand the amount of drinks I have in a year, I put it down to, simply being tired. Shouldn't it be dreams? I would reply in Romanian, but fear I'd do it injustice, as translation apps reputations aren't great. Night, Vlad.

Getting ready for bed, Vanessa found Winter's *chill* didn't so much bother now, company *cheering*, banishing chilly *gloom*...

Chapter Three

Vanessa tucked into peanut butter on wholemeal toast, pondering if she should be *slight* bit smug, given she'd bought the organic, no sugar, no salt, just *sustainable* palm oil and *peanuts* kind.

She'd gotten back home just after eleven. It was seven in the morning now, sun beginning to rise. She didn't have to be at work until ten, so, she sat on sofa, TV remote in hand, flicking through *inane* programmes, *repeats*, more channels than she could watch in *several* lifetimes, let alone *one*...

Picking up phone, *curiosity* twitched its feelers.

Should she text Vlad? Twelve *hours* after meeting him? Would that look *needy*? She wasn't sure if he were the type who appreciated simple, 'hello's,' preferring deep, *significant* prose.

Would mere 'good-morning,' come off as spouting *hot* air?

Only one way to know.

If he didn't reply, she *wouldn't* be offended. Vlad had a *life*, things to *do*, places to *see*.

Good morning. Apologies for this being ridiculously early. Early shift, seven weddings this week, alone, all wanting absurdly huge, 'flashy,' 'look at how much money we have,' cakes. All hands on deck. I hope this finds you well. I left late, you later, so, please do not think I believe you are awake, ignoring this, or that I expect reply. I don't. I wish you Happy Holidays (didn't want to assume you celebrate anything.) If I woke you, I apologise (again.)

She *really* hoped she hadn't woken Vlad.

She also wondered if, like *her*, he became tad *crabby*, when woken suddenly.

That silly thought *stayed* with her, as she readied herself for work...

The man himself lounged, *languidly* on his bed, daylight revealing *weakness* in him. Sunlight pulled at delicate *nerves*, fraying, causing headaches, had he not kept curtains *drawn*. He'd thrown sheets *off*, some point in the night, constricted, stark *reminder* of how he lay, dying, tortured, ropes *digging* into wounds, oozing blood, flowing freely, lash marks rubbed *raw* via hemp, Radu, *brother*, scorned *sapphire* iris fire, ire in *full* fury as he gazed at younger brother on cell floor.

Radu *seethed*, spouting that he *should* be ruler, Count, he *eldest* sibling, his behaviour was that of *royalty*, it was what men of *court* did.

They *took* lovers, sought *company* of sex workers, *despite* having wife, *promising* himself to *her*.

Their Father, Vlad II *bellowed* at eldest son, ashamed, *disgusted* at his conduct.

He *ordered* his son to leave, not his *beloved* country, but *past* the Carpathian mountain range, taking *weeks* by carriage to reach furthestmost village, until leader decided *what* to do with him.

Vlad was allowed to *stay*, watching Father wilt, *perish*, soon after, grief stark contradiction to *rage*, though they *felt* similar, caused *same* reaction.

Radu, upon hearing this, raced *back* to the castle, striking down brother's *wife*, two of his *sons*, servant girl, *fleeing* with baby boy (his *middle* child) in her *arms*, Vlad witnessing *everything*. Younger was *weakened*, strained, nerves *ripping*, tearing, knowing pulling at knots would merely *tighten*, Vlad tried to move towards his crest chest, armour and sword necessary to *cease* this nightmare.

It *must* have been hallucination, *folly*, ever-increasing growls, *booms* echoing through corridors making, *forcing* man to *question* deduction, mind falling apart...

Good day, Vanessa. Mornings find me at my worst. Nothing you have said, or done frets. Memories do, splitting headache, fracturing thoughts. I shan't be bane, plague on your day, time.

Vanessa, sat on train half *frowned*, her stop coming up. She pocketed her phone, lest she *drop* it, losing it in ensuing chaos of *many* people, trying to exit *one* door, when there were *six* to choose from...

Had too much to drink, huh? Panadol, that stuff should be listed next to 'sliced bread,' in terms of 'greatest inventions.' Don't lie down, no matter how tempting it is.

Vanessa was *teasing*, putting 'winky face' deemed childish, in *this* regard...

That is okay, I understand. If you have time to yourself, I advise self-care. Running at a hundred miles an hour can and will burn us out. I wouldn't want to impose, you can do as you wish. You already know that. If you celebrate Christmas, or another holiday, I wish you a time where your mind allows you comfort, if not solace, perhaps happiness. If you don't, I hope its a peaceful period.

Bavaria. I shall be in Germany for the festivities. I have had, quite some time to learn how to imbibe alcohol, and know enough to limit evacuating contents of my stomach.

Vomiting blood was not only vile, but, quite, *sticky*. *Whatever* it hit, it would *stain*.

That would be 'uncouth' level of inebriated. I jest. Single thing I smelt on you was not vice, but cologne I believe I have smelt before, cannot recall its name.

Heading into work, Vanessa sent Vlad the last message of the day.

The *final* message for a while, *actually*. She wasn't aware how much she would *miss* wise-cracking with this 'mysterious' man...

At work. All the best, Vlad.

Acqua Di Parma. And, Vanessa? Conviviality may vary in countries, but it holds thing in common. Warmth. Keep that in your heart. Don't let it grow frigid, like mine. Quaerite me sicut luminaria tua. Et ipse liberavit me...

"Latin?"

Vanessa exclaimed, aloud, interest, *eagerness* wanting fingers to type, copy, *translate* that, hoping, secretly *wishing* it was something cordial.

She knew *some* words.

'Luminaria, *light*.

Liberavit, *liberate*.

Liberating light?'

...

'Me?'

'No...*David Bowie on a cracker, Ness...*'

Customers looked her over, *irritated*, wanting to get *in* and *out* of the shop as quickly as *humanly* possible, time of year decidedly dreadful for *overcrowding*...

Chapter Four

Good morning, Vanessa.

Ah! Hello Vlad. Back in the UK?

Vanessa sat, fresh mug of *coffee* in hand, placing lunch, seeded bagel with cheddar cheese on the kitchen counter *calling* to rumbling stomach.

I am in London, Covent Garden, quaint cafe, quiet corner. London, whilst spirited, animated, can feel too much.

That's why I live outside the capital. Manchester may be a large city, but its never felt like anything other than home. The right fit, you know? Romania? May I ask what life was like there?

Vlad snorted, *wording* crucial, yet, *tiresome*. Truth *irked*, telling it causing woman to, inevitably think him *escaped* ward of the state, *off* his 'meds,' rationale *questionable*.

He went with *partially* ingenuous.

Romania consisted of small, old-fashioned, off the beaten track villages. I lived atop the Carpathian mountain range. My home crumbled, long ago. Events that occurred, and what followed cast me away, home no longer.

Picking up crumb of cheese, Vanessa frowned.

I heard West Country lilt when you spoke.

Well spotted. I thought I'd lost it. I am from Cornwall, moved to the North West for a dear friend, from school. She'd just had a baby, but the Father left suddenly. Reason? He 'couldn't be bothered,' being a Dad 'tired him out.' I understand that a fretting baby can, and will cause lack of sleep, but flat out fucking off? Complete, selfish toss pot...

Vanessa hit send, *regretting* it immediately.

Sorry. I try to keep vulgarity to a minimum, but some times, it slips out.

Sipping caffeine, woman savoured hazelnut, almond, toffee notes. Coffee was something she *didn't* skimp on. She wanted something she could sip, *properly* enjoy, *without* heartburn, plaguing her *later* on.

Something she could drink, *without* wanting to vomit afterwards. The *cheap* stuff made her feel *ill*...

I prefer to spit profanities in person...

Vanessa's jaw hung.

I simple cannot imagine you, 'painting the air blue.' Dignified, holding level of grace. How does my description fare?

Fixing cravat, Vlad made note of woman, pretty, *petite* blond looking his way.

I mean, three-piece suits, impeccably groomed, recherché cologne vociferate 'grace,' for me.

Finishing meal, woman wrapped digits around mug, weather numbing them and toes.

French?

Vlad, *openly* dismissed blond, woman positively *mortified* that he'd rebuffed her.

How novel.

Blues clouded, woman simpering.

Its a beautiful language. I do not allude to its 'romantic' persuasion. Oh! And, do tell me if I am disturbing anything. I am certain your work isn't simply finding local eateries and markets. Do you write a blog?

I make personal entries, and for my employer, if they ask. I find desolate buildings, cottages, cellars filled with caskets of wine. That was one of my favourite discoveries. Then, my employer creates holiday packages, including those areas. Most are outside of city limits, tourists having traversed through it wanting something different, off the beaten track.

Sounds wonderful. Excursions are something I wish to participate in more often. Just, fuck off somewhere, for one week, two weeks...

She snorted.

Like work would allow that...

They should. If you limit holidays throughout the year, that, in turn builds up.

Vanessa grinned, drinking last dregs of brew.

Is that offer of 'tour guide?' I'll take it!

Urge to put smiley emoji in there was palpable, *substantial*.

She fought it, with *all* her 'might...'

I think it would be, somewhat prudent to exchange emails, given my work would incur charges, were we to continue texting. Wouldn't there be concern present. in your

workplace? You merely leave, for quite the while, with a man you scant know? There ought to be.

You wish to keep chatting to me? Aw, I'm touched. And, I wasn't about to suggest we stay in the same hotel, same bed. I document things, whether written or with my camera. There'd be evidence, Vlad, and I am rather, proficient at hiding things. Plain sight is obvious, as is somewhere, decidedly tricky.

Questions loomed, hanging in the air, strings stretching to accommodate weight.

You warn me against being alone with yourself. Am I dealing with a serial killer here? I know, you aren't supposed to say that. I should say I appreciate your honesty. I do.

Its merely precaution. You look eerily similar to my late wife, Justina. I, find myself falling back into routine I had, with her. You are not her, this is clear. My heart's woe confuses mind's logic.

I am sorry to hear that. I think we should talk that over, smooth any potential bumps in the road. I can, assume then that she was your better half?

Vlad concurred, breath drawn, cheeks hollow.

Always. Cataclysms lay within me, she danced around them, diffusing wrath, combating grief with lilt, joy. Her radiance pulled me from abyss I thought unending.

Hesitant (with good reason) Vanessa's fingers hovered above letters, breath held.

You used similar words, with me, last we spoke. That explains it. I...I don't really know what to say, in these regards. I can't apologise for how I look. Apologising wouldn't be right, it would be an injustice. Should we (try) to meet up? Clear the air, so to speak.

You are not her, I am fully aware. I likely sound deranged.

You could have kept that secret, its precious knowledge. You let me know. I really appreciate that.

Standing, Vlad payed his bill.

It would take me two hours to get to Manchester, express train.

Hmm? If its okay with you, wouldn't want you to go out of your way.

I would not offer if I planned on rescinding.

I would like that.

Would you like me to pick up anything? Dietary requirements? Wouldn't want to poison, kill you, or anything...

Vlad laughed, loudly, leaving cafe before enquiring eyes found him.

