







# Tryst or Treat (Season's Readings #3)

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**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** An enemies to lovers, age gap romance with mafia vibes... but with vampires and witches.

Locked in a centuries-long war for the control of Halloween, vampires and witches finally signed a tenuous peace treaty to keep the bloodshed at bay, but when Vlad, the vampire leader, learns his son plans to marry the coven's heir, he races to stop the wedding. He agreed to the ceasefire out of necessity, but he cannot allow his son to marry the enemy. Yet everything changes the moment he sees HER.

Belladonna, the young and beautiful heir to the witch's coven, believes marrying her vampire boyfriend will help solidify the peace treaty, but on their wedding day, her fiancé's father steals her for himself, forcing her to marry him instead without explanation. Vlad is as brutal and terrifying as he is handsome, and with her coven in danger, she has no choice but to wed the ancient vampire. Suddenly married to her ex's dad and a stranger, Belladonna fights her fear and attraction, because as dangerous as her new husband is, she can't fight the magic coiling between them.

Vlad tries to keep his young wife at a distance, but her beauty and personality are spellbinding. He can't resist the enemy living in his house for the second he laid eyes on her, he knew she was meant for him. Belladonna refuses to make this arranged marriage easy, though. She aggravates him every chance she gets, but with Halloween around the corner, something sinister is brewing. An unknown evil threatens to undo their newfound peace and happiness, but no matter how many tricks he needs to pull off, Vlad is determined to save his new wife. Her growing love is a treat his dark soul doesn't deserve, and as Halloween dawns, will love trick or treat them?

Tryst or Treat is a full-length, enemies to lovers, age gap, arranged marriage, her ex's dad, paranormal mafia vibes but make it vampires and witches with an ever-increasing number of black cats Halloween Romance that can be enjoyed all year round. It's meant for mature audiences. Please see the Author's note inside for more information.

**Total Pages (Source):** 28

## Page 1

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:38 am*

Vlad clenched his hand into a fist, a fine mist of blood spattered across his tattooed skin like a Jackson Pollock. Normally the scent of approaching death filled him with a heady sense of power, but at the moment, murderous tension flooded his muscles. He had a rule about being interrupted when he was conducting... business, and the intruding vampire was seconds away from joining the bleeding victim on the chair.

“What?” His tone was cold as death, as bitter as ash, as sharp as a blade. He didn’t need to raise his voice. He didn’t need to shout. Power slipped off his tongue with a single word, and he felt the vampire at his back recoil.

“It’s your son.”

“What about my son?” Vlad turned around, lifting his tattooed hand to his lips and licking the man’s blood from the skull inked on his pale skin. It tasted of fear. He loved it when they were afraid.

“We received news he’s getting married,” the vampire said .

“And you interrupted me for that?” Vlad stepped forward, his fangs aching to sink into flesh and feel the life drain out of this vampire for interrupting an interrogation for something as trivial as a wedding. He and Gabriel weren’t close. Too many decades separated them, and the boy’s mother had been a problematic vampire. He should’ve never entertained the woman’s advances, but she’d coveted Vlad’s power as head of the Vampires and sank her teeth in hard. He’d fallen fast, only to discover her treachery when it was nearly too late, and her mutiny had cost him dearly. In the end, he’d been forced to kill her. She’d never loved him. He’d been foolish to fall for her charms, and she’d used his infatuation to ruin him. Only she underestimated just

how powerful one of the oldest vampires in existence could be, especially when angered. There was a reason Vlad ruled the night with an iron fist, a reason all vampires bowed to his reign. He was a god among the devils, and Gabriel's vengeful mother had learned the hard way what kind of man she'd so ruthlessly betrayed. Her death had left Gabriel to his care, and he'd done what he could to raise the boy right, to forge a worthy heir to his empire, but his son took too much after his mother. Vlad tried to instill reason into Gabriel, tried to explain that his mom had been a vicious vampire bent on destroying their race, but defiance ran deep in the boy's veins. Over the decades, they'd reached a peace Vlad hoped would morph into a genuine bond, but for now, it seemed his own offspring didn't deem him deserving of hearing the news from his own lips.

"Normally I wouldn't, but it's not so much his wedding that's concerning, but his choice of bride," the vampire said, shrinking further into the shadows. "His fiancé isn't a vampire... she's a witch."

Vlad's body froze impossibly still. He didn't breathe. He didn't blink. It was as if he was stone, a powerful statue carved of marble, and it was a terrifying sight to behold. One that heralded death.

"I wouldn't have brought this to you if the information wasn't confirmed," the vampire blurted, stepping further away. The distance wouldn't save him, but instinct demanded he flee Vlad's wrath. "Gabriel plans to marry a witch."

"He wouldn't do that," Vlad said, his cold voice as sharp as ice. "He would never betray our kind."

Vampires and witches had been mortal enemies for centuries, each race clamoring for dominance over Halloween. War and bloodshed filled their histories, and it wasn't until Vlad seized power from the previous tyrannical leader that the races achieved a ceasefire. Tenuous peace settled between them, and while Vlad hadn't conceded

control of Halloween to the enemy, his blood on the treaty ensured the brutality had paused. The unprecedented murders of his predecessor's reign slowed drastically, and while both sides were thankful that the carnage had waned, neither side took pleasure in peace. They both searched for any escape from the truce, but marrying the enemy was akin to staking his father in the heart.

"We didn't believe the rumors at first, which is why we didn't bring it to your attention, but it's been confirmed," the vampire continued. "Your son's wedding is this weekend, and he plans to marry a witch."

"Without telling me?" Vlad clenched his fist so hard, the tattooed skull on his hand contorted.

"He knows you would never approve of his marriage," the vampire said, his voice soft, as if it might soothe Vlad's anger. "The entire affair is being kept quiet. It's only by accident that we learned of his intentions."

"Is he doing this to spite me? Does he hate me this much that he would stoop so low to marry one of them?"

"Rumor is, he loves her, and there have been whispers of their marriage solidifying the peace."

"And how is my son marrying a witch supposed to end the conflict between our races when none of my efforts could?" Vlad stepped into the solitary ring of light, fresh blood peppering his skin like freckles from the job he'd been so inconveniently interrupted from.

"Because she isn't just a witch," the vampire said. "He's marrying Belladonna. Your enemy's only daughter and sole heir to the coven."

“This is it.” Belladonna smoothed her hands over the silky white fabric. “This is my wedding dress.”

A chorus of squeals erupted from the couch to her left, and she glanced at her best friends with a smile bright enough to rival the sun.

“I kind of hate you,” Juniper said as she rose from the luxury cushion and captured two of the champagne glasses from the table. “You’re going to be much prettier than I was on my wedding day.” She handed Belladonna the sparkling wine as Hazel joined them before the mirror. “Don’t you just hate her? It should be illegal to be this pretty and this lucky.”

“I say we hex her and be done with it,” Hazel smirked.

“I can’t take you two anywhere.” Belladonna rolled her eyes as she sipped the champagne, careful not to spill on the exquisite gown.

“But you love us, anyway,” Juniper said, throwing an arm over her shoulders. “Plus, you would’ve never been able to pull off a wedding this quickly without us. I don’t know what you were thinking trying to get married this fast.”

“I was thinking that Gabriel’s a vampire, and most would prefer we didn’t take this step toward peace,” Belladonna said. “I won’t let anything stop this.”

“But you love him?” Hazel asked. “You aren’t doing this for the coven, right?”

“Do you really think I would marry a vampire for the coven?” She stared at her friend with an accusatory glare. “This is something that’s never been done, and I wouldn’t sacrifice my chances at happiness just to make our parents stop fighting.”

“She has a point,” Juniper said. “When her mom found out, I thought she was going

to lock Bella in a dungeon and destroy the key.”

“I thought my mom was going to kill me,” Belladonna laughed. “There’s a reason she’s the coven leader. She’s terrifying.”

“Amen to that,” Juniper and Hazel said in unison, toasting their glasses before drinking the last of their champagne.

“I don’t even want to know how that conversation went,” Hazel said as she helped undo the buttons on Bella’s dress. “I pity the flies on your walls that night.”

“They were the worst weeks of my life.” Belladonna gathered up the skirt and slipped back into the dressing room. “But in the end, Mom saw reason. It’s time we stop hating the vampires and make real peace. Gabriel and I love each other, so what better way to start this new chapter than with a wedding?”

“It’s like Romeo and Juliet,” Hazel sighed, and Belladonna lunged out of the dressing room, her clothes hanging half off her body.

“Take that back!” she whisper-shouted. “Romeo and Juliet knew each other for like three days before they died. Gabriel and I have been together for six months, and we won’t be dying. No one, and I repeat no one, will be dying at my wedding. ”

“I meant romantically!” Hazel laughed. “Warring families. Star-crossed lovers. It’s so romantic.”

