

"Mashunechka, Mashunechka." Princess Irina Maria Poltoratzky's father was calling out to her as he strode across the wheat field with his imposing long-legged stride. "Mashunechka," he said again, this time softly, as he approached. "I have been calling for you for fifteen minutes. When I agreed you could tour the estate today, I didn't mean you could abandon your studies for the day. Now you have less than an hour to prepare for dinner. Your mother will be aghast at the state of your dress. And your hands.", he said, gently putting her small dirt crusted hand into his giant palm. "If you are not careful, you will end up with the hands of a serf."

Irina smiled as she stared at her father, who looked every bit the patrician officer and gentleman he was despite the mock peasant outfit he wore. No real peasant could afford the fine wool of his trousers or the crisp white linen of his blouse and certainly not the supple, polished leather of his tall boots. Dropping her smile, Irina addressed her father. "Look at the state of these fields, Papa. The wheat is unevenly sown, and the weeds are already threatening to take over. You need to order the serfs whipped to get them to work harder."

"Irina, my child, I worry for your soul some days. Whipping the peasants won't get them to work harder, just make them more stubborn."

"Sergei tells me his father has the serfs beaten for the slightest infraction, and they perform better for it."

"Yes, and the Khilkov's don't dare visit their estate without armed escort, whereas you are free to roam around the fields and hamlets with no cares. One day you will learn that the hammer is not the only tool. Now, go get your horse and ride back to the house before your mother take the hide off both of us."

A loud bang on the wall behind her head roused Irina from her fitful sleep. The quickly fading dream of one of her last days as a mortal was familiar to her, one that she had been having repeatedly for the past week. Lying in a cramped bed, Irina remembered what happened next. After dinner that evening, her Father called Irina into the drawing room. Her mother was already sitting in the room, waiting with a somber look on her face. "Irina, your Mother and I have been talking. We have decided that it is time for you to make your debut. You are turning seventeen in a few weeks. You are no longer a child. You will stay with your Great Aunt who will chaperon you to all the balls of the season."

"Do I get any say in this decision? What you really want is for me to find a suitable husband. Why don't you just say so? What if I don't want a husband? I don't want to be some rich man's chattel."

"Irina!" her mother exclaimed. "Is that what you think of me?"

"Sorry, Mother, but it's true. You can't own anything. Everything you have belongs to Father, included the house and land you inherited from Grandfather. I would rather stay here on the estate and study."

"Irina, it has been decided. We will have no more discussion," her Father said and with that her fate was sealed. Less than a month later, she had been transformed. Not exactly the future

her parents had envisioned, but perhaps better than becoming the wife of some fat prince or drunk general.

At first, she had wondered why she was having this dream, questioning whether it was a longing for her long-distant childhood or her mortality, but now she knew it was for the message from her father about more tools than a hammer. Ironic since it was a pounding hammer that had woken her.

The bang was just one more in a series of noises pounding in her head. For three days, she had been cooped up in her closet-sized cabin aboard the rusting freighter. The diesel motor's incessant hum located just yards from her head, which seemed to require constant maintenance in the form of being bashed with a hammer, had become intolerable. Now that she was again awake, she could feel the pounding in her head. She had a headache that defied description. It has started as a dull pain behind her right eye, gradually engulfing her entire head so that now every downstroke of the pistons in the giant engine was like a spike being driven into her brain. Despite the pain, the Princess knew she had no right to complain. She was lucky to be alive and was certain that she owed her escape to the Enemy's obsession with killing the Boss. She also knew that her three traveling companions were crammed into equally small cabins, enduring the noise and heat without complaint.

The Princess was still angry about how easy it had been for the Enemy to bring down the Boss and his Family. He had not appeared to be anything special when she first met him back in Moscow before he conspired with the Cheka to destroy her Family, and he was less impressive still when she had encountered him in New York, showing his weakness for mortals. However, the Princess had not been surprised when the Enemy had defeated the Boss. The Boss was always so arrogant, so confident of his abilities, and so blinded by his ambition to have dominion over mortals that he rushed to move to the final phase of their plan before they were ready. The Princess would not make this mistake again. She would build on her research into identifying candidates for transformation, perfecting the test that showed which mortals had the gene necessary to become an immortal, and she would move slowly, taking decades, if necessary, to build the army of vampires that the Boss so wanted.

Fortunately, the Princess was not without assets. Because she had expected the Enemy to track them down, she had wormed her way into the confidence of that spineless fool, Greg Albertson, extracting from him all the details of the Boss's many bank accounts and real estate holdings. Irina now had access to accounts containing several hundred million dollars and to homes, businesses, and warehouses around the world. More critical, she now had committed supporters from three leading Families, France, Egypt, and Japan.

