

## ~ Day 130 ~

With the deadened sound of silence permeating the banquet hall, everybody's attention was directed toward Lord Nosferas calmly scanning the crowd with a pleasant smile on his handsome and regal face.

As his gaze trailed along the many faces he eventually came to mine, almost seeming as if he stopped for a moment to lock eyes with me. For that instant, that roiling mix of emotions deep within the pit of my stomach churned once again, even stronger than before.

However, our gazes broke as he finished the sweep of his survey, his smile becoming even broader as he addressed all the guests gathered.

"First, I must say; welcome all, it warms my soul to see so many faces merrily socializing who would've otherwise been enemies in the wilderness of the great world that we find ourselves in." He spoke, his voice smooth as silk; regal in bearing but amiable in nature.

"I'm terribly sorry that I, as host, have been held up till now. But since my wondrous and generous guests have all arrived, I must thank you all from the depths of my gratitude for coming here to celebrate the exquisite show that we all shared just a few days past."

The way he spoke entranced the crowd, even without the use of any obvious underhanded method. It was simply the weight of his words carried with sincerity and power. A born leader.

"Contestant, your prizes have all been prepared; you need only tell one of the many stewards whether or not you'll be bringing said prize home with you today or simply you wish them to be delivered elsewhere. Your wish is their command." He smiled, raising his hand which in was held a filled wine glass.

"Now, a toast!" He exclaimed. "To the glorious winners, the contestants who fought valiantly, and lastly, but in no way least, all the patrons who worked to make this event possible."

In one collectible motion, each of the many monsters, in response, raised their glass and voiced their own appreciation with a mix of agreements and hearty laughter.

Surprisingly, even I found myself raising my glass along with everyone else, without really having even given it conscious thought. I couldn't deny it, the charm and posture of this man simply radiated leadership and authority, something that I would readily admit with way beyond what I could possibly achieve with just words.

"Good, let the festivities continue!" He laughed with the crowd. "Feel free to help yourself to the merriment and entertainment held in your honor."

\*\*\*

Taking a sip of my glass as I eyed the back of Lord Nosferas's figure from across the banquet hall, I was barely listening to the merchant excitedly offering me a flood of proposals and spouting nonsense about just why a partnership with his merchant's guild would bring me an overwhelming fortune.

Honestly, the only reason why I even still stood there was because I had run out of pleasant individuals to talk to, now that the banquet was coming to an end. I was honestly only waiting for when Eryanne called it a day so that we could take the carriage back to her domain, however, she still very much chatted about with the remaining guests, her daughter standing by her side, barely animated as ever.

Although I hadn't asked when we would finally leave this party since I would most likely come off as somewhat rude and impatient, I was still nonetheless reaching the end of my patience as I was never really one for these kinds of lavish celebration, not to mention how bored I was getting from listening to these bottom feeders having stayed to sweet talk me into some kind of deal or arrangement.

As such, I simply walked off, leaving the plump grendor to sputter off on his own. I was beelining for Eryanne, however, before I even got halfway, a figure suddenly appeared in my path.

Almost recoiling on the spot, I clamped down on my emotions as I stood face to face with Lord Nosferas himself.

"Greetings Xavier, I've been meaning to meet with you for quite a while." He smiled, clearly having seen the momentary mix of emotions flash on my face but seemingly deciding to ignore it.

He reached out his hand, going for what surprisingly enough was a handshake.

Eyeing the hand for a one tense moment, I hesitantly took it, feeling my skin crawl as I touched his hand. I knew there was nothing actually disgusting about him, but my whole being wanted to instinctually recoil from this individual for some inexplicable reason.

"Lord Nosferas," I nodded in acknowledgment. "I'd want to say I've heard a lot about you, but that would be lying. You seem to be quite a secretive person."

Seeing my troubled expression as my hand met his, he chuckled, clearly having expected it.

"And so do you." He replied simply.

He released my hand, letting his own rest behind his back in a comfortable manner.

"It would seem that the celebration is coming to end, would you like to accompany me to a place where we could talk a bit more... discreetly." He paused. "I can imagine you have many questions for me since I too have a few for you."

I stopped to scrutinize his face, looking for any deceit or malintent but finding none.

My hesitation was clear, not really wanting to go anywhere with this powerful being who could undoubtedly squash me like a bug if he truly wanted it.

"I understand your apprehension, but I truly wish you no ill," He tried. "I don't have anything to say to really dissuade your suspicions other than the fact if I ever wanted to harm you or your people, you would stand in no position to resist whether it be here, on the streets, or even out of Ebongrave entirely."

With that, I simply let out a resigned sigh. I of course knew this. I knew of it ever since finding out about the Order and Executrix Lana. There were hundreds of mage assassins scattered out across the city alone, and I couldn't imagine how many more powerful individuals lay in wait to do this powerful man's ever bidding and call at a moment's notice.

However, with that in mind, I still trusted Lady Eryanne regardless. While I was no expert in reading people, I was confident in my judgment when it came to the character I've gotten to know.