“Now that you’ve stopped hiding your relationship from us, how did you two meet?” Juniper asked as the bride-to-be exited the dressing room and handed the attendant her dress choice. “How on earth does a witch find herself in the same room as a vampire without being at each other’s throats... unless that’s what sparked your romance?”



“It was not.” Bella swatted her friend’s arm before stepping up to the register. The wedding was days away, and she was thankful she’d found a dress that fit perfectly on the first try. “And I don’t know. It felt like fate. We were both at this packed human bar. There was a sea of bodies, and I was attempting to order a drink at one end of the bar while he was doing the same at the other. Neither of us could get the bartender’s attention, and we simultaneously leaned forward and noticed each other. I can’t describe what passed between us, but he ended up buying me a drink. We’ve been inseparable ever since.”

“I would call bullshit, except that was exactly what happened with Dante and I,” Juniper said. “We took one look at each other and knew.”

“But you are both witches,” Hazel said. “It’s common for magic to guide us to our mates, but Gabriel’s a vampire.”

“I’m not sure if magic brought us together,” Belladonna said, ushering her friends toward the bistro across the street. She needed lunch before they finished wedding shopping. “But he’s perfect for me. We get along so well, and we agree on everything. I didn’t want to believe it, especially after I learned he was a vampire, but something about him forced me to look past his nature and see the man.”

“Yeah, I’m sure there was something,” Hazel said with exaggerated innuendo, and both she and Juniper burst into laughter at Belladonna’s crimson blush. “Oh, come on, Bella. You’ve been holding out on us long enough. What’s a vampire like in bed? He’s got to be amazing, right? A man who looks like that has to be talented.”

“I... um... hi, can we get a table for three?” Belladonna leaped for the hostess, smiling at the girl to avoid her friends. She could feel their eyes burning holes into her back, but she refused to meet their gazes until they sat, and even then, the awkwardness was unbearable.

“Holy hell, she hasn’t slept with him,” Juniper hissed, leaning conspiratorially over the table. “You haven’t been with him yet? Why not?”

“It’s not that I don’t want to.” Bella seized the menu and shoved it in front of her face, a plastic fortress separating her from her friends. “We’re waiting until we get married. Apparently, vampires often bite their partners during sex, and if they are mates, the act intensifies their bond. We were trying to keep our relationship a secret. The last thing we needed was a connection forming while we were hiding.”

“Biting?” Juniper hissed. “As in, you would let a vampire drink your blood?”

“I’m going to marry him.” Belladonna shrugged. “Why wouldn’t I? Once we get married, we’ll want the bond to form.”

“Sure... do it for the bond.” Juniper smirked. “Bella, I know you aren’t a prude, but I hope you understand what you’re getting into because, from the sound of it, you are in over your head.”

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:38 am*

When my daughter first told me of her engagement, I thought she'd gone insane," Rowena said, the champagne flute held delicately in her perfectly manicured black nails, and Belladonna forced herself not to roll her eyes at her mother's under-exaggeration. Insane was putting it mildly. Her mother, and leader of the coven, had been borderline nuclear when she'd revealed she intended to marry Gabriel.

"It's no secret vampires and witches would rather see each other dead than wed," Rowena continued with a smirk. "And I instantly planned to break up my daughter's pending marriage, but I am not too proud to admit I was wrong. It's a beautiful thing to witness your children become better than you, and Belladonna's ability to overlook centuries of war to acknowledge the goodness of another is the start of a peace our forefathers could never fathom." Rowena turned to where Belladonna and Gabriel sat hand in hand, the waitstaff clearing away the plates to prepare for the dessert course. The rehearsal dinner had gone off without a hitch, the few present witches and vampires surprisingly supportive of the union. It seemed Belladonna and Gabriel weren't the only two exhausted by the hatred their ancestors passed down to them.

With her fingers threaded through Gabriel's, Belladonna found it hard to view the vampires as their enemies. She worried she would barely survive the next twenty-four hours as she waited to walk down the aisle. She'd rarely dreamed of her wedding day as a child, but now, marriage was all she thought about... and the wedding night. Gabriel had been careful anytime a kiss had deepened, not wanting to accidentally bite her and ruin their cover, but six months of celibacy had a forest fire of need coursing through her body.

"So, I raise a glass to my daughter and her groom-to-be," Rowena continued, and Belladonna blinked the haze of longing away and smiled at her mother. Despite the

brutal verbal battle that had broken out between them when she told her parents of her engagement, Bella loved her mom more than almost everyone in this world. It filled her heart to overflowing knowing that she'd finally accepted her chosen partner.

“May your years together be long and happy.” Rowena cheered her champagne at the couple, and they returned the gesture. “May your marriage be the beginning of a peace our two races have never known. May Halloween flourish under this new era, and may we always strive to be as brave as you when following our hearts. Hopefully, this will be the first of many weddings to bind our people. Our ancestors gifted us this war as our inheritances, but I think it’s time that we threw off their mantel of oppression and learned from your love. You are my beloved daughter, and Gabriel, I’m glad to call you son.”

The wedding party erupted in cheers as they sipped their champagne, and within seconds, the room filled with the sound of clinking glasses. Bella turned toward her fiancé, her full and perfect lips barely able to contain her smile, and her groom leaned in to give the crowd what they wanted. The kiss was chaste and sweet, over too quickly, but Belladonna understood. Her parents were watching. There would be plenty of time to explore the longing between them after the ceremony. Tomorrow night, she would be a married woman. A wife. A spouse. A vampire’s partner. She shuddered at that reality. She was eager to marry Gabriel, but sometimes, her actions still shocked her. How had they pulled off a romance when their worlds were against them?

“Have I told you how beautiful you look?” Gabriel whispered in her ear as the crowd bubbled back to life. Waiters entered the dining room with trays of dessert, and Belladonna sipped her champagne to keep from kissing him and embarrassing her parents in front of the coven.

“I can’t wait to marry you,” she said as he pulled away to grab his fork, and she

instantly missed their connection. Vampires could consume regular food as long as their blood intake was high, and everyone was excited about the decadent chocolate cake, undead or not.

“Soon.” Gabriel offered her a bite. “Just twenty-four hours, although it’ll be a long day. It’s bad luck to see the bride before the wedding, so when we’re done here, I’m headed to my father’s mansion for the night.”

“It’s a shame he can’t come,” Belladonna said, digging into her own dessert. “I would’ve liked both our families to be here.”

“I don’t,” Gabriel said too quickly, his voice suddenly angry. “I don’t want my father anywhere near this wedding.”

“Why not?” she asked. “I know you have a strained relationship, but you love him, right? Don’t you want your dad to watch you get married? ”

“No,” Gabriel said, his tone signaling the conversation was over. “He can’t be here. He can’t know.”

Belladonna opened her mouth to ask why, but something about the way Gabriel said ‘can’t’ silenced her. She knew the feared vampire leader would oppose their wedding, but Gabriel’s mood seemed to imply something else. Why didn’t he want his father here? What was she missing? She wondered if she should ask him to elaborate, but his sudden change in demeanor scared her, so she ignored the nagging in her gut. If Gabriel hated the infamous Vlad, maybe she should be thankful the legendary monster still hid in Europe, where rumors had placed him for the last decade.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:38 am*

Vlad sat in his car, waiting for the last hints of daylight to surrender to the night. The vehicle's windows were a custom job, a necessity for all vampires who wished to leave their homes during the day, and they blocked the sunlight from burning him alive while still offering a perfect view of the quaint church tucked away in this middle-of-nowhere garden. The building had no parking level or basement, meaning that all the wedding guests pouring through the front door were witches. The vampires would have to wait for the sun to relinquish her hold on the world, and he'd arrived at this unassuming location hours ago to ensure his son never set foot on those hallowed grounds. Vampires being unable to enter churches along with the myth that they couldn't consume garlic or be seen in the mirror were lies his ancestors had spread like wildfire during the first age of men. When superstition ruled perception, those three simple assumptions protected most of their kind from being hunted, for if monsters weren't permitted within the four walls of a church, then surely the worshipper next to you during the midnight mass must be human.

Still, the reality of his son wedding Rowena's daughter in a cottage church was reason enough for Vlad to stop this disaster. A vampire marrying at the end of the summer in this ruthless heat was a sin in and of itself. It was an insult to his family name, and he couldn't fathom what had possessed his fool of a child. Had the witch hexed him? Had she forced a potion down his throat? Threatened him with disembowelment? Convinced him he was in love? An icy shiver ran down his spine at that thought. His son in love with a witch? He was unworthy of the title of leader if his own flesh and blood could betray his kind so easily.

