

Yvette sat uncomfortably in the back of the limousine and wondered at what the evening held in store for her. Beside her, Paul Viersan gazed idly out of the window at the unlovely landscape that lay between central Paris and Versailles, giving not one hint of what might be on his mind.

For the umpteenth time, Yvette squirmed against the constraints of her outfit. She was sure the dark red, Victorian inspired gown cost more than the car in which she sat, but the corset-style bodice – laced tightly at Paul’s insistence – limited her movement and even her breathing. Used to having to think in terms of violence and action, Yvette disliked having such constraints put upon her, but Paul had made it clear that she couldn’t wear anything else to the event that lay ahead.

“Don’t fidget,” he said mildly, spying her movement in the window’s reflection.

“That’s easy for you to say,” she grumbled. “You’re not trussed up like a Sunday roast.” She saw a hint of a smile at that. “Although I suppose I look better in this than you would.” She added, trying to lighten the moment further.

Paul’s smile widened momentarily, but the expression flickered and quickly faded. Something was on his mind and it irritated Yvette that he couldn’t – or wouldn’t – share it with her.

He had been uncommunicative and abrupt all night, since she had first found her way to the old-fashioned hotel in which he awaited her. “I expected you last night. Get dressed.” Was her curt welcome after several days’ absence – several days that had featured Yvette evading the German police and rebuking Paul’s sire for the incident. She had worried that Paul would take her actions poorly, that there was no way she could have ‘won’ the game – Yvette sensed it had been a test of her abilities and resourcefulness - as *someone* would be left upset and disgruntled. Unfortunately, the upset party seemed to be her Regnant.

But he wouldn’t *tell* her! And that rankled. And now her lingering irritation at the past week held her tongue and stopped her from asking too many questions.

So, to please him and in the hope that time would bring the truth, Yvette put herself into unfamiliar formal dress, allowed a twittering stranger to arrange her hair and makeup and reluctantly realized that the deadliest weapon she could carry in protection of her master would have to fit inside a small clutch purse.

Yvette hated the dress. The high heeled shoes could be shucked in a hurry, and a switchblade knife, a garrote and her favorite lockpicks had fit into the purse, but the dress cut off her breath as surely as the laces bit into her skin of her back - and there was no quick way out of it. Cinched in tightly at the waist and with her breasts teetering on a practical precipice, Yvette was sure she was quite a sight, but beauty always took second place to practicality in her book. They never coincided.

Scowling, Yvette resigned herself to an uncomfortable evening.

What little breath Yvette had left was taken away by the sight of Versailles at night. Decked out for the cream of Paris society, Yvette had an inkling of why the peasants would be incited to riot at the notion of such luxury existing whilst hunger gnawed at their bellies. Paul had broken his silence long enough to explain that the event was an charity fund-raiser, an annual event patronized by some of the most important kindred of Europe.

*So, it's business for him*, she thought, wishing she could dare eat something from one of the sumptuous buffets that had been laid out. *I suppose I'll just have to look pretty and not worry too much about threats to us*. Being in such a public venue always minimized the possibility of overt violence between kindred, although Yvette was always slow to let her guard down.

To her surprise, Paul had only passing words with a few guests – some she recognized as vampires, the others apparently human. He seemed to be waiting for something – a mystery that was answered as an orchestra began to play shortly after their arrival.

“Dance with me.” Paul didn’t wait for an answer as he pulled her onto the dance floor.

To Yvette’s surprise – as she had no memory of ever learning – her feet easily found the steps to the old-fashioned dances that only the rich seemed to perform any more. The evening was young; the guests full of energy and one high-spirited tune followed another.

Yvette quickly found herself in distress. Exertion and corsetry did not mix, in her opinion, and it took some effort not to stumble. She had to speak up.

“Paul, this is very nice,” the lie came easily, “but I really need to take a break. I can’t catch my breath.”

Paul’s gaze was elsewhere. He didn’t even look at her as he replied, “I know. Keep going.”

“What?”

“You heard me.” He tightened his grasp upon her, in emphasis.

Yvette gasped for air and wanted to curse at the costume that constricted her. “I really don’t feel good,” she insisted. “I don’t know-“

“Shut up.” Yvette blanched at his tone, hard and cold. “Keep dancing.”

“But why?” her breath was fast and shallow – and felt like nothing at all as Paul kept pushing her around the floor.