None, and I thoroughly appreciate the ellipses. And, no, thank you. I've already eaten. Heading to the train station now.

...

Vanessa *had* typed, 'I look forward to it,' deleting it, *naivety* budding.

Acacia Gardens. Lovely, this time of year. My address is personal. I will, reserve meandering thoughts, withhold that, for now.

Public. Smart woman. What I admitted would make anyone want to be surrounded by pedestrians, in case I am, indeed deranged...

Chapter Five

Want some tea? Quaint little tea shop on route to the gardens.

Assam, please. No milk, half-spoon of honey.

Specific.

Vanessa smirked.

Black tea? Distinct, hardy. Brave man. I can't drink it without at least a splash of milk, one sugar.

When you get to my age, you learn to appreciate deep, bold flavours. You could purchase any tea, remove bag from its packaging and, from smell alone, I could tell you its origin, its name, what it contains.

'Your age?' Do I dare estimate?

Go ahead. I assure you, it'll be incorrect...

Brazen. Ought to think up more words for brave. I will do, when in the shop. In the meantime? Forty-five/six. Tell me now if you wish to deck me. I'll spare you the horror of seeing my mortified face and go straight home.

Deck? Very apt guess.

Apt, indeed. Vlad died aged forty-five...

Punch, wallop, if you will.

I couldn't hurt you if I tried. I couldn't hurt her...

Vlad paused, occurrence rare, odd for him.

I would not do such a thing. Horror is my face when I wake. May I speak my mind?

Haven't you been doing that already?

I have, but, with the comparison I made, reticence would be understandable.

Your wife?

Her image stood before me at the market, refined, familiar fluttering in my stomach accompanying sight.

Fascination struck Vanessa, paying for the teas, reluctantly putting phone into her purse.

She didn't look at Vlad's reply until she got to the gate of the garden...

Sitting, placing cups down, woman pulled off mittens, phone retrieved. She sucked in breath, cheeks hollow, reason, as yet, unclear.

You struck me, began chipping at decades old brick walls I placed in my mind for reason. Captivating, resplendent, and I believe you do not see it.

"Fuck..."

Vanessa hissed, nippy breeze *biting* digits. Deciding whether or not to panic, *flee*, or go into park, walk straight over to Vlad and blush like hormonal, *ovulating* teen was deciding between walking on *Lego* bricks, with *bare* feet, and *upturned* pins.

Lego hurt *less*...

I don't know how to 'flirt.'

And, he's eloquent. I am the furthest thing from it.

Just, talk, about anything or nothing.

Logic spoke up, chiming bell *pleasant*, sound tingling, body vibrating, *anticipation* imminent, warming limbs.

If I fuck it up? At least I tried. Can always buy myself a treat, have a bath, find smutty book and let meandering mind wander...

Standing, letting tea warm hands, Vanessa stepped into space, scanning, finding man she'd come to see beyond intricately woven metal gate.

Not giving enough time for anxiety to rear its *ugly* head, she made towards Vlad, strides *purposeful*, fortitude *cheering* her on, every step of the way.

"Thank you, for coming all the way here. That was a sudden, on the *spot* decision, *wasn't it?*"

"What, *possibly* gave you that idea?"

Vanessa handed Vlad cup.

"Because what you *need* to say wouldn't come across *properly*, were you to do it via text, *or* email."

She sat opposite, under vast sprawl of branches. It felt *homely*, picture worthy.

"Spur of the moment, *yes*. Mere cursory rhetoric via modern-day technology *isn't* personable. People have forgotten *how* to talk, only tap, *tap*, tap."

"Yes," woman mused, "we have *regressed*, in terms of *language*. People abbreviate *everything*, as if its too hard, deemed *languishing* to spell out words. I find I *like* attempting to write out words that I do not, *normally* use. I, almost always get it *wrong*, but I *learn*. Learning is important. Glad you *aren't* despondent, some modernity *can* be a good thing. I can think of *several* positives."

Smiling wryly, Vlad mirrored her.

"*Humour me?*"

"Do you appreciate *bluntness*? I am known *for* it, though am aware it *offends* some."

Man waved her off, sipping liquid.

"I have heard *all*, been called 'everything in the book,' and I am *well* read."

"Could open a *library* with your collection? I *admire* that. Well-read *denotes* wise, at least, *observant*."

Humming, *misty* blues closed, opening *clearing* skies.

"*Okay...*"

"*Modern* views? I share many of those. I say it like it is, what *I* see. I am far from *nasty*, malicious, however. I do not put up with *nonsense*. If someone feeds me crap, I ask *them* to leave, or *leave* them. I adore sex, *intimacy*, though *understand* lust, simply sating *need*. I am *monogamous*. I see little issue with polyamory, as long as those involved are *responsible* adults. Its when *lies* lay beneath the sheets, lacking *respect*. I cannot *stand* the 'women hate sex,' *spiel*. We hate when we *aren't* listened too, when someone *assumes* we will love what a *previous* partner did. We aren't always ready in an *instant*. We *require* work, and, *no*, our vaginas are not *pavement*, and penises aren't *drills*. Unless we *ask*, don't shove *it* in. It *will* hurt. I shouldn't *have* to say this. No one's needs should be neglected, unless there is a *contract*, of sorts, between parties."

"With *age* comes *wisdom*?" Smirking, Vlad hissed. "*Tripe*. Wisdom comes with *practise*, when you know yourself, *learn* to listen, learn to observe. Why would women *not* enjoy sex? The type of men you speak of are the ones who were taught that *they* are all that matters. Rut until *you* orgasm. Women don't, *can't*? Nonsense. Just because it *isn't* simple doesn't mean it *cannot* be done."

"Bar medical conditions." Vlad agreed. "It can, under a *minute*, if I am rather happy. See, that's *ironic*." She simpered. "If *women* can orgasm quickly, that's *attractive*. If *men* do, its '*laughable*.' Women can do as they wish, men can't. Not right at all. I *despise* that. Say if you stood, made towards me? I can *guarantee* you'd be *tackled* to the ground, someone would call the police for *assault*, even if I didn't utter *single* word. If *I* slapped you? Shouted? It would be assumed that *you'd* done something wrong, '*deserved*' it,' somehow."

"We could *test* that theory."

Woman frowned, lines deep.

"Slap you? I'd need *reason*."

"If I told you what I *must*, that is *reason* enough."

"*Tell me*. If I *dislike* it, I will *go*, delete your number, forget *any* of this happened. I won't hurt you, not purposefully. *Please*?"

"History dictated me *monster*. They were *correct* to do so. If I informed you *who* I was? You are *free* to think me *mad*, leave. I won't pursue."

Vanessa remained quiet, pulling hair around side, tousling wavy locks.

"My true, *given* name is Vlad Dracul III, named after my Father. I was Voivode of Wallachia three times, *murdered*, aged forty-five, *millennia* ago. Before I was killed, slain by my *older* brother, he performed *blood* rite, ritual, *forced* me to imbibe life blood, source *unknown*, at the time. I awoke, in seventeen-sixty-five, lain asleep for near three-*hundred* years. Radu took everything from me, except youngest child, my *son*, Zaleska. I found out he lived *full* life, did lineage *proud*."

"You're *five-hundred-forty-three* years old? *Ought* to ask your beauty regime. Is it what I *think* it is?"

"*Other* people's blood? Care to *smother* face, body in that?"

Woman *shuddered*, sipping tea to combat chill.

"I would use my own, *thanks*."

Vlad grinned.

"Care to *drink* it?"

"I'd rather drink my *own*, if I *had* to. So, *well...*," she sighed, "I have questions. I *won't* inconvenience you with them."

"I shall answer the *easiest*..."

"Birthday?"

"Second of November."

"Forth. I'm *diverting*, aren't I?"

He nodded, shutting eyes.

"You mentioned you have seen your 'wife' *many* times, over the years. Did you, I don't know to phrase it exactly, feel a *connection*, somehow? Or were you *promised* to each other from birth, some *archaic* twaddle?"

"At the time, *most* marriages were *arranged*. Ours was not."

"That's *lovely*. Meeting someone now is a *joke*. People hide behind masks, they *claim* they want love, but end up in *random* beds, with *random* people, feeling *something* for a few hours, but its not *enough*. It never *is*. Depression is cruel *bitch*, far from mistress. *Whatever*. But, be *honest*. All I ask for is honesty, someone who washes their *hands* and knows what *contraception* is. I don't want *children*. I decided this *long* ago. My *mind* will not be *swayed*, opinion *remains* the same."

"I am *dead*. That would not be *issue*."

Vanessa snorted, having taken off cup lid, she managed to keep liquid *in* cup, not *splutter* it everywhere, *impolitely*.

"Is that an attempt at *panache*? You're asking me to *fuck* you? Is *that* what this is about? You miss your *wife*, I happen to *look* like her, *therefore*, you *think* you can *charm* me into bed? I am not her, *remember*? I recall you *told* me that."

Swatting, Vanessa twirled scarf.

"*Please*. It takes more than 'I *look like your dead wife, so screw me,*' to make me put a man on his back. I am Vanessa, I am not..."

"*Justina*...her name was *Justina*."

Vlad huffed, nostrils flaring, *clearly* irked.

"You aren't used to the word 'no,' are you? *Okay*. At least you are open with that, *fairly*. Forgive me if comparison to a *dead* woman isn't '*making me squirm...*,' or the idea of being intimate with a reanimated *corpse* isn't doing it for me. *Actually*, the idea is rather different, *potentially* interesting?"

Man studied face, scanning for *minute* twitches, movements.

"I *sound* like novelty. Am I *novelty* to you?"

Vanessa coughed.

"No. More, *confusing*, intriguing. I'm being harsh. I, *this* is strange. I *apologise*. See? Blunt, *careless*. I dragged you out here, *only* to *berate*. *God...*"

Woman scoffed, wondering *why* she'd ripped into man. Yes, his story was odd, *bizarre*, but it was *his*. He didn't have to tell her. He revealed *personal* story, life story *precious*, volumes plentiful.

And she'd *torn* them, paper viciously *pulled*, spines *severed*, leather *scratched*, nails dragged down them, some *breaking* in the process.

"Care to slap me? I, would like to *remind* you that, I did *say* it would sound untrue. You have every *right* to be alarmed."

"I'd be alarmed if you *assumed* I was yours, based on what happened in the *past*. Could have tried it on, you *didn't*."

"You haven't offended me. I have heard all, words tried and *failed* to damage me."

Vlad kept distance, *Vanessa* holding cards here.

"As for 'fucking' me? Only if you *wish* too. Never wish to see me again? I shall go. This wasn't ever about *me*."

"Does my *figure* look similar? Because...,' she looked southward, "*they* need all the help *they* can get."

"I *cannot* agree."

Opinion came into mind, vulgar, unsurprisingly, one begging to be uttered.

Uttering it would involve opening mouth, which she so desperately tried to keep closed...

"It isn't your *blood*, when you get *hard*, is *it*..."

"Rhetoric? *Must be*..."

His laugh shot straight through Vanessa, *lance* powerful.

"What are you wearing?"