The burning sunset fluttered her dying wings, and then the world plunged into darkness. Vlad stepped out of his car, his black suit and dark hair hiding him in the shadows, and he watched with predatory vision as the street surged to life. He wasn't

sure what he was walking into, so he'd enlisted the support of his most trusted vampires. His son was not getting married tonight. The might of hell at his beck and call would ensure it.

"We have the surrounding streets blocked off," Bartholomew said. Vlad's second in command was almost as ruthless as his boss, one of his eyes a milky white from a witch attack sixty years ago. "We'll see Gabriel coming before he realizes we're waiting for him."

"What time is the wedding supposed to start?" Vlad asked.

"Half an hour," Bartholomew said. "He should be here any minute."

"I would've assumed he'd be here already," Vlad said. "He tried to hide this from me, and he almost got away with it, but he undoubtedly knows someone would oppose this farce. "

"You would think, but rumor has it, Rowena supports the marriage."

"I find that hard to believe."

"It's true. Our informants say she is in full support of her daughter."

"Have you seen Belladonna?" Vlad asked. "What is it about this witch that has everyone wrapped around her fingers?"

"I have not," Bartholomew answered. "Rowena always kept a close watch on the coven's heir. Very few have seen her, which is one reason this wedding is so small."

"I've met Rowena, but I've never so much as caught a whiff of her daughter's scent," Vlad said. "How on earth did my son find the girl?"

“That I couldn’t say,” Bartholomew said. “You’ll have to ask him yourself.”

Vlad grunted and adjusted his midnight black suit. “Stay here. I’m going to check and see if Gabriel’s waiting inside. He should’ve been here by now.”

“Will do, boss,” Bartholomew said as Vlad strode toward the entrance. It might be unwise to enter a church full of coven leaders alone, but Vlad had no intention of being spotted. He was a tall vampire, all muscle and power and death, but after centuries of bloodshed and war, he’d perfected the art of moving through the shadows. No one would see him as he searched, and while Rowena was powerful enough to sense his presence, he was banking on the fact that she’d be too busy fussing over the bride.

Vlad slipped into the building and angled toward the back rooms. Magic hung thick in the air, making his cold skin crawl. It had been decades since he’d been in such close proximity to so many witches, and it made his fangs ache. The scent of magic drove him to hunger, and he longed to carve his teeth into flesh. It would obliterate the peace treaty and plunge them into war, but the hunter in him begged for blood. Perhaps he should locate Rowena and end her life... and that of her witch daughter, too. He hated the coven, but Rowena had an exceptional head on her shoulders. How had she so readily agreed to this wedding? Maybe he should stop looking for his son and find this Belladonna. Maybe then he would understand what kind of spell she had everyone under, and if he was smart, he would sink his fangs into her throat and drink her dry, ending this circus.

Vlad meticulously checked every room, but Gabriel was nowhere to be found. Was this all a trap? Was Gabriel planning to lure the coven heads to this church and burn them at the metaphorical stake? It would certainly destroy the peace treaty, but that sort of brutal declaration of war would not win his son any favors. Hundreds of witches and vampires preferred living in peace, even if they hated each other. Families had finally stopped burying their children in favor of cultivating new lives.



It was why Vlad's authority had gone uncontested for so long. People may shout hate with their tongues, but most enjoyed the absence of war. There would always be blood for Vlad to spill in the name of his reign, but the tenuous peace had ensured the vampires thrived. If Gabriel did something so stupid as to slaughter the coven leaders under the guise of a wedding, war would never occur. The more likely outcome would be his son's head on a spike as his own kind punished him for his stupidity.

Vlad's cell vibrated, and he dug it out of his pocket, lifting it to his ear. "What?"

"We have Gabriel," Bartholomew said. "His entourage just pulled up, and we're holding him for you."

"I'll be out in a second." Vlad hung up the phone and moved for the exit, but before he escaped the church, movement caught his eye. He lunged around a dark corner to watch the wedding party move into the sanctuary, but it was the woman in white that froze him to the carpeted floor.

Belladonna was pure grace as she practically floated through the hallway, her dress simple yet elegant, and if Vlad had a heart that beat, it would've stopped at the sight. She was young, although for witches and vampires, it was impossible to tell their true age by appearance. She looked twenty-five, but she could be fifty. After all, he looked forty despite his centuries. Thick brunette waves framed her seductive yet almost angelic features. Her lips were full. Her eyes were wide, and the shape of her face was exquisite art. Her slender neck was bare, and the barely-there straps of her wedding dress left far too much skin exposed. Her silken shoulders and chest were the perfection men waged war over, and her throat begged him to close the distance. Begged him to sink his fangs into her soft flesh and drink until he stained her white satin gown red. Only Vlad didn't want to kill her. No, he wanted to feel her pulse as he tasted her, as she moaned his name and wrapped her arms around his neck. She was shorter than his intense height, her athletic form still in possession of dangerous curves, and for a moment, he forgot Belladonna was the enemy. He forgot she was a

witch, and all he could think about was pushing her skirt up her thighs so that he could pin her against the wall and make her his while he drank from her.

That thought was so visceral he jerked back as if he'd been slapped, and the gorgeous witch vanished from sight. Vampires consumed blood to survive, but to drink from a lover while your bodies were joined wasn't to sustain life. It was to create a bond, which was why most never let their fangs touch their partners until they were certain they'd found a mate. Vlad never drank from women he was intimate with, not even Gabriel's mother, so the sudden desire to claim that witch was a punch to the gut. Who was this Belladonna? And why did he want her with such an intense longing that he was willing to destroy everything?

"What the hell are you doing here?" Gabriel shouted as Vlad strode through the darkness with the authority of a man who owned the night.

"Stopping you from making a mistake." Vlad turned to Bartholomew. "Get him out of here."

"Yes, sir."

"Wait, no!" Gabriel surged against the older vampire's hold, but he was no match for Vlad's right-hand enforcer. He was too young, too small even though he towered over mortal men, but Vlad and Bartholomew were vampires born of a different stock, bred for war and terror.

"You don't understand," Gabriel hissed. "I have to go through with this. I have to marry her."

"I understand perfectly." Vlad folded his arms across his muscular chest so that the tattooed skull stared his son down. The rumors that had reached his ears proclaimed his son loved his future wife, but three sentences were all Vlad needed to know the

truth. His boy's lies might have the world convinced, but he was not so easily fooled. Nor was he blind, and there was no affection in Gabriel's eyes. "You are incapable of making sound decisions in my absence, so I've decided to return for the foreseeable future."

"What? No. You can't..."

"That's the thing about being a god among our kind," Vlad said. "I can do anything I please. Now go before you cause more damage. As it is, I have a hell of a mess to clean up after your stupidity."

"Father, you can't do this!" Gabriel shouted, but Vlad simply nodded at Bartholomew .

"Keep my son out of the church. Under no circumstances are you to let him inside."

"Yes, sir."

"And surround the building. I want everyone in plain sight."

"Why?" Bartholomew asked. "Are you expecting something to go down?"

"Yes," Vlad said, striding toward the sanctuary. "And I want a show of force. The witches need to understand they're helpless to stop this."

"Should we be worried?" Bartholomew asked, but Vlad entered the church without answering.

"Yes," he whispered to himself. "Yes, you should."

Belladonna fiddled with her bouquet as she stood alone before the altar. She could

feel it in her bones, in the magic coursing through her veins. Something was wrong. Gabriel was late, and while her mind wanted to plunge to the worst-case scenario, the hum of the air warned his absence wasn't what she was imagining. Gabriel hadn't left her at the altar. Something else was at play. Something dark.

She glanced at her mother, the alarm in Rowena's eyes confirming what her magic already sensed. Evil had come to this church.

Rowena threw her husband a distressed glance, a wordless conversation passing between the couple, and then she stood, readying to address the situation when the doors flew open so fast that their hinges warped. The gathered witches yelped in alarm, momentarily stunned by the violent intrusion, but before they could regain their composure and call upon their magic, He stepped into the room.

Belladonna froze, her skin ice, her heart thunder. She'd never seen this vampire before, but he needed no introduction. She knew who strode down the aisle like the devil reincarnated. Vlad. Named for the great Impaler, he put the name to honorable use.

If Belladonna thought Gabriel was handsome, then Vlad was a god. He was the tallest man she'd ever encountered, his broad shoulders and powerful arms filling his tailored black suit with sinful perfection. A chiseled chest led to a waist meant for a woman's legs. His hips begged to be choked by bare thighs, his own long legs boasting of stamina most only dreamed of, and his face? It was unlike any face she'd laid eyes upon. He was so beautiful that to gaze upon him was painful. His features were severe, wicked, strong. His dark hair and short beard intensified his allure, and she shuddered involuntarily at the sudden and horrifying longing to know what his lips would feel like against hers. She knew his kiss would burn her alive, would torture her soul until she was nothing but ash, and the way his brown eyes studied her told her he was picturing the vile things his mouth could do to her body, imagining the places he would kiss her, own her, devour her. She couldn't breathe as she

watched him approach. Couldn't breathe as the infamous tattooed hand smoothed his suit over his abs. She'd heard tales of that inked skull, the blackened skin starting at his wrist and traveling to his knuckles in a design that mimicked human bones. When held against a person's jaw, his tattoo would align perfectly with their features, giving all a glimpse of what awaited them when his violence was complete. Many called it the angel of death, for it was the last thing you saw in this world before Vlad took you out of it.

