

November 20, 1979

Everything has a price.

Those had been the first words out of His mouth, its generous proportions stretched into a cutlass smile as He stood over me, serrated blade in hand, a trail of crimson flowing down the length of its edge, the drops pattering to the floor from its tip like water from a leaky faucet.

You remember the knife, as well you should. But do you remember the box . . . ?

I shook the memory loose with a shudder, focusing instead on the vibration of the planes's engines as they set my seat to thrumming. Almost painfully aware now of the sudden motion, I shifted in place. For He had been right, so very right, what He had told me in the light-filled Waffle House that morning, that that which had long been forgotten would now reassert itself.

Everything has a price . . .

What do You want from me? Or with me? I wondered yet again. For despite the modest air of concern He has always affected for my well being, I entertained no illusions. Whatever else our relationship might be, I had little doubt it was part and parcel of some bizarre game, which only He knew the rules of. I believed this with the iron-clad certainty of a snake handler wearing a Copperhead round his neck like a scarf.

But if that were so, and this *was* a game, then what were the stakes? Unless of course there were no stakes, and His occasional involvements in my life served as nothing more than a source of personal amusement for Him, an elaborate divertissement, its only purpose to pass the time and relieve His boredom until something more engaging caught His fancy.

But what if that were not the case? What if the stakes were, in fact, quite high? And if this was so, what impromptu role might I one day find myself performing? True, He had long claimed to be devoting an inordinate amount of what He purported were increasingly scarce resources to watching over me--the Hidden Ones alone know why--but what if things were to change? What if He, along with His (at this point theoretical) opponents were engaged in some form of esoteric gambit, one in which even a Queen might be sacrificed for strategic or tactical advantage?

You could always kill him, you know. Or try to. Admit it, now, you've always wondered what would happen, should the two of you have a confrontation.

What made this thought so disturbing was the fact that I had had it before. Numerous times, truth to tell.

But only in the absence of His presence.

Ill at ease now, and in need of a distraction, I diverted myself by focusing on the flight attendant as he bent forward to buckle me in. He was pretty, not

handsome, his delicate features paired with full lips and lashes almost as long as my own. The growing warmth, previously tamped, now spread throughout my belly like a flame. I sought his eyes as he fumbled with the straps. And though he performed his duties succinctly, I could tell I made him nervous, because he avoided my gaze. Were he some forest creature, he would almost certainly have frozen in place by now, a small animal hoping to avoid the eye of the hawk drifting in lazy circles overhead.

Placing my hand on his before he completed his task, I ordered him to bide while I spoke to the pilot (it was, of course, a private plane). After instructing the captain and his crew that under no circumstances was I to be disturbed, I returned to the cabin with a saber smile of my own.

I have heard it said that, due to the mechanics involved, a woman cannot take a man in *that* way against his will. To which I would reply, have you ever made the attempt? True, most women would find the process difficult, to truly force one's self on another. But even weakened as I was with Timothy's blood, still I was far this boy's superior in strength, if not in size.

As he quickly learned.

Ladies, you should try it sometime. For while I am hardly adverse to the coy flirtations so typical of my sex (and which are, in and of themselves, also an exercise in power), the taking of what one wants sans preamble inspires an exuberance all its own. Almost like . . . Hunting. And since that was a pleasure I could not indulge in without losing my newfound immunity to the sun (among other things), my appetites now required a, shall we say, surrogate.

You should not judge me by human standards. For I am a predator, after all.

My actions required caution, however. No shed blood. I know my mind all too well, so I forced myself to be contented with the taste of his tears alone, inhaling deeply of his sobs as I smothered his mouth with my own while, pent from long suppressed need, I used him in a particularly cruel fashion.

Sated afterwards (at least, for the moment), I disregarded his distress, giving him leave to tend to his injuries while I stared out the plane's small window at the earth, so very far below.

So much light. And as I bathed in it, like a cat on a windowsill, I shuttered my eyes and floated within the memory of the day after He had given me this priceless gift.

