

**THE SKELETAL THRONE I:**

**THE MOROI HUNTERS**

A

*Legends, Myths, and Prophecies™*

Novel

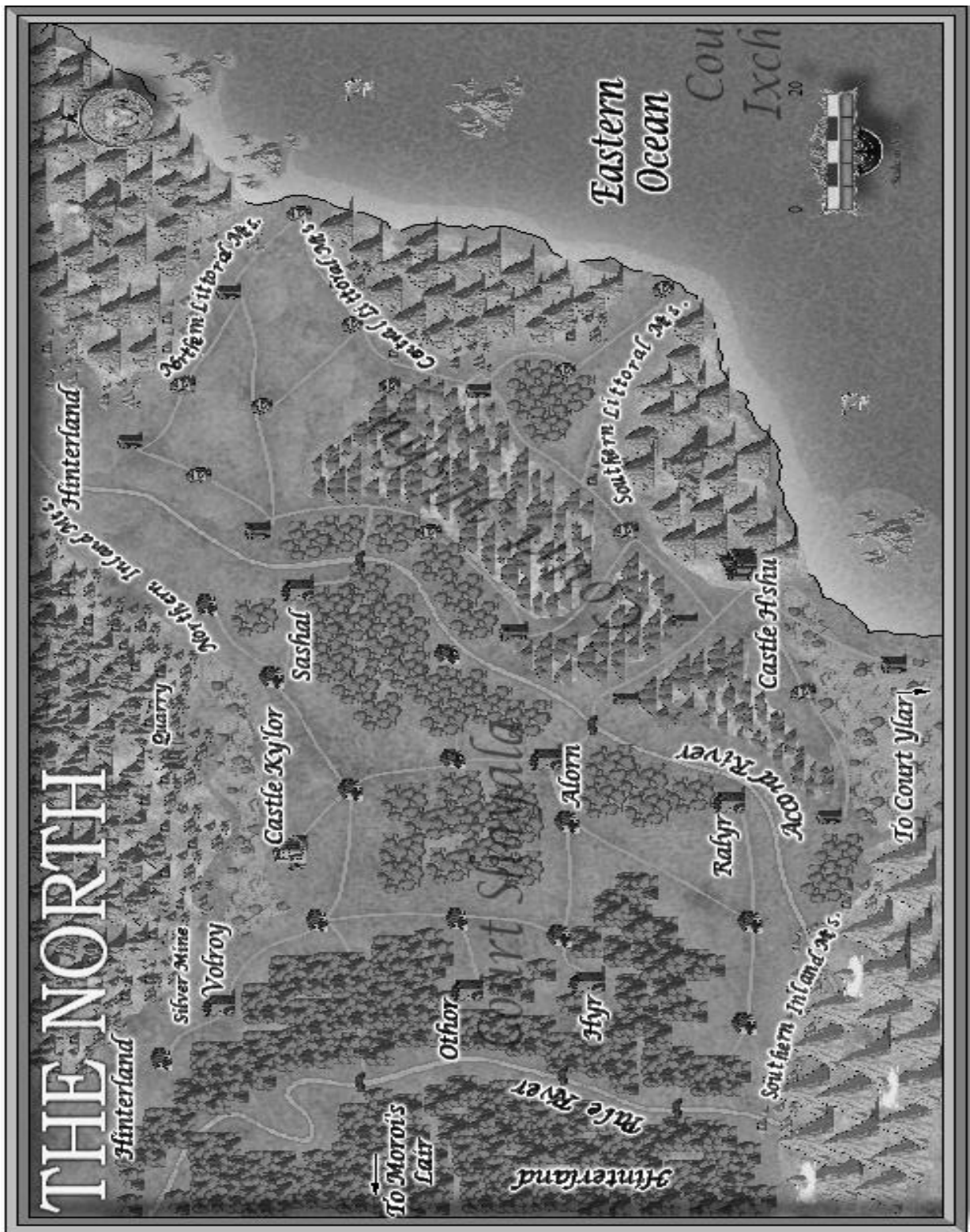
By

A.R.R. Ash

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# MAP: THE NORTH



Note: Safe houses and waystations not shown.

**PART I**

**Day 1: Night**

**T**hey ran.

Although they gasped for breath, although their legs ached and numbed, although sweat streamed into their eyes and stung the maze of open scratches on their bodies, although blood and pus excreted from the blisters upon their feet, they ran.

Every twilit shadow concealed the possibility of death. Every sound suggested a probable threat. Every silence was the prelude to attack. They ran.

So intent upon their flight were the two humans, they took no notice that the singing of day birds ceased and the serenade of nocturnal songbirds had begun. Even when the grasping spines and probing thorns of brambles tugged at their grimy, threadbare rags and opened afresh wounds upon their bodies, they did not slow.

How long had they run? How far had they run? How far had they to go? They knew only that rumors spoke of others of their kind, free beyond the forest. Among those free humans, they would finally know solace.

The verdant canopy grew thicker, obstructing what light remained from the crescent moon. The deepening gloom only compelled them faster, despite their exhaustion, for the hunters came in the night.

A rock underfoot turned his ankle; with a grunt of pain, he fell upon the forest floor. She stopped, uncertain whether to help or continue her flight. He clutched his already swelling ankle. Although she could not clearly see his eyes, his countenance was a mask of pain and his breath was ragged as he silently raised a pleading hand toward her. As if that hand swept away all indecision, without a word, she ran.

His terrified, truncated shriek only momentarily distracted her from her own plight before spurring her onward. She fought the urge to succumb, to end the fear and allow her body a moment's rest before it was torn apart. Yet she ran, her chest heaving as her heart struggled to keep pace.

A stone struck behind her ear, sending her to a heap upon the ground. She was quickly set upon by several pairs of hands. Her vision was blurry and her mind hazy from the blow. These were not the hunters, for she still lived. Through the darkness and her clouded vision, she discerned others standing nearby, observing.

The hands probed her and turned her over upon her stomach. She heard harsh, uncaring, but fearful voices:

“She’s marked.”

“They’ve tracked her here.”

“Leave her.”

“She’s already dead.”

“Remove the mark and let us be gone.”

“You heard the scream; they are upon us.”

“No time.”

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A weight descended upon her back as someone straddled her. A male voice commanded, “Be still,” before he spread her arms and pinned them beneath his knees, roughly shoved a cloth into her mouth, and held her head immobile. She screamed into the cloth as the edge of a blade bit into her left shoulder, just below a pattern of raised scars. The pain shot to the tips of her fingers and toes; her muscles clenched in response; she screamed and writhed but could not free herself. Only under the un pitying mastery of the hunters had she known such agony.

Abruptly, another male slid a blade into the base of the young woman’s neck, instantly silencing her screams; her body jerked once, then fell still.

“She is gone, and so must we.” The second male retracted the dagger.

“Too late!” came a frantic cry from the side.

The hunters descended upon the group, and the sound of terror replaced the music of songbirds.

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Queen Shayala stared over the parapet atop Castle Ky’lor’s western tower. She was a tall, dark-skinned strigoi, whose commanding presence and hard, yet sinuous, form and features spoke to both sensuality and ferocity. Her oval eyes were pupilless black orbs that seemed to blaze with ebon fire, and her deep purple hair fell free to her mid-back. She wore nothing save a large, gold-and-amethyst necklace, a dozen golden bracelets upon each arm, and several golden circlets around each ankle.

Although a clement breeze stirred her hair, she could not feel its balm upon her skin. With few exceptions—most notably, silver, sunlight, and the touch of other *ruža vladajna*—she, like all her kind, did not experience external sensations, whether the frigid embrace of falling snow or the baking heat of the deep desert.

She was strigoi, the urbane among the *ruža vladajna*—superior in sophistication and reason over the bestial moroi and the feral nosferatu. And master over the human chattel.

She surveyed *her* Court—Court Shayala. Although her vision was inhumanly acute, even her position atop the soaring tower, under the light of the moon and its countless scintillating companions, could not reveal the vastness of her Court. All animal calls were faint, near the fringes of the grassy plain surrounding the castle, for no beast, whether upon wing or paw or hoof, would near such a congregation of strigoi.

Northward, beyond the gray-green shrubland and foothills, were the Northern Inland Mountains that marked the northmost border of the Court. Here, where once sat the Courts of Lynar and Nassum, was the richest silver mine yet discovered in the North as well as a productive quarry of granite. To the east ran the Accord River, marking the border with Court H’shu. Through the centuries of rule under King H’shu and Shayala’s predecessor, King Thyse, the two Courts had known overt peace but incessant scheming—a state that existed into the present.

The Southern Inland Mountains marked the southmost border of her Court. Distributed periodically along the stone-paved roads crisscrossing the realm were safe houses and waystations for those strigoi who found themselves exposed when the sky began to lighten. To the west, the heavily forested extent of the Court was demarcated by the Pale River, beyond which was hinterland: home to tribes of feral humans.

Turning from the view, Shayala imagined the plight of the two humans released into those thick, western forests and tracked through magical runes branded upon them in hope they would

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lead her hunters to more of the humans. The air had grown chill and the wind shifted, though she took no notice other than the stirring of her hair.

Shayala was not given to introspection; she preferred action but, considering her coming trials, could excuse herself some self-reflection. Some within her Court were poised to move against her, but they looked only to their own stations; her vision encompassed so much more. She now approached the crux of her reign; decades of planning would come to fruition, and she would emerge stronger—if she survived.

One did not attain the throne, and one certainly did not keep it, through timidity. Power was for those willing to do what was necessary to claim it and maintain it. This was her opportunity to prove herself the worthy successor of King Thyse. She would be forced to commit atrocities, and she would be hated—even more so than she had already earned—by those of power and title and wealth. Yet, few would realize the necessity of her course. She did not want for strength of arms or will or strategy—those were her assets. No, her crucible, her greatest challenge, would be to suppress her nature and sublimate her disdain for the feral humans into something else. Although she would gladly take up arms and face a host of enemies, the need for temperance and tolerance could undo her.

Steeling herself for her upcoming ordeal, Shayala shunted all doubt to the little-used and rarely visited cellar of her mind. As she descended the stairs into the tower, her only thought was on the inevitability of her victory.

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Three strigoi, unclad and exhibiting varying levels of vexation, sat at an oaken table in a windowless stone room within Castle Volroy, the seat of the County of Volroy, within Court Shayala. Two brazen bowls, each holding a small heap of gleeds, were set upon the table and provided ample light for their sensitive eyes. Adorning the walls were fading, fraying tapestries of exquisite detail depicting epic battles between armies of strigoi. One depicted the aftermath of a battle: a line of staked strigoi who, extending from a rising sun, were in various stages of combustion. The one nearest the sun was but a pile of ash, the next engulfed in a pillar of fire, the next outlined in flame.

