

## Burdens

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# **Burdens**

by [Creed Cascade \(creedcascade\)](#)

## Summary

Velkan carries the burdens and secrets of Vladislaus Dracula bloodline. Co-Written with TJ.  
Written many years ago.

Notes: "Domn" means "Lord" in Romanian, the traditional language of the Gypsies.

Gabriel Van Helsing was a name interchangeable with the label of murderer or monster throughout Europe. There was a time in the vague reaches of his mind that Gabriel had not been associated with such monikers, but that was in the distant past. He never wanted to be called a hero for defeating Dracula and so many other monsters, but to be hated was never desirable. Even the Holy City, which had once been a refuge, was filled with hostility towards him. In their eyes, he was a traitor for having let Frankenstein's monster go.

His status as a Knight of the Holy Order and the fabled Left Hand of God did not protect him in the dungeons. Rather, he was despised even more than the worse criminal because in the eyes of the Church, he had betrayed their cause and values.

With no natural light to be found in the maze of corridors under the Vatican, Cardinal Jinette looked even more conceited and decrepit by the flickering light of the torches. It was not the first interrogation by Jinette since Van Helsing had been thrust in a dank cell in the bowels of the dungeons, nor he doubted would it be the last.

"The orders I gave Brother Carl were quite specific, were they not?" Cardinal Jinette asked as he stood in front of the Knight. "Or is Brother Carl to blame for not passing them on to you?"

"He gave them to me," Van Helsing confirmed and wondered if he could keep the contempt out of his gaze for Carl's sake. "Carl has no fault in this."

"So you say," the Cardinal replied, making it clear he didn't entirely believe Van Helsing. "But considering the fact that you lied about the creature, how am I to believe you now? Perhaps I should summon Brother Carl? I'm sure the Inquisitors would be able to get the truth from him."

There were very few types of pain that Van Helsing had not experienced and agony caused by torture was not new to him by any means. The most horrible form of torture Gabriel had ever faced was watching another being suffering in his place. It was one thing to rely on his own inner strength to bear the pain, but for another to suffer for him was too much.

"Don't touch him, you bastard!" Gabriel yelled. Immediately one of the guards standing close by rewarded him with a heavy punch to the face. Van Helsing spit the blood out from his bruised mouth onto the floor and growled, "I take full responsibility for my own actions. I let the creature free. No one else."

The Cardinal nodded, smiling maliciously at Gabriel. He had needed to take Van Helsing down a peg for a long time now. This latest defiance over the Frankenstein creature had been the last straw. By the time he was released, Van Helsing would know his place once more. "You will have to do a better job than that to convince me of your truthfulness."

"The creature had a soul," Van Helsing replied. He could see Jinette's lips tighten in distaste at his answer and he added, "I know supernatural evil, Cardinal. Frankenstein's monster was created by evil, but he was not the Devil's work. Carl tried to convince me of my folly."

"Really, Van Helsing? Brother Carl follows you around like a puppy."

"And like a puppy, can you blame them for what they do?" Van Helsing shot back.

"I'm sure whatever convincing he tried to do was half-hearted at best," Jinette sneered. "I will take that up with him at a later date. But in keeping with the analogy, puppies require discipline. A firm hand, if you will. I believe we've been a bit lax with Brother Carl."

"Jinette..." Van Helsing said in a warning tone. "Do whatever you want to me, but leave him out of this. He is a true man of God."

"A true man of God should have no fear of the Inquisitors then. But, you are right... I should concentrate on you. Brother Carl can be dealt with later. Perhaps I'll even allow you to watch. But... first things first, bring it in," Jinette sneered, his eyes never leaving the bound Knight before him.

One of the burly Inquisitors came into the dank chamber and there was no disguising the object he carried. The henchman flung the head of Frankenstein's monster in front of Gabriel's kneeling form. Already decomposing, fluid leaked onto the already filthy straw scattered on the floor. Van Helsing stared down at the head of the creature he had called friend, then looked up at Jinette horrified.

"Why?" he gasped, trying to understand how supposed men of God could do such a thing.

"Because it was an abomination," Jinette answered. "It has always been the mandate of the Holy Order to rid the world of such monstrosities."

"He wasn't evil," Van Helsing said, though his words fell on deaf ears. "You had no right."

"I had every right and responsibility," Jinette growled. "But my dear Knight, my gifts to you aren't over just yet. I have one more." Van Helsing swallowed thickly, his thoughts immediately turning to the Friar. "I know about your proclivity for Gypsies," Jinette sneered and with a casual wave of his hand, he signaled for the Inquisitors to bring in someone else. As the door opened, two men dragged a limp figure between them, covered in blood and wounds. "Consider him a gift," Jinette commented, ignoring the pain of the men before him. He momentarily studied one of the rings on his fingers and then buffed it on his robes.

"Why have you brought him here?" Van Helsing asked, eyeing the unconscious young man warily.

"Because this is a way for you to redeem yourself in the eyes of the Order," Jinette chuckled morosely. "Kill him. If you do, I will restore your previous status and leave Brother Carl alone."

"You would have me do this?" Van Helsing demanded in disbelief. "You would have me kill an innocent stranger?"

"He is no more innocent than you are, nor a stranger," Jinette answered. "He carries the evil of Dracula in his blood. His family served a purpose and those who died for the cause, have redeemed their souls. This creature lives as a reminder of all that is evil in the Valerious bloodline."

Gabriel then recognized the young man, but he didn't understand how he could be here. Velkan Valerious was dead. He had died from Van Helsing's own pistol. But, he was now very clearly alive, the shallow rise and fall of his chest gave testament to that much.

"Why would you have me kill him? Does he still suffer from the curse of the wolf?"

"Because I wish it. That is enough."

"No," Van Helsing said firmly. "You are not God, no matter how much you'd like to think so."

"I take it that you reject my offer?"

"You won't make me a killer of innocents. Dracula is dead, and with him his curse."

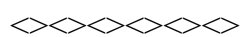
Van Helsing's statement made Jinette break out into laughter. In a flourish of red robes he was walking towards the door. "Drop that creature and untie Van Helsing. I want him to see for himself that he lives," Jinette instructed the Inquisitors holding Velkan. He turned back at the doorway and spoke again to Gabriel. "I shall leave you with him to reconsider. His life for the Friar's... think over my generous offer."

The two Inquisitors did as they were instructed and dropped Velkan with a thump onto the floor. Gabriel was alarmed to hear the young man did not moan in pain. Keeping a wary gaze on the Knight, one of the men used a blade to quickly cut the rope binding Van Helsing's wrists.

"Jinette, he needs a doctor!" Van Helsing yelled after the man, but the Cardinal ignored him.

The two guards secured the heavy oak and remained outside, standing guard to cut off any chance of escape. "I'll give you two days," Jinette called out once the door was shut and the chamber was swallowed into near darkness. "Then I'll come back for your decision or the body."

Once freed, Gabriel crawled over and looked down at the young man lying on the floor. He couldn't do what Jinette wanted and chose one life over the other. With all his being, he also knew he could not stand by and watch Carl being tortured to death either. Sinking to the stone floor, Gabriel was on the edge of being broken.



A few hours later, Van Helsing heard a soft groan and he was relieved that the Gypsy was finally coming around. Perhaps with two of them they could come up with a way out of this

mess. He could still smell the decomposing head even though he had pushed it into the farthest corner of the cell.

When he touched Velkan's cheek, the young man whimpered and turned towards the touch. "Anna..." Velkan moaned softly.

Van Helsing flinched at the name. "No, Velkan. It's Van Helsing," he said softly, stroking his cheek again.

Not fully conscious yet, Velkan seemed to relish the touch. When the hand passed over his cheek again, he kissed it lightly and mumbled, "Anna... please?"

Gabriel frowned, his hand stilling. Velkan continued to kiss his palm, even going so far as to pull one of the fingers into his mouth. With a gasp, Van Helsing jerked his hand away from the young man harshly.

Velkan whimpered at the withdrawal of the touch. "M'sorry..." he mumbled, starting to wake up a little more.

"Velkan, do you know where you are?" Van Helsing said. He crouched down beside the young man but was careful not to touch him, hoping Velkan wouldn't sense his discomfort.

"Hell?" Velkan groaned, eyes blinking with swiftly approaching clarity. His hands came up to cradle his throbbing head as he observed the cell surrounding them.

"You're more right than you know," Van Helsing told him. "You're in the dungeon under Vatican City. Most men never see this place and those that do never see anyplace else."

"Where's Anna?" Velkan asked. His first concern was his sister.

A pained expression passed over Van Helsing's face at the mention of Anna. "She's dead," he said softly, knowing no way to soften the blow. "I'm sorry."

Velkan turned over and watched as the impact of Gabriel's statement took hold. His beloved sister and centre of his world was dead. The loneliness and grief that he felt was greater than any loss he had ever felt.

Van Helsing moved next to Velkan and reached out to stroke the matted hair in comfort as the young man cried. "It was a quick death. She didn't suffer and I know that she rests with our Lord now."

"And Dracula?" Velkan ground out. "Is that monster dead?"

"Yes, it was Anna that helped destroy him."

"Then I can die as well," Velkan sighed. His tone was filled with pain, but it was also relieved.

Van Helsing told him, "Not if I can help it. Your sister gave her life fighting evil. Are you just going to throw yours away?"