Rowena lunged from the pews, settling before her daughter as a human shield, and the sudden movement woke Belladonna from her trance. The vampire leader was in this church... at her wedding, and by the vengeance in his eyes, there would be hell to pay for this hidden marriage. Bella scanned the sanctuary, desperate to locate Gabriel, but he was nowhere to be found. An army of ruthless bloodsuckers met her gaze instead, their numbers guarding the exits. They outnumbered the present witches five to one, and unlike the younger vampires Gabriel had introduced her to, these men were born killers, violent and battle-hardened warriors.

Vlad shook his head at Rowena's defiance, and Belladonna watched her mom falter. The coven leader scanned the room, desperate for an escape, for salvation, but it took her seconds to realize what her daughter already knew. There would be no fighting their way out of this. Rowena was a powerful witch. Belladonna and the coven leaders were equally strong, but their numbers were nothing compared to Vlad's small army. The witches understood the truth. Resistance would end in bloodshed.

The intimidating vampire settled before Rowena, and for a moment, Belladonna thought her mother would fight back, ending their decades-long peace, but after a tense minute, the witch retreated. Belladonna's heart thundered with alarm as her mom returned to her father's side, and as the vampires tightened their ranks, Vlad stepped forward, glancing briefly at her chest as if he heard her erratic heartbeat. He was so tall that she had to crane her neck to look into his eyes, and she hated that he smelled of cedarwood and power, of desire and blood and vanilla. His scent wrapped

around her, weaving through her magic, and her aura pulsed at his proximity. No one had altered her magic with their presence before, but the sight of this incredible monster had her body singing with vibrance and life. She felt a stranger in her own skin, and she threw her mother a pointed glare, praying the woman had an answer for why this devil affected her like no other creature of power had.

“I see we’re all gathered for a wedding,” Vlad said, and Belladonna fisted her flowers to the point of pain to stop from moaning at the sound. That voice. It was wicked and indulgent, and she instantly craved his words. She wanted him to worship her with that voice, to whisper desire and threats in her ear with that voice.

“I heard this was supposed to bring further peace between our races,” he continued, moving until they stood side by side at the altar, and wariness snapped Belladonna out of her unwelcomed fantasies. Her reaction to this towering man was filled with fear and longing, and the intensity of her opposing emotions set her teeth on edge. Something was happening, and the oppressiveness in the air warned it wouldn’t be pleasant. Only she couldn’t decipher what this god among men wanted with her wedding.

“My son won’t be getting married today.” Vlad captured her hand with his tattooed fist and pulled her before the terrified officiant. “But a union to seal the treaty is a wise proposition. So, we’ll have this wedding. Only Belladonna will be marrying me.”

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:38 am*

What?” Belladonna gasped as the witches erupted with violent voices. She tried to yank her hand free of Vlad’s hold, but his grip was too strong. It didn’t hurt, but his strength was clear. There was no escape.

“Get your hands off my daughter!” Rowena lunged forward, her fingers already forming a defensive spell. It seemed she didn’t care that they were outnumbered. She was willing to shatter decades’ worth of peace for her child, and as she prepared to throw the first assault, the witches rallied to her cause.

“You wanted an alliance,” Vlad said calmly, as the room exploded around them. “I’m here to give you the wedding you so foolishly tried to hide from me.”

“I don’t care who you are,” Rowena growled. “If you don’t release my daughter, I will kill you.”

Five vampires lunged for her, and time slowed as Belladonna watched the scene unfold. Seconds stretched on endlessly, showing her the witches’ bloody future. Her mother was moments away from attacking the man known as the angel of death, and while Rowena could hold her own, the vampires had the upper hand. An attack would be fatal for the coven, and Belladonna realized with a sickening twist of her gut that she was the only person in the church with the power to stop the carnage. It would require a choice, though, a decision that would forever alter her future. She had to choose between her mother and her fiancé. Would she save the woman who’d given her life, who always fought and sacrificed for her, or would she choose a fiancé who wasn’t even there? She understood Vlad was a force to be reckoned with, but Gabriel was his son. If anyone could fight their way through this horde, it was him, yet he was absent.

“Stop!” she screamed, throwing an electric shock of magic at the vampires descending on her mother, and the men stumbled backward at the incredible force. “Just stop!” The church fell silent, and with a somber look at her parents, Belladonna faced Vlad.

“Bella, no!” Rowena shouted, but she ignored her mom as she gazed up at the impossibly tall man. She didn’t speak. She didn’t need to. He read the surrender in her gaze.

“Excellent.” Vlad glanced at the shaking officiant. “You may begin.”

The man’s eyes flicked to Rowena, but he understood their predicament as much as she did. The witches were outnumbered and outmaneuvered. Vlad had won this battle, and she was his spoils of war. As the coven’s heir, Belladonna was always aware she might be required to marry for an alliance and not for love, but as the priest began the ceremony with a shaking voice, the reality of her future settled deep into her bones. She was marrying a vampire, and not the one she loved. She was binding her fate to the man named for the Impaler himself. The enemy her mother had spent her daughter’s entire life trying to hide her from.

“Do you take Belladonna to be your lawfully wedded wife, for better or worse, in sickness and in health, till death... true death do you part?” the officiant said, snapping Belladonna out of her trance, and she stared up at the vampire as he leaned forward to ensure his words were explicitly clear.

“I do.” His deep tone vibrated the air in her lungs, and she shuddered at the finality of the vow.

“And do you take Vlad as your lawfully wedded husband, for better or worse, in sickness and in health, till death do you part?” The officiant glanced at her with sympathy in his gaze, and Belladonna twisted toward the church entrance. She held



her breath, hoping without hope that Gabriel would charge through those doors to rescue her, to defy his father for stealing his bride, but he didn't come. She couldn't hear him, nor did her magic sense him. He was gone. He wasn't fighting for her.

"I do." She looked back up at Vlad as an expression of triumph bled into his handsome features.

"Does anyone have the rings?" the officiant asked, but Belladonna shook her head. Gabriel had the wedding bands, and all she wore was the small engagement ring he'd placed on her finger.

"Right... well, by the power vested in me, I now?—"

"Wait." Vlad cut the man off and seized Belladonna's left hand. He ripped her engagement ring off and cast the simple diamond to the carpet. "That's a cheap ring, and my wife will never wear something that mediocre." He released her and then pulled a ring from his pinky finger. He then slid it onto her hand, and Belladonna froze when she saw what he'd given her. It was his signet ring, the one passed down from vampire leader to vampire leader. It was centuries old, only ever worn by the most powerful vampires to walk this earth... and now her.

Vlad twisted her fingers, surveying how the ring looked on her with appreciation, and then he nodded at the officiant to continue.

"I now pronounce you man and wife," the priest said, conveniently forgetting the last half of the line, but a single movement of Vlad's dark eyes seemed to jog his memory. "You may kiss the bride."

Vlad smirked a dangerously handsome grin as Belladonna's face paled, and then he leaned forward. She braced for the impact, wondering how angry it would make him if she turned her head at the last second, but his next movements answered her silent

question. Vlad shifted as he closed the distance, and his lips brushed against her cheek. The kiss was feather-light and filled with respect, and the innocence seemed wildly out of character for the devil before her. She half expected his softness to be a joke, a way to embarrass her further, but there was no malice in his actions. He simply kissed her cheek and then pulled back, capturing her hand with his angel of death.

“May you all toast our newfound peace at the reception dinner,” Vlad said, keeping a firm yet gentle grip on her. “Raise your glasses to the success of this night.” He pinned Rowena with his stare, but to her mother’s credit, she did not wither under his cruelty. “I hope everyone enjoys their evening, but I’ll be taking my bride home now.”