To the right of each attendee, through an aperture in the table, emerged the head and neck of a living human, whose tongue had been neatly sliced out. Facing the center of the table, the humans were held in place by wooden clamps beneath. Their heavy breaths came in quick, frightened gasps. The shivering from their tatter-covered bodies sent creaking vibrations through the wood.

A male strigoi entered and settled his tall, thin frame into a seat at the head of the table. Despite his tardiness, the arrival's thoughtful countenance was unruffled, and his pupilless, liquid blue eyes quickly scanned those present. He greeted the others by decreasing rank. "Countess Sashal. Count Volroy. Baron Hyr."

Only Sashal acknowledged his greeting, and that with only a nod.

"At last you arrive, Corvyne," Count Volroy huffed, his gray eyes menacing. Although his cheeks could not ruddy, his normally impatient visage was contorted into a study of irritability.

"My apologies, Your Lordship," Corvyne responded with mock deference.

"Is our time less valuable than yours, *castellan*?" With an edge to his voice, Volroy persisted, "We are, of course, all subject to the whim of the royal lackey."

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“My duties at the castle fully occupy my time,” Corvyne responded in his most diplomatic tone, “and I could not leave without some pretense to explain my absence. But I am here, now, Count Volroy. What of the others? Earl Othor, Earless Ralyr, Baroness Alorn?”

Volroy drummed his fingers, each adorned with a jeweled ring, upon the table. “We could not have too many of title unavailable at once, as it would draw suspicion. The countess and I shall ensure they are apprised of all they need to know.”

Corvyne nodded. “A wise precaution.”

Volroy was not certain whether he detected sarcasm within Corvyne’s agreement. Before he could further reproach the castellan, Corvyne said, “With your permission, Your Lordship, we can commence our business.”

Corvyne interpreted Volroy’s ensuing grunt as assent. “As Count Volroy rightly points out, time is of the utmost import. However, the strike cannot occur within the confines of the castle. Her personal guards as well as the castle guards are ever present. Queen Shayala must be drawn out.”

“Can some simpler means not be found? Perhaps an assassin in her chamber?” Baron Hyr inquired, raising his head from sampling the neck of the human before him. His white eyes shone like beacons among his fiery red hair and bloodied chin.

In the momentary silence after the question, the human’s pained sniffing filled the chamber like a soothing melody to the strigoi.

“Your Lordship,” Corvyne began, some exasperation creeping into his voice, “no assassin will ever reach her. No, on some pretense we will induce Her Majesty to tour her Court. The assassins will strike upon the road, posing as agents of King H’shu.”

“When will the strike occur?” Hyr asked. “Her popularity has grown with the recent overthrow of Courts Lynar and Nassum. For the good of the Court, we must act before she becomes too powerful and her position secure.”

“The timing cannot be forced, Your Lordship,” Corvyne explained in a reasonable tone. “Doing so guarantees failure. Nevertheless, we will act as soon as it is prudent.”

“This is no hunt of moroi or even feral humans,” Countess Sashal offered. “This prey is far more cunning and surrounded by fanatical soldiers.” The blue-gray eyes of the lithe, lavishly jewelried strigoi appeared as gems below arched brows, and her slate hair was as lustrous as flowing metal.

“Quite true, Your Lordship.” Corvyne nodded his long, thin head in thanks to the countess.

“The elevation of that lowborn is an affront to every noble of the Court,” Volroy said, every word imbued with undisguised loathing. “The commoners admire her base origin, and they esteem her for the strength shown by her foreign conquests. A move of—”

“Yes, Your Lordship,” Sashal interjected. “We are well aware you still harbor animus over your descent when Nassum fell.”

Volroy glared at her for a long moment. Choosing not to be baited, he finished, “If it were known how her inept rule has led to a shortage of potable humans, she would be rightly despised.”

“Yet the extent of the problem cannot be revealed, as that would lead to panic and rebellion,” Countess Sashal replied, absently adjusting a golden vambrace. Etched upon that vambrace was her insigne of a raven perched upon the lower tip of a crescent moon, an arrow in its beak.

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“Can we escape implication?” Baron Hyr asked before again feasting upon his specimen. As Hyr gripped the human’s oily hair, the captive began to pant and shake with such madness that his terror spread to the other humans.

A sharp snapping of vertebrae and the ragged tearing of skin sounded as Hyr’s sudden, vicious swipe sent the human’s head rolling across the table to land upon the stone floor with a cracking thud. Blood spurted from the stump in a scarlet fountain and pooled upon the lacquered wood of the tabletop. The other three humans began to tremble violently, grunting in inarticulate horror.

The violence provoked no objection from the other strigoi, though Sashal offered the wry comment: “Perhaps the humans are fortunate their food need not be alive.”

Count Volroy made a noise, equal parts grunt and scoff, at the suggestion that any aspect of humanity could be preferable to true life. “Quiet!” he yelled at the humans. “Or you all will suffer the same.” The humans ceased grunting and clenched their eyes, though they could not completely still their shaking bodies.

“Ah, yes, well.” Corvyne attempted to bring the discussion back to its previous track. “His Lordship asked if we can ‘escape implication.’ There is always some risk of discovery in conspiracy.” To nettle the baron, he added, “If we are implicated, your only recourse will be to take up residence among the feral humans.”

Hyr waved a hand in sharp dismissal. “I have no intention of abiding among chattel.”

“And who will organize the attack?” Volroy asked.

“His Grace has entrusted that task to me,” Corvyne said, eliciting a harrumph from Baron Hyr.

“Folly!” Volroy exclaimed. “Entrust you with such a delicate operation? Absurd!”

“Corvyne is capable and competent,” Sashal insisted.

“Whether he had been delirious from the effects of the poison or beguiled by that bitch, King Thyse erred in bequeathing the throne to Shayala, and I will not leave the future of the Court in the hands of a bloody *castellan*,” Volroy spat with as much disdain as he could pack into the word.

“The duke has expressed trust in Corvyne,” Sashal said. “A well-deserved trust, in my estimation.”

“I will discuss the matter with the duke.” Volroy looked pointedly at Corvyne. “Until then, make no move.”

Corvyne nodded disarmingly. “As you wish, Your Lordship.” He unconsciously tugged on the platinum medallion suspended from his neck; the piece depicted the device of his office, a vertical scepter before a crossed quill and sword.

“We are adjourned,” Volroy declared.

## Day 1: Light

**T**he cloudless sky shimmered a brilliant blue, as if the world sat within a turquoise shell. The market at the southern base of Castle Ky’lor’s motte teemed with scores of patrons and dozens of vendors. A naked girl, who could have claimed thirteen years to thirty, shuffled mutely through the crowd; her bare and calloused feet stirred the loose dirt and suffered cuts from the



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unpaved ground. Her sunburnt body was mapped by scars, scratches, and punctures—both scabbed and fresh. Although she walked with her head down, her nervous eyes surreptitiously scanned the crowd and darted to anyone who approached too closely. With the same furtive caution, she observed her surroundings.

In the early morning light, the marketplace resembled any other. But upon further inspection, the sounds and smells were all wrong for a human market. No animals sounded their calls. Vendors sold no food or drink. Buyers and sellers barely spoke to one another, even to haggle, and all conversation was subdued. However, the reek of fresh shit and stale sweat and piss was strong and prevalent.

This was a bazaar that catered to the monsters; the only humans present either were for sale or represented their owners as vendors or patrons during the daylight hours. No human foodstuffs would be sold here, as access to such fare was strictly controlled, though a number of troughs filled with dreggy water were available from which the humans could drink.

A well-maintained palisade surrounded the marketplace. Booths lined the enclosure, and stalls and pens haphazardly filled the interior of the plaza, leaving only narrow walkways between the vendors. Rising above the stalls were worn, wooden signs depicting images of the vendors' wares for the illiterate humans.

The human market-goers were thin and naked, or nearly so; they scarcely looked at one another with sunken, empty eyes. Branded behind their left shoulders were single runes of various designs, indicating ownership and allowing for the tracking of the chattel. Uncounted generations of swift, merciless subjugation had bred hopelessness and helplessness into this captive humanity. If ever a vestige of hope or independence emerged, it was crushed to prevent the virus from spreading.

The sound of a couple rutting in the dirt in the small space between two stalls brought her attention more fully into the present. Briefly, her mind flitted to the strictly and mortally enforced prohibition against such coupling, though the event was put out of her mind as she deftly avoided the splash from a man urinating by a tent pole. She hurried past the rank smell of a woman defecating behind a booth and passed, with nary a glance, a man lying with a bloody hole in his belly.

Although she carried no purse, she paused at one stall and half-heartedly fondled a wooden trinket carved into the likeness of a dragon. She ignored a wooden corral in which a score of naked and muddy males and females—bound, huddled, and docile—lay in their own filth. Although her course was circuitous, she inevitably approached the solitary gate at the far end of the market.

A wary, male guard eyed her approach but said nothing until she stood before him. Bearing a wooden cudgel, the guard was better nourished than the other market-goers. He was outfitted in worn but serviceable leggings and a shabby, grimy tunic.

“No.” He cast a lecherous look upon the girl. By her limbs and digits, which showed no signs of improperly healed breaks, and by her hair and skin, which were caked with fewer layers of grime than those of other market-goers, he guessed her to be young and a recent capture from the hinterlands.

“No, what?”

When she spoke, he noticed that malnutrition had not yet bloodied her gums or rotted her teeth. The guard scoffed. “Ye may no’ pass.”

“No?”

“No.”

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She took a step, then another, toward the guard, close enough to brush his growing erection with her belly. As with the two whom she observed earlier, she knew this act could result in her end, but she planned to be long gone before her violation was discovered.

“Ye canno’ pass,” he repeated. “The pleasure ain’t t’be worth the pain.”

Nevertheless, with only a brief hesitation, he took her by the arms and turned her away from him. After shoving her onto her hands and knees, he pulled down his leggings and pushed into her. The guard gave a throaty grunt as he thrust, oblivious to the danger approaching from behind. With barefoot steps, another male neared the guard and struck him in the head with a rock, laying him low. With a triumphant whoop, he similarly struck the girl.

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Queen Shayala sat engrossed, composing a missive in her study, a large room adjoining her private chamber in the upper levels of the keep. Several hundred books—some of which were purportedly penned by humans and even dwarves, elves, and gnomes—lined stone shelves built as extensions from the walls themselves. The enormous stone and wood desk at which she sat occupied the center of the room. Several deep red tapers, scented to resemble the coppery smell of blood, burned in stone depressions inlaid into the desk’s wooden surface.

Shayala replaced her quill, touched a small, crystal sphere, and muttered, “Courier.” After using a small, wooden fan to expedite the drying of the ink, she folded the parchment and affixed it with wax, into which she impressed her insignia, depicting four disembodied fangs—two upper, two lower—superimposed upon a rising full moon.