"Not throw it away, just..." Velkan hesitated and as he sat up, he gave a pained groan. "Go home."

"Your home is in Transylvania," Van Helsing reminded him. "Don't let Anna's sacrifice be in vain."

"She's not Christ, she was my Anna," Velkan snapped. "And we've done what we were born to do, so there is nothing left for me to live for."

"You're a fool," Van Helsing spat. "You have a people that need you. Do you truly believe Dracula is the only evil to plague your lands? The world is filled with evil. Some wearing the guise of those trusted most."

Lowering his sullen gaze, Velkan seemed to comprehend the implications of Gabriel's words. "Why do you argue with me, Van Helsing?" Velkan asked. "I won't do what the Cardinal asked me to, so you don't have to worry."

"What did he ask you to do?" Van Helsing prompted. It seemed the good Cardinal was trying to play them both.

"Seduce you. Get you to choose me over some Friar."

Van Helsing looked away for a moment then back at Velkan. The motives behind Jinette's games were beyond him, but it was clear the old bastard wanted to control whoever made it out of this cell alive. Perhaps Jinette sought control over him by trying to increase his attachment to Velkan and use the Gypsy as a pawn. Whether or not he could trust Velkan was yet to be seen.

"Jinette asked me to choose between you and my friend. I have two days to decide, which means we have that long to figure a way out of here."

"There is no choice to be made," Velkan told him. "I wish to die."

"This is not a decision I will ever make and I don't wish you to die," Van Helsing replied, his tone laced with guilt. "I... cared for Anna. I might not have been able to save her, but I'm not going to just turn my back on you."

Not willing to accept a saviour, Velkan shot back. "You may have cared for her, but Anna did not care for you in the same way. Do not do me a favour I do not want."

"She cared for me more than you know," Van Helsing told him. "And I'm not doing it just for her or you. They want me to kill you. I won't spill more innocent blood."

"Then I will just find a way to get them to kill me," Velkan sighed, voice laced heavy with sarcasm. "Shouldn't be too hard."

Van Helsing grew angry to hear the utter disregard for the man's own life. He grabbed Velkan by the remnants of his shirt and shook the younger man. "You will not make her sacrifice in vain!" he roared. "You will not curl up and die. Do you hear me?"

Tears formed at the corner of Velkan's eyes as Gabriel shook him. "I am alone! She would want me to join her!"

"She would want you to live, you insolent pup!" Van Helsing continued to rage. "Do you think I didn't think of joining her? Do you think it didn't tear my heart out to know that I had killed her?"

"You killed her?" Velkan asked. His voice didn't harden, but seemed a little lost.

"I... yes... " Gabriel dropped his head, his brow worried with shame. "I didn't mean to. She was trying to inject me with the cure. I... I snapped her neck when she rammed the needle into me."

"Then please... kill me, too," Velkan begged him. He tilted his head to the side to bear his neck to Van Helsing.

Not knowing what else to do Van Helsing pulled the young man into his arms and held him tightly. "Don't ask that of me," he implored. "Please. Don't ask me to do that."

"I am lost without her..." Velkan started to mumble and sobbing, he clung to Gabriel like the lost soul he was. "I cannot do it myself... it is a sin. And I will not join Dracula in Hell."

"So is murder, damn you. You won't damn your own soul to Hell, but you're more than willing to damn mine? Anna stopped me from killing you before. It's a shame she didn't know what a snivelling coward you were."

Velkan started to shake as he was inundated with Van Helsing's words. "I am..."

"You're her brother. Prince Velkan Valerious... the last of your line. Do you truly wish to die in this dungeon?" Van Helsing said, trying to reach the young man.

"I'm a coward," Velkan shook his head. "I'm alone without purpose. I am a monster."

"I'm right here beside you," Van Helsing cut him off. "And you are no more a monster than I am. As for your cowardice, you can still prove me wrong. Help me find a way out of here, Velkan, and we'll make Jinette sorry he ever tried this."

Velkan understood the tone that Van Helsing was using. It was the same commanding tone that Anna and his father had always used with him. Following orders was something familiar when his whole reality crumbled around him.

"Revenge?"

"A whole lot of very bloody revenge," Van Helsing promised. "But first we have to get out of here and find Carl. He has no idea the danger he's in."

The mindset that Velkan used in combat covered the sorrow and dissolved his uncertainties. He could ignore his injuries and pain with the distraction of purpose fuelling him. "We could lure the guards in and kill them."



Van Helsing glanced about taking in the guards by the door. "Possibly. There are only two. How do you propose we lure them in here?" he whispered.

"I can attempt to seduce them," Velkan answered, his tone serious.

"No," Gabriel ground out. "We'll think of something else. You'll not be their... their plaything."

"Why not?" Velkan responded, starting to remove his torn shirt and Van Helsing could hear the rustling of the fabric. "It's one of the best lures. I'm filthy, but that rarely matters at times like this. For men such as those, it is about power more than anything else."

"No!" Stilling Velkan's hands, he held them in a tight grip. "We'll find another way."

"What other way?" Velkan challenged. "We're in a locked chamber in the heart of the Holy City. I do not see why you are reacting this way. If it is because I am a man and they are men, do not look. I have done this for years for my family's cause."

"I will not stand by and watch you whore yourself to the likes of them," Van Helsing said, his disgust evident. "If we can think of no other way, then I shall be the one to... offer."

Velkan looked down at the mention of the word 'whore'. "It's not whoring. It is sacrificing oneself for the greater good..."

"You will not sacrifice yourself to them," Van Helsing told him again. "I'll kill them with my bare hands before I see you on your knees before those murderers."

"Then tell them you've killed me," Velkan offered. "When they come to take away the body, we can attack them."

Van Helsing considered the plan. More than likely, if they tried that, the guards would summon Jinette and the others before coming to take away the body. Reluctantly, Van Helsing realized that the Gypsy's first idea was probably the best. He would simply have to modify it a bit and hope that together they could entice the guards to enter their cell.

"Just remember that what I'm about to do is simply part of the plan. Go with it," Van Helsing said. He shifted closer and put his hand on Velkan's neck to draw him in for a kiss.

Velkan realized what Van Helsing was planning a second before the man's lips touched his. Having little choice but to trust the Knight, he responded to the kiss, deepening it in the hopes of luring their guards closer with a distraction and make them believe he was succeeding at seducing Gabriel.

Velkan could feel Van Helsing's hands running over his back and shivered. He realized that it would take more than kissing to draw the guards' attention. Pushing Van Helsing away slightly, Velkan shifted down to manoeuvre his head over the man's groin.

Van Helsing quickly grabbed Velkan's neck, stopping him momentarily. "Just make noises to sound like the act is real," he whispered urgently.

“They might be able to tell,” Velkan answered and then pulled away.

Gabriel was about to protest again when Velkan reached into his trousers and pulled out his sex. Half-hard from the adrenaline rush, Van Helsing shuddered as his body responded to the attention. He could feel his cheeks warm at the idea of what was about to occur between them and hoped that Velkan would not see his pleasure in the half-light of the cell.

“It doesn’t mean anything,” Velkan tried to console Gabriel with a soft whisper. “It doesn’t make you any less of a man.” He breathed, lowering his lips down upon the head of shaft.

Van Helsing tried to stifle a moan as he flushed with embarrassment. Then he remembered they were trying to lure the guards in and didn't hold back. He didn't even have to pretend as Velkan expertly worked on him and he quickly found himself fighting not to explode in the man's mouth.

Velkan didn’t even stop when he heard the door creak as it opened. “Oh, look what we have here,” one of the Inquisitors laughed. “The whore is doing his best to convince Van Helsing to let him live.”

Both men tensed as the guards moved closer to get a better look. Van Helsing bought his hand to Velkan's head and pretended to guide his movements. He didn't want the other man to make a move too soon. As it was, he was having a hard time concentrating with Velkan's mouth on him like it was. Van Helsing was just about ready to strike when he heard the one of the guards’ cry out and slump to the floor. Standing there in the doorway was Carl with table leg in his hand.

The other guard quickly followed as Carl slammed him in the head as well. "Van Helsing, do you really think now is the time for... that?" he asked, a bemused grin on his face. Word had gotten to him that the Knight was being held in the dungeon. Carl knew he couldn't simply abandon his friend to his fate and had come to help free him. He hadn't known about the other man.

Before Van Helsing could answer, Velkan pulled away and blurted out, “It was merely a distraction for the guards.”

"Oh yes, well, I can see you holding him down from here," Carl smirked. "But if you gentlemen would be so kind, we really should be going. Unless you want to stay here?"

Van Helsing coughed as he got to his feet. “Of course not.” He pulled up his trousers quickly and tucked himself away. “Thank you, my friend, for saving me yet again.”

"You're quite welcome, but I do wish we'd stop making a habit of this," Carl said. They quickly scanned the corridor. Muttering to himself, Carl pressed a particular brick and the wall to reveal a secret passageway. “Cliché, I know, but handy none the less.”

As soon as he heard of Van Helsing’s imprisonment, Carl had immediately begun to question Cardinal Jinette’s motives. Knowing they would have to leave the city, following any sort of rescue, he gathered the most essential of his friend’s gear and loaded it onto horses with his own. He hadn't known about the other man or he'd have had a third horse waiting as well.