“Bella, no!” Her mother lunged for them as Vlad guided her down the aisle to exit the sanctuary, but her new vampire husband offered the woman no chance to catch up. His men flocked to his lead, guarding his back as he loaded her into his sleek black car. Everything within her screamed for her to run, for her to flee before he separated her from the coven, but before she could so much as conjure a spell to deliver her to safety, Vlad locked her in the vehicle beside him as his driver sped off into the night. He didn’t speak as they departed the church, but he held her hand tight, his grip a warning. She could not escape. She would never escape. No witch had ever been inside his mansion before. Vlad hid its location with absolute secrecy, and if he was taking her there, he didn’t intend for her to leave. Her mom wouldn’t come for her. She wouldn’t know where to search, and suddenly the chaste kiss at the altar seemed like a curse. He’d performed for the crowd, but now she was alone with the angel of death.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:38 am*

They parked in an underground garage between endless rows of expensive cars, and fear bubbled in Belladonna's chest at the realization that Vlad hadn't blindfolded her on the drive to his home. She knew where they were, a knowledge no witched survived, and panic flooded her veins. She was Rowena's daughter and heir to the coven. She was the last person the vampire leader would allow to live with this information, and she inhaled a fortifying breath as Vlad slipped out of the car. She wouldn't surrender without a fight, would not go gently into the darkness. Vlad was centuries older than her, but she was the coven's future. This vampire would regret ever laying eyes on her.

Vlad stood expectantly outside of the vehicle, waiting for her to crawl out, but Belladonna crossed her arms over her stomach and leaned against the seat.

"Okay then." Vlad shrugged and lunged for her, capturing her waist and hoisting her out of the car as if she weighed nothing. With powerful grace, he threw her over his shoulder and strode across the garage, completely oblivious to her shouts. She pounded his back and thrashed against his hold, but the man's grip didn't so much as budge. He was far stronger than she realized, and he carried her through his expensive home with ease.

Realizing she wasn't escaping his control, she collapsed against him and took to memorizing the halls. The mansion was elaborately massive, the opulence a far cry from the cozy cottage she grew up in with her parents, and by the time he shoved through an ornate door, she was hopelessly lost.

Vlad carried her across the grand bedroom, the décor too light for his dark demeanor, and he dropped her on the king-sized mattress. Belladonna wasted no time, and the

second his hands left her waist, she kicked, her stilettos slamming into his gut. Vlad grunted, stumbling backward over the cream-colored carpet, and she lunged to her feet, fingers already moving. They wove the spells that were more familiar to her than breathing, and when her hands completed the first incantation, she threw the magic at her new husband... but nothing happened.

Vlad burst into laughter as she stared in horror at her useless hands, and he closed the distance between them. “The house is warded,” he said. “Cost me a fortune, but it was worth every penny. Magic cannot be performed within my property lines... and before you go looking, you’ll never find the wards, so you might as well not even try.”

“I... you...” Belladonna sputtered. “Well, I don’t need magic to slay a vampire. I’ve been training since I could walk to kill the likes of you, so if you so much as lay a finger on me, I will end you.”

Vlad burst into another fit of laughter, and she squinted at him in confusion. She’d expected a fight. Expected him to take what she wasn’t willing to give. What she hadn’t expected was to watch the angel of death laugh with genuine amusement. If she wasn’t so furious at him, she might enjoy the sound, appreciating the way his lips curved and his eyes brightened. But she was livid, so all she could fantasize about was punching his perfect mouth.

“I don’t doubt that you could,” Vlad said with a smile. “But there’s no need for threats, wife. I may be ruthless. I may be a tyrant, but I never take a woman without her consent. I have no intentions of touching you.”

Belladonna pinched her eyebrows at her new husband. This man had just forced her to marry him instead of his son, yet he hadn’t even kissed her at their wedding. What was his endgame? What did he want with her? If he truly wanted peace, why not let her marry Gabriel?

“These are your rooms,” he continued, gesturing to the large white bedroom, immense walk-in closet, and luxurious en-suite bathroom, and she suddenly understood why the decor was so bright. This wasn’t where Vlad slept. This was a guest room. “You’ll be safe here. No one will so much as touch a hair on your head, so you’re free to move about as you please. You can sleep here with the assurance that no vampire will harm you and that I won’t touch you until you ask me to.”

“I won’t ask,” Belladonna spat.

“Oh, you will, wife. Mark my words, you will. And when you do... not if... when you do, you’ll beg for it. Then and only then, when you’re dripping wet and desperate for me, will I touch you.”

“Well, I hope you’re prepared to live a celibate existence, husband.” She sneered. “Because I would rather die than beg for anything from you.”

Vlad stepped forward, his looming height forcing her to crane her neck as his chest settled centimeters from hers. “You’ll have to get better at lying, little witch. You forget I can scent your arousal.” He winked and strode from the room without another word, simply ducking out of the way as she launched her shoe at the back of his head.

“You married her!” Gabriel ripped free of Bartholomew’s hold and charged for his father’s desk. “You swoop home from who knows where after years and not only forbid me from getting married but then you steal my fiancé? What the hell is wrong with you?”

“I was simply stopping you from doing something stupid,” Vlad said, leaning back in his chair as if he was dealing with a toddler’s tantrum and not an enraged vampire.

“Something stupid?” Gabriel shouted. “I was getting married.”

“To a witch,” Vlad said calmly. “And Rowena’s daughter no less. It was never just a marriage, and if you believe that, you’ve learned nothing from me. Everything you and I do is political. A wedding isn’t simply a union, but a strategic maneuver, and by marrying that witch, you were about to hand Rowena your head on a fucking platter.”

“So, you stop me from marrying her and then you wed the witch yourself?” Gabriel spat. “You stole my bride! And for what? A political move? To spite me? To be a monumental dick? I guess Rowena has your head on a platter now.”

“Careful.” Vlad folded his arms over his chest. “I love you. You are my son, but I would watch your words. Rowena may be powerful, but she’ll never gain the upper hand on me.”

“You love me? Sure, Dad, sure. You love me so much you stole my fiancé.”

“I did, but it doesn’t mean I don’t care about you. Your marriage would have been a mistake, and I know you. You weren’t marrying her because you love her.”

“Yes, I do,” Gabriel said too quickly, and Vlad saw the flicker, the overzealous confirmation lacking genuine conviction. To anyone else, he was telling the truth, but Vlad knew his son. He was lying. Why? He wasn’t sure, but the boy didn’t love the exquisite witch locked away upstairs. If he had, Vlad would’ve forced himself to leave the church. He would’ve returned to Europe and left the perfect woman he now called his wife alone, but Gabriel didn’t love her. He was marrying her for another reason, but for the life of him, Vlad couldn’t figure out why.

“Well, what’s done is done,” Vlad said. “The witch is mine, and when you feel so inclined to be truthful about your reasons, we can revisit this conversation.”

“Whatever.” Gabriel ran a hand through his hair. “It doesn’t matter. You got what you wanted. You always do, but this changes nothing.” He pounded the desk in

frustration and then whirled around to storm out of his father's office. "Nothing at all," he muttered under his breath as he slammed the door, and Vlad frowned at the words his son hadn't intended for him to hear. The phrase was vague, meaning little to him, so why did he feel like it was important?

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:38 am*

Belladonna stood before her bedroom door for the fifth time that afternoon. She'd tried to remain awake all night, worried that a vampire might break in to attack her magic-less body, but true to Vlad's promise, she was left alone. Exhaustion won in the end, and she'd fallen into a blissful sleep, a fact she was now livid about. The mattress was supportive, the blankets soft, the air conditioning the perfect temperature. She woke to sunlight filtering through the curtains, and she felt glorious until she remembered the disastrous wedding. Angered by her own comfort, she'd removed her white dress and stepped into the massive shower, annoyed again at how much she enjoyed the hot water and spiced apple soap. It smelled like Halloween, and while the weather was still warm, the scent comforted her witchy senses. Every product in the bathroom, as well as the dozens of clothes hanging in the closet that were miraculously her size, pointed to Vlad having known she would stay here, and she cried when she realized it wasn't Vlad who'd prepared for her presence. The idyllic room made sudden sense. Gabriel had organized this as their honeymoon suite.

Belladonna dressed in a pair of designer shorts and a cropped tank top and then sat on the bed, refusing to leave. She possessed no desire to see her new husband, and she planned to sit in this gorgeous accommodation for the rest of her life, but as the sun burned a path across the sky, her stomach growled. She attempted to ignore the hunger, her fingers twisting to cast a sustaining spell when she remembered the goddamn wards... which resulted in her throwing a pillow across the room... and then two more for good measure, which was why she currently stood before the door. Vlad clearly had no intentions of feeding her, which meant she had to venture through this monstrosity of a mansion to locate the kitchen. It was midday, the sun at its highest and brightest. If there was ever an hour to explore a vampire infestation, it was now.



Belladonna cracked the door open and scanned the hallway, but when not so much as a shadow shifted, she crept out. She angled for the main staircase, thought better of that obvious route, and retreated further into the house. Historic mansions like this often boasted service staircases, and the odds of running into her husband on the back stairwells seemed significantly lower. It took a few wrong turns to uncover what she was looking for, but her suspicions were correct. The service stairway was deserted, and within fifteen minutes, she'd found two libraries, six bathrooms, the courtyard pool, a completely bare room, a broom closet, the wine cellar, a locked door she imagined led to a dungeon, and finally the massive kitchen.