Vlad inhaled *roses*, jasmine *blooming* behind, musk *close* third.

"*Victoria Secret*. Why?"

Blown pupils and *hitched* breath told the man Vanessa's *guard* was dropping.

He would leave it to *her* to drop it *entirely*, however.

"Please," using her way of speaking *further* prompted her forward, "it takes more than crotch-less underwear and lace to entice *me*."

"Dior, Poison. Cost me an arm *and* a leg, but I work *hard* for my money. I pay *my* way, my taxes, I save, *so*, why not?"

Offering hand, crystal irises sparked *concern*.

"Feel free to call me a 'bitch,' whatever. I can be *too* much, *too* rowdy. *Simply* put, I won't get on my back, and I know would not want that, unless I agreed. *Otherwise*...I may well have had to hit you."

Vlad shook her hand, cautiously holding it, *lightly*, so she could pull away, *if* necessary.

"That is abhorrent. *Trust me* when I say I could never, possibly harm a woman, especially not in such *barbaric* manner. I only act upon *consent*, as with my wife, each woman I lay with. *Of course*, disagreement makes one *discouraged*, though that isn't grounds for harm."

"I *couldn't* act, if a man said no. My body won't respond, if that's the correct word. As soon as I hear it, I pull away, *shudder* even. It isn't always *verbal*."

"*Vanessa*." Her grip tightened. "Ask, *tell* me to walk away. I shall. I have thrown *much* at you. Its expected one would flee to *safety*. I am something to be *feared*, after all."

Woman smiled, tad *wryness* in the corners.

"*You* can't act in *daylight*, or 'transform,' so..."

"Bram's book is not based on *me*."

"So, I am not your *Mina*?"

She laughed, fast becoming audible, *belly* laughter.

"You *wish* 'Johnathan' type? *Saccharine*? Refuses to grow *backbone*? Leaves his wife *alone*, fully *knowing* that 'I' could materialise *through* walls, windows, *cracks* in foundation? *Coward*."

"I can *handle* myself. *However*, it would be nice to be with someone who *listens*, doesn't just fuck off *without* word, doesn't need to be '*grr, me man, hear me roar*.' Someone willing to be themselves in a world full of *clones*. Emotions are *normal*, wholly. Rather a guy *cry* than beat the shit out of *me*, someone *else*, or break his knuckles via *wall*."

"If crying *is* vulnerability, than *all* of us are vulnerable. It is a *lie*, manufactured by a society that *expects* men to fall apart, then *complains* when they do. *Here*."

Vlad got out fountain pen, jotting down email on folded receipt.

"If you wish to *keep* chatting."

Vanessa took note, pocketing it.

"After something this *vital* coming to the fore? *Of course* I do. Thank you."

Getting out cafe receipt, woman wrote email.

"You ought to be getting *back* to our good old capital, will take a few hours. Again, *forgive* my tongue, it holds *barbs*, and they like to latch onto *things*, rhetoric that's rather *acidic*. Don't want to *burn* you, so *to* speak."

"Burning would *warm* my cold, *dead* heart. *Long* since frozen, hence why I have not *touched* you, not without *gloves*."

"I dislike *cold*. It makes me cranky. Not in *all* instance, not all *entirely* unpleasant..."

Abdomen *twitched*, reflex from man's aquamarine's sparkling *mischief*.

"Noted..."

Needing to keep repartee witty, Vanessa had to think, long, *hard*, tilting head causing locks to spill over, thumb and index finger musing jaw.

"Remind me to buy you *binder*. I have to get you something, since you came all this way, for *little old me*."

"*If* it is binder, filled to *brim* with knowledge of you, background, interests and the *rest*? I will take you *up* on that."

"Like an old-fashioned *dating* profile?" *Assumptive*, Vanessa *tried* looking nonchalant. "Okay. Does that mean we're *dating*?"

Vlad *half-nodded*, woman catching sort of glint that *preempted* prurience. Vanessa *continued* incline.

"*Yes*."

She grinned, blushing *before* she knew it had blossomed on cheeks.

"Walk you to the station?"

Man stood, arm extended. Linking that came as easily as *breathing*, woman deciding she'd question what on *earth* had just happened *later* in the evening, over glass of *wine* and *dinner*...

Chapter Six

Hello. Vanessa smiled. I am currently babysitting, so, if my replies are sporadic, you can blame this little one...

Harsh. I assume your friend's child?

You assume correct. Emily, her daughter is called Annabel. Her Dad wants in, suddenly. I mean, its not like he left it six years or anything...

Toddler-sitting, then.

Pedantic.

Apologies. I ought to switch to email, I can explain my behaviour far easier, that way.

To: Vanessa Dawes

From: Vlad T T

Subject: Abstruseness

Time: 09:36 am

My voracity needs tempering, I've been limiting feeding, as I prefer to *know* someone is healthy, rather than *assume*. Hunger makes me rather, *austere*.

From: Vanessa Dawes

To: Vlad T T

Time: 08:39 am

In *what* capacity are you using the word 'austere?' Thesaurus is telling me it can be 'abstaining,' not that it is, in any way *acceptable* for me to inquire about *that* particular subject.

Vlad T T? That's *cute*, if it means what I *think* it means.

From: Vlad T T

To: Vanessa Dawes

And what do you *think* it means?

From: Vanessa Dawes

To: Vlad T T

If I told you?

Actually, how would I kill you? Stake? Sunlight? Particularly *sharp* knife?

From: Vlad T T

To: Vanessa Dawes

You've been reading Dracula again, haven't you?

Vanessa *grinned*.

From: Vanessa Dawes

To: Vlad T T

Predictable. Really ought to work on that. I know it isn't about you, per-say.

Vlad The *Third*? Vlad The (somewhat) *Tame*-Impaler?

From: Vlad T T

To: Vanessa Dawes

I *am* tame, compared to my previous life.

From: Vanessa Dawes

To: Vlad T T

You've killed an awful lot of *people*. Barbarian warlords, I understand...

Innocent *civilians* though? They could have been *forced* to serve that person. I don't believe everyone who follows say, a religion, or is in a cult is *inherently* bad.

To: Vanessa Dawes

From: Vlad T T

You are *correct*. I told my men to kill those they deemed the 'enemy.' They did so. I carry severe regret, *burdensome*. That has never left me, never will.

I was lied too for *decades*, my brother conspired against me, scheming in the background, having *me* do his dirty work. I should not have listened, I admired him, so much so, it blinded me to *his* truth. Our Father died *before* he could stop me. My actions fully *warranted* my end.

Fuck, that's grim...

Vanessa looked at Annabel, little girl playing with toy train, putting wooden figures into its carriages.

From: Vanessa Dawes

To: Vlad T T

I can't really *say* if you come off as a bad person. There's, *something*, lingering there in your demeanour. I don't have the language capacity to describe it accurately.

From: Vlad T T

To: Vanessa Dawes

I am a *murderer*, plain and simple.

I would not hurt you, or *anyone* else. I have not harmed anyone since my *second* life began.

From: Vanessa Dawes

To: Vlad T T

Nice to know...

Seriously though. That is your *past*, your 'past life.' No one can truly say their past is 100% clean, spot *free*.

I don't, *won't* judge you. How do you *want* me to view you? With *fresh* eyes?

From: Vlad T T

To: Vanessa Dawes

With *curious*, circumspect eyes.

No matter the guise, I hold you in *high* regard. You know who you are, founded your own *path*, forged stone, *nothing* has stopped you.

You are *immensely* compelling.

From: Vanessa Dawes

To: Vlad T T

Thank you. Uh...

Ahem. I'd like to think myself (somewhat) interesting, given I have gone against *many* grains in my life. *Haven't* had kids, *haven't* been married/thus gotten *divorced*, never *wanted* to settle. I get *antsy*. I find men *my* age want to begin *settling*. They've 'messed around,' in their twenties, so to speak, and now know *what* they want.

As do *I*...

But, I don't want what *they* want.

I'd rather be *alone*, if it means I am *free* to be me.

Click!

The front door opened, Emily, quickly followed by a man hurrying inside. Vanessa squirmed away her phone, battling narrowing eyes, head directed at man. He was sheepish, on-edge, as he damn well *should* be, woman thought, given he (likely) already knew she helped *raise* Annabel.

"Thanks, Nessa. I *owe* you one."

"*Another* one."

Emily *grinned*, Vanessa winking.

"It's *nothing*." She purposefully aimed her tart tone at *whatever* his name was. "Annabel is a fantastic child. Really. *We* did well."

Man tilted head, well *aware* Vanessa could *lunge* at him, rip out throat, *followed* by vocal chords as he yelped.

He took deep, long inhale, exhale measured.

"Vanessa? This is *Simon*."

"Look," Simon piped up, as quietly as possible, "*I fucked up*." Louder, he looked at his daughter. "I was a *coward*, ran. I didn't want to *listen*, didn't even want to *look* at

her...*Annabel*?"

His little girl's innocent hazels were the same *shade* as his. She looked very much like *him*.

"*Hey there*." He knelt. "I'm your *Dad*, Daddy." Trying not to panic, Simon offered hand to Emily. "I don't expect her to *say* it. Look, I am really, *really* sorry. It took losing *everything* to see what I actually had, what I *needed*. This was a opportunity to grow up, *learn*, but my head wouldn't accept such a drastic *change*. I won't lie, say '*I tried*,' I *didn't*. Thank you for letting me see her, Emily. If that's *all* that happens, I want you to know I appreciate it, *immensely*."

Emily shook it, then Vanessa's, man turning to Emily. *Former* saw truth, witnessed *grief* for his failures pour from his eyes, complexion paling.

Latter saw the *same*, knowing here wasn't where she *should* be.

She stood, wanting to let the two be with their child, give them the *space* they needed.

Quietly gathering her belongings, Vanessa pat younger woman's shoulder, walking around her and to the front door.

From: Vlad T T

To: Vanessa Dawes

Whoever tries to mould you into something you are not does not *deserve* to be in your presence.

From: Vanessa Dawes

To: Vlad T T

Sorry, I went quiet there. I *left*, Emily has some figuring out to do. Doesn't need me, glaring at her ex, stabbing him with imaginary *needles*...

From: Vlad T T

To: Vanessa Dawes

I could provide a *pole*.

I shall leave it to you to *where* it would come in use.

From: Vanessa Dawes

To: Vlad T T

I'm going nowhere *near* his asshole, thank-you-very-*fucking*-much.

No judgement if *you* want to though. *Go for it!*

He looks like the type who doesn't wipe *properly*.

Though, I *suspect*, with ramming a pole up there, that would *help*, somewhat.

I wasn't aware that was a type of person. Thank you, for that lovely image.

Says the man, who shoved them so far up people's backsides, he could use them as pinatas.

I don't recall hanging them from trees...

*Trees?! How many fucking people would you need, in order to need a tree? Branch, Sir!
Single piece of wood, which just so happens to be attached to said tree.*

A thousand?

He chuckled quietly, darkly.

Several thousand. There were plenty of trees in the Carpathia's, my dear.

You pick the strangest times to flirt.

Forever an enigma?

Forever...strange. Different. I'll think on it. Date night?