“Because I said so, of course,” now his tone was light and brittle, and a parody of a smile rested upon his face as his eyes continued to watch for something.

Yvette couldn’t disobey such a directive. She straightened her back and continued to dance, even as her ribs ached.

“Is it because I was late coming to you?” she whispered. “I didn’t know where to go...” That much was true. It was also true that Yvette had lingered over her day of sightseeing because she couldn’t trust herself to keep her temper in check if she had found Paul too soon.

“Of course not,” Paul said in that same light, false tone.

Yvette tried to fight off encroaching dizziness and growing panic. “Or what I said to your-” she caught herself just in time. “To your father? About his family? You must realize that I wouldn’t have really hurt them. It was just a threat.” She gabbled.

“Don’t be silly, darling.” Steel beneath the lightness, now. Yvette could see the tension in his neck and jaw. Still he was watching something – or someone – other than his partner. “Now be quiet and dance.”

“And if I pass out?”

“So be it. In fact, I’m counting on it.”

Yvette frowned at his words, and at the movement of his hand across her back. Unless she was mistaken, Paul's left hand was pulling at the back of her dress, twining his fingers into the corset laces.

"What are you—" she gasped as Paul somehow tugged the lacing even tighter. It might not have been more than another inch of lace wrapped around a finger of his hand, but Yvette already felt on the verge of suffocation and that little tug made it feel ten times worse.

"Keep dancing, dearheart." He insisted.

*Why can't he tell me what he's doing?* Tears of resentment prickled at her eyes, even as she summoned up the effort to keep going, to deliberately push her body past its clearly-stated limits.

It didn't take long. Within minutes, Yvette felt her knees buckle of their own accord as her vision went black and Paul murmured empty endearments in her ear.

The noises of a party in full swing – music, laughter, the clink of full glasses – reached Yvette's ears, but from a distance.

It was a greater distance than she had expected. Lying down in the dark, Yvette felt not tired and breathless – as she had expected – but languorous and ecstatic. Eyes closed, she could feel a stranger beside her and wondered at it as consciousness muzzily returned.

The stranger was close – too close for propriety, she realized - and then the reason for her good feeling became clear. She moaned quietly, a sound of mingled fear and lust.

The vampire moved at that, ever so slightly, but didn't cease feeding. Yvette felt cool fingers stroking her forehead.

Full-blown panic remained at bay – but it had nothing to do with the stranger's reassurances. The paralysis and pleasure of the Kiss kept terror at bay for the moment. *Am I going to survive this?* The thought was idle, anesthetized. *Paul had a plan – surely it wasn't to kill me?* She had to trust him – she had no choice.

The warm bath of pleasant sensation ended abruptly. Somewhat deliriously, Yvette wondered if the reduced blood pressure might make her damned dress – still painfully intact – fit a little easier, but she realized that wasn't the case. She squirmed in renewed discomfort and finally opened her eyes, wondering who had the nerve – or stupidity – to feed from another man's ghoul.

He was handsome – devastatingly so, she had to admit that. Black hair, dark green eyes and pale skin that reminded her of porcelain rather than the freshly-dead – as so many vampires did. He wore his expensive clothes like one well used to them, and he was a born actor. There was nothing but polite concern on his face – not a hint of blood or greed.

"I see you are back with us, *Madam*." Yvette noticed that he spoke French with the ease of a native.

"Yes," Yvette replied carefully, her mind sharpening. "I'm sorry to have caused a fuss. The exertion..." She realized that they were in a small drawing room, near the party but forbidden to the guests in general. In passing, she wondered if the divan beneath her was priceless, or merely worth millions.

He nodded. "Indeed, lady. I see that what was old is new again." He touched the steel boning of Yvette's bodice in a familiar manner that she carefully overlooked.

“I think I’m ready to get up.” She announced. “I had better go home.” She hoped that whatever Paul had in mind had occurred, because she wanted nothing more than to get away from this lush, artificial place and its attendant discomforts.

Her handsome companion nodded. “That’s probably for the best.” He agreed. “No doubt you need to rest.”

“No doubt.” She agreed. *Particularly if I’m short a few pints of blood.*

Yvette accepted her companion’s proffered arm as she sat up and thence found her way across the room.

“You’re too kind,” she murmured the expected words as they made their way back to the party. “I’ve taken you away for too long.”