Shortly thereafter came a rapping at the door of her chamber. Leaving her study and entering the main room, Shayala called, “Come.”

A female strigoi guard opened the door, allowing a timid male—whose jittery goldenrod eyes looked everywhere and at everything except the queen—to enter. He wore around his thin neck a medallion of brass, engraved with a small, rolled scroll that signified him as an official courier of the Court.

Afraid to enter, he stood in the doorway. “Yes, Your-Your Majesty? You summoned?”

“My messengers are dispatched, Lathyr. Have this delivered to Count Volroy.” She handed him the missive.

“Yes, of course, Your Majesty. Anything else?”

“Just see to it.”

“Yes, Your Maj—”

Shayala closed the door.

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As the distance between Lathyr and the queen increased, the courier’s anxiety subsided. He did not consider himself an overly nervous individual, though, for some reason, the queen always intimidated him in a way no other did. Lathyr padded through a corridor lit by braziers set within small alcoves. Preoccupied as he was, he did not notice a pair of liquid blue eyes peering at him from around a corner.

When Castellan Corvyne stepped out before him, Lathyr scurried aside, stuttering, “Ah, apologies, Your Honor.”

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“Ah, Lathyr, just the one I was hoping to find,” Corvyne said with good-natured surprise, though he had been informed when the queen sent for a courier. As castellan, his purview included responsibility for the domestic staff of the castle as well as couriers and heralds.

“Oh, me, Your Honor? May I ask why?”

“I have an urgent errand for you.”

“My-my apologies again, Your Honor, but I am on an urgent task for the queen.” With as much pride as if he had been entrusted to care for the royal heir, Lathyr held the letter for Corvyne to see. “The queen’s messengers are unavailable, so she entrusted its delivery to me.”

“To whom do you deliver it?” Corvyne asked.

“Count Volroy.”

“I will see the count receives it.”

“I, ah, I cannot, Your Honor. I am truly sorry.”

“That is unfortunate, Lathyr, because you are the only one I would trust with this errand.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. Although I have another matter to which I must attend, this is an errand of the utmost import and secrecy, so naturally I thought of you.”

“I’m, uh, flattered, Your Honor, but—”

“Lathyr, you answer to *me*.” Corvyne knew the injection of authority in addition to flattery would prove more persuasive. “If you wish, let us go discuss the lines of authority with Her Majesty.”

Lathyr’s distressed expression was a silent denial of that suggestion. In a more sympathetic tone, Corvyne continued, “I give you my word as castellan, I will see to it Count Volroy receives that letter if you complete this task for me.” Before Lathyr could object, Corvyne lightly gripped his arm. “Come.”

In a casually hurried gait, Corvyne escorted the courier to his offices. To avoid the scurrying administrators, they entered through a private entrance into Corvyne’s personal workplace, which in all aspects other than its greater size appeared no different from any of the other offices. From a locked, plain iron chest, Corvyne retrieved a scroll and a parchment. The scroll was sealed with red wax and bore the insigne of a pupilless eye within a circle. In a conspiratorial whisper, Corvyne said, “A covert agent is undertaking clandestine negotiations on behalf of Her Majesty, and this information from a confidential source must reach her agent.”

“Secret-secret negotiations? With whom?”

Corvyne cast an incredulous look upon the courier. “Even I do not know, but the fate of the Court could depend upon the agent receiving this message.” Corvyne again brandished the scroll and displayed the other document. “Here are the instructions where to deliver the message in the south of the Court.”

Lathyr was silent, his brow bunching in the effort of his deliberations. “I-I have your word?”

“Upon my station.”

Lathyr nodded, satisfied, and the two exchanged missives. “Your Honor.” The courier departed immediately upon his mission.

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Exiting his office, Corvyne locked the door behind him as Lathyr disappeared around a far corner. He forthwith sought Duke Munar. Without the dining hall that adjoined the duke’s private chamber in the eastern tower, Corvyne encountered two members of Munar’s personal

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guard, who stood their post without expression. At Corvyne's request, one guard knocked, and the sound echoed down the empty hallway. Upon receiving acknowledgment from Munar, the guard announced the castellan, who entered with conspiratorial enthusiasm. The thick, plain, oaken door closed behind him.

Munar's long, jet black ponytail hung over a shoulder; his hazel eyes, set deep in a severe, light-complexioned face, glanced at the approaching castellan. The duke's form was robust, and his air was one of imperious confidence. He wore, as a personal affectation, a royal blue cape with gold trim that fastened around his neck with a golden chain. The smell of musk as hung heavy as a mist.

Beneath crystal chandeliers, which transformed the soft, yellow light of candles into a glittering brilliance, three humans lay strapped to a table. With heads hanging over the edge to expose their necks, they dry-sobbed, their red eyes long devoid of tears.

Munar raised a hand to silence Corvyne before he spoke. With a snap of his fingers, the duke summoned a servant, who brought a crisp, pristine, white cloth with which Munar wiped his mouth. Munar tossed the napkin back to the servant, who scurried away through a door at the far end of the hall.

"Your Grace," Corvyne began in a solicitous whisper, "Her Majesty entrusted that buffoon Lathyr with the delivery of this missive to Count Volroy. Though I convinced him I would ensure its delivery." At the duke's annoyed expression, Corvyne explained, "His urgency to see it delivered leads me to believe that its contents are of the keenest interest."

"And why did she entrust its delivery to him, rather than one of her messengers?" Munar asked in a tone laden with suspicion.

"Lathyr remarked they are presently dispatched upon other matters," Corvyne responded. As Munar considered, Corvyne added casually, "Though it is sealed."

"Your simplicity astounds me, castellan," Munar declared. "There are ways to learn its contents. Come."

Leaving his meal unfinished, Munar and Corvyne withdrew to the duke's private chamber, followed stoically by the two guards.

The spacious chamber was sumptuously furnished with intricately carved furniture, decorated in bone, ivory, and precious metals. The walls were adorned with the taxidermied heads of various races—dwarves, elves, gnomes, humans, and even strigoi. Three platinum candelabras lit the room in an ebbed glow that would appear as a half-light to humans but was more than sufficient for the sensitive vision of strigoi.

Munar took a seat at a small teakwood table, the top of which was inlaid with an ivory depiction of a sea creature. Corvyne remained standing to the duke's left. Seizing the missive, Munar held it to the candlelight, examining whether any lettering could be discerned. When that proved futile, he moved the wax nearer the flame. Once the wax softened slightly, he carefully worked the tip of a dagger underneath and lifted the wax.

Munar spread the missive upon the desk, and he and Corvyne perused its contents. The queen's elegant script read:

Count Volroy:

I have become aware of disturbing rumors of insurrection among the titled nobility, though I know I need never question your loyalty. However, the time approaches when the true fidelity of all must be revealed and a reckoning made. Most painful to me, I have

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an abiding suspicion that Countess Sashal, for all her professed faithfulness and comfort, works against me. You must uncover the truth of the matter.

Yet, there is one other task I must ask of you. I have received confidence that a second conspiracy is afoot between Baron Hyr and King H'shu. In the name of your queen, unmask whether others of my Court participate in this foreign connivance.

To allay suspicion against you, I must appear opposed to you at the Noble Conclave. Though all will be set right once this business is behind us. I continue to depend upon your aid and counsel.

~ Queen Shayala

As if he could strike against Volroy's duplicity, Munar stabbed the point of the dagger into the tabletop with a *thwack*. Corvyne reflexively leaned away from the incensed duke.

With effort, Munar regained control of his anger. "Volroy approached me and requested I permit him to devise the ambushade against the queen. The reason for his objection to your involvement is now clear: he wishes to ensure its failure. And this letter comes suspiciously before the gathering of the cabal. If the count serves the queen, then she may already be aware of our intention and our identities." He slumped, hunchbacked, into his chair. "We are lorn."

"Your-Your Grace," Corvyne began. "If the queen *knew*, our headless bodies would already lie discarded on the field. She cannot act upon the word of only the count."

"Perhaps," Munar conceded, though he remained unconvinced. Then, with sudden conviction, he declared, "We must act soon. We cannot wait to lure her from the castle. It must occur at the Noble Conclave."

"Your Grace, that is but a week hence!"

"Nevertheless, it must be. She will not expect us to act so quickly."

"And what of the information regarding Baron Hyr and King H'shu?" Corvyne asked.

"I care nothing for the baron, but we cannot afford additional complications," Munar returned. "In the garboil of the ensuing fray, we shall rid ourselves of all three—the queen, the count, and the baron. You are responsible for Her Majesty's schedule, and none have more knowledge of the castle. You will assume responsibility for this endeavor."

"The council chamber has only two exits, and none but the queen may bring guards within, though her custom is to bring only a token escort," Corvyne supplied. "But what of the castle guard?"

"I will handle the castle guard, but we must be prepared if they interfere. Have the other nobles move their soldiers into place under the guise of their entourage. Captain Syuth will lead the combined force. The queen's guard is formidable but, without the aid of the seneschal, cannot stand against our united force."

"It is possible," Corvyne said, hope finding its way into his voice. "But the risks are great."

"So are the rewards. All must be put in place by then, for too many pieces are in motion to reset the board. We cannot afford further delay."

Munar again allowed the candle's flame to soften the wax, and he gently reattached the blot to the parchment with the flat of the dagger. He returned the letter to Corvyne with a stern eye. "Do ensure that the count receives his message."

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### Day 2: Night

Within the antechamber of his offices, a cluttered suite of administrative activity, Castellan Corvyne stood before four strigoic thralls. Such thralls made ideal messengers, for a newly risen strigoi was physically incapable of disobeying its creator. Within the organizational structure of the Court, such messengers were distinct from couriers, who were not similarly enthralled. Presently, Corvyne instructed the four on the communication they would convey to his fellow conspirators: Countess Sashal, Earless Ralyr, Earl Othor, and Baroness Alorn.

“You will deliver your message to only the designated individual. Whether through action, omission, or spoken or written word, you shall neither reveal the content of your message, nor shall you allow the content of your message to be revealed, other than to the designated individual. Understood?”

“Yes, Your Honor,” all responded.

“The message is: ‘Circumstances have necessitated expedition of our plan. The strike will no longer occur upon the road but during the upcoming Noble Conclave. Your personal participation shall not be required, though your soldiers must be placed under the temporary command of Captain Syuth of Duke Munar’s personal guard. They can gain access to the castle as your assorted courtiers, retainers, and sycophants. Respond with your concurrence.’”

Concludingly, Corvyne added, “You will treat their responses in the same manner as my message to them.”

“Yes, Your Honor.”

“Now go.”