Bold.

That's your new favourite word, isn't it?

Vanessa had typed that before Vlad could type *single* letter. Pleased hum left him, *chest* warming.

Day date, then? Wouldn't you fry? I lack cannibalistic tendencies.

Skin cancer aside? The sun cannot hurt me, merely give me a headache, if in its gaze for too long.

He weighed his *options*.

He *did* wish to see Vanessa, had an *itch* that needed scratching, and required it *dealt* with.

He could, *should* deal with it himself. Vanessa wasn't there for *his* use, Vlad *knew* this. He wasn't about to throw her about like *yo-yo*, toss her out into the night.

Base view wondered what she looked like, beneath layers of *wool*, cotton.

He knew being *deceased* was (*somewhat*, Vanessa's *favourite* word) of a '*buzz-kill*,' this was something he was unable to help, *rectify*.

It was clear woman *hated* Winter, and, whilst his skin *was* cold, heart *frigid* and blood resembled icicles when it *clotted*?

Man decided to contemplate answer over mocha, with *lashings* of cream, deciding nought *fucks* were to be given, Halloween prop *frame* needing *some* bulk...

Chapter Seven

Vanessa picked up tumbler of rum, savouring vanilla, quick hit of cinnamon swallowed up swiftly by toffee note.

"How come the poles you used end up going through people's shoulders, when they are inserted straight up?"

"The rib cage shifts, cracks, doesn't break, the bones move the pole steadily."

"So, you just sat there, watching people die, agonisingly slowly?"

"Sat, on my horse. Do you think I would stain my clothing with their blood?"

Woman was, understandably, disturbed.

"Vanessa," Vlad spoke, tone respectful, "do not ask questions you do not want the answers too."

"I wouldn't." Sapphire irises sharpened, blades against man's throat. "Honestly. Anyone would think I was a dolt."

"Dolt is as dim does. If I thought you an idiot, I wouldn't have entertained this."

"I know what you've done." Woman offered hand. "I also know that, if you wished me harm, I'd be dead," she clicked fingers, "just like that."

"True, and true. You ameliorate me, I cannot envision letting you stray into harm's way, let alone the perpetrator being myself."

Vlad continued.

"Considering my background doesn't exactly constitute as dating bio friendly?"

"Neither would mine, Vlad. Don't sweat it. Its pointless to stress over things like that, considering unless you are deemed 'perfect' you may as well have had a car run over your face."

Woman simpered.

"I know you're wondering if I think that. If I did," she moved forward, clinking glasses with man, "I'd have told you."

Man's azure irises sparkled, mischief glinting.

Woman waited, waited, and wondered if Vlad had drifted off into space, swirling, pretty galaxies shimmering around him.

"Hmm?"

That's when Vanessa noticed where his gaze was. It was on her neck, moving upward, then down, scanning upper half, sight holding cruel barb, woman seeing man as others had seen him, she was sure.

He wasn't friendly, neighbourly, homely. He hadn't made himself out to be any of those.

He was neither and none, man enigma, puzzle, pieces he, himself held, close to his chest.

If Vanessa wanted to be handed slice of his history, she would have to wait, learn to be patient, keep mitts to herself, prevent them and mind from prying.

"Do, go on. I find myself examining you."

"Want to know everything? Warts and all?"

Vlad nodded, woman downing the rest of her drink.

"Okay..."

"Five-eight, one-hundred-thirty-five pounds, not classy enough for wine, champagne makes me queasy and I'd much rather nurse a bottle of scotch. Size ten, thirty-four C, if you're wondering. Isn't much there, your imagination will have to fill in the cups..."

Vanessa started off, hoping Vlad followed.

"Will it now?"

Smirk man wore was formidable, form tensing, menacing.

"Five-seven, one-hundred and thirty pounds, I've drank, tried enough wine for several lifetimes, champagne is vanity, and I've procured several bottles of scotch. I shall leave your imagination to decide on what lies below my waist..."

Blues sharpened, woman snorting.

"Oh no! I'm taller and heavier than you!" Feigning worry, Vanessa's jaw worked. "Don't feel emasculated, please, I beg of you."

"My vanity, the level it is akin to does not care for emasculation. You are as you are, I am as I am. What gives me right to dominate you, simply because I am deemed the 'monopolising' gender? I am no better than you, simply by being male. A man can handle a woman as she is. A boy cannot."

"No, you aren't, nor am I more accomplished than you, because of the fact I'm a woman. I don't want us to fight. I'll get this out of the way now. I don't think you're a sex pest, because you're a man, nor are you horrendously sexist. I'd like to think I'm a modern woman, but

many of my views aren't modern, not one bit. As for what's underneath your clothing? That's entirely up to you. I don't kiss and tell. I don't really kiss, to be honest..."

"Kissing is intimate."

"And, you'd have blood breath."

Vlad paused, gawking, jaw working.

"I have not heard that one, before...Do you realise the extent of your ability to mesmerise me?"

"Mesmerise? In what context? Mesmerism? Would I dare try that? No. Do I believe in that? Fuck no."

"Hypnotising me would certainly be a feat, indeed. I find certain charm, drawing me to you. So, in the sense of magnetism, then, yes."

"Should I be flattered? Half the time, I barely understand what you're on about, but I sit, and I nod, so, that makes me charming? Wasn't aware so little effort needed to be put in!"

Vlad stood, helping himself to more rum. He offered to fill Vanessa's glass, woman nodding.

"Relying off of beauty? Don't insult yourself, or me."

"Not used to being called that, is all. Its a word I associate with hidden meaning, intent."

"If you wanted to be on your back..."

Vlad breathed out syllables methodically.

"I would be."

"What about wooed?"

Vanessa gaped.

"Wooed? Are you trying to make me hurl?"

"And ruin the cheap faux fur rug beneath you?"

"We don't all have the money, gumption or stomach to hunt, kill, skin something and use that for decorative purposes, you know."

"I dislike furs, skins. Father's castle's halls, rooms were embellished with them, and several boar, stags heads."

Vanessa made face.

"I hate taxidermy. It looks wrong, creepy. The last time I was in a room full of it, I couldn't stop shivering."

"That could have been because the room was cold, and you have an intense hatred of frigid temperatures..."

"That, I do."

Man hadn't moved, he'd remained standing beside her chair. Vanessa (boldly) let her free hand make its way towards his.

"And you are freezing. What a shame..."

She tutted, Vlad moving her hand up to his face jolting her stomach.

"I warm up quickly."

He lowered head, Vanessa blinking rapidly.

"What did I say about being alone with a stranger?"

"Well, I did invite you in."

Man ceased nuzzling her jaw, moving away to snort, doing it in her face rude.

"And you aren't a total stranger. Would I have let you into my home, if I thought you were a maniac? I don't condone what you did in the past. You know that. By doing what I did, that means I trust the man you are now, today."

Vlad loosened grip, letting woman decide whether she wanted to let it drop to her side.

His head was at her neck, Vanessa biting lip, to keep from laughing.

"Can you smell my blood, or is it my perfume that's bewitching you?"

Vlad rolled blues.

"Blood smells exactly the same, doesn't matter the person, their blood type."

"Ah, the latter. I bought myself some perfume for Christmas. Cost a pretty penny, but as I said, nine-twelve hour shifts at work? I deserve a treat, every now and again. What can you smell?"

"Peaches, amber, hints of rose. Aren't you glad I do not have fangs?"

Vanessa snorted, masking it successfully.

"Even if you did, would you seize the opportunity, whilst my guard is down?"

"Only if you wish it."

"How would, did you feed? I imagine the process is rather messy."

"I procure blood packs from hospitals, as it is screened, therefore, I know it is safe to consume. I use scalpels, I get those from hospitals too."

"Would you like to try mine, some time?" Woman held up hands. "No pressure."

"Another time."

Vlad moved, gracefully back to his chair, readying scarf and jacket.

"Ought to make some dinner. I'd offer to make you some, but, well, you know. Can you eat food?"

"It makes me, rather violently unwell. Neither of us want, need to witness that."

"Mints, many mints. Before you, er, drink from me, or after you chunder, preferably in the toilet," Vanessa frowned, "please. If can you handle mints, I shall buy some."

Vlad, once he affixed his clothing turned, nodding, holding out hands.

"I shall avoid regurgitating anywhere other than the toilet. Anywhere else is simply uncouth."

He bent neck, woman's eyes lighting up, pulse visible in her neck.

"Before kissing, if that so happens, I shall endeavour to pick up some mints."

"Good. Blood doesn't smell great, and tastes likes pennies."

She took his hands, prominent bones knobbly.

"Tad bit concerned if I did get my hands on you, I'd break you, Halloween prop..."

"Muscles do not beget strength, they show it, yes, but does not automatically suggest someone is able. You will find me stalwart, able to endure. I've endured much, hardship the one, consistent in my lifetimes."

"Lifetimes?"

Vanessa felt awful, knowing what man before her had been through, the mires of shit he'd waded through, drenched in sweat.

But, determination lingered, he fought, crawled his way out, cleaned himself up and moved on.

Investigating pushed aside, woman felt esteem for Vlad. Honesty came close second to personal grooming, moustache impeccable, dressing in fine garments. He gave off regal, without pomp, without arrogance.

Confidence radiated from him, and not because he was a leader, general.

It shone from inside, spirit, giving him dazzling glow, one woman sought.

As if he were lighthouse, and I were ship, in dangerous seas, with a treacherous crew...

Woman held back titter, returning to present, wishing to say something, before man left.

"How about seduced, thoroughly and properly?"

"That, I can do. I shall invite you to my home, one day."

"Coffin under grand staircase?"

Vlad laughed.

"Would I fit in that? Single bed and all. I like my space, stretching, and heated blanket when nights get long, nippy. I miss company in bed, and I don't mean that in a sexual sense. Someone to cuddle, chat inane nonsense, laugh, or merely lie there, contemplate, sleep. Hold on..."

"Its daylight, and yet, I'm awake?"

Vlad followed on her assumptive streak.

"Myths exist for a reason. They make me out to be everything I am not. I do not have powers, I cannot transform into mist and travel through walls, into the bedrooms of young, unsuspecting maidens, plunder them, drink my fill and leave them to be found, wilted flower in the morning."

"Oh no!" Aquamarine's widened. "I'm not your usual type? Should I plaster my face in white paint, dab some red paint on my lips and cheeks, use every poisonous substance known to man to 'pretty' myself up?"

"If we knew they would make people desperately ill, devour them from the inside out? No, Vanessa."

Vlad palmed her cheek, woman wanting fall under his spell, concerned how easily she acquiesced.

"You are striking, graceful, without needing to try, holding allure in the palm of your hand. I want nothing more than to bolster self-confidence, seeking nothing in return."

"Oh, you do. You're a rather engaging figure, yourself."

"Am I? Hook nose, scrawny, short, far from Adonis as one could get?"

"Is that what women have said? Fuck me...completely unacceptable. Why is it okay for women to judge men for how they look, but if men judge women, that is morally unacceptable?"

"I rest in a bed, I rather enjoy sunrises, being constricted isn't something I wish to experience again, I am short, for a man, and I've never been able to 'bulk up.'"