"The Gypsy will have to ride with you," Carl said as they managed to make their way to the back gate.

"Right," Van Helsing replied then paused. "Carl, do you know what Jinette had planned?" He needed to know how much the friar knew, if anything.

Carl's answer was simple and swift. "Why do you think I was so quick, Gabriel?"

"I wouldn't have let him hurt you, Carl. You know that, don't you?"

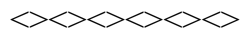
"I know," Carl answered and gifted Van Helsing with an understanding smile.

Velkan saw the short exchange and immediately tried to understand the fondness between the two men.

"The Cardinal was a fool to think he could tempt you with me," Velkan said quietly.

"Whatever this is about, we'll discuss it after we get out of this place," Van Helsing told Velkan. He patted Carl affectionately on the shoulder and then mounted his horse. Extending an arm, he helped the Gypsy up and behind him.

With Velkan holding on tight, Van Helsing urged his horse to run. Carl followed right beside him, eager to be away from the Holy City as well. He was still reeling from what Jinette had tried to do and wanted as much distance between themselves and the Cardinal as humanly possible.



No place was safe in Rome and so they rode north at first, but Van Helsing doubled back and took the coastal route south. He hoped their pursuers would think them heading towards Bolonga and from there onto Switzerland or Austria. They would never suspect where he was planning to actually escape to.

They were still in Italy, but they had ridden so far and fast that the horses were foaming at the mouth. Van Helsing reined in his horse then headed off the road and into the woods. He found a small clearing not too far in that would meet their needs. "This'll have to do for tonight," he said, waiting for Velkan to dismount. "I don't want to risk staying at an inn until we're clear of Italy."

Velkan refused to give into the pain throughout his body. The long ride had just aggravated the injuries he sustained from the Inquisitors. Gritting his teeth together, Velkan slid down from the horse onto the ground, placing a hand upon a broad flank to keep himself upright.

"Sit down over there," Van Helsing told him, pointing to a fallen log. "As soon as Carl and I have the camp set up we can see to your injuries." He hadn't missed the young man's signs of pain but they had been too busy fleeing to do anything about them.

Velkan sat down where he was told without a word. He watched as Van Helsing and Carl set out the camp with easy familiarity. To his sleep-deprived mind, it was easy to draw the conclusion that they were lovers, even if Gabriel claimed to have loved his sister. The

camaraderie and affection Gabriel openly showed Carl made Velkan's heart ache with envy. He did not blame Van Helsing for Anna's death, instead knowing that all of the misfortune and tragedy plaguing their family was due to Dracula. He wanted to join his family in heaven and leave the isolated world behind him.

It seemed to make sense that he could repay the debt to Van Helsing and achieve his goal of death by simply leading the Cardinal's men away from their flight. His death would have merit then and Velkan was resolved with his plan of action. He waited until they were engrossed with making a fire before he made his move. He took off as quickly and silently as he could away from the camp.

The snap of a twig alerted Gabriel. "Damn," Van Helsing swore, catching sight of Velkan as he dashed into the woods. "Carl, stay here".

Setting off into the woods after the Prince, Gabriel knew that they weren't far enough away from the Holy City for Velkan to be so careless. If Jinette found him, he'd kill the damned boy for sure. And compared to all of his many years, Velkan was a damned child, especially for this stunt. Telling himself that he pursed Velkan to keep the boy safe, Van Helsing moved through the trees with the skill of a predator.

Velkan couldn't hear Van Helsing tracking him. He had run flat out for at least three miles before assuming it safe enough to stop for a moment to catch his breath.

A moment later, Van Helsing stepped out from behind a tree directly in front of him.

"Going somewhere?" he asked cockily, ready to tackle Velkan if he tried to take off again.

Velkan swore in Romanian under his breath and then glared at Van Helsing. "I am going wherever I wish."

"Not just yet," Van Helsing told him as he moved closer. "Jinette's still alive. As soon as he finds out we've escaped, he'll set his dogs on us. If they find you, they'll kill you."

Velkan stepped backwards and glared at the Knight. "If they follow my trail, then you will be able to go free and unchecked."

"And when they find you, they will torture every bit of information about Carl and I out of you that they can before they let you die. I'm not willing to take that risk. You're coming with us for now."

"I know nothing about you," Velkan shook his head and took another step away from the Hunter. "And there are always ways of avoiding torture..."

"You've felt their touch. There is no way to avoid spilling your guts once they get their hands on you," Van Helsing argued.

"Cutting your tongue out is one way of avoiding talking," Velkan laughed sharply. "It's hard to laugh when you're dead."

"Make no mistake, boy. They will take you alive and they will make you talk. Now come back to the camp with me before Carl comes looking for us. I don't want him traipsing around these woods alone."

Velkan looked down at his boots and chastised himself mentally. Of course Van Helsing had followed him out of concern for his lover, not out of any real concern for a Gypsy whore. "When will I be able to part ways with you?"

"Once I'm sure you're safe from that monster and his minions," Van Helsing replied. "I have no wish to see you dead, Velkan."

"Perhaps, I want to be dead!" Velkan snapped.

Van Helsing moved forward quickly and grabbed the man by the front of the shirt Carl had given him. Shaking him hard, he slammed him back into the tree they stood next to. "I don't care what you want, you selfish brat! I won't let you die!"

When Velkan connected with tree, his head snapped back and slammed hard into the trunk. His eyes rolled back into his head and his body went limp in Van Helsing's grip.

"Damn," Van Helsing swore angrily as he hoisted the unconscious form over his shoulder.

As he carried Velkan back to camp, he had time to really contemplate him since their escape. He held Velkan's wish to die in contempt, but understood the pain it was born from. Velkan was obviously a warrior, so to see him seek death was distasteful and saddening. There was also something very off putting about how easily Velkan was willing to use his body to buy their freedom. Velkan was a bundle of mixed skill, honour and insecurities. The instant dislike Velkan had developed towards Carl was also troubling.

Carl scolded the Hunter the minute he came within sight of the camp. "Gabriel, what in Heaven's name did you do to him?"

"He was being stubborn," Van Helsing mumbled, setting Velkan down on the ground carefully. "I didn't mean to thump him against the tree that hard, but he was pissing me off."

Carl's eyes narrowed at Gabriel. "Thump him? You attacked a man with a head injury out of anger and then carry him back here like a bag of potatoes? What were you thinking? Don't answer that, obviously, you weren't thinking at all."

"Well, it's nothing compared to what will happen to him if the Cardinal gets his hands on him again," Van Helsing huffed.

Gathering a satchel with healing supplies, Carl moved to fuss over Velkan and started to nurse the lump on the back of Velkan's head. "Gabriel?"

"What is it?" he asked, moving over to look down at the unconscious figure.

"We both saw him die. How is it possible he lives now?" Carl asked. It was the first time he had a chance to address the nagging anxiety since the escaped and hard ride.

Sitting down on a fallen tree, Gabriel shook his head. "Honestly, I don't know. Do you think Jinette is behind it? After everything else the fool's tried to do, I wouldn't put it past him. Cavorting with witchcraft and demonic arts."

"It would make sense..." Carl reasoned and then looked at Velkan with pity. "Poor boy, to have your soul pulled back into your body. To be denied a peaceful afterlife..."

"Was his afterlife truly so peaceful?" Van Helsing wondered. "He died a werewolf, my friend. Perhaps it was not Heaven his soul was in after all."

Rolling his eyes at Gabriel, Carl knew that the Prince had been an innocent enslaved to the curse of the wolf. God would not allow him to suffer for the crimes of a beast. The doctrine of their faith, both Gabriel's and his own, was one of forgiveness at its core. "I will not discuss theology with you while he is in pain."

"Do you need any help with him?" Van Helsing asked warily.

"That depends?" Carl asked. "Will you be thumping him again any time soon?"

"I won't hurt him again," Gabriel said, feeling suitably admonished. He knelt down beside Carl and began helping him to cover Velkan's wounds in clean bandages. "He kept talking about wanting to die. I was just trying to get through to him."

"Well, you can help by keeping him warm tonight, Gabriel," Carl sighed as they finished their work. "There's nothing more I can do for him. Try to wake him up every few hours."

"Fine. He can have my bedroll. I want to keep watch tonight anyway."

"That won't do," Carl told him. "He has a touch of the cold fever and needs to stay warm. A blanket won't be enough and well, he might toss it off in the night. He also needs someone to watch over his breathing."

Van Helsing raised a speculative brow. "And just what did you have in mind?"

"Try not to thump the boy when you're cuddled up with him tonight," Carl answered with a half smile.

"I don't cuddle," Gabriel grouched but he made no further argument. If Carl said the boy needed to be kept warm then Van Helsing would do it. He just hoped the boy didn't wake up during the night. After what had transpired between them in the cell, he wasn't sure his touch would be all that welcome.

They had to get an early start, so soon enough, so after a meal of dried rabbit and broth, Carl was settled on the other side of the fire snoring gently. Van Helsing however, was not having an easy time of getting to sleep. He had Velkan held against his body and the Gypsy was starting to stir with the impetus of bad dreams. At first it was nothing more than mild shifting, which Gabriel could ignore. However the moment Velkan's backside pressed back against his groin, Gabriel couldn't force himself to ignore it with all the help of the angels in Heaven.