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While Corvyne instructed his messengers, Munar returned to the dining hall to finish his meal. After ordering a guard to fetch him a messenger, he again savored the taste of the specially selected specimens. To fully appreciate their flavoring, they were to be sampled in a particular order. By now, the humans had ceased their weeping and lay compliant.

The messenger was not long in coming and waited silently by the door while Munar continued his repast. Once the duke finished, the messenger hastened to Munar’s side. With words identical to those used by Castellan Corvyne, Munar ordered the messenger to relay a meeting request to Princess H’shu. He and the foreign princess had a long-established protocol for such clandestine rendezvous.

As the messenger withdrew to carry out his instructions, Munar felt contentment of mind and palate—a rare emotion in the intrigue-plagued Court.

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Castle Ky’lor, constructed nearly entirely of wrought, mortared gray granite, sat upon an expansive motte, around which a spiraling path led to a barbican. Beyond this small fortification was a dry, twenty-foot moat replete with outward-facing wooden stakes. From the far bank of the moat rose a fifty-foot curtain wall with a single gatehouse, from which a drawbridge could be lowered. When the drawbridge was down, a steel portcullis, plated in silver, barred passage. Beyond the outer curtain wall and the wide outer bailey was a second wall, enclosing the inner

bailey and the massive three-hundred-foot keep. One round tower stood at each cardinal direction of the keep. The towers and keep, all entirely without fenestration, stood apart but connected through soaring, enclosed bridges at three different levels.

Under the clouded sky, the outer bailey was pressed with unclad bodies, human and strigoi, around a low stage. Hanging by their arms from a wooden framework were the guard and the youngish girl from the market. Nearby was the market's rock-wielding human, whose gaunt face and body were unwashed and smeared with grime. Additionally suspended above the stage were a second woman and a female strigoi whose restraints were silver.

Upon the stage also stood four strigoi. One strigoi controlled a second with a pole-mounted collar, fitted with inward-pointing argent spikes. The third strigoi was shackled about his wrists and ankles. The last was Queen Shayala.

The crowd fell silent when Shayala, gesturing toward the human male and female, began to speak. "These chattel are guilty of a *desire* to escape and of rutting without permission."

Howling and screaming shamelessly, tears smudging their dirt-smeared cheeks, the two humans frantically tugged against their bindings. Without another word, Shayala approached the girl and disemboweled her with a single fingernail, allowing her to flop and scream as her intestines protruded, oozing from her abdomen.

The guard emptied his bowels upon the stage. "T'aint so!" he protested. "I was no' wantin' to escape. 'Twas just a bit o' fun I was havin'." His voice trailed off into his sobs.

Shayala had intended to eviscerate the guard as well. However, upon hearing his pathetic denials, a visceral disgust of the creature arose within her, and she decided upon another punishment. Avoiding the ordure and ignoring its stink—she thought, *humans are such vile creatures, fragile and repugnant*—she grasped the guard's arm, placed her other hand upon his shoulder, and pulled. The bone snapped, then skin tore and tendons ripped as arm and shoulder separated. Pain pushed the guard beyond reason when she did the same to his other arm, causing him to fall to the stage and into his own excrement. The detached appendages remained dangling from the restraints above. The abrupt silence was jarring when unconsciousness claimed him and his screams stopped.

The strigoi of the crowd showed no reaction to the executions, though the humans, like the victims of a bully who had turned his attention to another, cheered and applauded, happy not to have notice focused upon them.

By this time, the girl had stopped screaming and hung still. Shayala gestured toward the remaining human upon the stage. "This male prevented their escape. For a reward, he may choose a week's ration of additional food or any human present now with whom to rut." She turned toward the rock-wielder. "Choose."

The male ran his gaze over the crowd and picked out a young, knobby blonde, whose unwashed hair was ragged and tangled. Without a word, he leapt from the stage, moved purposefully through the crowd toward his chosen female, grabbed her, and forced her against the wall. The female at first resisted, but, looking beyond her assailant, she caught sight of the queen. Although Shayala no longer paid them any heed, if the queen had decreed this was to be his reward, the woman would not risk inviting Shayala's notice and ceased struggling. Most strigoi of the crowd took no interest in the rutting of chattel, though many of the nearby humans turned to enjoy the scene.

Shayala spoke, and the strigoiic onlookers offered their full attention. "Kurl has committed the offense of bestowing true life upon a chattel." She gestured toward the third hanging form,

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whose lavender eyes were wide with terror. “And without the proper allowance. For this, the chattel must be destroyed and Kurl punished.”

Kurl’s prominent eyes were unfocused. He had known his action was a crime and was aware of the prescribed punishment, yet he never imagined he would find himself in this predicament.

Shayala crouched and retrieved a treen dagger laying on the stage. Extending it to the restrained strigoi, she commanded, “Do it.”

The queen’s steely, unforgiving voice jerked Kurl’s thoughts back to the nonce. With an unsteady hand, he took the hilt. Although the thought of plunging the dagger into the queen’s breast did flit through his mind, a glance into her eyes, before quickly lowering his gaze, brought unreasoning fear that she fathomed his thoughts. Kurl knew he would never succeed in such an attack and would sooner plunge the dagger into his own heart than face her wrath.

Still held by the pole-mounted collar and shadowed by the guard, Kurl walked to the form that hung by argent chains. Her waxy wrists smoked and bubbled from the silver, and the smell of burnt flesh wafted across the stage. Her eyes pled with him.

He looked into those eyes and, with only the slightest hesitation, plunged the dagger into her chest. Kurl stepped back and stared at the dagger protruding from her heart. His slack arm dropped to his side as if broken under the weight of the cruelty he was forced to perform—and would still be required to perform. His punishment required he destroy the strigoi he had created, for a stake to the heart did not kill *ruža vlejna* but only incapacitated them; if the stake were removed, they would recover.

Unable to complete his task, hopelessness washed across his face. He turned to Shayala.

Wordlessly, purposefully, Shayala approached the now-still form and placed a hand upon either side of its head. With a few powerful twists, she rent the head from the body. Cheers erupted from the now-boisterous strigoi. The humans dared not applaud the execution. Despite his pain and rage, Kurl found a sense of thankfulness toward the queen for sparing him the cruelest task and completing that which he could not.

Shayala dropped the head, the face frozen in an expression of wide-eyed fear. It struck the wood with a dull *thud* and rolled across the stage until its nose pressed against the wooden planking. To Kurl, Shayala said, “Your punishment shall commence at dawn. Over the next month, each morning you shall be burned by the sun, only to be healed and burned at the following dawn.” With an indifferent wave of her hand, she dismissed the prisoner.

Shayala glanced at the last strigoi, shackled about wrists and ankles, upon the stage. In a commanding voice that held all of the revulsion she felt, Shayala said, “Finally, Navin has violated one of our oldest prohibitions, that against fornicating with chattel.”

Boos and hisses emanated from the strigoi of the crowd, while the humans slunk and cowered, fearful of attracting their enmity.

*Every strigoi knows the danger*, Shayala thought. As strigoi did not reproduce sexually and did not concern themselves with the unfounded, hidebound sexual mores governing humans, they cast no moral judgment upon any sort or variety of sexual activity, with one exception: bestiality. Copulation between a strigoi and a human was a capital offense. *He brought this upon himself*.

Navin whimpered and mewled like a human, only adding to the bloodlust of the crowd. “Please, Your Majesty. No, please, I beg you.”

Shayala beckoned toward an attendant at the base of the stairs leading atop the stage. In response, the attendant mounted the several steps and, with a wicked grin, handed a silver-bladed sickle to the queen. Navin shook all the more violently, causing his restraints to further melt his



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skin and intensify the smell of burnt flesh. He howled. But that howl was nothing more than a purr compared to his frenzied screech as Shayala held him upright by his tousled, maroon hair and cut him open from throat to pelvis. She dropped him, still writhing in pain, face-first upon the stage. “The dawn’s light will complete his punishment.”

When Shayala turned toward the last human hanging above the stage, the woman fainted from fright. Desiring to end the exhibition, she unceremoniously cut the human’s throat with the sickle. Before descending the stairs, Shayala scanned the raucously cheering crowd. She experienced neither joy nor disquiet from the executions. They were necessary. *The humans must be reminded of their place, and the strigoi must never forget the seriousness of granting true life at such a precarious time or the existential danger posed by rutting with a human.*

Shayala alighted from the stage and strode toward the gate in the inner curtain wall. The crowd parted as if a sweeping wind had blown her path clear. Navin’s alternating screams and moans followed.

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Castellan Corvyne and Duke Munar stood on a balcony of the southern tower, viewing the spectacle in the outer bailey. From their vantage, they could clearly hear the cheers of the crowd and the screams of the condemned, though they were spared the stench of the humans’ discharges.

Corvyne observed Queen Shayala, seemingly unprotected upon the stage, absent any guards or defense. He said as much to Munar, adding, “As her power grows, she becomes complacent.”

The comment sparked a contempt born of exasperation within Duke Munar. “Really, have you no sense beyond the extent of your nose? The castle guard patrols the battlements, and do you think her guards are not concealed within that mob, ready to strike against any threat in an instant? No attacker would get close. And even if an archer managed to loose a missile before he was brought down, it would not end her.”

“It was an arrow that brought down King Thyse, if you recall.” Corvyne further intimated, “An arrow that would fell any strigoi, any one of us.”

Munar’s eyes narrowed to slits; he growled, “If you are such a fool, you’ll soon find yourself upon that stage. Or I would be better served to kill you myself than ally with one of your stupidity.” Although Corvyne had left it unsaid, the suggestion of an arrow that was coated with the blood of a dhampyr was plain.

The assassin of the previous, much-loved king had yet to be apprehended, and this absence of justice was still denounced by strigoi at all levels. Even in the matter of political assassination, certain etiquette had to be observed. Although King Thyse was no more, his memory still commanded the loyalty and respect of many within the Court. Any intimation of a conspiracy in his death would undoubtedly result in a civil war, which would likely grow to engulf the entire North. Although Munar was certainly willing to use such a method, he would have to ensure that, even if the attempt were successful, he avoided the merest suggestion of involvement. In any case, he did not believe such a drastic course was necessary, as this parvenue queen did not rise to the eminence or cunning of King Thyse, and a less risky approach would suffice.

Corvyne ignored the insult but bristled at the threat. Duke Munar stared at his fellow conspirator, daring him to voice his indignation. When no response came, Munar continued, “With the annexation of Courts Lynar and Nassum, her influence and popularity grows. Nevertheless, under her rule we approach a crisis of food, and we shall not follow into extinction

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those who could feed upon only dwarves or elves or other bygone chattel. Her lack of leadership in this matter undermines the security and standing of the Court. If the extent of this crisis were widely known, it would encourage threats from without and within.”