A telephone call to my hotel room that morning from a payphone outside the restaurant had found Charles in a panic. Calming him had taken no small amount of time. Hours earlier he had contacted Melanie and George, who were already making preparations for separate flights to our location. (Amongst the *topovar*--that is, the blood slaves--of House Ember, I only allowed committed couples such

as Arthur and Tracy Bingham to travel together as a matter of course, and even then solely when circumstances made it inconvenient to do otherwise.)

After instructing Charles to call and reassure them that everything was fine and to remain where they were, I told him that circumstances had delayed me, but that I would return to the hotel once night had fallen.

I spent that day thinking--sometimes walking, sometimes seated--while people watching. Young men cast curious glances in my direction, or ogled me openly. The women mostly frowned, though a few did cast curious, smoky glances my way.

Under normal circumstances I would have ignored them all. Meeting another's gaze is an open invitation, after all, this I learned as a small child. Eye contact was only to be initiated when it served a purpose. My purpose.

But now . . .

Understand this about the Breed, only infrequently do we give ourselves over to the pleasures of the flesh. Oh, we are far from incapable of it. But we do not feel it as we once did, during our previous lives. A shadow, sometimes, when the blood is hot in our bellies, warming our flesh with liquid heat. But when all is said and done, there is little point. After all, we cannot breed (pardon the pun), which makes sex with our own kind purely recreational. But even then we rarely indulge. For to give of ourselves, one to another, is to make ourselves vulnerable to the memory of a life long since left behind; a past existence which we know instinctively, or learn through bitter experience, to avoid.

To lie with those who nourish us, now, that is a separate thing. With them there are no politics, no fretting over words or deeds which might be turned against us. But there are--How shall I put it? Practical concerns. For human flesh is tender, and heals slowly, if at all. So while one can take some degree of gratification from a human (and their bodies are oh so warm), the joy that comes from unrestrained passion is not an option. At least, not more than once. Nails that would carve simple furrows into the back of another Breed would split the skin of a human like a carving knife, exposing the raw meat, perhaps even the spine, to glisten in the lamplight like the backbone of a freshly gutted fish.

It has happened before, you see.

But on that morning I watched them as they passed by, with glances both surreptitious and open, men and women alike. Some resentful, a few hostile. The others, though . . .

Against my will, I felt the need rising within me, like the tide. Prior to the start of my new life it had always been that way, even from my earliest memories (for I had been a precocious child, what my mother had once described as 'an old soul'). Closing my eyes didn't help, for then my imagination entertained what my sight had been deprived of. Nails dug into the stone of the bench I sat on, carving

shallow furrows into the granite, as I struggled with the long-forgotten sensations which now tormented me. I felt like a bottle of champagne, shaken near to bursting, my mouth damp with the need to taste both skin and blood alike.

Which I could not do, He had said. At least, not the blood. And if forced to restrain myself during the act, to dampen the fires now threatening to consume me, then what would be the point?

So, shaking with suppressed desire, I absented myself from temptation, from the clean scent of skin, the fragrance of pheromones permeating the air around me like a mist, and found a darkened, solitary space where I could be alone with my thoughts, at least until night fell.

A short time later I took my rest in a deserted alcove, where I could focus on my new situation free from distraction. At some point, I knew I would need a plan to explain my newfound resistance to the sun. Either that, or keep it a secret. Which I certainly could have done, but what benefit would it have served me then? At a minimum, Charles had to know. So, alone with my thoughts, I formulated a plan, returning that evening to the hotel, still pretending to avoid the day star, but whispering to Charles that my mission had been a success.

Over the next year I shared stories with him about a secret book, filled with ancient Breed lore, which had been the goal of our trip that day. Quite the little actress I was, initiating brief forays into the morning light to 'build up my resistance', coupled with the aid of certain herbs and alchemical concoctions.

But then, acting was a familiar profession to me. Though hardly the oldest.
Reveal this secret at your peril, He had said.

So I kept His counsel. Only Charles ever knew. And he carried that secret like a strutting peacock, as I had known he would.

I returned my attentions to the present. We had long since left the cityscape. Ahead were mountains, old and brown, resting in a veritable sea of pines I now observed through gaps in the cloud cover as I mulled over my plans for when we reached our destination, and I confronted the killer of the last member of my family.