"Easy, young one," Van Helsing whispered, trying to soothe him back to sleep. Although he could feel his body responding to the young man's movements, Gabriel gritted his teeth and tried to still his hips.

Velkan just whimpered in response and rubbed back against Van Helsing. "Anna..." he moaned.

Van Helsing froze, aghast at the name Velkan had called out. This was the second time he had sought his sister in his delirium. And, like the first time, his voice held no brotherly connotations.

"Anna, please..." Velkan whimpered again. This time he rolled over, so that he was facing Van Helsing, except that his eyes were still closed. He pressed his body tight against the Hunter and buried his head against Gabriel's neck.

Van Helsing could feel the young man's arousal as it pressed into his side. He was loathe to wake him, but he could not allow this... whatever this was... to go on. "Velkan... Velkan, wake up," he said softly, trying to not disturb Carl who lay but a few feet away.

"Love me?" Velkan gasped dreamily. "Please?"

Breathless, Gabriel gazed down upon moonlight features soft with anguish. "Shhh... It's all right. She did love you," Van Helsing whispered, thinking the boy simply wanted a reaffirmation of his sister's love for him.

Velkan was slowly coming out of his delirium, but not enough to realize he wasn't with his beloved sister. In his mind, he was living in the past when they had been happy together. "Touch me..." Velkan begged. "Father is away."

Van Helsing closed his eyes, a sick feeling stirring in his chest. "Velkan," he said more sharply, giving him a gentle shake. "Wake up."

"Wha-" Velkan groaned out as he woke up. He didn't want to wake up and face the world, so he squeezed his eyes shut and buried his face against Van Helsing's neck.

"Easy now," Van Helsing said as Velkan began to awaken. He didn't want to hurt the boy as he'd already been through so much.

Velkan was fighting waking reality with every inch of his consciousness. He started to kiss Gabriel's neck, sucking on the flesh softly.

Despite his misgivings, Van Helsing couldn't stop the groan that escaped him as Velkan began kissing him. He tightened his grip on the young man, pulling the muscular body closer. While he knew he should stop this but he remembered all too well the feeling of Velkan's mouth on his flesh.

Lost in warmth and memory, the Prince mouthed the column that was too thick to belong to a female, more less his Anna. "Tell me what you want," Velkan pleaded. He would do anything he was told right now.

"Velkan..." Van Helsing whispered brokenly, trying to fight both his body and the beautiful young man in his arms. "I don't want to hurt you..."

He knew he wasn't with Anna now, but he was with a warm body, a willing one if the weight pressing into his hip was any indication. "Doesn't matter," Velkan insisted. "You can fuck me. You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

"Perhaps it would be best if Velkan slept with me," Carl called out from the darkness. He had awakened to Velkan's soft pleadings and had not missed the struggle in Van Helsing's voice when he replied.

At the sound of Carl's voice, woke Velkan up entirely. Remembering fully whom he was with and what he had offered, Velkan went rigid in Van Helsing's arms. "Release me."

Van Helsing loosened his grip, but didn't let go. "You were dreaming."

"I will sleep alone," Velkan said. "Go sleep with your man."

"My man?" Van Helsing questioned, confused. "Do you think Carl and I..."

"Don't lie to me!" Velkan spat and struggled to get away again. "You rub it in my face that you love each other... you remind me that my beloved is gone!"

Shocked by the outburst and the accusation, Gabriel balked, "Of course we love each other. He's my best friend."

"She was my best friend," Velkan said more to himself than the others. "Now, stop touching me!"

"She was more than that, though, wasn't she?" Van Helsing asked. He didn't want to let Velkan go, but he was afraid if he released him altogether, the Prince would run again, especially now.

Velkan stopped struggling for a moment as he thought of Anna. Not wanting to give the Knight information he would not understand, information that he held dear, Velkan spoke cautiously. "Yes..." he sighed. "She was my older sister... she always took care of me. She taught me everything I know."

"Tell me," Van Helsing implored. The boy needed to talk this unnatural relationship he had with his sister. "Tell me what she was to you. Perhaps... perhaps, she was your sister in name only? I know the Gypsies take in orphans."

"She was everything to me..." Velkan answered. "We had to gather information in our fight against Dracula any way possible and sex is the most effective tool. Anna was the last daughter of the Valerious line... and how Father loved her. She looked so much like his favourite wife that he would not send her out to do that work and raised her like a son. It fell to me to get the information when the need arose. She showed me what to do... she loved me when no one else would... I was a son of the House of Dracula and shunned by the local people for what I had to do."



"She was your lover," Van Helsing said, his voice flat as the truth became clear. Anna had been a very strong-willed woman. He could only guess that Velkan was a follower who idolized his sister and was lost without her strong presence.

"My first..." Velkan agreed, with a soft smile on my face. "I needed to be skilled or I would disgrace the family."

The entire situation made Gabriel's stomach turn. He had a vague memory of a desert land, Egypt perhaps, where similar relationships had been common, but it did not lessen his disgust concerning this one.

"How... How old were you when she first..." Van Helsing trailed off. He couldn't say the words. To think that Anna of all people had done such a thing with her own brother was nearly beyond comprehension.

"Old enough," Velkan said. "There was a great need for..."

"My God," Van Helsing said, aghast. "What were they thinking, to use you in such a way?"

Glaring defiantly at Gabriel, Velkan would feel no shame about his training, his lover and his life. "There was a great need for information. Our numbers were so few... usually one of the Valerious women was trained in such arts, but with only Anna left and no other daughters, there was no choice. It was my duty."

"They had no right to subject you to such depravity. Your own sister..." Van Helsing hesitated, unsure what to say. He didn't want to speak ill of the dead and it was clear that Velkan cared very deeply for his sister, so Gabriel kept to himself the true range of his opinion on the matter.

An easy and firm claim sprang from Velkan's lips in the face of Gabriel's scrutiny. "She loved me. You just don't understand. She was everything to me... she raised me after my mother died. She taught me to fight... how to love."

"What she did to you was not right. Surely you must see that?"

"You do not have to worry, Hunter," Velkan spat and started to struggle again. "I wouldn't have given her a child. I'm not a man in that way! My father tried to breed me to one of his mistresses to carry on the line, but to no success."

He had heard enough and felt ill. "Be silent!" Van Helsing snapped angrily. "A child is the least of my concerns. Do you even hear yourself? They tried to breed you? You are not an animal to be bred. You are a man and should have been treated as such."

"I am the last of the line," Velkan growled back with the strained remnants of patience. "The last son, bred from the last wife of my father. We had brothers... they all died for the cause. Now even Anna is dead... but she died with honour! I know what I am, Hunter! You told me as much... a whore... a catamite!"

"When did I call you that?" Van Helsing snarled angrily.

"In the cell," Velkan answered. "You told me I whore myself. In my homeland, it was a noble deed... a sacrifice for the cause, but you've told me the truth. If I let you fuck me, will you let me go?"

"No," Van Helsing replied. "And telling you not to whore yourself to gain our release isn't the same as calling you a whore. I don't consider you a whore no matter what you've had to do to protect your people."

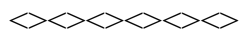
Velkan went limp in Van Helsing's arms, the fight leaving him. He had always been able to use sex to get what he wanted. Van Helsing didn't want him, that for sure was certain. "Go to your lover," Velkan said. "He has been silent through this whole exchange and is undoubtedly mad at you. I will not run."

Velkan had such a thick skull and Van Helsing too was tired of restraining the whelp. "Carl is not my lover and he isn't angry with me. If he were angry, we would both know it, believe me," Van Helsing said, trying to lighten the tense mood a bit. "Besides, Carl said you needed to be kept warm. The last thing I want to do is make him angry. He can hear every word we're saying, but he's chosen to keep silent."

Now Velkan understood even better. He was an object of pity and probably disgust. "If that's what you want," Velkan answered him. "Not to make him angry..."

"That's what I want," Van Helsing said, willing to settle for the young man's capitulation at the moment.

Van Helsing wasn't sure what to say to convince the boy he was wrong about his relationship with the friar. He was equally puzzled as to why he wanted to so badly, as well. For some reason, he didn't like the idea of Velkan thinking he and Carl were lovers and it had nothing to do with the Carl being a "holy man". Deciding to let it be for now, Gabriel pushed it from his mind, determined to enjoy a few peaceful hours with Velkan tucked safely in his arms.



Van Helsing woke with Velkan clinging to him and fast asleep. Even as he monitored the man's breathing, he also watched Carl puttering around with what would have to pass for breakfast.

"He's exhausted," Gabriel said, running one hand over Velkan's hair.

"I would expect so," Carl answered. He had collected apples from a nearby field and bite into one that nearly past ripe. "Coming back from the dead will do that to you."

"There is a thin line between life and death," Van Helsing said. "You heard everything last night about his perverse relationship with his sister."

"Yes," Carl replied, shaking his head grimly. "I would never have thought such a thing of Anna. She seemed so... devoted to ridding the world of Dracula and protecting her people. Perhaps, in hindsight, she was too devoted."

Gabriel shuddered, trying not to disturb Velkan. The way Velkan had been used by his family sickened him, but he knew better than to let Velkan know that. It would push the young man away for certain if he did. Finally, Gabriel looked at Carl and said softly, "I'm worried for him. He does not see what they did to him as wrong."