Corvyne knew Munar would listen to no counterargument; although removing Queen Shayala would not correct the problem, she made a convenient scapegoat. Were the nobility to admit to the populace that food was scarce, panic would undermine support of the titled class. As long as the nobility never admitted a problem, they could claim the common concerns were unfounded. Compounding this reluctance, no noble would dare appear weak or destitute to his peers, so each continued to behave as always—as if unaffected by any scarcity. Which for the moment was true, for the nobility would be the last affected by any shortage and would feel no need to conserve if food was readily available to them. And by the time the nobles were affected by the shortage, the problem would be beyond remedy.

Rather than further agitate Munar, Corvyne said only, as if revealing a profound truth, “The masses will protest her overthrow.”

Munar clucked his tongue in dismissal. “The details of our justification do no matter. The rabble will accept any reason we give them because it is in their nature and their interest to do so.”

Pleased to have the duke’s ire redirected, Corvyne chose simply to offer agreement. “A circumstance that will soon be corrected.”

## Day 2: Light

**A** pounding at the door brought Duke Munar from his thoughts. Events were in motion, and, within a sennight, he would be king—or he would be dead. Irritably, he waved off the two servants cleaning the chamber. Both withdrew, and he raised his head to glance at Captain Syuth, who stood respectfully mute near the door. The captain was a wiry strigoi whose nondescript appearance—medium height and complexion, with beige eyes and matching short hair—was deceptively disarming. His steel gorget, protecting the neck, bore the stamp of the duke’s insigne: an owl perched atop a full moon, red blood dripping from where its talons pierced the sphere. A cutlass and an assortment of daggers hung from his baldric.

Syuth opened the door. Without stood a powerfully built strigoi with a shaved head and pupilless brown eyes. His countenance registered neither fear nor reverence at the ducal personage. As one of few outside Munar’s guard permitted to remain armed in the presence of the duke, he bore two backwords scabbarded upon his belt; strapped to the back of his baldric was a long-handled sickle. His gorget was emblomed with the insigne of a two-towered castle within a square.

“Your Grace, Seneschal Lyuth,” Syuth announced.

“Moon’s embrace, Seneschal,” Munar greeted.

“And to you, Your Grace,” Lyuth returned.

Munar motioned for him to enter. “Do come in.”

Syuth stood aside to allow Lyuth to pass, closing the door behind the seneschal.

“A refreshment, Seneschal?” The duke gestured to a naked human female beside a bureau, sitting with her knees pulled up to her chest and her arms hugging her legs.

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“No, thank you, Your Grace.”

Munar shrugged and moved to take a draught from the neck of the woman, now broken of any resistance. Once finished, he dropped her to the floor and, moving back to his desk, offered a seat to Lyuth.

Munar spoke. “What I share with you today is of the utmost secrecy and import. Were any word to escape, the perpetrators would be alerted to our knowledge, and the opportunity to apprehend them when they strike would be lost.”

Lyuth leaned forward intently.

“We have learned there are those within the queen’s own court who would see her gone.”

Lyuth bolted upright, eyes wide. “Your Grace, I should have been informed, that I may take precautions.”

“This is a matter of internal politics. Your charge is the protection of the castle, is it not?” Munar asked.

“As Your Grace is aware.”

“And you must remain neutral in matters politic.” It was not a question.

“Again, Your Grace.”

“The castle itself is not threatened.”

“But there is precedent when...”

“I trust in your discretion in the days to come,” said the duke in a clipped, authoritative voice. “If your soldiers interfere, I cannot promise they will not be mistaken for conspirators.”

“Your Grace, I must...”

“Seneschal, you will *not* involve yourself. Understood?”

“Yes, Your Grace.” Without waiting to be dismissed, Lyuth took his leave.

## Day 3: Night

**D**uke Munar and Castellan Corvyne sat within the anteroom of Queen Shayala’s audience chamber at the base of the keep. The undecorated room, little more than a short hallway, was fitted with double bronze doors upon either end, and arrow slits were set into the walls, through which guards in concealed passages and rooms could fire upon intruders. Simple wooden chairs lined either side, and currently both sets of doors stood open. Two halberd-wielding guards—whose impassive faces seemed to notice nothing said or done while, at the same time, noticing everything—stood at either entrance.

Corvyne peered to his left, through the doorway leading to the keep’s foyer, then glanced to his right into the audience chamber. What he saw—or, rather, did not see—was jarring to most who clung to certain usages of court, including Duke Munar: the areas were bereft of courtiers, flatterers, and sycophants. Shayala’s distaste of, and hostility toward, those whom she considered superfluous was well known among the Court, and she had removed all such individuals, creating enemies among those who lost their tenuous handhold upon power.

Present and visible to either side, however, were members of the castle guard and several bustling functionaries. The latter formed Corvyne’s army—not an army of swords and arrows and shields, but one of quill and parchment and bureaucracy. He commanded a host of such who performed the never-ending and thankless tasks that maintained and administered the castle.

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Without acknowledging their presence, the queen strode, straight-backed, through the anteroom and into the chamber.

Munar and Corvyne stood immediately and followed several paces behind the queen.

They exited through a side door, passed through branching corridors lit by sparse hanging braziers, and descended several flights of stairs. The corridors were lined with doors, some unguarded, others set with two attentive guards armed with silver-bladed halberds and daggers. Finally, they came to a pair of arched doors marked with a wyvern holding a sword in one claw and a staff in the other. Beyond the doors was a large room filled with cages of humans, whose anger at their recent captivity had changed to fear under the growing realization of their predicament. The miasma of human filth was obnoxious to strigoic sensibilities.

At the queen's appearance, a strigoic, vivisectioning a screaming, barely coherent human strapped to a blood-stained workbench, ceased his work, leaving the woman to cry and moan, begging to die. He approached the queen and bent on one knee. His pupilless, fiery orange eyes contrasted with his calm, inquisitive demeanor. He wore only a harness of pouches and pockets, filled with an assortment of steel implements, many of which were bloodied.

"Report, Magificer Haluth," Shayala said.

"The hunt was a success, Your Majesty," the experimenter began. "We tracked the pair of fleeing chattel to a band of feral humans and retrieved twenty specimens, none of whose blood proved poisonous." He gestured toward the protesting, incarcerated humans. "However, such successes are growing rarer, and our supply of potable blood diminishes."

No sooner had he spoken than, quicker than he could deflect, a backhand from the queen sent him sprawling.

"Do not explain to me that which I already know, Haluth." Shayala's voice did not reflect the sudden violence she had committed.

"My apologies, Your Majesty," begged the experimenter, struggling to his knees once more, eyes downcast.

"Find a way to breed these chattel more quickly. They take far too long to gestate; the farms cannot keep pace with their attrition." No threat was needed. The experimenter knew the price of failure.

Shayala turned to leave but, before withdrawing, addressed the castellan. "Distribute the new specimens among the chattel farms to replace the depleted stock." To the duke, "Increase the number of hunts, into King H'shu's territory if you must."

Both bowed, intoning, "Yes, Your Majesty."

But Queen Shayala had already moved past them.

Haluth returned to the sobbing woman whose innards were exposed; the heady smell of gore wafted like a comforting friend. After waiting for the queen's steps to recede, the duke and castellan approached Haluth.

"Magificer, may I have a moment?" Munar asked.

"Of course, Your Grace."

"No disrespect to Her Majesty, of course, but I fear your talents are not fully appreciated." The duke tossed a look of disgust at the tortured human.

"No—or yes, Your Grace. Her Majesty shows me far more respect than I am due by one of her eminence." Haluth's orange eyes, which shone at the unexpected comment, darted back and forth between Munar and Corvyne.

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“Of course, of course. No doubt, Haluth,” Munar said in a mild tone to soothe the Magificer’s obvious discomfort. “I mean only that I can certainly envision many other ways to acknowledge your brilliance.”

“I...I do appreciate that, Your Grace. However...”

“What His Grace is saying, Haluth,” Corvyne interjected, “is, although your work is laudable and imperative, you are capable of so much more benefit to the Court. So much more renown.”

“I seek only to do my duty as commanded by Her Majesty,” Haluth said, standing straighter.

“As do we all,” concurred the duke. “A day may come when you will be called upon to show your true mettle. I have no doubt, at that time, you will choose correctly, and your reward will be great.”

“I do not—” Haluth began, again slouching.

“You will understand when the time comes,” Munar finished. “And I have full confidence in you.”

“Yes, Your Grace. Thank you,” Haluth muttered in a quavering voice.

With that, the duke turned and left.

“Magificer,” Corvyne said, nodding once, before following Munar from the chamber.

## Day 4: Night

**D**uke Munar, encircled by his personal guard and bundle-carrying servants, returned to the keep after an excursion through the market, now bustling with the commerce of strigoi. Crowds of shoppers, some bearing newly acquired goods, including human chattel, stood aside in sudden sobriety as the duke’s entourage passed.

At the entrance to the keep, Corvyne remained silent at Munar’s approach, awaiting the duke’s acknowledgement.

“Castellan,” Munar said, implicitly permitting the castellan to speak.

“Your Grace,” Corvyne responded, standing just beyond the circle. “May we speak in private?”

“By all means, accompany me to my chamber.”

Corvyne followed the procession across the topmost bridge to the eastern tower and, in short order, arrived at the duke’s private chamber. Guards closed the door behind them and took up position beyond the room.

A strong scent of musk surrounded the duke, likely due to the indulgent tasting of humans at the market. Without preamble, Munar asked, “What news, Corvyne?”

“My messengers conveyed the amended arrangement to Countess Sashal, Earless Ralyr, Earl Othor, and Baroness Alorn. Predictably, their responses were alarmed and questioning, but they came to realize no other option was tenable. Although they are prepared, they are anxious. Were any other changes necessary, I fear we would lose several allies.”

“And of the baron and the count?”

“I have relayed instructions that neither is to leave the council chamber.”

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“A wonderful touch.” Munar’s enthusiasm lay undisguised as he considered his coming elevation. “Soon, the bones of our pretender queen will be added to the Skeletal Throne.” The duke chuckled, then added, “I require privacy.”

“Yes, Your Grace.” Corvyne bowed and withdrew from the chamber.

### Day 5: Night

**A**t a casual glance, the gray wolf within the cage would have appeared as any other. However, with even the slightest more discernment, disparities became apparent. Its coat and skin were singed where they touched the silver bars; its canines were longer than usual for an animal of its type; its yellow eyes were pupilless.

As the cage was not large enough to allow the creature much freedom of movement, whenever it brushed the bars, its howling became a high-pitched yelp, accompanied by the acrid odor of burnt hair. The enclosure sat at one end of a low, wooden tunnel, barely taller than the wolf itself. The other end lay open to the forest beyond.