Sebastian. Others of House Ember had considered him my favorite, though he had not been (that would have been Juliette). But he had been the newest member, and the first I had personally sired. Some had made thinly veiled remarks about that, but I am not a sentimentalist, and those who consider me one only do themselves a disservice. For I was the one who gave him his new life, which--as I see it--means that only I possessed the right to take it. As I intended to explain in explicit (not to mention excruciating) detail to his murderer, when finally we did meet.

That was when the wing of the plane exploded.

Tilting at a horrifying angle, we dropped like a stone. Belly in free fall, I watched as the flight attendant flew past me towards the cockpit, a look of mortal terror on his face. He slammed into the bulkhead with a *crunch* that made me wince. Blood flowed down his cheek from a wound in his scalp as he lay there, unmoving.

I gripped the arms of my seat, knowing what I would see out the window, yet unable to look away from it. An endless carpet of green stretched into the distance, the individual trees growing as I watched. Past them I saw a silvery sheen.

The plane twisted in the air, as if the pilot were wrestling with the controls in an desperate attempt to prolong our flight until we could reach what looked to be a lake ahead.

This is how Juliette died. Remember?

A jarring bump flung me upwards against the straps holding me in place. Digging my fingers into the armrests of my seats, lips parted, I heard myself snarl. Then we hit.

Blood flowed over my chin from where I had bitten my tongue, and I heard the roar of the waters parting as we skated over them like a stone. A sideways motion caused my head to bang against the sidewall of the fuselage, and everything went dark. At some point we came to a halt.

It took a few moments for my head to clear. When it did, I looked out the window which, remarkably, remained intact. I watched, as if in a dream, as the waters crept up the window. We were sinking.

Remember the box . . . ?

Forcing my sluggish thoughts, along with my limbs, into motion, I fumbled with the buckles of my seat belt. Moving slowly, each step taken with a cautious precision, I finally managed to get free.

Now that the plane was more or less level, I got to my feet, then staggered to the emergency exit. None too steady, I grasped the handle, twisted it, and pushed. Nothing.

I looked out the nearest window. We now appeared to be completely underwater. But how far down? And how deep did the lake go? Had the door jammed, or was the force of the outside water pressure preventing me from opening it?

You're trapped now. Just like before . . .

I screamed while throwing myself against the door. Nothing.

Too weak. You can't escape.

Yes, I thought. Too weak now. However . . .

Still swaying on my feet, I made my way forward. The flight attendant lay sprawled against the entrance to the cockpit. I saw water, tinged with red, seeping

in under the door. No doubt the forward compartment was flooded. Then, to my surprise, I saw the young man tilt his head to look up.

"Help me," he whispered.

I looked down into his face, as white as paper, and nodded.

Then I fell on him.

The flesh of his throat parted like tissue as I ripped through it. He let out a gasp, almost a sigh.

I drained his fluids like a drunkard. The heat of him raced through me. And when there was nothing left, I licked what remained of him from my lips. His eyes stared up at me, his face contorted with the joy of *Som na Idilque*, the Ecstasy, which I had allowed him to experience prior to the taking of his last breath.

I am not a complete monster, after all.

Yet even then, flush with newfound strength, it took all of it to wrench the door from its hinges. And as I did, water roared into the compartment, sweeping me along in its path.

Submerged, I pulled myself forward yet again, squeezing through the narrow gap between wall and door. Then I realized, in my useless panic, what I had done.

Above me I saw light. The light of a sun now dangerous to me. For, by draining the attendant, I realized I had destroyed the protective properties of Timothy MacAlister's blood, trapping myself in the lake's depths.

What now?

What now indeed? I had no fear of drowning, since I had no need to breath. But I could not swim either, for the bodies of the Breed outweigh the water we displace, which is why we avoid crossing it whenever possible. I would have to walk.

Assuming, of course, that the lake's floor remains solid. For if it doesn't, and the mud runs deep, you may find yourself buried alive yet again. Might as well have stayed in the plane. At least there you had solid ground beneath your feet.

I suppressed the scream trying uselessly to claw its way up my throat, then returned to the fuselage and forced myself to sit, my hair floating about my head as though I were a mermaid.