"You don't need to be anything other than who you are, Vlad. I ascribe to the way you think, see things. If something happens between the two of us, I'd be too in the moment care for anything other than making sure you're very happy."

"I would return that, tenfold."

The way he said that had goosebumps cover Vanessa's body.

"Good." She stood, shaking Vlad's hand. "When is your flight?"

"Tomorrow morning, six. I ought to be going. I shall keep in touch."

"Take care. Oh, and if you want to shag some gorgeous woman, I have one issue."

Vlad smirked.

"I would not, but, go on."

"Make sure they are clean. That's all I ask." She mused. "Is that what started the 'men should only sleep with virgins, as they wouldn't have contracted anything, yet' trope?"

"It is. I've been careful since the day I began having sex. I have standards, Vanessa. Rather, high. Not many women get over the bar, it hits them in the face when they try."

"Ouch."

"At least I'm truthful."

"And I value that. I won't have you lower the bar, for me. I'll need to go to the gym, if I want to vault over the bar. Fifty-fifty, at first?"

"Fifty-fifty."

Vlad agreed, heading to door.

"Let us put in the work, ponder where this will take us."

"Us? Presumptuous..." Vanessa pouted, tilting head. "Should I pine, cry myself to sleep?"

Vlad grinned.

"Yes...definitely not."

"I'll do something else, if you don't mind?"

Man shook head.

"I shall leave it to your imagination, as what that 'something else.'"

Vanessa winked, Vlad leaving, sucking in breath after shutting the door.

Woman was poking man, stoking vampire's flames, coals hot in chest, Vlad imagining her on the couch, naked, holding poker, lazy smile on face, plush scarlet lips beckoning.

Clothes stifled him, they stifled her, pupils giving it away. Vanessa wanted to explore, but disliked the idea, wondering if Vlad would think her easy, if she gave in to want.

He wouldn't think anything of the sort. She gave as good as she got, keeping him on toes, entertaining him.

Vlad headed outside, swift breeze chilling skin, throwing water over coals.

Swallowing conniption, vampire needed to return home, eat, and find sleep, that being feat, given he was restless.

He'd rather seek himself than rest...

Chapter Eight

"Do you know that the more cocks a woman has in her, the more of a whore she is?"

"That old adage should have died out, aeons ago."

Vanessa smirked.

"Whore times," she held up three fingers, "three."

Vlad bellowed, scotch sloshing in glasses, precariously close to its lip.

"And...what if that applied to you? Not you, in general, of course, Vlad number three."

Woman laughed, unabashed, man needing to hear glorious sound.

"A whore times a thousand."

"I'd say that's far too many, but that would involve me forgetting that you've lived many lives..."

Vlad agreed, strangely enough, woman perplexed, dark tresses falling over shoulder, man aching to weave hand through them.

"It is large number. However, I decided not to count after certain number. I made a, rather uneducated guess. It meant little, after a while."

"Just warmth of release, another body. It dies quickly, when it means little."

"You must understand, Vanessa..."

From the time he arrived, up until now, the way man spoke her name, mouthed the letters held woman in flux, adoring how he said it one minute, then questioning why she did.

She barely knew the man, but knew one thing.

She starved, food, alcohol, chocolate not cutting through need, expressly wanting, requiring something other than her own digits.

Finding herself wanting was rare.

Someone handsome was nice, but they had to have something between the ears, a personality of their own, some sort of sense of humour (preferably smutty.)

Vlad, whilst not 'conventionally' attractive held the other cards, and he showed to them to her, readily.

It was personality that drew her in, man's delightfully sinful humour fucking wonderful, and she could but imagine his tongue was just as wicked.

"...I would not, could not see you as any less of a captivating wonder, any less feminine, whatever the number."

"Oh, I don't know," woman mused, "you haven't seen me when I play Strip Poker. Drunk off my tits, my clothes practically fell off..."

"You're leaving an awful lot of the imagination."

"And you're unbearably chilly, dear Voivode."

Vlad clicked tongue, drumming fingers against glass.

"Should we play Strip Poker, with I, deliberately playing badly, stripping, and standing by the fire?"

Vanessa scoffed.

"Spoilsport. You've played such a dirty parlour game before? I'm starting to think you not so innocent..."

Vampire snorted, just about catching errant drips of amber liquor.

"That word hasn't ever been uttered in my presence."

"The General doth protest too much."

"Am I? Aren't I abhorrent? A 'creature of the night?' A stain upon the parchment of God, on which he writes his plans for us? Red ink bleeds through the pages, my doing."

"Well, I can certainly ascribe to the latter."

Vlad stood, abruptly, placing tumbler down on coaster, Vanessa appreciating that.

"How so?"

"I am a woman with an opinion."

Man laughed, dark, broad, rich sound, close to her.

That little bit closer, and she could kiss him.

He'd taste of whisky, *right?*

Not of someone's donation of plasma, they assumed would be saving someone's life, who'd been in a terrible accident?

In a way, it was. It was fuelling, running through the veins of a man, a vampire, the thing nightmares were made of, that many lusted over, fucked roughly by one, bitten, everything blurry, dying in the throws of passion.

She moved slowly, inching forward, nodding to Vlad. He breathed into his hands, deemed himself acceptable, lowered his head, and kissed a chuckling Vanessa.

When she stopped giggling like child who'd heard crude joke, Vanessa kissed back, man holding back, closed-mouth, woman understanding, given she'd accused him of having haemoglobin breath, clots between his teeth (Vlad tacked that on himself, practically hearing woman say it...)

"You're throwing bait, Miss Dawes. Need a fishing pole?"

"What's with your obsession with poles? Can I borrow a line?"

"So you can strangle me with it?"

Ah!

"These are kinks, aren't they?"

"And, if they are?"

Azures glimmered, cogs whirring behind them.

"Is this you, wanting to shove a pole up my arse? I hate anal." She went to point, accusatory, but it was clear it was in jest. "And don't think you're putting it anywhere else."

"Down your throat?"

Vanessa sat right on back down, stunned, shutting the fuck up immediately.

"That, wasn't the hole I was thinking of. I'll think on that? I'm too tight for it to be between my legs."

"Is there any other type of vagina?"

Vanessa finished drink, grimacing slightly.

"No. That's what they want you to think. Its a muscle, it contracts and releases. If it can handle pushing out a baby, and tightening not long after, it can handle penises just fine. Why do some insist that a penis will irreparably ruin a woman?"

Vlad sat back down, refilling glass.

"Ask modern men. They believe such bull. How can you possibly stand them?"

"Some do. And, with degree of caution."

"So," man mused, "you aren't a virgin. Good."

Rather odd time to change subject, (sort of change it) woman went along with it anyway.

"Virgins are dull. I wouldn't know what I'd do with one. I prefer experience."

"I concur. Rather practised hands than fumbling."

"The fire wouldn't do much. The radiators would be better. I'll turn them up."

Man tilted head, as if he hadn't a clue what she was talking about.

"I'd like to try something. Call it an experiment?"

"You want me to warm up?"

"I could have ordered you to get into my bed, and there's always my bath, but I thought those were tad bit forward, and impolite, given your status."

"I take it I won't be able to lounge in it?"

"I don't have the money for a fuck-off huge tub. For the love of Bowie, Vlad. I am not descended from royalty. I lack funds. Don't you think I'd love a huge bath?"

She headed into bedroom, fingers asking man to follow.

He did, but remained outside.

Respectful.

I like it.

Vanessa hid happiness in the low light of her room, fishing out several bottles of bubble bath, and bags of bath bombs.

Turning, she held them, precariously in arms, man raising brow.

"Use whatever you want. We have sweet scents, citrus and toothpaste-esque bath products. Take your pick."

"One at a time."

Vanessa dumped them on her bed, unable to think, process, use logic.

Moving around him, time slowing down, movement sluggish, Vlad looked at Vanessa, woman attempting to speak, tongue like jelly, mouth opening, merely accomplishing making her look like fish...

"If your bath were large enough to share..."

"You'd suggest us taking one together, save on water? Aw. Isn't that skinflint?"

"It is, if you're used to having all the water you could ever, possibly need. I did not, nor could I assume it was clean."

"I'm forgetting how old you are again. I'm sorry. You've scattered my brain cells like marbles, I am trying to locate them, and I know some have gone under the fucking bed, between grooves in the wooden boards..."

"Then I shall help you find them. I'd rather you have all your faculties, were something to occur. It would be wrong of me to try at this moment, taking advantage is something I will not do."

Vanessa regained footing, cheeks burning.

"Thank you. Shall I run you a bath?"

"Yes, please. I shall return to my hotel, bring some clean clothing, then return, if I may?"

"If you may stay? Yes."

She opened bathroom door.

"I'll wash your clothes for you. Please, leave them in there."

Woman pointed to wash basket.

"Hopefully, none of these make you hurl."

"At least I'll be in the bathroom."

"True."

Vlad's index finger caressed Vanessa's jaw, purest, cloudless skies looking back at him.

"Nothing has to happen, Vanessa. I do not have an agenda."

"I know, and, we'll see..."

Kissing her, aiming for chastely, man had to swallow growl, keep that in his chest, Justina in front of him was not Justina.

She was *Vanessa*, Vanessa Dawes.

He had to remember that, keep slamming that into his head until it hurt to do anything other than lie down.

If Vanessa knew what was inside man's head, thoughts unbidden, would she entertain any of this?

The answer obvious, blaring in front of Vlad's eyes, he shielded them after leaving her home.

No.

No, she would not.

Chapter Nine

"Toothbrush, clothes, pyjamas, travel case, blood bags...standard."

Vanessa laughed, latter sat next to the milk, needing to be kept chilled.

She didn't need to look inside bag, Vlad told her what he'd brought. She knew he'd bring food, this making her curious as to what her blood type was.

Inquiring as to where this may go, woman sat, closing eyes, let mind wander.

When she was younger, Vanessa would have said her type of man was tall, broad, sun-kissed skin, blue-eyed, steely, but had air of calmness, serenity, seas tranquil.

This was because she was told that was what she should want, female friends ordered her to date someone who looked like he'd just come straight from a GQ magazine shoot.

As she got older, she realised neither height nor weight, or the width of their arms mattered. What did, was personality. She wasn't attracted to her first boyfriend, in the beginning.

What struck her was his humour, very quick-witted, made everything fun, the world that little bit brighter. Over time, Vanessa fell, and she fell hard. She told him, crossing fingers behind her back, hoping, praying to the great David Bowie that he felt the same way.

When he said he did, she pounced, emotional, somewhat aggressive, dominant sex following, everything utterly brilliant. The sex after that was fantastic. He'd taught her about herself, thoroughly pleasing her until she needed him to make love to her, or fuck her, depending on their mood, her time of the month.

They'd split after five years, but remained friends.

They were friends before, friends during, friends after. The best way to handle a breakup, so long as it was amicable.

Her second, Grahame was gorgeous, but brain dead, complete dolt. So much so, Vanessa quickly realised he wanted to fuck his Mother, but knew he couldn't, due to that being illegal, and society would (rightly so) frown upon him.