The room was empty, but the fridge and pantry were overflowing. For men whose diet required blood, not a single drop was to be found. Belladonna knew vampires ate human food, so she wasn't sure why she expected goblets of crimson to be filling the refrigerator instead of expensive meats, cheeses, and vegetables.

"Those shorts fit you well," a deep voice interrupted the silence, and she yelped, grabbing the closest cucumber out of reflex.

"You going to throw that at me?" Vlad asked, studying the green vegetable with amusement. "First a shoe and now a cucumber. I can't wait to see what other weapons you find in my house."

Belladonna glared at him, fantasizing that her eyes could shoot lava to burn the hateful man to ash before she shoved the veggie back into the fridge. Without a word, she pulled eggs, a block of artisanal cheese, and some spinach out before nudging the door shut with her hip. She caught Vlad's gaze dip to the small shorts hugging her hips, and she wondered if she was fast enough to clobber him with a pan. She hated how he studied her bare legs with longing, but she hated that her heart raced at his appreciation even more.

"Of course, the shorts fit," she spat as she opened one cabinet door after the next in

search of the bowls and spices. Vlad didn't offer to guide her investigation, and she had no intentions of asking for help, so she amused herself by obnoxiously banging every cabinet shut. "Gabriel brought them here before you stole me from him. Some fucking father you are." She seized a knife from the butcher block and an onion from the pantry, but Vlad stepped closer, distracting her as she chopped the vegetable, and the blade sliced through the tip of her finger.

"Dammit!" She dropped the knife as lightning-fast movement caught her eyes. She froze at the realization of what she'd done. She'd cut herself in front of a vampire. And not just any vampire. The angel of death.

Vlad captured her hand, and she flinched, readying for him to rip her apart. She possessed no magic within these walls. She was defenseless against one of the most powerful men in the world.

"I bought you those shorts." Vlad emphasized 'I' as he lifted her finger to his mouth, his tattooed skull holding her carefully. "I purchased everything in that room. You were asleep when I returned this morning, so I quietly stocked your closet and bathroom. It's why I'm pleased you look so lovely in my clothes. I can't wait to see how flawless you look in the rest of the outfits I chose for you."

Belladonna inhaled an unsteady breath as Vlad sucked her bleeding finger into his mouth. He licked the blood from her skin, holding her gaze as he tasted her. Her flushed cheeks ignited at the contact, her heart racing uncontrollably, and as he pulled her finger from his lips, she forgot how to breathe. For a long moment, all that existed was the heat pulsing between them, and then Vlad stepped forward until his chest hovered an inch away from hers.

"Be careful, wife," he said, his voice thick with an emotion she refused to acknowledge. "Blood that sweet in a house full of vampires. You might start a war."

Vlad disappeared into the shadows, forcing himself to leave his new wife alone. She hated him. His son hated him. Everyone was upset by his actions, and his reckless behavior confused even himself. He needed to stay away from the exquisite creature currently banging every pot and pan he owned. She was making him impulsive and irresponsible, clouding his judgment with her intoxicating scent and fragrant blood. He'd stolen his son's bride. He'd married a witch. A goddamn witch. Vampires did not live in harmony with coven members, yet her taste consumed his thoughts. He hadn't meant to lick the blood from her fingers. He'd planned to flee the kitchen, but the next thing he knew, her finger was in his mouth, her perfect chest heaving as he licked her clean. The wards prevented magic from being cast on his property, yet Belladonna had him under her spell. What was wrong with him? Why had he thrown caution to the wind the second he saw her? Why did his control slip anytime she looked at him? And why did her blood taste better than any he'd drank in his long decades?

Vlad shook his body as if to cast Belladonna's hold off him. Yes, needed to stay away from his wife before he did something stupid. Before his new obsession got him killed.

Belladonna didn't see her new husband after their encounter in the kitchen. It had been over a week since he lifted her fingers to his lips, since his tongue made her forget to breathe. She refused to admit it. Absolutely refused, but that single touch to her fingertip from the angel of death set her soul ablaze more than Gabriel's kisses ever had. She sensed his lips throughout her entire body, her skin growing too tight at the contact, her heart too desperate. It was a dangerous feeling, magic without magic, and as she sat in her room watching the sunset, she knew what she needed to do. She had to escape these walls, to escape her husband. She loved Gabriel. He was sweet and fun and kind. He was a safe sort of handsome, and that was who she belonged with. Not with the vampire named for the Impaler himself. Not the man who made her ache, who made her angry and violent. She needed to disappear, and she'd finally figured out how she would do it.

Belladonna had been watching the guards every day for the past week. She hadn't seen Vlad, nor had Gabriel come for her, so she was resolved to save herself. She would slip through the holes in the vampires' security, and then she would run to her mother. Rowena would know how to annul this farce of a marriage, and then Belladonna would be free to wed the man she loved. The safe choice who didn't threaten to destroy her life and sanity with a single caress of his tongue.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:38 am*

Belladonna stood before her window, studying the UV-protected glass that shielded the home and the vampires within it from the scalding sunrays. The technology ensured they could move safely throughout the residence during the daylight hours without having to avoid the sun patches, which put a slight kink in her plan. It left the mansion teeming with guards around the clock, meaning the gardens and lawns were the only unprotected parts of the property. Escaping while it was light was counterintuitive, but if she could just get outside, she'd be free. She could use the remaining sunlight to make her way home, and once she was within coven territory, any attempt to reclaim her would be an act of war. Two weeks locked in this house were two too many. She hadn't laid eyes on her husband since their encounter in the kitchen, and if she survived this climb, she would never have to behold the angel of death again.

Her initial plan had involved the front door at midday, but after watching a guard step into a patch of sunlight on the floor without collapsing into ash, she realized the windows were treated. The afternoon was still her wisest opportunity, but the bright hallways were no longer an option, which was why she stood at her window. Once she opened it, the sunspot on her floor would transform from cheerful light to the depths of hell for any vampire who ventured into her room, and she secretly hoped today was the day Vlad searched her out. He was too handsome for his own good; sex and sin and seduction unmatched. A proper burning would serve him right. The devil shouldn't be permitted to look like a god.

Belladonna inhaled a fortifying breath and shoved open the window. She climbed out into the warm afternoon sun, summer stretching its limbs one last time before it surrendered the earth to autumn's control, and she cursed Vlad for sequestering her in the tallest point of the mansion. Without magic, a fall from this height could break

her legs, and she cursed him again, wishing she could put power into an actual curse instead of simply spewing a string of vulgar words.

It took her ten minutes to reach the ground, and she raced past the pool toward the gardens, knowing she was cutting it close. She'd memorized the guards' routines, and the vampires undoubtedly had cameras trained on the lawns separating her from the estate wall, but if she stuck to the sunshine, she would be safe. Belladonna darted into the grass, dodging the shade the carefully manicured trees and bushes offered, and she made it to the wall without opposition. A nagging deep in her gut warned her escape had been too easy, that her route had been too unmonitored, but the need to find her mother and Gabriel clouded all rational thought. She couldn't concentrate on the obvious, not when freedom was beyond that barrier.

Belladonna pulled herself into a tree, thankful for the years of weapons training her mom had insisted on. As heir to the coven's leader, she was second in power only to Rowena, her magic a fearsome sight to behold. Her abilities with brewed potions were also unmatched, but it seemed her mother anticipated a time when not even simple spells could help her. Rowena had taught her daughter to kill vampires with her bare hands, ensuring this tree was no match for her strength.

Belladonna hoisted her athletic frame high into the branches and leaped over the wall with graceful speed. She landed hard on the opposite side, her ankle cracking on the pavement, but she didn't stop. With limping steps, she forced herself to keep moving. Her fingers began to twist and contort, casting silent spells as she walked. For long minutes, nothing happened. Her hands cast in vain, but then, as if a thread had snapped, magic flooded her limbs. She threw a triumphant smirk over her shoulder at the mansion as she wrapped her sore ankle in magic. She'd escaped the wards. Magic flowed through her veins once again, and she eased into a run, confident nothing could stop her now. Her mother would know what to do. They'd had no choice at the church. The vampires had outnumbered them. The one named for the Impaler had stood with his hands locked around hers. Surrender had been her only choice, but

now? Now they could make a plan. She would find Gabriel and her mom, and Vlad would answer for his?—

A car pulled before her as she passed under a bridge, cutting off her escape, and her heart slowed as she registered the sleek black vehicle. Only one man drove a car that expensive, and before her fingers could form a spell, her husband stepped out into the shade.