At a gesture from Duke Munar, the master of the hunt—a rangy strigoi whose golden medallion was emblazoned with the profile of the yawning jaws of the wolflike moroi in the cage—slid open the front gate. The moroi, faster than its living counterparts, sped down the tunnel and into the forest.

With the first quarter moon still low in the sky, the duke, accompanied by twelve guards, assumed the chase. While the duke carried a silver-tipped spear and a silver-bladed rondel, his guards were armed with an assortment of weapons.

Munar and his retinue pursued the lupine moroi into the forest. The band had little difficulty following the creature’s mad rush, which left a clear trail through the underbrush. Even without the obvious path, the strigoi’s acute olfactory sense could easily track the moroi’s spoor.

After proceeding several miles, Duke Munar addressed his entourage. “Continue with the moroi hunt. Await me at the waystation to the south.”

One of the guards protested, “Your Grace, allow several of us to accompany you.”

“That will not be necessary. Do as instructed.”

“Yes, Your Grace.” Although he disagreed, the guard was wise enough not to press further.

Munar embarked southward and, in short order, reached a windowless, single-story stone building. To obstruct the penetration of light, the sturdy, oaken door was set into a recess formed by a surrounding brim of projecting stone around the seams. The duke entered, immediately faced with an internal wall that ran the width of the structure—a further precaution against the light—with an additional door at either end.

Once the duke passed beyond the internal wall, he found another already present. She was a petite, light-skinned strigoi, with hooded, pupilless, champagne eyes and matching hair. Her proud mien was accentuated by an innocent beauty, belied by a shrewdness in her eyes that intimated a far-greater age than she appeared. Although she wore a dagger upon a jeweled belt, the weapon was more ornamental than functional.

The interior consisted of a single, unadorned room, furnished with only a dilapidated table and four chairs at its center. Two wooden doors stood closed to the right of the entrance. The only other occupants were two feeble, pacified humans fettered to the far wall.

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Munar set his spear aside and slid his dagger into his belt sheath. “Moon’s embrace, Your Highness.”

“I received your summons.” With a playful smile, she added, “Your Grace is quite the lecher.”

Flashing Princess H’shu a doubtful expression, he said with some annoyance, “I would not risk us both by calling this tryst, Highness, were it not of import.” Before she could inquire further, he continued, “The plans have changed.”

A moment passed as she grasped his meaning. “You cannot! He must fall.” In an imperious tone, tinged with desperation, she added, “It is time you repaid your debt. It is not my fault Thyse named Shayala as his successor.”

Displaying some petulance at her outburst and indignation at the reminder of his obligation, Munar responded, “And he will. However, we are forced to advance the removal of the queen.”

“Then we must expedite the fall of my father as well.”

Munar did not immediately respond. “It requires impeccable planning, Princess. King H’shu will not be easily overcome. To underestimate him invites disaster.”

“We can use the chaos surrounding the demise of Queen Shayala as cover. He would be an unlucky casualty of your Court’s internal politics.”

“Perhaps,” Munar replied thoughtfully. “It may require your hand to lure him into a vulnerable position.”

“Gladly, providing I need not take a more active role.”

“Not at all, Your Highness. I will see to the details. During the convening of the Noble Conclave, the queen will lose her throne. And by the noon of that night, I will rendezvous with you along this same road, at the station midway to your border.”

The princess’s answering smile was wide and genuine. “I must go if I am to return to Court H’shu by morning.” Raising her voice slightly, said she, “We go.”

At that, six gorgeted soldiers, bearing silver-bladed, straight-edged swords, entered from two side rooms to flank her. She took satisfaction in the duke’s momentary startlement.

As H’shu and her guards removed to a large coach stationed behind the safe house, the duke, while awaiting his retinue, chose to sample upon one of the unresisting humans within.

## Day 5: Light

**A**s Kurl’s screams reached the ears of those within the queen’s audience chamber, the last of the petitioners who had arrived the night before were ushered in.

Shayala sat upon the Skeletal Throne, set upon a dais ten steps above the black shale-tiled floor at the far end of the audience chamber. Two rows of fluted columns, topped with sculptures of the heads of various beasts, ran the length of the chamber. The walls were lined with tapestries forming a pictorial, chronological history of the Court, beginning with the capture of the castle by King Ky’lor, whose name the castle still bore. Along the center of the nave, exquisite branched chandeliers of worked copper and gold hung in line with the columns. The cool dankness of the keep went unnoticed by the unclad occupants of the chamber. Humorless castle guards cordoned the assorted petitioners and inquirers at the opposite end of the chamber.

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Shayala's personal guard of female strigoi lined the aisles between the columns and the walls. They stood impassive but alert, resting the hafts of silver-bladed glaives upon the floor and bore assorted edged weapons at their waists or across their backs.

Standing at the base of the platform was Captain Halura, whose supple form, stern visage, and vigilant, aurous eyes brought to mind a great cat stalking its prey. Her chestnut hair was pulled back and tied with a simple thong of leather. Although she wore no jewelry or adornment, she displayed a steel gorget, two scabbarded swords upon her belt, and a dagger sheathed upon each thigh and upper arm.

Castellan Corvyne stood opposite the captain at the base of dais and introduced the next petitioners. "Your Majesty, these are V'laryn and R'laryn, formerly thralls of Laryn—who was killed during a moroi hunt. She left no written instructions, and they disagree as to the allocation of her lands and property."

In a long-held aulic tradition, any citizen of the Court might petition the sovereign for redress or adjudication. Verdicts were final, with no further recourse or appeal. Although many sought the queen's intervention and judgment, only a select few were chosen to stand before the Skeletal Throne.

Presently, Shayala's expression was a mix of annoyance and impatience as Corvyne continued. "The property consists—"

Shayala interrupted, "Within one week's time, you will return with the allocation of the land and property expressly defined, or it will become the possession of the Court."

Both petitioners were too stunned to speak, so Corvyne responded for them. "Thank you, Your Majesty." He gestured to V'laryn and R'laryn that their audience had ended. Although their expressions reflected confusion and dismay, they bowed and departed without complaint.

A scribe stood aside, busily recording the particulars of each case, adding to the stack of parchment on a lectern.

Corvyne announced the next two petitioners. "Valyn and Yalar. Their dispute concerns compensation for the destruction of chattel. Valyn seeks compensation for a human male destroyed by Yalar. Yalar does not dispute the act but claims justification in that the human struck him."

"Valyn," began the queen, "did your human strike Yalar?"

Valyn hesitated briefly before answering, having considered then discarded any thought of lying. "I cannot say, Your Majesty, I did not witness it."

"But you allow for the possibility," Shayala replied, "and that is enough. Under *no* circumstance may chattel strike a strigoi. Perhaps your chattel do not have sufficient respect for your authority."

Valyn was downcast as he realized his mistake.

"Valyn, *you* will compensate Yalar with two chattel in recompense for your negligence," Shayala ordered. "If you again fail to control your chattel, the punishment will not be so lenient." The queen stood and, despite the waiting supplicants, declared, "This audience is ended."

Disappointment was evident in the expressions of the remaining petitioners, yet all were wise enough not to voice their objections too loudly. While the castle guard expelled everyone from the chamber, Shayala descended the dais, and Halura assumed a position behind her.



## Day 6: Night

**S**hayala, accompanied by Captain Halura, called upon Haluth. The pens of the Magificer's work area were now empty.

Haluth, seated at a table and engaged in the meticulous fabrication of a gold-and-amethyst necklace, rose and bowed.

"Report, Magificer," Shayala ordered without preamble or salutation.

"Your Majesty, the interrogation of the captured humans revealed nothing new concerning the feral tribes. No alterations to the plan are necessary."

"And what of the new specimens?" Shayala asked.

"I have them here, Your Majesty." Haluth forthwith retrieved two collared and leashed, dark-skinned human females from a side room. Their scent recalled to Shayala a time long gone and irretrievable. As he returned, he bowed once more. "These are the last from the south for your consideration."

Shayala appraised them quickly. "Have these cleaned and sent to my chamber."

Haluth summoned an assistant to carry out the command. Before the exchange was completed, Shayala and Halura had departed.

## Day 7: Light

**I**n her private chamber, Shayala considered the two tremulous, tearful, naked human females huddled upon the floor. The chamber contained only utilitarian desks and tables; the walls were lined with silken tapestries depicting myriad scenes of strigoi slaughtering various species of chattel in progressively more creative and sadistic ways. One portrayed a complicated apparatus that simultaneously stretched, stabbed, and crushed a body. Burning candles, set within graven candlesticks upon each desk or table, filled the chamber with flickering light and the musky scent of mugwort.

"Stand," she ordered the humans. The queen examined them in detail, turning their heads side to side, inspecting their teeth, gripping and squeezing their breasts, and scrutinizing every blemish upon their dusky skin. Without a word, she broke the neck of one of the females. She could not allow a witness, even if—especially if—human. The other human squealed and started, but the queen's hand around her throat quieted her to a whimper.

Still gripping the woman's neck, Shayala turned to Captain Halura, standing by the vestibule and watching the queen conduct the inspection. "No one is to disturb me before the sun has set and risen once more. And dispose of this body."

Halura saluted, right fist over the heart, and moved immediately to relay the orders to the guards beyond the main door.

Shayala retrieved a collar and leash from a desk drawer and fastened them to the remaining human. She spoke a word, causing a portion of the wall hidden behind a tapestry to swing open, revealing an unlit passage. Pulling the human behind her, the queen entered. Another word

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sealed the wall, and a third ignited ensconced torches, which extinguished shortly after the two passed.

The queen moved surely through the maze of passageways and stairways, the human struggling to keep pace. If the woman fell behind, a tug on the leash brought her stumbling forward. Like the castle, these passages were cool and dank, though, because of the infrequency of their use, they also contained a dusty quality.

Shayala stepped through another section of wall, which opened at her command, and into a spacious chamber. The room held a large desk, several worktables, and wooden shelving, all covered in documents, implements, and glassware containing all manner and color of liquids, powders, and sundries. The profusion of chemicals, smoke from a small alembic burner, and assorted substances combined to create an acidic odor, unpleasant but not harmful to strigoi.

Haluth awaited her.

A tug on the leash brought the human roughly to the floor and induced from her a piteous mewling. Haluth noted only one human accompanied the queen but did not voice any concern regarding the other. Nevertheless, Shayala answered his unspoken question. “She was too short and her breasts too small. Add this one to the other candidates and choose the best suitable.” Without waiting for acknowledgement, she continued. “What is the count of our stable?”

“We have accumulated well over ten thousand in the last decade, Your Majesty. However, maintaining the chattel is logistically challenging and requires a great deal of feed. It is becoming increasingly difficult to dispose of their waste—disgusting creatures—and to conceal and transport that amount of fodder.”