Vanessa was not his Mother, she wasn't about to 'instinctively' start producing milk, letting him suckle whilst he ploughed her into oblivion. The sex was horrific. He finished, rolled over, fell asleep quicker than she could react, sitting up, wondering if she existed or not to him, anymore.

The very idea of that made her feel physically sick. That ended after three months, three fucking months.

In between boyfriends, Vanessa had a fling, man she kinda-sorta knew. He regularly came into the shop, getting cakes for his work colleagues, some times for his daughter, him and his wife were estranged.

Vanessa only found that out after he picked up batch of chocolate fondant fairy cakes, and had to put the box down, in order to answer his phone.

His wife screamed at him, screeched the shop down, man having (seemingly) married a banshee, man apologising, profusely, as red as a tomato, ending the call and leaving hastily.

He forgot the box, Vanessa hurrying after him. She put note on it, telling him that (to her) he came off as a wonderful Father, from what he'd told her.

He lit up when he spoke of her, Vanessa lacking maternal instincts, though, even she had to admit his daughter was adorable, and looked just like him.

She wanted to blow off some steam, offering coffee outing, not date, unwilling to further pressure man.

He agreed, woman slowly inching through his barriers, man letting her.

One night, he pulled her into darkened corner, gently, mind, which she (admittedly) swooned over, and began nibbling on her earlobe, woman eagerly agreeing, taxi ride to hers too long, body too hot, needing to shed clothes, keep some dignity, reign in horniness until after they got back.

They continued to sleep together, sex haphazard, but fun, whenever they needed it, it happened, naturally, without much work needing to be done.

They slot together nicely, but feelings didn't come into play. It fizzled out, sparkler dying, embers crackling coming to halt.

That was fine, they'd gotten out what they needed.

"Mind if I ask you something?"

"If you thought that, you wouldn't have asked."

"Okay, okay," Vanessa called, couch far from bathroom door, "since you're dead, does that mean your sperm is too?"

"Of course. You know that."

She shivered, making face.

"If we have sex? Excuse me if the idea of dead, bloody semen slipping out from between my legs is, perturbing me, somewhat."

"Then I'll wear a condom."

"Isn't it better without?"

"Yes, but I respect you, your opinion."

"You are dead, I have have been taking the pill for over fifteen years, like clockwork, trust me on that, there's no reason for you to use one. I have plenty of towels. I should, at LEAST try and save my sheets..."

"Why would it be bloody? Should I demonstrate?"

"I'm not complaining. Kitchen roll, please use that, so I don't have to scrub sperm out of my carpet, even if it is 'cheap, faux fur...'"

Vlad laughed, Vanessa making her way towards bath.

"How high up do you like the water, and how hot?"

"To my chest, and medium."

"I'll let you do that. There's a spare dressing gown in my closet."

Vanessa kissed him, light simper gracing features, puffing cheeks.

"You can go into my bedroom. You have permission to enter."

Vlad checked water's temperature, finding it scorching. He turned off hot tap, switching to cold.

"Singeing off your skin a past time of women?"

Vanessa snorted.

"Yes. We must warm our frigid, ice-bitch souls somehow."

"Try harder." Man went into bedroom, opening cupboards, one by one. "'Frigid, ice bitch,' isn't radiating from you strongly enough for me to believe that."

Opening drawers, woman 'caught' him in the act.

"Looking for toys? They do nothing for me. I use my hand."

"If something happens, I would like it if you told me what you enjoy."

"And the same goes for you."

Vlad stepped into bath, sighing, muscles relaxing instantly.

"If I demonstrate now, it'll go down the drain."

"Won't it stick to your leg? Its hilarious how sticky it actually is, especially when you think you cleaned it up, and then lie in it. It stuck to my back, slimy and rather disgusting. Why do we have sex, again? Its messy, potentially risky, loud, and the body can make rather, odd noises..."

Justina and Vanessa had one thing in common.

Gall. Not many stood up to Vlad, not without fearing his wrath, terrified he would kill them and their families, for speaking, if they said something he did not like. Justina challenged him, her knowledge of several subjects, her Father making sure she had excellent education, instead of forcing her to be married by twelve, having her first child at thirteen, if the labour didn't kill her...

She reasoned, refusing to argue, rewired him when he threatened to blow up. She helped him plot routes across Carpathians, find ways to infiltrate cities.

What she didn't know, eventually would learn, was how brutal he truly was.

With her, he became docile, teacher, mastering her form, mapping that to memory.

Away from her? He butchered entire villages, slaughtering children, first, making their parents watch. It didn't matter if they were innocent.

They followed the wrong leader, was all.

Looking back, how his wife could bear his existence in her life baffled man.

It confused him until he returned back to Poenari Castle, and he held her, feeling prominent bump under her gown.

That, his son changed everything.

Vlad vowed he would listen to the villagers, before deciding to lop off their heads.

Gaining followers was important, finding men capable of battle, to replace his fallen soldiers important task.

He could not accomplish this, if he massacred each, every one of them...

Vanessa?

Vanessa spoke with confidence, pushing her luck, man allowing it, as she entertained him.

Woman took his wrath, combating it with crudeness, vulgarity, hands making obscene gestures, mouth uttering filth.

And, damned if man wasn't base. She appealed to baser instinct, and was rather easy on the eye.

Vlad resisted urge, temptation to think of her as his wife. She merely looked like her, was all.

She uncrossed wires, giving him pliers when he wanted her be alone, do the job himself.

Lounging in tub, man took bar of soap out of travel case.

"I've noticed men use bar soap, women bottle."

"We need something we can get to grips with."

Vanessa coughed.

"Mere man shtick? Where did the 'barbarian-warlord' go?"

"You want me to spill blood and guts on the linoleum? Well, it is 'easy-clean.'"

"I am rather proficient at getting blood out of things. Women learn, we learn quickly."

"So, that would be a yes. After I'm done bathing, I shall endeavour to stalk the streets and find myself a victim. Man or woman?"

"Fuck off! You do that? Films massively embellish you. I mean, shit, I think you could see through clothing, at some point."

Fuck.

Vlad cursed, mostly in his head, rarely aloud.

Vanessa goaded him, she knew what she was doing, man wanting to get out of the bath, forgo drying, pick her up and screw her senseless.

She did not do things like this as often as he did. He could not rush her, bruising, marking her skin, damaging her body.

This needed to be thorough, courtship lengthy, exploration plenteous.

Vlad forced himself to be patient, it was a virtue.

If Vanessa wished to play game, throw him ball, vampire decided he would catch it.

After luxurious bath, wafts of honey pacified him, for the time being.

Chapter Ten

"Neck, wrist, thighs and earlobes are fair game. Do not, under any circumstances bite my nipples or labia, or I will hit you. Fair warning."

"Okay. All of me is fair game."

"Really? All?" Woman paused. "I don't think I'd be comfortable doing that, not below the waist, anyway."

"You don't have too."

"Scratching?"

"Yes."

"Good." Vanessa smiled. "I love that."

"Nothing much hurts me, anymore. I was tortured for days before I was forced to become what I am."

"Yikes. You don't need to speak about it."

"Short version? My brother grew angry, because our Father gave his title to me, not him, the eldest, as per-usual. He had my wife killed, three of my children, and myself tortured. A maid ran with my son, clutched in her arms. They escaped, I learned much later. Radu made me imbibe tainted blood of the first, true ancient, a malevolent entity. I had no choice, was spurned from the God I served, and buried alive."

Vanessa's jaw worked, Vlad finally getting opportunity to thread digits through long, silken hair.

She looked up, kissing his jaw.

"You don't need to apologise, scorn my brother. The former accomplishes nothing, the latter I have done more than enough of..."

Sitting on his lap was lovely, woman taking small steps towards, potentially something else?

It had been some time, however, Vanessa concerned her body may not do what it usually did.

What it usually did, when she was properly, thoroughly pleased.

"In this instance, apologies are crass, pointless. I will refrain from speaking about your family, I do not have any right to do so."

Vanessa slipped from his arms, turning, squinting blues.

"No macho displays of 'I've got a bigger cock than you.' I despise those. I couldn't give a flying fuck whether or not that's true."

"You insult me, Miss Dawes."

"And you amuse me, Mr Impaler."

She laughed, man standing, making his way to her room, telltale signs of lust creeping across face, her body, head keeping themselves in his direction. She couldn't look in any other direction, senses trained on vampire.

Vlad slipped into woman's bed, arm behind his head, lazy, contented smile on his face, free hand beckoning Vanessa.

"Do assure me you won't just lie there..."

"I will lie here. What I do with my hands, tongue in the meantime?"

Oh?

Oh...

Oh, fuck.

Damn the man, damn the utterly atrocious glint in his eyes.

Damn the smirk plastered across his face.

He wanted to give Vanessa the one thing that made her utter noises, loud noises.

He said he didn't have 'powers,' yet he read her mind, without her needing to utter single sentence?

He saw through her, woman pane of crystal clear glass, desires tendrils appearing behind it, slithering, woman's reflection being teased stunning her into silence.

Vlad watched her, azures sharpening, focus honed on woman. He did not need 'seduction,' techniques apparently acquired over hundreds of years non-existent.

He wasn't a gaunt sex pest, society merely painted him as such, brush bristles rough, scratchy.

Man wanted sex, sought it, yes...

But seducing young, vulnerable women, and fucking them so hard, they bled, soaking, staining the sheets, him, defiling their body in the process?

Never.

Never.

Undressing herself, Vanessa flushed, biting lip as she slunk into her bed, beside man, wondering why she reacted like love-struck, dumbstruck teen, with little to zero knowledge of foreplay, which she assumed would happen.

She needed it to happen. She felt herself quiver, blood heating, heart begin to flutter.

She needed that little bit more.

No, she needed much more, an inordinate amount, requiring orgasms, inordinately happy that the man beside her couldn't give two fucks, concerning 'women should be seen and not heard.'

She would be heard, strain her vocal chords, squeal herself hoarse.

There's a thing...

She hadn't told him she was unable to scream. She squealed, squeaked.

If Vlad wanted her to scream, like he was murdering her, he'd have to find himself another woman. The idea of yelling in someone's face, when they are trying to make you happy was strange to Vanessa.

She much preferred staring them down, letting them feel, as well as watch her, toppling down the mountain.

"May I?"

Vlad had his hands above duvet, eyes on the ceiling. As soon as she entered the room, shed her clothing, the vampire gave her respect, permission needed to look, touch.

"Yes. May I?"

Vlad shook his head, wiry hand cupping her cheek as he rolled over, kissing her deeply, woman scrunching fists, nails, she was sure leaving imprints in palm.

His hands removed cover, prompting woman to close her eyes. Vanessa did so, not without fair amount of trepidation blooming in stomach.

Slim fingers took time in their explorations, Vlad finding Vanessa did not acquiesce quickly, she kept quiet, fine hairs on skin raised, little else happening.

He knew what she wanted, wiggling legs, curling toes, murmurs leaving mouth, those plush lips darker, blood drawn to them, man knowing they'd be distinctly delicious when around him, those puffy cheeks hollowed, woman stoking coals in his chest, lava flowing throughout him, begging to erupt, pour into her.