You can't leave now, I told myself. You have to wait until the sun sets. Then find something, a pole or the like, to test the ground with, then walk to shore.

And how far is that? Looked like a large lake when we were plummeting into it just now. And how quickly can you move underwater? Hopefully fast enough, because once you surface there will only be so much time to find shelter before morning arrives.

I'll make it, I growled in my head.

Then what? Don't know if you were paying attention during that five point landing, but you're out in the middle of what He would call 'Bumfuck Egypt'.

I clenched my jaw and squelched the voice in my head. One catastrophe at a time.

Sitting there for what felt like hours, I finally noticed a dimming in the light overhead. Aware of how precious little time I might have, I found my carry-on bag and hung it over my shoulder before ripping a length of metal railing up from the floor to use as a walking staff.

Then I plunged into the darkness.

Fortune, bipolar bitch that she is, spun on her heel and now smiled down on me as I made my way forward. My feet did sink into the soft mud, but not so much that I couldn't maintain a steady, albeit exhausting, pace. The staff appeared to be doing its job, warning me of uncertain ground ahead I should avoid. My greatest fear was that, unable to orient myself, I might choose the wrong direction and take the longest way to shore, for while my light-sensitive eyes could make out my immediate surroundings, my line of sight was limited to perhaps six feet or so.

Shadows moved around me as I plowed ahead, and I could not help but wonder what creatures might call these waters home. For while I had no (well, at least not much) fear of coming out on the losing end of a battle with anything I was likely to encounter in those depths, healing any consequent wounds would drain my resources, perhaps significantly, and there was quite the shortage of flight attendants at hand now from which to replenish them.

After walking for what seemed an interminable amount of time, I looked up. Total darkness. I tried to recall what phase the moon was in.

If it's overcast, what difference would that make? You might as well be alone in the depths of space, far from the nearest solar system, out of sight and out of mind. Almost like being in a box . . .

I felt the water sliding down my throat, then forced my mouth shut.

Keep walking, I told myself, just keep walking. Don't think about the time, about how long it might be to sunrise. Just keep walking . . .

I felt something stab into the ball of my left foot (I had lost my shoes to the mud long before). Balancing precariously, I lifted my leg and felt about. Something thin and sharp. I scented blood in the water as I removed whatever it was from my foot (a bone, perhaps), then made my way forward yet again.

I cannot say how long it took, but at some point I made out a dim gleam overhead. Sluggish from the cold, I forced myself to move quickly. The effort would not warm my body (only human blood could do that), but I now worried that my energies might give out before I could reach safety, leaving me to collapse and sink into the mud, still conscious and aware, but unable to move, a potential food source for whatever inquisitive creatures might happen along . . .

And though I do not require air to breath, I do require it to speak. And speak I did, as my head broke the water's surface, and I cried out with joy.

Yes, my circumstances were still desperate. But I had overcome one challenge. Now for the next.

I looked around. Trees and large bushes bordered the shore of the lake, there was no beach. Squeezing the water from my hair, I checked the sky for any sign of an approaching dawn, but saw nothing, save a sliver of the moon at rest in a sky as full of stars as I could ever remember seeing.

Which way now?

If this lake is isolated, you're in trouble. But if not, if it's a recreational lake, there may be roads, perhaps even a camping ground. Best thing to do? Start circling it. You could simply plunge directly into the woods, hoping to run across a highway eventually, but what if you pick the wrong direction? You could find yourself attempting to cross hundreds of miles of forest. The shade might give you some protection once the sun rises, or perhaps you could burrow under the ground layer during the day and avoid it, but how long can you go without feeding after expending so much effort? A week? Maybe two?

"Circling it is," I muttered to myself, picking a direction at random.

After walking for some time, while casting ever more nervous glances at the sky, I found a pier with a dirt road leading away through the trees. Charged with hope, I almost trotted down its length, eventually coming out of the woods onto a highway. Not much of one, only two lanes. One of the most beautiful sights I had ever seen.

I walked a bit in either direction, and found what I was looking for, a sign: *Pixie 18 Miles.*

Still wet, my dress clinging to me like a second skin, my bare feet scraped and sore, I shouldered my bag and headed for Pixie.