"No, he doesn't. But that's to be expected," Carl said. "They were his family. He trusted them. Something does worry me about him, though."

"What's that?"

Taking another bite, Carl met Gabriel's eyes with serious concern. "What went on with the two of you while you were in the dungeons."

"Hell," Van Helsing answered quietly. When Carl gifted him with a scowl, he shakily amended, "I think that I was gifted with the caretaking of another soul..."

"He was brought to tempt you," Carl pointed out. "As one of maybe many darker purposes for the Gypsy."

"I do not see why they should think he would tempt me," Gabriel grumbled. "I do not seek out the company of men..." Again Carl scowled at him. "Alright, I have not for centuries..."

"But you have in the past, there is no denying that fact." Carl said, recalling an instance of Gabriel's fondness for a Roman soldier. "Cardinal Jinette isn't the only one to possess such knowledge. He won't be the only one to try to use the Gypsy against you, either."

"So, what do I do? I cannot simply abandon him. He wouldn't last a week before he was dead."

Carl wondered when Van Helsing had become an optimist. "Or worse."

"Then I ask again, what do I do? I won't simply leave him to his fate, Carl. Regardless of what danger he might bring."

"His fate was to die, Gabriel," Carl sighed. "Someone denied him that. He was raised for the sole purpose of killing Dracula and freeing the souls of his ancestors. Those tasks are complete and taking into consideration his... immoral relationship with his sister... I'm not saying it right, but it's understandable that he is not so attached to this mortal coil."

Gabriel double-checked to make sure that Velkan slept on before he answered. "I will not let another soul under my guard die. I cannot carry that burden..."

"Perhaps it is not your burden to carry, my friend," Carl told him.

Van Helsing looked down again down at the young man in his arms. "I'm afraid that it is. Try to sleep a few more hours. We'll ride at first morning's light towards the port of Brindisi."

"And then?"

Closing his eyes, Gabriel whispered, "Back to Transylvania..."



“I know where we are headed.” They were the first words Velkan had spoken since he had fallen asleep in the Hunter’s arms. He had awoken and obeyed the commands to stay by Van Helsing’s side. Now they were on board a ship and he was looking out at the waves, watching the port disappear. It was all very a much a daze for him.

Due to the high winds, Van Helsing was forced to take off his trademark hat before he asked, “Do you?”

It was a growing feeling as they sailed towards the horizon of returning to his birthplace. “Home. We’re going home. I can feel it.”

“Yes, back to Transylvania,” Van Helsing nodded and ran his fingers over the worn railing. “If they come for us, we will have them on unfamiliar lands. We will have the advantage.”

“They will not come for you if you simply give them what they want...” Velkan’s voice was heavy. “You wouldn’t even have to kill me, Domn. It could be as simple as slipping into the sea...”

Van Helsing shifted closer and laid his hand onto Velkan shoulder. “You call me Domn...”

“I do and I will continue to do so,” Velkan agreed. He had noticed a remarkable change in Gabriel after his confession about his past. Van Helsing was treating him with more patience and touching him more. It was so sudden a change that it was a little unnerving. But Velkan was not about to turn away the affection of the man he held in such high esteem.

“You are the Prince...” Van Helsing said, squeezing Velkan’s shoulder slightly.

Laughing with irony at the mention of the title, Velkan shook his head. “We are in a time that needs no Princes. The Valerious line is dead. I am but a shell with no soul.”

“Do not speak this way, Velkan,” Gabriel warned him. “I will not tolerate it.”

“I do not care what you think!” Velkan spat, but he did not pull away from the older man’s touch.

Gabriel could no longer deny a growing fondness and attraction to Velkan. It had been just as quick with Anna. Gabriel leaned in closer, his breath now teasing Velkan’s ear. “I think you do, my young Prince. You could have killed yourself numerous times, despite my wish that you keep breathing. I think you care highly what I think.”

Velkan closed his eyes and whispered, “I do not know what to think anymore, Gabriel. I am lost.”

Gabriel gently wrapped an arm around Velkan’s waist, hoping it would offer some comfort. “No more talk of death, as you are not alone.”

Velkan did not answer right away, but stood close to Van Helsing and continued to watch the sea. “I will not speak of death, but I cannot promise you I will not think about it,” he

answered and he was still unnerved by Gabriel's change in attitude. "You should not stand so close."

"Why?" Van Helsing asked, pressing even closer.

Velkan's cheeks were quickly stained with a rising blush. "Your Friar... the crew. They will see."

"And? Carl is not an issue. He is not, nor will he ever be my lover. As for the crew... they are familiar with each other on lonely nights at sea..."

Gabriel didn't even have to finish the comment before he got a quick chuckle from Velkan. "Do not make me laugh. I do not even want to smile."

Van Helsing's hand was now resting flat against Velkan's stomach. "Why?"

"I do not deserve to enjoy even a moment of life," Velkan answered. "And why do you now not only accept my touch, but seek it out?"

Van Helsing sighed and brushed his lips over the back of Velkan's neck. "Escaping death makes you think you have no soul or happiness. I know, Velkan. And perhaps I see that you need me to touch you and I want to. It reminds us both that we have souls."

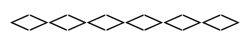
"Does living get any better after you have tasted death?"

"Some days," Van Helsing told him the truth. "Other days all I can do is pray. But do not let what keeps you here or brought you back dictate who you are. You are not evil, even though you have touched evil."

"No, perhaps I am not evil, but I am tainted," Velkan said, his voice barely above a whisper. Gabriel's mostly innocent touch was affecting him more greatly than a more lustful grope from a lover might have.

"Enough of this solemn talk, boy," Gabriel said. "Let's get back to our cabin before Carl gets bored. He's dangerous when he's bored and we don't need any fires aboard a wooden ship."

Following the tall, dark man who would be his protector, Velkan smiled, "Yes, Domn..."



Carl found Van Helsing on a secluded section of the deck, watching waves dance against the hull. In the last few days of the voyage, it was like living with two ghosts. Gabriel had always been a quiet man, but now it was even worse and Velkan, was more like an obedient servant than a traveling companion. Although they were mostly silent, lost in grief or guilt, there was still an electrical undercurrent between the two men. Carl thought it had the potential to develop into so much more, if they didn't self-destruct in the mean time.

"You know Velkan is just sitting on the bed staring off into nothingness," Carl said in lieu of a greeting.

Eyes taken in by the swell and flow of the sea, Gabriel did not look away. “Is he bothering you?”

“No, but it is rather unnerving,” Carl sighed. “He says nothing. And it’s not like he’s brooding like you. His eyes are just blank...”

“He’s not trying to overcome suicidal tendencies,” Van Helsing answered him. “He’s simply mourning.”

“Gabriel, it’s more than that,” Carl insisted and hid his hand inside his cassock to shield them from the cold wind. “When you’re around, there’s life again in his eyes and yet you stay away from him whenever possible.”

Van Helsing did not answer right away and the silence hung heavy between the two friends. “He has her eyes...” Gabriel finally answered.

“But he is not Anna.” Carl moved to stand beside his friend.

“He looks at me as she did,” Van Helsing continued. “Except he does not have her fire. I thought it would be easier once I understood his pain, but healing is not instantaneous. Looking at Velkan is sometimes like looking at an unfortunate version of Anna.”

“Gabriel!” Carl hissed under his breath. “For someone who has walked the earth for so many years, you lack any semblance of wisdom.”

Van Helsing ran his hand through his hair and sighed. “I don’t want to talk about this, Carl. You’re going to lecture me on how the boy is not his sister. I know that, but her presence lingers with me, even though I know her sins. To me Velkan Valerious was only a werewolf. He had to die...”

Carl reached out and gently patted Gabriel’s arm. “I know you feel guilt for killing both monsters and the people they once were. Now you have to deal daily with a man you killed.”

“He was a werewolf...” Van Helsing said gruffly. “Even Anna saw that in the end.”

“But that doesn’t make it any easier, does it?” Carl asked.

“No...” Van Helsing sighed. “He doesn’t blame me for his death... or even Anna’s.”

“The only revenge or blame he seems to hold is directed at Dracula,” Carl agreed. “To Velkan, you are a hero for killing that monster.”

“I don’t want to be his hero!” Van Helsing growled and tightened his grip on the railing.

“But you are, Gabriel,” Carl reminded him. “You hold his life in your hands. He needs you around.”

“He needs time alone to heal.”

“At first, I thought we should be wary of him. Even though we do not know how or why he returned from the dead, I have grown to trust him. He needs you and you may not want to hear this, my friend, but I do believe you need him. You cannot deny that something has grown between you.”

“I need no one,” Van Helsing growled. When Carl made a coughing noise, Gabriel smiled. “Present company excluded, of course.”

“I’ll accept that as both an apology and your denial,” Carl chuckled. “Just tell me... why Transylvania?”

“It’s a place that is used to the unusual, a place where Jinette has no power.”

“And that’s the only reason?” Carl pressed. As he looked out over the water, there were seagulls in the distance and he knew land would not be far away.

“Yes,” Van Helsing insisted.

Carl pushed his hands back into his cassock with the rising chill in the wind. “I mean, the old Gabriel Van Helsing would have stormed into the Vatican itself and killed Jinette with his bare hands to avenge the death of a friend.”