The Princess had not known what to expect when she slipped out of her hiding place after the Enemy had searched the lab. Only curiosity had driven her to see if any of the visiting vampires had survived. Much to her surprise, all six dignitaries were still in one of the cells on the lowest basement level. Instinct honed from years on the run after the disaster in Moscow kept her from immediately opening the cell door but rather to insist that they pledge loyalty to the cause. When three of them hesitated, she ordered the others to kill them before she would open the door. The quiet delegate from Japan, Mr. Yoshi, had pulled a razor-sharp blade from somewhere and dispatched the three doubters almost before she finished her request.

Together the four new companions had crept through the same tunnel the Boss had used. Instead of trying to use the front gate, they fled through the deep woods, hiding in the undeveloped wilderness for three days until the police had finished searching every nook and corner of the estate before stealing a car and escaping. Unsure if the authorities would be looking for them and not willing to take any chances, they drove to the port of Newark where a few well-placed bribes had secured them berths on the small Greek-owned freighter now churning its way across the Atlantic.

Irina's contemplation was interrupted by a quiet knock on her door. She scowled, thinking it was another of the five crew members yet again inviting her to join the ship's captain for dinner, an invitation she had declined on each of the previous three evenings. She was relieved to see the elegantly dressed Frenchman, Henri Bourdain, the enigmatic Muhammed bin Azur of Egypt, and the reserved Japanese vampire, Ito Yoshi, quickly slide into the cabin. Irina waved them in but remained reclined on her berth. Yoshi took the single guest chair in the room. Bourdain leaned against the closed door with bin Azur squeezed against the far wall.

"Gentlemen, to what do I owe this honor?" Irina asked.

"Yoshi-san and I have had the opportunity to discuss our situation, and we need to ask some questions. You did get us out of that disaster, for which we are grateful, but our gratitude only goes so far. We have accepted your decisions, including traveling on this disgusting vessel." Here Henri paused to brush a non-existent speck of dust from the sleeve of his Yves St. Laurent jacket as if he were brushing off the grime that covered the ship. "But now, we are interested to know what you plan to do once we reach port."

Irina smiled her most pleasant smile. Now was the time to use charm and not threats. "Henri, I completely agree. Now is the time to discuss our plans. And my plan is exactly the same as our late departed friend, the Graf, to build an army of vampires that we will use to control the mortals. But unlike the Graf, we won't make the mistake of rushing. He was too concerned with his position in the new order. All I want is to bring about the new order. When vampires rule the day and not just the night, I assure you we will all have ample opportunities to indulge our desires."

The quiet Asian raised an eyebrow in question of this plan. "An admirable desire, I'm sure we would all agree. We would not have supported the Graf otherwise, but given his failure, why should we have confidence that you can succeed where he failed so miserably?"

"His foolish mistakes might have destroyed the Graf, but he did not necessarily fail. He rushed his small army together to demonstrate what he thought could be accomplished, but they were only part of the work, and in my opinion, a much less important part. Our sleeper assets are still in place, ready to be activated at my command. The Lt. Governor of New York, the head to two major departments within the New York City Police Department, and several high-ranking members of the US Army have all been transformed. And these are just the most prominent ones. There are many others. They all are being fed regularly by my remaining team under the guise of on-going medical treatment. Putting these assets in place took less than a year. I can train multiple teams in your countries to start transforming assets. I developed the blood tests that identify victims that can be transformed. I developed the drug cocktail and the psychological conditioning to control their minds. I even have access to the Graf's millions to

fund the labs and equipment we will need. All I need from you is the support of your Families to get started."

"So, you don't think we need a full army to achieve dominance?" a quizzical Henri asked.

"Oh, we will need an army. But our triumph will come by bringing down the mortal governments from within. You see, the Graf thought too much like a general and not a politician. He thought brute force was the way to succeed. He enjoyed killing too much, which affected his thinking. After seeing how easily one man, granted a very talented and frightening man, could destroy his force with the help of just a few mortals, I'm sure you will agree. Now imagine how different the outcome would have been if we had been able to deploy our sleeper assets in the police department. They could have either stopped the investigation before it began or turned the force of the police against their own suspected rogue agents."

Irina continued, "With patience and planning, we can infiltrate every police force, every government agency, every military in the world, and when the time is right, have them seize control of key assets and communications. When our army is released, no one will be able to stand against them." The nods and smiles from her guests assured Irina that she had convinced her fellow vampires. "Now, let's talk about how we can get started in each of your countries. I want to have a plan for all of us in writing by the time we reach Le Havre."