"Where do you suggest we go then?" I asked.

"How about my office. There we can talk freely without needing to look over our shoulders or care about this tedious decorum." He said, gesturing with a hand towards the archway leading into a corridor.

Glancing towards Mia who was looking warily at both me having seen our brief conversation and Bob who was laying passed out in one of the chairs that had been fetched to him as he gorged himself on the food of the banquet, I simply nodded to her with a slight 'don't worry, it's okay' mental nudge through our connection.

"Lead the way," I said.

\*\*\*

Standing in a nicely furnished office that neither seemed grandiose nor sparse as every nook and cranny had something curious occupying the space. From inviting furniture to bookshelves filled with books of all kinds, this was a bonafide office of every caliber.

Even I was slightly taken aback, wanting to study many of the books that must hold endless knowledge about this world.

"Want something to drink?" The city lord asked me, pulling me out of my reverie.

"Uh, ahem - sure." I coughed awkwardly, hiding my awe-filled expression.

As he turned to what looked like a bar counter placed against the wall of the office, I found myself once again staring warily at his back, feeling those roiling emotions creep their way back up onto my face before I managed to clamp down on them.

"That revulsion you're feeling towards me... you do realize why you are; right?" Nosferas suddenly asked, his back still facing me as he fiddled with the bar.

A long tense moment passed.

"You're a vampire, are you not?" I finally asked, steeling my nerves.

I would be an idiot if I hadn't put the pieces together yet, although I still had my doubts about it really being true.

"Indeed I am..." He sighed, a surprising note of deep melancholy in his voice that managed to take me aback.

Another long silent moment passed.

"I assume that you're not fully aware of exactly why you react to me as you do," He stated rather than asked, finally turning around to reveal two glasses filled with wine. "It would seem to me that you don't know about the history of our races."

I simply shook my head as I took the offered glass, surprised when I realized it was in fact not wine, but rather blood. And some blood that radiated a delicious aroma.

"I... do not." I hesitated.

"You feel hatred, disgust... wrongness towards me," He said, smelling the blood of his glass as he swished it around. "But it's not surprising seeing as my whole existence is a perversion of your race; your lineage."

I paused at that, curiously scanning Nosferas's expressions.

"I only know that the Strigoi are supposed to be mortal enemies with Vampires, but why is that?" I asked, not denying his assumptions.

"One is not born a vampire... I was made into this abomination that you see before you..." Nosferas said, gesturing to his body with such animosity on his face that I was taken aback once again. "Vampires are the result of blasted necromancers trying to replicate the ancient racial lineage, The Shaar."

He paused.

"*Your* lineage."

Sitting down on a nearby chair, I found myself frowning.

"Undeath, is by nature, against everything that The Shaar is," Nosferas explained. "They're the epitome of life and death, but undeath is the embodiment of stagnation."

"So... that's why undead make bubble up with rage and disgust whenever I lay eyes on them...?" I muttered, realizing that my suspicions had been right all along.

However, my thoughts suddenly stopped in their tracks.

"Wait... if I can't stand undead, why is it Bob doesn't give off any such feeling toward me? Honestly, I feel even more connected to his race than other normal living beings..." I asked, meeting Nosferas's gaze.

"Bob...? Oh, that big follower of yours," He asked.

Nodding in affirmation to his question, Lord Nosferas walked over leaned himself against the counter of his desk.

"That's simple," He smiled, finally shedding some of his previous melancholy. "Bob isn't undead."

Frowning, I started piecing together where this was going but asked anyway.

"Aren't Draugr a race of undead?"

"No," He chuckled. "In fact, they're more alive than most beings if you looked at in another perspective."

"Draugr are beings harnessing the essence of both life and death, embracing both aspects of the cycle. Whereas undead are beings that shy away life, and most of all, death; abandoning both concepts in the pursuit of immortality and perverted power. That is undeath." He frowned, clearly holding back a great amount of deeply rooted hatred.

Nodding along with his explanation, I agreed with it. By any regard, Bob did not, in any way shape, or form, act like how I expected an undead to act. I mean, he could still eat, all his bodily needs and functions were still there, and honestly, nothing besides the name really suggested that he would be something like an undead.

"But... if you hate what you've become... hate I mean undead," I hesitated. "Then why is it that you allow necromancers in your city. I mean, I've seen a few, and not to mention that there is that noble house... uh - Mortanis was it?" I asked.

At the mention of the necromancer nobles, Nosferas's face finally cracked to reveal unabashed fury, cracking his wine glass as he failed to restrain his anger.

Instantly being pulled back by the glass shattering, it was his turn to cough awkwardly.

"I apologize, but no, I wouldn't allow them in the city, let alone their existence, if it was up to me." He sighed, pulling out a handkerchief from his suit to clean his stained hand. "Although I am the city lord, I am not the lone ruler of this city. There are those above me, this city and the two adjacent ones, Tar'kath and Eldriac also falling under their rule."

"While I won't be humble and say that I'm any weakling, there are those much... much more powerful than me..."