“It was nothing,” he countered – knowing how to play the game. “It has only been a few minutes. And if not for this, I wouldn’t have met you.” He added with a gallant smile that Yvette couldn’t help warming to.

*Indeed not.* Yvette suspected that Paul’s unspoken plan had worked. “You’re a considerate host, M’sieur Duvalier.” His name had finally come to her.

He inclined his head, a gracious acceptance of the proffered compliment. “I endeavor to be so. May I see you to your car?” he asked, as they returned to the body of the party.

Yvette struggled to keep her tone light. Now that she was moving again, the dress had become simply agonizing and the return of that pain brought more lightheadedness and dizziness with it.

“I don’t think that’ll be necessary,” she breathed, scanning the crowd. “I came with a gentleman.” *In so far as I can apply that word,* she thought irritably.

“Oh?” Polite curiosity only, as Duvalier was already looking to disengage.

“Yes. I don’t know – oh, there he is.”

With timing so coincidental as to be suspicious, Paul emerged from the crowd of revelers, moving swiftly towards Yvette and her companion. She wanted to spit in Paul’s face, a so-convincing mask of concern, but shame at the thought immediately smothered her anger.

Duvalier gasped and he clutched reflexively at Yvette’s arm. He quickly covered his disquiet, but not in time to stop a hint of triumph flashing in Paul’s eyes.

“There you are, Yvette. I was wondering – but I see that Duvalier here continues to maintain his reputation as an excellent host.”

“Yes, he has.” Yvette kept her tone demure. *When in doubt, play dumb.*

“Even more so when the lady in question is a friend of yours, *Monsieur.*” Duvalier replied easily, his voice betraying none of his previous alarm.

“As I would hope.” Yvette sensed a victory had been won, somehow.

“Of course. Now that the lady is safely in your hands, I’m sure you’ll excuse me?” Without waiting for a reply, Duvalier abruptly left the pair and hurried away.

Paul smiled the slow smile that Yvette had come to recognize as one of extreme satisfaction. “Run along, you little frog.” He said quietly and with great venom.

“Paul,” Yvette’s voice was tight with anger and fatigue. “I don’t care if you don’t tell me what the hell just happened, but if you don’t take me away from here and get me out of this god-damned dress...”

“Of course, Yvette.” Now he was all warmth and smiles, although Yvette didn’t like that unnamed gleam in his eye. “All will become clear, soon.” He extended an arm to her. “Let’s go.”

Yvette slumped into the limousine with a sigh. Just getting off her feet was a significant relief. Immediately, she squirmed and reached for the now much-hated corset laces.

“Don’t.”

Surprised, Yvette stopped and stared at Paul. “Excuse me?”

“Don’t loosen that just yet.” He said, voice mild.

Yvette wanted to shout, but she didn’t have the breath. “Why not?”

“Because I’m asking you not to.”

“And that’s that.” Yvette acquiesced, albeit reluctantly. “May I *ask* what the bloody hell just happened?”

“Politics.”

“I guessed that much,” Yvette snapped. “Can you spare me a few details?”

Paul smiled, amused by her irritation. “Duvalier owed me a small debt. Now it’s a large one, and he knows it. Feeding from another man’s ghoulish is quite an imposition.”

“How could you know that would happen?”

“Because I know that Duvalier prefers to feed from unconscious victims. He has a bit of a delicate conscience – or so I’m told. I gambled on him taking advantage of an opportunity presented by a fainting guest.”

Yvette grumbled a little at that. She understood why Paul didn’t disclose his plans to her – what isn’t known can’t be divulged – but the sheer discomfort that she experienced – and was still experiencing – struck her as pointless. She could think of two other – painless – ways that the trap could have been laid.

“Duvalier’s important?”

Paul nodded. “He’s the Toreador Primogen for this city.”

“Big fish, indeed.”

“Hence the value of having him in my debt – but not so much so that he gets resentful.”

“I see.” Yvette felt dizzy and irritable. “Can I *please* get out of this dress? I don’t care if I have to get out of the car in your overcoat.”

Paul made a show of thinking about his answer. “No. Not yet.”

“Oh god,” she groaned. “Why not?”

“Maybe I like you breathless and begging.” Paul’s eyes gleamed with malicious humor.

“That could be arranged without my being trapped in this damn thing,” Yvette countered, pulse quickening.

“Is that so?” He smiled slightly. “Perhaps after I’ve cut you out of that dress, I’ll let you prove it...”