“Maybe I’ve had enough of death for now,” Gabriel told him. “Transylvania is as good as anywhere else. They will come for us and when they do, I will face them. But in the mean time, perhaps we can find a little peace.”

Dropping his head, Carl covered his mouth with his hand and smiled. “We?”

“Just say whatever is on your mind, Carl,” Van Helsing sighed. “I’m not in the mood to figure out whatever blunder I’ve made now.”

The Knight knew him so well. “Very well, Gabriel,” Carl chuckled. “I do believe you’re returning to Transylvania because it will provide some comfort for Velkan. I also believe you’ve set aside your need for revenge against Jinette to protect him.”

Van Helsing did not answer right away, instead he appeared to inspect a section of rigging next to him. “And to protect you as well,” he finally muttered under his breath.

“Thank you, Gabriel,” Carl told him. “I will always be your friend, but perhaps you will find something else with our young friend.”

Gabriel now reached out to grip the rigging. “Only a few days ago you were warning that he might have been brought back to tempt me.”

“It is a possibility,” Carl admitted. “That could have been Jinette’s plan, but I truly believe that young man could do no harm to you. I believe that with everything else he knows and loves gone in this world that you have become his connect to sanity. And there is something to be said for reading people and may this not come back to haunt me, but I trust him.”

“He’s really just starrng off into nothingness?” Gabriel asked, looking back in the direction of their cabin.

“Yes,” Carl said and tried to hide a smile. “The poor lad is miserable.”

“I might go see how he’s fairing…”

“Of course, just out of duty,” Carl said, not even bothering to hide his smile now.

Van Helsing responded with a nod, “Of course.”

“And I’ll stay here,” Carl added. “I need the fresh air.”

Gabriel’s answer was a simple tip of his hat and he left Carl’s side to seek out Velkan.

He found the Gypsy Prince exactly where Carl said he would be. The young man was sitting on the bed and starrng out the porthole, only moving with the gentle rocking of the ship.

“Good day, Velkan,” Gabriel greeted him and closed the door, locking it behind him.

It took a moment for Velkan’s eyes to focus, but he turned his head towards Van Helsing.

“Good day, Gabriel.” He felt a strange flutter in his stomach that he knew wasn’t seasickness.

“Did you eat today?” Van Helsing questioned him.

Velkan nodded and folded his hands into his lap. Gabriel’s concern made him want to smile for the first time all day. “Some dried fruit, but not much. This travel on the sea does not agree with me. I yearn for proper soil under my boots.”

“That is a sentiment I share,” he echoed and moved closer to Velkan in the cramped quarters they all shared for the voyage.

“Did the Friar send you?”

“I came on my own and you will have to stop calling Carl… ‘The Friar’,” Van Helsing said. He took his hat off and set it down on a nearby table.

“Why would I?” Velkan asked. “He is a Friar.”

Van Helsing stepped a little closer and reached out to gently cup Velkan’s face. He was getting to know Velkan as an individual as the days past, even if there were limited conversations between them. Velkan was very much like his sister, both a product of a proud family dedicated with a terrifying devotion to duty. There was no cost too great for the Valerious family if they fulfilled their duty, even death. But take that duty away from a proud young man like Velkan and he was lost. Trained his whole life to fight one kind of evil, it was painful to watch Velkan struggle without a purpose.

He was proud that Velkan had not given into the darkness and found a way to die. While the young man was very much like his sister, Gabriel recognized the differences. Velkan was far more serious and literal than his sister, but he was also much more passive.



Velkan let out a quiet sigh and rubbed his face against Gabriel's palm. Van Helsing moved in close, standing right in front of him and Velkan laid his head against Gabriel's stomach. Gabriel didn't say anything right away, just ran his hands through Velkan's hair. For a long moment neither said a word, both relaxing with the crash of the waves against the hull.

It was Van Helsing that broke the silence. "We're close to land."

"I know," Velkan answered. He did not pull away, but simply closed his eyes and let himself accept the comfort.

"Velkan..." Gabriel sighed. "I don't hate you. It amazes me that you have forgiven me for killing you or Anna. I cannot forgive myself. If there was a way I could have given my life instead of Anna's I would have."

It was in that moment that something changed for Velkan. The despair he felt was still present, but the desire to run was gone. He understood now how unselfish Gabriel truly was and the righteous warrior he was, possessing an innate goodness. There was no doubt in his mind that Gabriel would die to save his life, even if Velkan did not think he was even worthy of breathing.

Velkan took Van Helsing's hand and squeezed it tight. Feeling the calluses from long years of fighting, he knew he was starting to fall in love with a true soldier. "I want to follow you, Gabriel. I want your cause to be my new purpose."

"I don't have all the answers you're looking for," Van Helsing said after a few more moments of shared silence.

"You offer more than you think, Domn..."

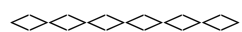
"I would like to be your friend."

Velkan's answer was to boldly move and kiss Gabriel on the lips. He was so nervous that Gabriel would reject him, but that feeling lasted only a moment because Van Helsing was kissing him back.

"I would like to be more than your friend, Gabriel."

In that moment, Van Helsing knew he could break Velkan's heart with one wrong word or action. The vulnerability was so clear in Velkan's eyes and he knew for Velkan to make such a move was a step closer to healing.

"I would like that, Velkan," Gabriel told him. He could not think of anything else to say that spoke of his own nervousness and growing feelings for Velkan. So, instead he kissed Velkan again and hoped the younger man would understand.



The Valerious ancestral home was still intact, guarded by loyal family servants who refused to abandon the property, even though all heirs were reportedly dead. When Velkan road onto

the estate with Van Helsing and Carl, the servants did not shrink away in fear with Velkan's return from the grave but there were curious glances and hushed gasps nonetheless.

An old man shuffled by the front door and bowed as Velkan rode up on a large, black Transylvanian horse. "Prince Velkan, you live," he greeted.

"Yes, Petru," Velkan told him with a curt nod. "These are my guests."

Petru bowed again and bellowed out instructions in Romanian that brought a younger man running from the nearby barns. The labourer took the reigns of all three horses and greeted Velkan with a bow. "Domn, welcome back."

"Thank you, Teodor," Velkan answered and dismounted gracefully from the horse.

Van Helsing noticed that Velkan's demeanor had changed once they got close to his ancestral home. Velkan sat higher in his saddle as he tried to hide the weariness they all felt from the long journey. Even the way he spoke to the household servants was more confident and dignified.

"You have been missed," Teodor said and gave Velkan a look that spoke of great devotion. He waited until Van Helsing and Carl dismounted, but gave them both a distrustful glare.

"Teodor!" Velkan snapped. "These men are my guests. This is Gabriel Van Helsing. This is the man who killed Dracula and you will give him his due respect. If you do not, I will flog you myself! Understand me?"

Teodor was a big man, towering over Velkan by a good head and outweighing him with the heavy bulk of a peasant. But even with the advantage of his size, his gaze snapped to the ground and his shoulders slumped. "Sorry, Domn. It will not happen again," Teodor muttered and then he added, "I am deeply sorry for offending you, Mister Van Helsing."

"And the Friar, as well," Velkan instructed.

"My apologies, Sir," Teodor told Carl and only when Velkan nodded, he led the horses away.

"Well... I..." Carl stammered. "Really, Velkan. That wasn't necessary."

Velkan answered curtly, "He was rude."

"He was only being wary," Carl shook his head. "I've encountered worst."

"You will not be treated with any disrespect in my home," Velkan said. He then turned to the old man who was still lurking by the front door. "Petru, my quarters?"

"Left untouched, Sir," Petru answered. "Where would you like me to show your guests?"

This was the first time that the confident mask Velkan had in place slipped a little. He turned uncertain eyes on Gabriel that pleaded with him. Their relationship had developed, but it was still on tenuous ground. On the ship, they had all slept in separate bunks, but now Velkan was

unsure where Gabriel would want to stay now. Velkan wanted him to stay close, but he would not push Van Helsing.

“I will be staying wherever the Prince wishes me to stay.” Van Helsing’s voice rang clear in the room and it left the door open for Velkan. The young man could walk back into his old life, not necessarily bound to Gabriel.

Velkan swallowed thickly and took a deep breath. He needed this and was willing to take the risk. “He will be staying with me,” Velkan finally instructed in a quiet voice. “And Carl can stay in a guest room down the hall. The one with my mother’s tapestry...”

“Very good, Sir,” Petru answered without a negative or positive reaction. “And you shall be resting after your long journey?”

“Yes, we will be,” Van Helsing said and stepped up behind Velkan. The young man’s mask of confidence was starting to slip and Gabriel sensed it was an appearance he wanted to keep up in front of the servants. Now that he knew what Velkan wanted, he would support him.

“Please, make sure we are not disturbed.”

“I am looking forward to a good bed,” Carl commented after Petru bowed and left them to their own devices. “Is it a straw mattress? Straw does make me itch, but I’d rather bunk with bed bugs than sleep on the ground. I’ve spent too many nights in my life sleeping on dirt.”

Velkan couldn’t help but offer a half smile at Carl’s comments. He found that Carl was making him smile more often than not these days. “Does this look like a peasant’s shack, Carl? I can assure that you will sleep on a feather mattress tonight.”