“Going somewhere, little witch?” Vlad asked, striding into her personal space and slipping his tattooed hand into her curled fingers, halting her magic. His hold wasn’t cruel, but his grip was explicitly clear. She wasn’t allowed to leave him, and judging by the cars pulling up behind her, Vlad had known she would try to escape. The ease of her route flooded her memory. He’d let her leave. Seemed his curiosity wished to test how far she would go.

“If you wanted to go somewhere, you should have told me,” Vlad said, guiding her toward his car, and despite the magic flooding her veins, she was outnumbered yet again. She had no choice but to yield. “I have a home gym. You don’t need to run these streets. Besides, it’s dangerous out here.”

“I can take care of myself,” she spat.

“Of that, I have no doubt.” Vlad kissed her knuckles before guiding her to a seat. “But you are Rowena’s heir and my wife. The target on your head grew infinitely larger the moment you put on my ring.”

“Then why give it to me?” she asked, glaring at him with enough venom to damn a lesser man’s soul.

“Because it looks better on you than it does on me.” He winked at her as he started the car. “And I want everyone to know who you belong to.”

“I don’t belong to you.”

“Oh, but you do, little witch, you do. You became mine the second you said ‘I do,’ and I didn’t take that oath lightly.” He pinned her with a meaningful stare as he drove too fast, his eyes belonging to her and not the road. “I took our wedding vows seriously, and I intend to uphold my end of faithfully yours till death do us part. Don’t you?”

Belladonna had the urge to lunge across the center console and add a healthy dose of magic to her slap, but she inexplicably found herself nodding in agreement at the idea of the angel of death remaining faithful to her.

“Excellent.” Vlad’s gaze finally returned to the road. “Oh, and I’ve increased my security,” he added, and Bella’s heart dropped. “Can’t have just anyone wandering around the property.”

Vlad parked in the underground garage and watched with a smirk as his young wife leaped from the car and slammed the door too hard in his face. She was glorious when angry, and he realized he was probably sick in the head, but the witch’s rage turned him on. He liked how determined and brave she was. Willing to wed him to save her mother, willing to defy him in an escape attempt. He liked her more than he should, which was why he’d tightened his security. Belladonna was enraged, assuming her breakout was the reason, but that wasn’t why he increased his home’s protection. The arrogant part of him believed that even if she left him, she would eventually return. Her spirit called to him. The way her blood tasted promised their wedding hadn’t been a mistake. It hadn’t been a reckless decision or a foolish whim. Belladonna was his. Truly and eternally his, which was why he increased the security. He had someone to protect now, and while he couldn’t put a finger on the cause of his concern, the shift in the air warned him to be careful. Not of his witch, though. Of something else, and the additional guards weren’t to lock her in. They were to keep the source of that unknown feeling in his gut out.



Belladonna stood in front of the pantry, staring at the spice rack with disappointment. Vlad kept the kitchen stocked with a vast array of ingredients, the foods she preferred suddenly showing up in a greater abundance, and while the spice rack was adequately diverse, it was nothing compared to the herbs her mother's kitchen boasted. At home, she could brew any potion she needed from her mother's stores, but among the vampires, it seemed all she could do was make a delicious dinner.

After her failed escape attempt, Vlad stopped ignoring her. He didn't go out of his way to be with her, but he didn't hide either, and Belladonna resolved that if he wouldn't play the coward and disappear, neither would she. He stood firmly by his word, though, and not a single vampire so much as looked at her with more than a passing glance. The first few days after she climbed over the wall, she'd tried doing the most ridiculous things imaginable to test their commitment to their leader's commands, but her husband meant what he said. She was safe from his vampires and free to roam the estate as long as she avoided the walls. By the time the week came to a close, all she'd accomplished was embarrassing herself by sliding down banisters, moving the guards' equipment when they weren't looking, and eating rapidly melting chocolate ice cream bars with her fingers on the creamiest white couch she'd ever seen.

Belladonna grabbed a garlic bulb down from the braid, hating that the groceries had recently been restocked with everything she liked to cook. It bothered her that Vlad paid attention, that he realized how much she loved pasta and garlic and chocolate. It also made her laugh that a vampire had an entire braid hanging in his kitchen. She knew the myths surrounding garlic, holy water, and churches were invented by vampires to help them hide in plain sight, but their presence in this pantry still amused her, and she wondered if he'd bought it purposely to be humorous.

Belladonna grabbed one of the mini chocolate bars from a jar that magically seemed to refill overnight since she'd moved here and popped the sweet into her mouth. She returned to the cutting board and reached for a knife when familiar features passed by

the kitchen door. The vampire's movements were quick. She only caught sight of him for a fraction of a second, but it was enough for her blood to run cold in her veins.

"Gabriel?" She dropped the knife and raced after the figure. "Gabriel, wait!" She chased after him, but he didn't so much as slow his pace. "Gabriel!"

She lunged forward and captured his biceps, pulling him forcefully around to face her. Surprise registered on his features at her strength, and she scanned the hallways before shoving him into a small library.

"What are you doing here?" she whispered as she shut the door.

"This is my father's house," he said.

"I know. I just assumed he was forcing you to stay away." She flung her arms around his neck, hugging him tight despite his lack of reciprocation. "I missed you. I've been here for almost a month and haven't seen you since our rehearsal dinner."

"Yeah, well, you married my father. Did you really expect me to hang around and watch you with him?"

"I haven't been with him." Belladonna looked her fiancé... her ex-fiancé in the eyes. "And you act like I had a choice."

"You're wearing his ring, not mine... actually that ring is mine, only not the diamond I gave you, but rather, the one meant for the leader of the vampires. When my father dies, that will pass to me, but somehow, you're wearing it. So, tell me again how you didn't have a choice? Dad wouldn't part with that for just anyone, so you must be putting out for the old man."

"Gabriel!" Belladonna reared back as if he'd slapped her, his words more painful than

any blow. “The church was surrounded, and you were nowhere to be found. Vlad’s tattoo is called the angel of death because it’s the last thing his victims see before they die, and it was locked around my wrist. The vampires outnumbered the witches, and my mother was seconds away from being attacked by your father’s most ruthless men. You weren’t there. You left me alone without help.”

“So, you betrayed me and got with my dad?” Gabriel spat. “What? I don’t show up for five minutes, and you decided you would prefer to fuck a more powerful vampire.”

“Gabriel, I told you, I haven’t been with him.” Tears flooded her eyes involuntarily, but she didn’t understand why the man she loved was being so cruel. “I haven’t even kissed him. I wanted to marry you, but he forced me to marry him instead. He was named after the Impaler. He isn’t someone you refuse. What was I supposed to do? Let him kill my family? My coven?”

“It doesn’t matter now, so why bother talking about it? What’s done is done.”

“It is not done. You and I are in love. If anyone can stand up to your father, it’s you,” Belladonna begged. “Take me away from here, please. I’ll go with you right now; we’ll walk out the door and never look back. I’ve barely been married a month, and we haven’t even kissed. My mother will help with the annulment, and then you and I can get married.”

“We could get married?” Gabriel asked incredulously. “You really think I would marry you after this? That I would want my dad’s sloppy seconds?”

“Gabriel, I know you’re angry,” Belladonna felt herself spiraling. This wasn’t how she imagined this conversation going. She’d been convinced that if Gabriel found her, he would throw her over her shoulder and carry her far from this mansion, not insult her with unnecessary names. “I’m angry too, but please don’t be cross with me. I

couldn't let my family or my coven get killed, and without your protection, your dad held all the power in that church. I need your help. I want to be with you."

"Yeah, well, I don't want to be with you," her ex spat.

"Don't say that," Belladonna started crying harder. "Gabriel, please don't say that. We love each other. We can face your father together."

"It doesn't matter," Gabriel said, sidestepping her. "Your marriage to him changes nothing, so it's of no consequence to me."

"What are you talking about?" She seized his wrist, terrified that if he walked out that door, she would never see him again. "How is it of no consequence? I was your fiancé. You said you loved me. I'm trying to fight for us. Why won't you fight for me?"

"Because you're a witch," Gabriel said, slamming the final nail into their relationship's coffin. "Did you really think I would start a war with my father over one?" He flung open the door and strode out into the hallway, leaving her to cry alone. "No witch, not even one as hot as you, is worth the trouble."

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:38 am*

If Belladonna could wield magic, she would've burned the entire mansion to the ground, roasting every vampire inside to dust, but not a single spark of power emanated from her twisting fingers. It didn't stop her from trying, though. Just because her magic wouldn't manifest in this house didn't mean she couldn't practice casting the spells, didn't mean she couldn't picture Gabriel's face as her hands twisted another powerful spell.