He rolled her, so her hips were above his head.

That was when he heard it, that unmistakable hitch of breath, Vanessa beet red.

Experimental licks, slightest touches were not viable options.

Human needed to let go, let vampire expunge preconceptions, fracture her sanity.

She preempted what it would feel like, forgetting Vlad was not any of the men she'd slept with. He knew where she required attention, tongue seeking parts of her that certainly were far from 'dead,' as far as one could possibly be.

Man wanted to tell her something he deemed vital, mind repeating words Vanessa could not hear.

Do not make noise, simply to flatter my ego. Its been flattered enough. Moan because you want too.

Vanessa's breathing became ragged, chest heaving, hands seeking purchase on something, anything, Vlad's arms first idea.

They were svelte, willowy, woman worried she'd crack bones, with the force she exerted, when she let go.

Vlad was a vampire, yes, but did that mean his body was able to endure much more than hers? If she gripped him, dug nails in, seeking anchor, would that hurt him?

She shook her head of that thought, dark tresses swept over shoulder, increasing waves from her abdomen downwards throwing her head back.

The idea was abandoned when Vlad's index finger ventured inside her, crooking, man knew, he fucking knew exactly what to do.

Vanessa burned, sweat itching her face. She was beginning to seep, man absorbing her, melding with her, gluing face to her, drinking her in, woman unable to take it, waves ever closer, body threatening to cave, Vanessa plastering hands on the headboard, small bit of wood held onto, for dear life.

She squealed, sound far from exquisite 'waif-like, angelic gasps,' Vanessa was too busy being thrust into Heaven, (too far gone to think of being 'ladylike') until the built up sin inside her

was released, freed of its bond.

Irony was delicious, as was Vlad's mouth, honey sweetening kiss.

A vampire had taken her to that plain, all whilst the pair knew he would fry in Hell...

"Unless I call your name, no one would have an inkling anything was going on, at all. The neighbour to my left is deaf, and the one to my right is blind. If they want to band together, complain? I wish them luck..."

Vlad smirked, capturing Vanessa's lips, wanting her to say it, his name.

"How cruel..."

"Coming from you?" Hah!" Vanessa snorted. "That's adorable."

Man pressed himself against woman's thigh, latter missing the indescribable feeling of making a man hard, and not merely because she flashed some flesh.

She made him hard simply by being her.

"Squealing? That's a new one, on me."

"You wanted a screamer?"

"That would be obnoxious."

"A medium-level moan?"

"Whatever you like."

"So long as isn't yelling. Don't worry, dear General. I am incapable of speaking in capitals."

They laughed.

"Can I swear?"

In response, Vlad throbbed, nodding, predicament obvious.

"Fuck yes..."

Vanessa turned, favourite position achieved.

Spoon. Minimal movement, felt bloody brilliant for both, was not romantic, but romance wasn't on the cards.

This was lust that needed sating, plain and simple.

Vlad eased his way into Vanessa, former hissing, riled snake, latter moaning, jaw falling open.

She grabbed man's hand, wrapping digits around her hair. He pulled it, yanking her head back, woman whispering 'yes,' rushed, raspy, man taking breath away.

Vampire exercised degree of caution, he could rip the strands out of her skull, if he used too much force.

But Vanessa wanted him to hurt her, so, he did.

Both knew if it got to be too much, one word would cease it at once.

They knew that word, though neither uttered it...

Chapter Eleven

"Why did I ever stop having sex?"

Vanessa sighed, moving hair away from her, several loose strands between fingers. She dropped those onto the floor, making mental note, to vacuum later that day.

She rolled over, kissing Vlad's collarbone. He was dozing, murmuring, woman pondering whether or not to listen, or get up, fill kettle, ready two mugs, box of tea and jar of coffee.

"You would tell me, if I hurt you, wouldn't you? I cannot bear the thought of me damaging you..."

Vanessa's stomach jolted.

"Of course I would. And, you haven't, I assure you."

Vlad seemed pleased with this answer, apparently unable to wake up. Woman considered peeking under duvet, helping his transition to wakefulness.

She hadn't yet looked upon him, man informing her he was badly scarred, woman unbothered, wanting to prove that, pushing the issue disrespectful, Vlad regarding his body in less than attractive ways...

That wouldn't be right. He wouldn't be aware, conscious enough to consent.

Twitching fingers remained above sheet. Pearl blues followed razor sharp jaw.

"I've loved you for centuries..."

Come again?

Is this?

You aren't talking to me, are you?

Oh, by David Bowie's hair!

"No. I'm not doing this."

"Hmm?"

Vlad was woozy, hunger clawing, invisible hands pulling him upwards, towards the kitchen. He fought them, batting them off.

"Don't act like you don't know what you just said."

Vlad sat up, woman leaving bed, man seeking her body heat. He moved into the dent she left.

"I'd like you to leave, please. How many blood bags do you have in the fridge?"

"Two."

Vlad did not move, Vanessa getting antsy, moving up and down, feet wanting to turn, body following, away from man.

"Vanessa. I apologise, but my mind, as I have informed you has an uncanny knack of recalling my wife. Sleeping next to you pulled more up than I thought it would."

"How am I supposed to react to that? You did the one thing I asked you not too."

Vlad's face turned into solid, impassive stone, eyes hard, jaw set.

"Never look at me like that again."

Scorn filled Vlad's eyes, derision hollowing cheeks, annoyance setting jaw. This pissed Vanessa off, woman holding tongue, focusing on making breakfast.

"You can come back, finish those," she opened fridge to grab tub of butter, gesturing to bags of haemoglobin, "its only fair. I won't throw them out."

Vanessa ignored Vlad's apology, in the form of him, lowering his head, hair masking eyes, beginning to water.

He huffed, attempting to sift out hurt, locate logic within grains of sand.

"Huffing?" Vanessa took the sound negatively. "How immature. You have centuries over me. You also have hands. If you aren't done, I'm sure you can find someone with distinct lack of moral scruples and lack of brain cells..."

Vlad choked, throat sealing. He'd swallowing the damn sand...

"You expect me to act, say 'I love you,' call you pet names and fawn? This isn't a film."

Throwing up her hands, Vanessa went to grab plate, everything shaking. Woman did not want to have to fish pottery shards out of her carpet, before they embedded themselves in her foot.

"You're insulting me. Do I have to slap you?"

Man couldn't respond, his world turned to black, shadows enveloping form. He curled up on the couch, beginning to shake.

"Do I need to make you scream my name, so you recall it, even in your dreams?"

"Nightmares..."

Vampire got out, hitch in his voice audible, louder than he knew. Blues widened, woman ceased pacing, folding arms, concern sweeping through mind.

"Your...words imply that," Vlad's throat convulsed, Vanessa making her way over, kneeling beside him, "you wish to...see me, again."

"See? No." Woman snorted softly. "Feel? Fuck? Yes. Blindfold me, and call me cynical? Or Justina, if you want. I will allow single slip up."

"How," Vlad smirked, woman offering hand, man taking it, placing it over his heart, "magnanimous."

"Its beyond fucking magnanimous really. I forgive you. I haven't experienced the loss of a loved one. I cannot understand your grief, the stages it has. I will not put length of time on those."

"But, you did..."

Vanessa sighed, eyes glistening.

Vlad began phasing out the room, ambient noise, Vanessa, as mind toiled, two entities did battle, wounds inflicted for him to know, and her to, hopefully never find out...

Think of their differences now...

Vlad cursed, this voice was truth, spinning its tale childishly, pouting, vehement.

Vanessa argues.

Justina does...did not.

Tears fell freely, cascading, shiny slopes he yearned to wipe away, rid himself of the traces of agony.

Justina was pure, pristine.

That was anger, the demon inside, yearning, in equal measure to be set free, to sink teeth into woman, nails into her throat.

Vanessa? Taste her blood and see. Filthy, impure.

Vlad raised brow, first voice correct in its views, second incorrect in its assertions, its findings.

He did not recall her tasting rotten...

More to the contrary, sugar corroding teeth, causing tingles on his tongue.

The second voice wished Vanessa would slip, injure herself, give him excuse to drink his fill...

Or, at least have a few, less than cautious licks, lap up her vital fluid like cream, all while Vanessa glared daggers at him, wishing to ram one into his chest, and another where the sun didn't shine...

The sun did not shine for the vampire. Its embrace was reserved for those worthy, deemed worthy of being alive.

Vanessa. Vlad needed her to be his sun, his compass, his destination, give his life meaning. Something other than cutting, supping, tricking and fucking.

Those four things were constant, single assurance he had.

He wished for Vanessa to be that single, the first assertion.

He could not say whether or not she wanted the same...

"Want something to eat?"

Vanessa squeezed Vlad's hand, pulling him from daze.

"This?"

She had walked to the fridge, opened the door and gestured to blood bag. Man smiled, despite himself.

"Thirty seconds? You don't have to speak. I've just shouted at you, after all. God...nod or shake your head?"

Vlad's smile grew, pearly whites slightly sharper than woman recalled. He nodded.

"You're hungry, hangry, as am I."

Vanessa put blood pack into the microwave.

"Should I poke a hole in it? Will it explode if I don't?"

She shuddered at the thought of having to clean up someone else's blood.

Her own, she could deal with.

Someone else's, splattered all over where she prepared food?

Woman fought off the thoughts, observing man.

He'd now sat up, one leg under him. He nodded a second time.

Poking hole in the top of the bag with fork prong, Vanessa pressed a few buttons, thirty seconds appearing on the screen, light behind door, plate inside appliance revolving.

"I woke up on the wrong side of the bed....," woman mused, "no, really. I sleep on the right side..."

Man huffed, woman registering that was silent laughter.

"I misheard you earlier, didn't I? I thought you were mocking me."

"I couldn't ever manage that. Vanessa. I owe you a thousand apologies, yet I know they are not enough."

"I owe you even more..."

Closing eyes, the microwave pinged.

"Need a mug?"

Vampire nodded.

"A tissue? I sure as fuck do."

Vlad stood, making his way towards sink, the cupboards above it containing mugs.

"I should clean myself up, sort myself out. I don't want you to go on bad terms. I'm so sorry for saying that."

"You wouldn't have said it, if you did not mean it. I shall finish this, change and take my leave. I shall not, however leave on negative terms. My mind was doing what yours was. You voiced it, is all..."

"Oh?"

Vanessa smirked, half inside her bathroom.

"Tell me, sometime?"

Leader hummed, drinking his breakfast, satisfied groans with it.

Chapter Twelve

"My mind wished you to slip, hurt yourself. Not gravely, but it wished you to bleed, so I could feed, drain you, leave you spent, utterly."

"If you'd met me when I was younger, that would have happened. Humour a bitch's curiosity?"

Vlad scanned room.

"Where is this 'bitch' you speak of?"

"Oh, she's there, in between the cracks."

"My eyesight isn't proficient enough to see her. What is your question?"

"How badly would it hurt? Squealing bad, or yelping?"

"Wouldn't the first qualify as pleasant, at least, for you?"