“Oh,” Carl breathed out a pleased response. “Well then, let’s not dawdle. Show us the way, Velkan.” He started walking towards the main door. “Let’s go.”

Velkan ended up guiding them down the halls of his ancestral home, past the repaired window he vaguely remembered crashing into as a werewolf. All along the walls were displayed the portraits of his fallen ancestors and proudly hung beside them were their weapons hung in tribute. It was all evidence that the Valerious’ clan had been numerous, having as many as children as possible to replenish the ranks of the warriors who died too young. In one of the halls, he stopped and pointed out a cluster of seven paintings.

“Those are my brothers,” Velkan said and waved his hands at the portraits that showed a family resemblance, but also spoke that his father had more than wife over the years. “I shall have to commission a portrait of Anna.”

“Some of them look so young...” Carl couldn’t help but blurt out.

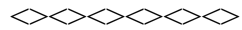
Velkan nodded and sighed. “Yes, I only remember Emil and Victor very well. They were born to Anna’s mother and died when they were...” Velkan had to stop and shift through a variety of unwanted memories involving too many deaths. Even though they were his half-brothers, he had been young when they had died, he had still loved them. “Around fifteen or sixteen, I think. But they were good, honourable deaths.”

Van Helsing reached out and laid a hand on Velkan's shoulder. "Their souls rest in heaven now. That I know."

"They deserve it..." Velkan whispered.

"As do you," Gabriel assured him, but the look in Velkan's eyes demonstrated the young didn't believe him. "Now let's go rest."

As they continued down the hall, Velkan spared the portraits one last lingering look.



Awakening from his short nap, Van Helsing gazed around the room as the early morning light crept in through the window. The room gave no hint of Velkan's personality, as an adult or even as a child. There were no special mementos on display, only weapons. He could see a light child's sword that would have been a practice sword for any other child, but he had no doubt that it had seen action in the hands of a Valerious son.

Velkan lay in his arms, stripped down to his trousers. He could feel the younger man starting to wake.

Snuggling closer, Velkan mumbled with closed eyes. "Did you sleep well, Domn?"

"As much as I ever do," Gabriel answered.

"It does not haunt you to return to this place?"

Gabriel moved a stray dark lock away from Velkan's ear. "I could ask the same of you, Velkan."

"No," Velkan answered with a soft chuckle. Opening his eyes, he did not shift away from Van Helsing's touch. "It is home... whether good or bad. The Valerious blood has nurtured the soil of these lands. If I am to live, I should see to my people."

"You talk like an old man, Velkan." Gabriel's fingers started to trace scars on Velkan's back. "I wasn't sure if I made the right decision to return here or not."

"This is my home," Velkan repeated. "Your part of Europe is changing too fast... discarding the past. And you never answered my question. Does this place haunt you, Gabriel? You walk these halls as if you had been here before..."

"I was here with Anna," Van Helsing reminded him quickly.

"No," Velkan shook his head and his hand came to rest on Gabriel's hip. "It's more than that. You do not pause to think about where you are going."

A heavy silence hung in the air. "You know I killed Dracula..."

"Yes, Domn," Velkan said and Gabriel couldn't miss the quick look of devotion that passed over Velkan's face.

“This was the second time that I sent him to hell. The ring I wear... I remember now that I took it from Dracula’s body the first time I killed him.” Van Helsing stopped and waited for some sort of reaction from Velkan, expecting shock, but receiving calm acceptance instead. “There is more that I do not remember...”

“I know,” Velkan said and reached out to twirl the ring on Van Helsing’s finger. “It is my family’s emblem.” He grasped Gabriel’s hand and leaned over to kiss the ring. “It is fitting that you wear it.”

“I can think of something more fitting,” Van Helsing told him. He slipped the ring from his own hand and then grasped Velkan’s hand. “I want you to wear it.” Before Velkan could protest, Van Helsing slipped the ring onto the same finger he had worn it on. “It’s a little big, but we can always get a smithy to adjust it later on.”

“Gabriel...” Velkan’s breath caught.

Van Helsing held Velkan’s gaze steady. The symbolism of the gesture was not beyond him, but it felt right. “I want you to have it. My memories are returning... I can tell you that Dracula’s father gave that to him. He was a good man and you remind me of him. I took the ring to remind me never to waiver in my faith and service to the greater good.”

“Then you should keep it...” Velkan said and shook his head. Now his own fingers were tracing over the ring and spinning it on his finger.

“Don’t be stubborn, boy,” Gabriel chided with affection, but then his tone grew more serious. “I want you to wear it and whenever you look at it, promise me that you will have hope. I know that you still think of death.”

Velkan closed his eyes and sighed. “I cannot help it, Gabriel. I do not want to leave you, but sometimes...”

Gabriel grasped chin firmly until the young man opened his eyes. “When you think like that, Velkan. Look at the ring I gave you... remember, that I do not wish you to die.”

“But the book of your Master says an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth...”

“It also tells me that suicide is a sin, Velkan.” The words were spoken with strong certainty. “It is a selfish act that leaves those left behind to deal with the pain, sorrow and guilt. I expect better from you.”

Bearing the responsibility, Velkan tried to smile. If Gabriel wanted something from him, Velkan would do his best and said as much. “Yes, Domn.”

Velkan melancholy expression caused Gabriel’s heart to break just a little. He leaned over and kissed the younger man, knowing that if anything would draw him out of his sudden despair, it would be that. Velkan responded to him warmly, like he always did. Van Helsing quickly rolled Velkan under him and stared down at the younger man.

“You only have to say the word and I will leave you here to live your life without my interference,” Gabriel needed to make this offer before he pushed the relationship any further.

A pure look of panic crossed Velkan’s face. “Don’t leave me alone, Gabriel... please?”

“Hush now,” Van Helsing said and quickly kissed Velkan. “I just wanted to give you the choice, Velkan. I won’t leave you if you don’t wish it.”

Velkan gave him a slightly wary look. “You promise?”

“I promise that I will not leave you willingly,” Gabriel vowed and kissed Velkan again. “I want more from you, Velkan.”

“I am yours.” The answer was simple, but Van Helsing knew it was true.

He nodded and offered Velkan a smile in return. “What part of my soul that is mine, sings for you.”

Something dark retreated from Velkan’s eyes and he touched Gabriel’s cheek. “No need for such poetry, Domn. You do not have to tell me that you burn for me or other such nonsense. You tell me that I’m worthy enough to live... that means more than you shall ever know.”

“If you ever listen to anything I say, listen to that,” Van Helsing growled in a raspy voice.

Ghosts of the past seemed a little less haunting in this exact moment. There were no thoughts of Anna for either man. Gabriel’s touch dissolved all other experiences, replacing his sister’s love with a bolder, untainted passion.

Gabriel’s long hair fanned out as he kissed Velkan’s chest, down his torso before stripping the younger man of his trousers. Long muscled legs spread before him as Van Helsing had all the proof he needed of the Prince’s desire and need.

Leaning over, he kissed the head of Velkan’s member, causing a deep moan from Velkan. Van Helsing took him into his mouth and was forced to hold Velkan’s hips down, as the gypsy thrust upward, hungry for all that Van Helsing dared to give. Teasing the thick shaft with his tongue, blowing hot across the crown, Gabriel was determined to tease the Prince senseless with his tongue and mouth.

“Gabriel, more...” Velkan groaned out as he felt his control waning.

“Patience, Velkan.” Van Helsing pulled away and as he gently blew a soft puff of breath onto the still glistening member. At the same time, his fingers were tracing soft patterns along Velkan’s inner thigh.

And in some inexplicable twist of fate, it was not Velkan’s sweetly accented tones that he heard crying out. Rather, he heard the creak of the door opener and a distinctive voice gasping. “Oh... oh, my...”

“Carl, unless the castle is being attacked by something exceedingly evil... Get out!” Van Helsing growled.

The Friar had turned to look at the wall, with a bright blush covering his cheeks. “You overslept,” Carl offered up.

“Are you deaf?” Gabriel sighed, followed by a quick groan. “You could certainly tell that we were not sleeping.”

“Well, yes... of course,” Carl stammered. “Which is exactly why I wanted to bring something Velkan asked for.”

“It can wait.”

“No, it cannot wait,” Velkan said and offered an embarrassed smirk to his lover. “The Friar has something we need. I asked him for it once our... circumstances changed, but I did not foresee needing it quite so soon.”

Carl had started to make his way into the room, walking backwards the entire time and only stopped when he stumbled into the bedside table. He took out a round, clay pot from the folds of his cassock and set it on the table. “I believe, you will both find this batch more than satisfactory.”

Gabriel laid his forehead on Velkan’s chest and groaned when he realized what it was. “Thank you, Carl.”

“It’s always good to use my talents to help those who need it.” Carl was already moving towards the door, but Van Helsing didn’t need to see his face to know the man was smirking.

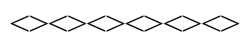
“Carl...” Gabriel said in a warning tone.

“I’m going... I’m going...” Carl laughed opening the door. Just as he was about to close it behind him, he called out. “Speaking from scientific knowledge only... it might speed up the process if you remove your own trousers, Gabriel!”

Carl escaped to muttered threats from Van Helsing and finally stopped when he realized Velkan was laughing beneath him. It was a beautiful sound that caused Gabriel to smile. “I suppose taking my trousers off would help.”