“It shan’t be much longer. And the duke and castellan?”

“They did approach me, Your Majesty, hoping to manipulate my...” He paused, searching for the right word. “Mistreatment.”

“Move one hundred chattel to the rooms adjoining the second passage from my chamber. When the time comes that you must choose a side, reveal to them that passage and the rooms.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“And my necklace?”

“Just one final test, Your Majesty.”

“We are out of time, Magificer.”

“Simply an abundance of caution, Your Majesty. It will be awaiting your return.”

“See to it.” Deigning a nod to Haluth, Shayala left through the same secret portal she had entered. Rather than return to her chamber, however, she followed another route, the walls becoming more roughly hewn the farther she traveled. At her command, fixtured torches flared, illuminating the passage; as she passed, the torches extinguished, leaving only darkness behind her. Without the human in tow, her pace quickened. She reached the end of the tunnel, where irregular stone stairs led upward a mere seven feet. Shayala ascended and, using rungs bolted into the stone, raised and moved aside the solid sandstone block to emerge beneath a waystation a mile from the castle.

Similar in design and furnishings to other such structures in the central Court, it contained simple trappings and no side rooms; however, no living human victuals were present. The headless body of a male strigoi, with much of his torso dissolved by melted silver, was chained to the far wall. The head that lay nearby had half its face burned away.

The sole occupant in the room did not start at Shayala’s appearance. The only movement was to shift her cold, dark purple eyes to focus upon the queen. Above a steel gorget, stamped

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with an encircled pupilless eye, elegant features contrasted with her severe expression. Once she moved, her deceptively lanky figure belied the fluidity of her gait.

With a salutation nod, Shayala said, "Report, Lyan."

"The scouts have reported no unusual movement by the soldiers of Court H'shu along the eastern border, Your Majesty, nor along the southeast. Some small incursions of nosferatu have been observed but nothing beyond the ordinary."

Shayala nodded again.

Lyan indicated the tortured strigoi. "A spy from Court H'shu. I was unable to overcome the restrictions of his enthrallment, but evidence indicates Court H'shu is not involved."

Queen Shayala was at her in an instant, standing threateningly before her. "I will draw my own conclusions, Spy Marshal."

Shayala glanced downward at Lyan's hand moving away from the hilt of a dagger. A knowing look passed between the two, and both offered a smile of genuine affection. The spy marshal's smile also held a somber note—understanding of the burden demanded by this crucial endeavor to which Shayala was now committed.

Calming, Shayala nodded. "No doubt your informants in King H'shu's Court confirm that conclusion."

Lyan nodded deferentially in return.

Shayala continued, "If a significant deployment occurs within Court H'shu, or if any soldiers breach our borders, inform me or Captain Halura immediately."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"The traitors grow restless and desperate; their strike is imminent." Shayala paused. "As you no doubt know, the palace coup will occur during the Noble Conclave."

Lyan showed no surprise at the news.

"Once the insurrection begins," continued the queen, "Captain Halura will assume command of those who survive, but no counterstrike is to occur until I give word."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"You will be my intermediary, Lyan. Institute standard cyphers and primary sign and countersign protocols. Ensure the appointed site is monitored. I will deliver any messages or instructions there."

With a portentous grin, Spy Marshal Lyan bowed. "As you command, Your Majesty."

Queen Shayala grasped the other's left shoulder with an affectionate squeeze. Satisfied, Shayala withdrew whence she came, sliding the stone back into place, though she did not follow the tunnels back toward Castle Ky'lor.

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Queen Shayala lay embracing and entwined with Princess H'shu in the bedchamber of a small, isolated villa the queen maintained in the east-central forests of her Court. The two strigoi rested atop a mattress of water-filled human bladders within a wooden frame, covered in cream-colored sheets. A pole-mounted oil lamp sat in each corner; a palpable musk from their feeding hung close in the air. Other than their conversation, the only sound was the muffled groaning of several humans around the bedding.

"The Courts have been ruled by kings for far too long," Shayala said. "It is time for another queen, Highness."

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The other looked warmly at Shayala before responding. “A situation you seem intent to change. But you speak light of weighty matters. H’shu is my master and king—and my father.”

“I mean only tumultuous times are upon us, and position is ever uncertain in such times. After all, I myself ascended after the tragic loss of a king. Were it to come to pass, by some unforeseen tragedy, that *Queen* H’shu sat upon the throne, the Court would surely benefit.”

“Court H’shu or Court Shayala?”

With a smile, the queen responded, “Both, of course.”

Princess H’shu returned the smile as she rolled atop the queen.

## Day 8: Night

**Q**ueen Shayala stood, once again, within Haluth’s cluttered laboratory. With a sweep of his hand, the Magificer felled a stack of parchments from atop a chair to provide a seat for the queen. The acridness of smoke and chemicals still hung in the air.

Haluth reclaimed a necklace from the neck of a strigoi who sat restrained and dejected upon the floor and offered it to Shayala. “Your Majesty, I am pleased to report it functions flawlessly.” As an afterthought, he retrieved, from between two bookshelves, a long-shafted battle axe with a single, crescent-shaped blade and beheaded the strigoi, thus eliminating the only witness to the effect of the necklace. “And it has the added benefit of disguising your hair, eyes, and eyeteeth. Regrettably, we have not the time to test it upon your person.”

“Yes, it is unfortunate our enemies are not more considerate of our schedule,” Shayala said in a rare expression of droll humor. “But, be assured, your regret would not long trouble you, Magificer. If it does not function, although I will be no more, Lyan will ensure that you, too, cease to be.”

The settings tinkled softly as Shayala removed her necklace. She replaced it with the identically appearing one Haluth had provided.

The transformation was nearly instantaneous. The black of her eyes receded into the jet dot of her pupils, leaving dark brown irises and the white of the sclera. Her fangs appeared to blunt and retract into her upper jaw. The sheen of her nails lightened from the color of charcoal to a fleshy pink. Her deep purple hair faded into the black of soft, tight curls. Even the severity of her features softened, leaving her with an alluring sensuality but absent the accompanying ferocity. Shayala herself felt nothing of the change.

Haluth did not try to hide his surprise—which arose not at the success but at her appearance—though he did conceal his disgust at her “human” visage behind an ingratiating smile. “Then neither of us has anything to fear, Your Majesty,” said he as he passed her a hand mirror of leaded glass.

Shayala stared at an image she had not seen in over a century and had thought to never see again. She touched a finger to the tip of an eyetooth, feeling its sharp point, though the image in the mirror seemed to show her finger hovering below a normal, human canine tooth. She gazed into her own changed eyes for several moments before nodding approval and laying the mirror aside. If she looked too long, she feared becoming lost in memories of a time that was no more than dream.

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Shayala doffed the necklace, and her appearance reverted just as quickly as its previous change; she re-donned her mundane jewelry. Haluth relaxed at the return of her proper cast.

“Please do be careful of the item, Your Majesty. I was able to fabricate only the one. Its materials and components are rare and exceedingly difficult to acquire.” Turning, Haluth grasped a black iron brand upon the table. “The only matter remaining is that of the rune. It will add to the authenticity of your disguise. You can apply it once you are beyond the Court.”

Shayala thought for a moment before saying, “No, my healing from the mark itself or from its removal will only draw suspicion. My tale will have to suffice. If not, I will slaughter them all and find another, more credulous, group.”

“As you say, Your Majesty,” Haluth conceded. “I await your return.”

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Princess H’shu lay beside King H’shu upon a pile of furs and silken coverlets, surrounded by several living but dazed humans. The princess’s boudoir, accessible through only a series of secret doors, was appointed with luxurious furnishings and portraits depicting other notables of the H’shu clan. An enormous crown chandelier provided lighting, and the redolence of musk hung heavily in the still air of the room.

“You have heard the rumors of a plot against Queen Shayala?” asked the princess.

“You know our spies report as much,” responded King H’shu. He was an unusually tall and muscular strigoi. His almond-shaped, silver eyes were piercing and alert, missing no detail, and his mien projected pride and confidence. Both his medallion and ring were engraved with the H’shu insigne: the frontal view of a wolf’s skull, its cranium pierced by a downward-pointing sword.

“Can they succeed, Father?”

“That is not an easy question to answer. The queen has many enemies who, if they underestimate her cunning and resolve, will surely be destroyed. Do not forget that King Thyse himself named her his successor, something he would never do lightly. Within her first century upon the throne, she conquered the Courts of Nassum and Lynar. However, those very victories have made many of established title apprehensive, believing her too ambitious in her overreach for power.”

Rolling aside, King H’shu took a draught from the thin neck of a human female. He wiped his lips, then continued, “Nor does she abide by all Courtly traditions, showing no respect for the customs and conventions of the aristocracy. One of her first acts as queen was to banish all courtiers and other power- and influence-seekers from her side. This was a source of consternation for those who lost their influence, but it was a symbolic message to the masses that she respects industriousness and competence, not fawning parasites.”

“Such courtiers are not without their uses,” Princess H’shu said in a petulant tone that almost sounded defensive.

“Perhaps the customs of Court have evolved around their presence. They can certainly be used and manipulated to the benefit of a clever ruler. But lastly, regarding your question, do not overlook the growing scarcity of potable humans. Whether Queen Shayala is at fault or not, this has occurred under her rule, and many will blame her.” After a thoughtful pause, he added, “Our supply is not decidedly better than Court Shayala’s.”

He stroked the Princess’s cheek. “However, regardless of the outcome of the coup, if the victor is sufficiently weakened, we will be poised to overcome them.”

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Now, Princess H'shu smiled and called for more human fare to be brought in as she rolled atop the king.

### Day 8: Light

“**W**here is the queen?” Munar shouted at Castellan Corvyne, outside the latter's offices. Corvyne's staff hurried upon their business—moving about, shuffling parchment, writing requisitions, completing forms—as if oblivious to the exchange.

“I don't know, Your Grace, I—”

“The Conclave is set to begin.” Munar's tone betrayed some nervousness, and he said in a lower tone, “Could she have some inkling...?”

“Impossible, Your Grace. I will—”

Interrupting again, Munar said, “Have your underlings search the castle. I will go to the queen's chamber myself.”

“Yes, Your Grace.” But Corvyne had spoken to the duke's back, as Munar had already stomped off, his cape trailing.

Soon after, without Queen Shayala's private chamber, Duke Munar stood before two sentries, who wore steel gorgets embossed with the queen's insigne, identifying them as members of her personal guard.

“I must see the queen.”

“Her Majesty is not to be disturbed,” responded one guard in an even tone, unimpressed.

“I am the duke and I command you to admit me.”