"And you..." They shared smirk. "You derive gratification from drinking blood."

"I do. The latter sounds akin to stepping on upturned plug. It would be excruciating."

Vanessa's sky blue eyes softened, woman fidgeting.

"I shouldn't have spoken to you the way I did..."

"You spoke the truth, Vanessa. The truth isn't always palatable. I will leave, I must think things over I'd long assumed I had gotten out of my system."

"..."

"Do I dislike you?"

Vanessa nodded, suddenly shy.

"Never. Unimaginable."

"I need to say something that I may well change that opinion."

"Go ahead. You do not need my permission to speak."

"I do not seek it..." Vanessa winked. "I believe this morning happened because I look like Justina. You know I am not her, but physically, I am. I look just like her. It's understandable that your sleepy self would get confused. I reacted badly. This is, mostly on me."

"Correct. You know me far better than you realise, Vanessa. My heart will always be with my wife, viewing her image next to me caused me to regress."

Vanessa watched man finish his meal, swallowing last dregs of blood.

"That is, rather compassionate, kindhearted. Are you sure I'm dealing with a maniacal force of nature?"

Vlad smiled.

"I was, at some point a force of nature. I swept through villagers, countries, decimating populace, tearing down buildings, desecrating holy sanctums. Now, I am man, a man who's days are many, and every one of those has been harrowing. That changed, when I laid eyes upon you. You, Vanessa. Yes, it was your visage that drew me in, at first, but it is your mind, quick-wit, sordid, your heart is made of pure gold, you remain glimmering, glorious, when ninety-nine percent of the population, myself included are heavily tarnished."

Vanessa looked between her legs.

"I don't know...you may have ruined me for anyone else."

"I wasn't planning on sharing..."

Vampire growled, standing, placing mug in the sink, washing it several times, precious liquid swirling around plughole.

"I am a one man woman, Vlad."

"Good..."

Man walked around where she sat, hand extended.

"I ought to leave. Whilst sunlight won't set me aflame, it can pull at my head, causing migraines. Whilst the sky is cloudy, I shall be fine."

"Thanks for being understanding, being the adult here. I'm being a child."

"Fractious? Yes, a tad. But I understand why. I created cause for alarm. You could have thrown me out. Your behaviour is that of an adult. I have been less than accommodating."

"Take care, Vlad."

Vanessa shook his hand.

"Let me know when you want to come back," she gestured to the fridge, "for your dinner."

Man nodded, heading to bedroom, woman seeking second chance.

Chance she was made painfully aware she did not deserve...

The remainder of Vanessa's day was miserable, mind working up whirlwind, consisting of stress and trouble, stomach tumbling around, appetite disappearing.

Head on top of her hands, woman hoped man would come back.

Not for anything intimate, merely for company. If Vlad sat in the room, silence perfectly acceptable, Vanessa would feel a bit better.

Vampire had said he did not dislike her.

Human still felt guilty, all the same.

"Good evening."

Vanessa wanted to grin, hiding it in the darkness around them.

"Good evening, Vanessa."

"Back for your dinner?"

Vlad nodded, woman letting him inside home.

"Okay. Same as before, right?"

Man nodded second time, silently asking woman if he could sit.

Vanessa gulped, man's manners making her feel like shit, all over again.

...

...

"I'm really sorry..."

Vanessa whispered, hands on counter, head low, anxiously waiting for the microwave to ping.

"As am I. I've felt terrible all day. I have much thinking to do, processing. This is, entirely on myself. Please, do not feel upset."

"That obvious?"

Woman sniffled, posture telling man all he needed to know. The dryer finished its cycle, woman using that to occupy her, refusing to look at Vlad.

Pinging took her from dourness, woman grabbing mug.

"Here." She handed vampire his meal. I'll get to ironing your clothes for you."

Grabbing ironing board, Vanessa got to work, falling silent, sadness covering her like shroud.

Vlad remained quiet, swallowing blood, knowing that he could leave, and woman wouldn't notice. That made man terribly sad.

"Here."

Woman folded Vlad's clothing, looking around the room.

"I'll see if I can find a bag, preventing creasing, undoing all that work."

After a few minutes, sniffing found vampire's ears.

"I'm sorry, but I can't do this. Could you go, when you're finished, please?"

Vlad nodded, viewing his wife again, forcing that out of his mind growing increasingly difficult, as he knew that look, intimately.

He'd made Justina upset many times, though she rarely shed tears.

When she did? Man knew he had fucked up, badly, extent of which meant woman would not speak to him for days, weeks, sleeping as close to the edge of the bed she could, feasibly get, without falling out.

Then, Vlad would leave her alone. She would find him, if she wanted to speak. Until then, he would wait, resist tempestuous urge to ride out into the Carpathia's, murder something, the first thing he came across, whether that be deer, wolf, rabbit? It did not matter.

Vampire wondered if Vanessa would react similarly, thus knew to take his leave, go on with his life.

It would not be without regret.

Chapter Thirteen

"Evening, Vlad. Its," woman smiled, "good to see you."

It had been a year to the day they met, yet Vanessa never failed to stun Vlad for a few seconds, man working jaw, to keep it from lowering, effervescence captivating, emboldening his courage.

"Good evening, Vanessa, and I cannot express how pleased I am that you agreed to meet me. May I?"

Woman paused, looking at man. Opening her coat, he gestured to her dress. She nodded.

"You look simply impeccable."

Vanessa twirled, aware dress was snug, in all the right places. Carrying heavy boxes filled with cakes gave her toned arms, daily runs shaped legs and arse, she was happy with how she looked, attention ignored.

She only entertained one man, batting off any unwanted advances, as kindly as possible, but woman decided she was no longer taking any nonsense.

If anyone treated her like rubbish, she would do the same, drop them into a bin and walk away, giving zero flying fucks as to whether they were upset or not...

Buttoning up coat, Vanessa shivered.

"I admit, your invitation was very well received. I confess I am, rather useless when it comes to asking someone out. I usually just ask, a little too forward. It frightens men away."

Man smirked.

"It frightens boys away. They claim they want a forward thinking woman, then shrink when they find one. Commiserable, quite frankly."

"Positively pitiful form. I do not think you would appreciate me flat out asking, 'want to go out sometime?' That is far from eloquent."

"I would like you to be yourself, Vanessa."

Man offered hand, keeping respectable distance. Woman closed that, taking it, cuddling into his shoulder.

"Is this okay?"

Vlad nodded, pair winding their way through crowds, Christmas market surprisingly less busy than it should be.

Vanessa stopped beside homemade soap stall, lavender filling nostrils.

"I love things like this. I mean, it wouldn't last long with me, but at least you know what is in it. I will pick some up."

Woman picked up two bars of lavender soap, and one rosemary. She handed some money to the vendor, who nodded and thanked her.

"I take it you have used all the strangely named products in your bath?"

"No." Sky blue eyes hazed. "I haven't bathed since I last saw you..."

"Then," Vlad inhaled, peaches hitting nostrils, then something tooth-decayingly sweet, "why do you smell edible?"

"I shower. Cannibal..."

Vanessa grinned, placing lips near Vlad's cheek. He moved his head, kissing her deeply, feeling her fall against him.

"In public? That would be crass. In private?"

He whispered the rest, Vanessa cursing his fucking existence, and the fact he made her vagina clench just by talking made her want to paint the air several shades of blue...

"I would like to get you something. Is there anything that you would like? Don't say me."

Vlad squinted.

"I was not aware I am predictable."

"Was, past tense. That means you can learn from it."

"Would it surprise you if I said that there is a bat in family crest?"

"No. I guess Bram had to get that from somewhere..."

Vanessa teased.

"Jewellery?"

"I wear silver."

"I could stretch to that. Please? A ring, maybe? I see you wear a few."

Vlad nodded, smiling, one on right hand's middle finger.

"My Father's."

Four crowns adorned shield, silver tarnished, but its design was distinguishable.

"I could have one made like that, but with a bat design."

"That would be expensive."

"And you are more than worthy of it. You are no ordinary man."

"And, if I were?"

Vanessa winked.

"Then it wouldn't be real..."

Placing bag of goodies onto couch, Vanessa slipped off boots, jacket swung over coat rack, instead of hooked onto it.

"I had a wonderful night. Would you like something to drink? I'm thinking cocoa."

"I would much rather hold you, know that you are there, that I am not in dream-like, euphoric state."

Woman was taken back.

"That sounded like I mean much to you. Come here."

Vanessa beckoned, opening arms, Vlad stepping inside, woman's arms circle, cocoon from troubles.

Perfect cuddling position achieved, Vanessa felt warm breath on her neck, secretly enjoying every moment.

"You have a knack of keeping me awake at night, visiting my dreams when I fall asleep."

"What do you see?"

"Pottering around the kitchen, the market, bedroom, unabashedly naked, letting concerns go, light bathing your form, angelic glow I do not deserve to observe. Yet, you let me, and I watch, without intent, without roving eyes, twitching fingers."

He shifted, looking at woman.

"I also see you, letting me feed."

"What do you use? I don't mind the idea."

"A scalpel, and antiseptic wipes."

"You get asked *that* often?"

"I asked a doctor. Vanessa," man huffed through nose, "I am not sleeping with anyone else. Sex is not casual for me, it hasn't been in decades."

"Its okay," woman reassured, "I trust you wholly, completely."

"Sure?"

Vanessa nodded, sitting up, so Vlad could get up, retrieve necessary items from his bag.

Vlad washed hands before peeling backing off scalpel packet, returning to woman. He tilted her head, slicing above her collarbone, fluid pooling, sitting on skin for second, warmth immediately whisked away, cool tongue, contrast bewildering, situation just as much, but Vanessa heart began to beat faster, pupils blown, form quivering.

Single drop of blood ran down her chest, almost staining dress. That being swiftly removed, woman was no longer unsure where to put her hands. She placed them on Vlad's face, taking one of his and placing it on the zip at her side. Fabric being freed from her form, woman eyed military jacket, far too luxurious for her to merely yank off.

"Lose the jacket, or you'll be losing the buttons, its too nice to ruin, and I don't know how to fucking sew."

Knife-edge blues closed. Dropping head, Vlad smirked, growling under breath, removing jacket.

Vanessa became one with wall, glued to it, stuck fast.

"Yes."

Hands either side of her head, man's eyes opened, questioning woman. She nodded.

"Let me apologise? Sit, let me take the lead?"

Vlad agreed, sitting on comfy recliner, Vanessa's hands finding the zip on his pants.

Reclining, pearly blues stared into his, woman wanting to witness every twitch, every reaction.

Man chose look right back at her, rivalling intensity.

Gauging what he needed went very appreciated, words crass, unnecessary.

Taking what he needed, Vlad returned that in kind, deciding to stay with woman, as long as she could stand him.

Vanessa gave Vlad purpose, loneliness that plagued him for decades vanquished, woman shattering man's feeling of being obsolete.

He wasn't, never had been, but felt 'messaging around' was something younger people did.

This did not count as messaging around.

This meant something, Vanessa did.

It did not matter whether or not it was 'love.'

What mattered was their contentment.

And, contented, they were...

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