Velkan bit his lower lip and tried to look somewhat solemn. “Yes, Domn...” At the same time, his hands were already unbuttoning the man’s trousers.

The contents of the mysterious little jar were more than satisfactory. Van Helsing was grateful that Velkan didn’t have to feel anymore pain, especially when it involved their lovemaking. He would have to thank Carl later... much, much later.



“How’s Velkan?” Carl asked when Van Helsing wandered into the dining hall. The servants were few and far between in the great estate, but they were loyal and proud of their work. Petru, the senior household retainer who ran the estate, always made sure there were fresh fruits and bread still hot from the oven available.

Gabriel grabbed an apple and bit into it. "Sleeping," he mumbled with his mouth full.

"Undoubtedly," Carl snorted good-naturedly. "At least he is able to sleep, because goodness knows, I wasn't."

"Well, it's your own fault for providing us with the appropriate... accoutrements."

"It took me several batches to perfect that solution."

Van Helsing could see the faint blush rising on Carl's cheek and couldn't help but tease his friend. "Do I want to know how you tested it?"

Carl shook his finger at Van Helsing, scolding him. "Don't you start with me! I did you a favour."

Gabriel sat down across from his friend and poured himself a cup of tea, a luxury he seldom afforded himself. "Tell me what's wrong."

"I never said anything was wrong."

"But I know something is off with you," Gabriel told him and blew the steam rising from the delicate china cup. "You don't have a problem with Velkan and I?"

"Of course not," Carl huffed. "I told you I trust Velkan now and as for the other aspect, I suspect I shall get used to the noise."

"Then what is it, friend?"

"It's this house," Carl sighed after a moment. "Every where I look, there are signs reminding me of the souls who died... and their secrets. When I couldn't sleep, I did some research in the Valerious family library."

"And..."

"The sheer carnage..." Carl continued on in a quiet tone. "Dracula's father... he remarried in his old age after he took the vow to destroy that demon that had been his son. Did you know he sired eleven children?"

"No." Van Helsing was used to Carl's rants and lectures by now. He just had to sit back and listen, because inevitably, that brilliant, but somewhat barmy mind would wrap itself around a problem. Of course, half the time Gabriel didn't know what the problem was until Carl told him, but it was always useful information in the end.

"Only two lived to be over the age of twenty five and carry on the line," Carl reported. "The rest died battling their half brother and that's a common theme for generations. Names and dates, simply recorded in a book, but so many were barely out of childhood. I even read about the valour heaped on one of the Valerious daughters who died with a sword in her hand and heavy with child. And there are other secrets... I fear this family is mad, Gabriel."



Thinking of Anna, Van Helsing answered curtly, “We already know they are. Tell me what it is you want me know, Carl.”

Carl nodded and leaned over the table. He lowered his voice so that only Gabriel would be able to hear him. “I guess after a while women were not so keen to marry a Valerious. They didn’t want to watch their children and husband die.”

These were secrets he did not want to here, but if he understood Velkan’s family, then he would be able to understand Velkan better. Maybe it would also explain why another wise normal woman like Anna had gone so terribly wrong. “Tell me.”

“The unhealthy relationship between Velkan and Anna was not the first. The family history records many marriages between first cousins and a few uncles to their own nieces. And Dracula’s brides... Verona, Aleera and Marishka, were all daughters of Valerious men or their brides. Aleera was Anna’s grandmother.”

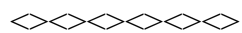
“And do not forget that Dracula was Anna’s ancestor and still pursued her...”

Carl set down the tea he had been sipping when he felt sick to his stomach. “It was something I thought you should know. We still don’t know how or why Velkan was recalled from the dead. His family has served both the greater good, but also evil.”

“He is not Vladislaus Dracula,” Gabriel said insistently. He was forced to set down the china cup in his hand before he crushed it. “We all carry secrets, some we know about... others we do not.” There was finality to his words that spoke volumes. Velkan was not to be held responsible for his family’s sins. That was in the past. “Velkan has forgiven me for my sins, and I shall forgive him his.”

Carl nodded, but he still looked troubled. “It is not my place to pass judgment on him. There is something else I needed to ask you about... Jinette.”

“We wait,” Gabriel sighed. “Jinette will find us. Until then, we wait and forget that he ever troubled us.”



Three weeks passed in relative harmony and with no hint of a threat from Jinette. During those weeks, Velkan and Van Helsing grew closer, seldom apart from each other. Gabriel grew used to the way Velkan watched him intently and with devotion. The darkness still lurked in Velkan’s eyes, but the light of hope was quickly overshadowing it.

Not wholly unaffected, Gabriel loved the cultured, but accented tones of Velkan’s voice. He loved it when he could drive the younger man to such abandon that Velkan was only able to speak in his native tongue. Velkan brought a new purpose and freshness to his life.

In the study, pretending to gaze upon a tome, Van Helsing’s self-introspection was brought to an end with a sharp cough that echoed in through the stone room. He looked over to see Petru standing close by.

Van Helsing groaned. “Don’t tell me what Carl’s done now. The scullery maid, again? She was rather taken with Carl, but I told him to be discrete.”

“It’s not that, Sir,” Petru said. He had always been a man of very few words and got directly to the point. “There was a rider.”

Van Helsing stiffened in his seat. “And?”

“The rider left something for you, Mister Van Helsing,” Petru reported.

Bolting up from his chair, Gabriel held out his hand. “Well, give it to, man.”

Petru shook his head and said with a very thick accent, “Not quite yet, Sir. Our Prince returned to us. We are grateful. I want to know...” He stopped and Gabriel could tell the old man was struggling for the correct words in English. “...know how committed you are to our young Prince?”

“I will not hurt him,” Gabriel promised. “I have great affection for Velkan.”

That was apparently the correct answer Petru was looking for and a smile cracked the wrinkled face. “Thank you, Sir.” Without further comment, Petru handed over the letter delivered to the estate only minutes before.

Gabriel heard the footsteps leaving the room even as he examined the fine parchment and crimson seal that marked this as correspondence as coming directly from Vatican City. He cracked the seal and opened the letter to read the refined calligraphy. The message was short and to the point.

Cardinal Jinette is dead. The Order does not condone any of his crimes or sins. We will not pursue you, or those you protect. Should you ever wish to return and work with us, you will be most welcome. May Our Lord God be with you and yours.

Gabriel sat down in his chair and simply stared at the unsigned letter in his hands. He must have been there for a while, because Velkan and Carl came looking for him. As they came into the room, they were bickering pleasantly back and forth.

“You need to stop distracting the scullery maid,” Velkan scolded Carl. “The cook has been complaining about dirty pots.”

“Her name is Rawnie,” Carl said and looked down at the floor with a slight blush. “Really a delightful girl.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” Velkan chuckled. “But since I want decent food and a happy cook, I think it’s time I introduce you to the Stable Master’s daughters... twins. Very... friendly girls.”

“Well, I... ah... yes, of course,” Carl stammered. “It is only good manners to be friendly myself.”

Velkan laughed and slapped Carl gently on the back. “Gabriel will be glad to know you’re making... friends.” Deciding that he would welcome the Friar as a friend first and foremost, Velkan shook his head at Carl’s gentle deviousness. Yet when his eyes fell upon his lover, the smile dropped from his face. “Gabriel?”

Van Helsing looked up from the letter in his hand to meet both Velkan and Carl’s sudden concern for him. “I got a letter from the Vatican.”

“They are coming,” Velkan growled under his breath. “We’re ready for them.”

Gabriel shook his head and crumpled the parchment in his hand. He let it drop onto the floor and got to his feet. “They say Jinette is dead.”

“Did they say how?” Carl asked. He wanted to read the letter for himself and thought it was still salvageable.

Van Helsing was now pacing and the echo his heels hitting the stone floors rang through the room. “No, they did not and I am not sure if I am inclined to believe this is true. It could be a ploy. That bastard was too devious just to die of old age.”

“He was old, but I hope someone killed the bastard,” Velkan hissed. “Just because he is dead... if he really is, does not mean they will not come for us.”

“They also say they will not pursue us,” Van Helsing reported. “We are apparently safe. They even invited me back into the fold.”

“They lie,” Velkan spat and walked in front of Gabriel to stop his pacing. “We cannot trust them.”

“If they wanted to kill us, why did they send a letter?” Carl asked and ran his hand nervously over the cord he wore as a belt.

“It could be a strategy to lull us into a false sense of security,” Velkan argued. He reached over and laid a hand on his lover’s shoulder, to offer comfort.

“So, what do we do now?” Carl asked quietly. Van Helsing and Velkan would be denied revenge against Cardinal Jinette if he truly were dead.

Van Helsing looked first at Velkan and then at Carl. “Are you happy here?”

Velkan squeezed Gabriel’s shoulder and then leaned over to kiss his cheek. “Yes, Gabriel.”

“Very much so,” Carl agreed with a nod of his head.

“Then we stay,” Van Helsing told them. “We’ll deal with each day as it comes.”

“But I feel that this is not over...” Velkan whispered uncertainly to Gabriel. “If I can come back from the dead, then there is nothing stopping Jinette returning from the bowels of hell.”

“It’s not over,” Van Helsing agreed and wrapped his arms around Velkan’s waist, pulling him into an embrace. “I feel that this has only just begun, my love.”

END.

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