Had the guards any humor within them, they would have laughed; rather they stood impassive and unresponsive. The duke's voice, however, did alert Captain Halura, who appeared around the corner, flanked by four other soldiers. The four tapped the butts of their glaives upon the ground in rhythm with their synchronous steps, creating a menacing echo in the stone corridor.

“Your Grace,” began the captain, stopping only a pace from the duke. “Her Majesty was explicit, and she did not allow for exceptions. I would be happy to relay your displeasure over the inconvenience Her Majesty has caused you.”

Without betraying any affect, but standing straighter and injecting all the authority and dignity of his title, Munar replied, “Relay to Her Majesty the principals are assembled and the emissaries have arrived. Her Noble Conclave awaits her pleasure.”

“Of course, Your Grace,” Halura replied, without a bow.

Duke Munar turned and left.

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Queen Shayala returned to her private chamber through the same tunnel from which she had exited the prior day. She placed her new gold-and-amethyst necklace within a drawer and noted immediately the human's carcass had been removed.

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Exiting through the chamber door, she nodded to Captain Halura, who waited in the vestibule, and motioned for two guards to accompany her to the council chamber in the heart of the keep.

The queen entered the chamber from a door at one end of the room; a second door was situated in the opposite wall. Braziers upon either side of the room offered light, a faint crackling from the flames, and the scent of lavender from an added aromatic. The walls were lined with depictions of the heraldic designs of the nobility throughout the millennia; above the door through which she had just entered was the four-fangs-on-a-rising-full-moon emblem of Queen Shayala herself.

Around an oval ebony-wood table eleven figures already stood. Duke Munar was at the end opposite the queen. To her right stood Castellan Corvyne, followed by an aide to the castellan, two others whom Shayala did not recognize—though by the look of their features and jewelry, they were not members of her Court—and Baron Hyr. To her left were Countess Sashal, Count Volroy, Earless Ralyr, Earl Othor, and Baroness Alorn.

Once the queen sat, so too did the others, while her guards assumed positions to either side of the door from which she entered. The queen looked at the assorted nobles, and her gaze settled upon Castellan Corvyne, who referenced a parchment before him.

“Firstly, Your Majesty,” said the castellan. “We have with us two emissaries from the Southern Courts.” Gesturing toward the two unknown to Shayala—a swarthy male and female strigoi—he introduced, “Emir Azhum and Emira Jubyra.”

The resemblance of the two was that of a brother and sister. Although their features were similar to those of Shayala, their eyes were more almond-shaped and their noses thinner. Nor were their complexions quite as dark as the queen’s, though they were several shades darker than anyone else in the room. Unlike strigoi of the Northern Courts, these wore piercings in their nostrils and ears.

Both stood, bowed to the queen, and uttered, “Your Majesty.”

Shayala acknowledged with a nod.

“They are here to witness your seal on the trade agreement,” continued Corvyne, who shuffled the parchment and brought to the fore a stack bound by an iron ring.

“The terms of the agreement have been finalized,” Corvyne said, glancing at the parchment. “The duties on various commodities have been negotiated and are listed on the tariff. Import and export quotas have been determined, as have bartering values for each commodity. The exchange rate for currency—”

“Corvyne, the document.” Shayala extended her hand, and Corvyne provided two copies of the agreement. After applying her insigne beside the marks of several others, she handed the sheets back to the castellan.

“Thank you, Your Majesty,” said Emira Jubyra. “This accord will benefit us all.”

“Yes, it will,” responded Shayala.

“With your permission, Your Majesty, we will take our leave to convey this agreement with all due haste,” said Emir Azhum.

Shayala responded with a nod. Corvyne handed both copies of the agreement to the aid, who escorted the emir and emira from the chamber, but not before all three stood and bowed to the queen.

Once the visitors had gone, Earless Ralyr spoke, her tone filled with more condescending disgust than her usual aristocratic disdain for anything not conforming to the traditions of the ancient Northern Courts. “Those Southern strigoi pierce their skin with jewelry in the manner of

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feral humans. And I hear they allow humans some measure of dignity and autonomy.” Carved into an ivory pendant was her insigne, depicting a bat, wings outstretched, overlying a full moon.

“It’s said they even grant humans some rights,” Baroness Alorn added, her voice like hurled daggers.

“Barbarians,” Duke Munar said.

“Abominations!” Count Volroy exclaimed.

“Um, yes, well…” Corvyne looked to Queen Shayala, recognizing her impatience to continue with the business before them. “Your Majesty, several other matters of Court await your attention.” At a nod from Shayala, he continued, “Since you have enfolded Nassum within the Court, Count Volroy has consistently failed to remit the appropriate taxes.”

As he finished, Corvyne looked pointedly at the count, though Volroy was looking at the queen with mixed embarrassment and anger. Impassive, though with the faintest trace of cruelty, Shayala returned his stare.

“*Your Majesty*,” Volroy began, veritably spitting the title, “the chattel that work the mines are indolent and weak. They have not had the production to—”

“Do the chattel govern your domain?” interrupted the queen. “Should they be sitting here in your stead?”

One noble at the table stifled a snicker, while the others observed the exchange with nervous but intense concentration.

Volroy could barely control his rage. “I cannot be blamed.”

Rhetorically, Shayala asked with obvious derision, “Who then? No matter, an easy problem to solve. I have no doubt Countess Sashal would be far more conscientious of her Courtly obligations. The mine now falls within the authority of the countess.”

“Your Majesty!” Volroy protested too loudly. “I am noble. Certain proprieties must be observed.”

All present stared, agape, at the count. Earless Ralyr, who sat beside Volroy, noticeably leaned away. Silence hung palpably, swirling and engulfing those in the room.

With deathly calm, the queen responded, “Propriety is purchased with taxes, Your Lordship.”

Humiliated and harboring barely restrained resentment and antipathy, Volroy glared at the queen. Through clenched teeth, said he, “Yes, Your Majesty.”

Corvyne paused a moment before continuing. “Your Majesty, we have lost a number of chattel to accidents at the quarry. Rather than repurpose potable chattel, we can transfer replacements from the mines to the quarry, at least until additional laboring chattel can be acquired.”

With only a short pause to consider, the queen replied, “See to it.”

Corvyne continued, “The nosferatu population to the west, in the territory of Baron Hyr, seems to be, for unknown reasons, growing.”

“Your Majesty, may I request some small aid in hunting the feral creatures?” asked the baron. His only adornment or covering—in the style of the anachronistic armament once worn by strigoic soldiers to protect the heart—was a small, steel shield that rested over the left side of his chest and which was kept in place by three leather straps.

“No.”

Baron Hyr sat back, looking abashed.

“Your Majesty,” Countess Sashal began, “in return for aid in reducing the nosferatu population, I’m sure the baron would graciously donate chattel to replenish those lost at the



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quarry.” Although Sashal often changed her many pieces of jewelry, the lustrous sheens and multi-faceted gems of her current assortment still seemed to draw in all the light from the room before releasing it in a dazzling display.

Without waiting for either endorsement or argument from the baron, Shayala said, “Corvyne, see to it.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty, Countess,” Hyr said in his best imitation of an appreciative tone.

“Next on the agenda, Your Majesty,” Corvyne resumed. “We—”

The door opposite the queen burst open with a crash of splintering wood. In came two male and two female strigoi soldiers. Their gorgets bore no emblem, and they were each armed with two argent swords, long and short. One male had thick amethyst hair, and the other sported a shaved scalp save for two dark green crests upon either side of center; one female wore her azure hair in a braid, and the second kept her sapphire-colored hair short.

The nobles shouted in feigned fear and shock. They leapt from their seats and pressed against the sides of the room. Shayala, however, remained seated and observed the scene in silence. Her guards took two steps forward to stand immediately beside the queen.

“What is the meaning of this?” Duke Munar demanded in plausible outrage.

The intruding soldiers began stalking around the table, one male and female to a side. They were grim-faced and focused, seeming to ignore most of the room’s occupants. While urging her to withdraw, Shayala’s guards engaged the male attackers.

Noticing that the sapphire-topped soldier seemed intent upon him, Baron Hyr attempted to leap away, over the table. But his recognition of the danger came too late. With a thrust to his side, she dropped him to the table’s surface. Like a guillotine, her blade fell, slicing through his unprotected neck and sending his head rolling; from the strength of the blow, the point of the sword bit into the table with a woody clack.

The soldier with sky-colored plaits ignored the other nobles, until reaching Count Volroy. His shock was genuine when she impaled him. She retracted the blade and decapitated him with a single, powerful stroke.

The guard to Shayala’s right dispatched the green-crested soldier and was immediately beset by the blue-braided attacker who had slain Volroy. The aisle opposite was blocked by the continuing fight between Shayala’s second guard and the amethyst-locked strigoi. Hyr’s slayer leapt atop the table.

“Your Majesty, you must get to safety,” implored her guards.

The shouts of combatants and the ring of metal from the hallway behind the queen could be heard within the chamber. Shayala stood calmly.

To Shayala’s left, a guard engaged Amethyst. As Sapphire-locks passed, stalking atop the table, the guard slashed her knee, bringing her crashing down. Amethyst used the momentary distraction to thrust a blade into the guard’s face.

Without a parting look, Shayala exited through the door she had entered. Captain Halura, with six guards, awaited her in the hallway, slick with strigoic blood. Several soldiers with unmarked gorgets lay dead and headless nearby. Halura’s guards immediately assumed formation around the queen as the captain led the group away.

The procession passed other decapitated strigoi—apparent assassins and insurgents, members of the queen’s guard and others loyal to Shayala, as well as castle staff and other innocents. On two occasions, the party was accosted by hostile soldiers, whom Halura and the guards quickly dispatched. By the time they reached the queen’s chamber, four more of the

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queen's guards had joined the entourage. Three sentries stood waiting without the chamber, dead guards and assassins lying about.

Halura entered the room with the queen as the other guards took up position beyond the door. Shayala removed her jewelry, including the gold-and-amethyst necklace, and handed them to the captain, who placed them all within a pouch at her belt. Next, Shayala retrieved Haluth's necklace from the drawer and donned it. Halura raised her eyebrows at the instant transformation, though said nothing.

With another uttered word, Shayala opened a portal behind a second tapestry in her chamber and entered the tunnel, accompanied by Halura. Both ran steadily, never hesitating at any branching passage.

Finally stopping at one fork, the queen looked to her captain. "Thank you, Halura."

With obvious emotion, Halura responded, "My pleasure and my duty are to serve, Your Majesty."

"I expect you to survive this day," Shayala said affectionately, yet in the commanding tone of a queen, while placing a hand upon the captain's shoulder.

With that, Shayala took the left fork, and Halura the right. After some distance down a descending passage, Shayala reached a seeming dead end. With a word, she opened a hidden portal leading from the base of the motte, and the deposed queen ran into the daylight.

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