Within minutes, she was sweating, the burn of her muscles glorious as magic flowed through her. She couldn't cast it, but she sensed it flooding her veins, and she savored the internal power. For the first few days after Gabriel destroyed her world, she'd taken to lying un-showered and un-fed in her bed, but as the early hints of fall crept through the air, reminding her how much she loved autumn, she resolved not to wither away in this expensive prison. Gabriel may have made a fool of her, breaking her heart, but she was Rowena's daughter, heir to the most powerful witch in the country. Her ancestors had overcome far greater obstacles than an unfortunate arranged marriage and a brutal heartbreak, and she was determined not to be defined by one man's rejection and another's control. She had no magic, no support in this house, no potions to brew, but strength was only one strategy in warfare. She wasn't helpless, even if her situation whispered that she was, and while she couldn't go toe to toe with the angel of death in his territory, she could punish him in other ways.

The more she practiced her dormant magic, the more the idea appealed to her, and by the time she was done exercising, she was eager to escape her bedroom. She showered, taking forever, so she used all the hot water, and then she carefully applied the expensive make-up Vlad had bought. At first, she'd felt strange wearing the clothes he'd picked out, but now she liked the idea of fighting this battle with the very weapons he gave her. She donned the shortest pair of shorts she found and then

pulled on a tiny tank top. The shirt was meant for layering, clearly not intended to be the sole article of clothing, for it showed too much cleavage and midriff. She'd never worn something so revealing, but one look in the mirror confirmed she was hot enough to burn this house down without magic, and with a wicked smile, she exited her room.

"Hi, boys." She waved at two guards as she sauntered down the stairs, and though the vampires knew not to gawk at their boss' young and nearly undressed wife, both of them grunted in surprise at her sudden appearance.

"It's such a nice day," she continued, wondering how long it would take Vlad to arrive. "The air is cooling, but witches thrive on fall weather. The world bundles up, but I can't get enough of the crisp breeze on my skin."

Neither vampire spoke, but she didn't miss how both of them suddenly possessed stiff necks that refused to let them look down .

"We'll I'm off to the kitchen to make a pumpkin-spiced latte. Or maybe some apple cider," she said, waving over her shoulder. "I drink so much of those during the fall, I swear it makes my blood sweet and spicy. I wonder? Do vampires like spiced blood?"

"They might, but they'd lose their head if they even thought of tasting yours," Vlad said behind her as she busied herself brewing the coffee, and she smiled triumphantly. He'd arrived faster than she'd expected.

"I know I saw canned pumpkin in the pantry," she whispered to herself, completely ignoring the sexy-as-sin vampire leaning in the doorway. "Lattes are much better with the real stuff and not the artificial syrup." She captured the can and some spices, making sure she bent over more times than necessary. "Oh, boys?" she shouted as she leaned out of the kitchen door, avoiding Vlad as if he wasn't there. "Would you fine

gentlemen like a coffee?" She felt Vlad's stare burning the nape of her neck as she ignored him, and it took all her willpower not to laugh. "What am I saying? Of course, you two want coffee. I'll make you some."

She whirled back around, careful not to glance in her husband's direction, and busied herself at the stove. He said nothing, but he didn't need to. His eyes observed her with such intensity she felt his gaze as powerfully as if it was his hands. They moved up her legs to her hips. They lingered on her breasts, focused on her throat, studied her full lips, but no matter how intently he glared at her, she pretended he wasn't there. Men like Vlad were never ignored, and she might not be able to physically fight him in this house, but torture him? That she could do, and by the tension in the air, he was burning alive.

"Do you boys want whipped cream?" She called over her shoulder. "I don't know why I asked. Of course, you do." She poured three coffees and then sprayed healthy doses of cream on top. A wicked idea flooded her mind, and she knew she was tempting fate, but she couldn't stop herself. She twisted so Vlad had a clear view of her profile and aimed the nozzle at her mouth. Whipped cream cascaded past her lips, and she moaned as she swallowed. A loud and suggestive moan. A dollop fell from the nozzle to land on her chest, and with exaggerated movements, she wiped it off before licking her finger.

Vlad growled at her performance. His voice was deep and primal and predatory, a menace only an ancient vampire could accomplish, and she hated how the vibration settled in her core. She hated that she was attracted to her husband. She wanted to despise him, but something about the angel of death spoke to her soul. She couldn't explain it. She didn't want to explain it, but her new and powerful husband set her body ablaze with a single sound more than Gabriel had with even the most passionate kiss.

Vlad inhaled, and with horror, Belladonna realized he could scent how he affected

her. With urgent movements, she captured the tray of coffees, and sauntered out of the kitchen, almost running into his solid chest as if she didn't see him barring her way.

"I bet you boys have never had a pumpkin-spiced latte prepared by a witch before," she said as she offered the two stiff-necked guards the coffee, but when they declined the drinks, glancing warily over her shoulder at the man burning a hole in her back with his glare, she forced herself into their personal space. "I made these for you. It's extremely rude not to accept."

Both men shifted uncomfortably, but when she refused to leave, they captured the mugs.

"Go on," she encouraged with a smile, and the vampires hesitantly lifted the beverages to their lips. They took the tiniest sips, their eyes widening at how delicious her coffee was, and satisfied that she'd gotten what she came for, she turned toward the courtyard, her mug in hand and not a single one for her husband. "Enjoy!" she called, smirking to herself at Vlad's scowl when his guards proceeded to finish their lattes. It was a small win, but a win all the same, and for the first time in weeks, Belladonna felt like herself.

On Monday, Belladonna wore tiny black shorts and an even smaller tank top. On Tuesday, she wore a black dress that Vlad was certain was actually a nightie. On Wednesday, she donned an orange sports bra with too much push-up and black leggings, looking like an adorable yet delicious pumpkin. On Thursday, it was a black sweater that barely covered her ass... and nothing else except for knee-high ghost socks he'd purchased on a whim, and today she wore an orange bikini that he bought without realizing how small it was. And why did Vlad know what she'd worn every day? He'd memorized her clothes because the images were burned into his brain. For an entire week, his young wife had paraded around the house in her revenge outfits, talking to everyone but him, and he was ready to explode. He swore he wouldn't



touch her until she begged for it, and she was putting his resolve to the test. He wasn't sure what had possessed her. For weeks, she'd avoided everyone, and now they couldn't get rid of her. His guards knew he would rip out the hearts of anyone who looked at her disrespectfully, so he wasn't worried about her safety. His sanity, on the other hand? That was in danger.

Belladonna was currently sitting by the pool in her orange bikini, soaking in the new fall sun, and he both loved and regretted his decision to buy her that suit. It barely covered her ass... the ass he wanted to sink his fangs into. She would look exquisite with his bite mark on her perfectly shaped cheeks. He would dig his teeth in and taste how sweet her pumpkin-spiced-flavored blood was, and then he would slip her bottoms to the side, baring her pussy to him so he could take her from behind while staring at his bite mark.

Vlad shook his head and growled. He needed to get a grip, or his beautiful wife would be the death of him. He also needed to buy her more of those bikinis... and supplies to brew pumpkin-spiced lattes. She'd yet to offer him one, making them for everyone in the house but him, but he didn't mind. Many of his men were angry about his decision to bring a witch into their ranks, but their resentment had softened significantly since she started treating them to her lattes. She could make them every damn day if peace was the result... and because while she wouldn't acknowledge him or let him sample the coffee, she always shot whipped cream onto her tongue when he was watching. He was a sick bastard, but it was quickly becoming his favorite part of the day, especially since it showed him exactly how she would look on her knees for him.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:38 am*

Belladonna stood before her bed with her arms crossed over her chest. She'd returned to her room after dinner to find her mattress covered with clothes. Brand new designer clothes, all in her size. She'd started practicing casting magicless spells every morning until she was sweating and sore. Then she would shower, apply her makeup, and proceed to torture her husband. As the weather grew steadily colder, her outfits grew steadily smaller, and even though she was ignoring him, she spent most of her time with Vlad. September was flying by, and as she punished her husband with increasingly sexy ensembles and outrageous feats of avoiding him while in his presence, she found herself enjoying his company. Maybe it was because, as angry as she made him sometimes, he never once threatened or harmed her. She was genuinely safe in this mansion, even if she missed her friends and family. Not only was she safe, but she was worshipped. There was no other way to describe the way Vlad gazed at her as she sauntered around his house, taunting him... and oh, how she taunted him. Some days, she feared he might explode at her antics, which only fueled her need to tease him. What began as a punishment had somehow become exhilarating, and the clothes on her bed made that change abundantly clear.

There were new sets of everything she'd tormented him with in every shade of the rainbow. Dozens of barely-there bikinis, tiny shorts, and even smaller tank tops. But Vlad's gifts weren't composed of only sexy outfits. He'd gifted her piles of the fuzzy socks she liked, a handful of designer dresses she would kill to wear on a night out, jeans that would fit her like a glove, panties and bras that were almost too risqué, and an oversized tee shirt that said 'Which Witch is Which?' on the front in bold letters. Every article of clothing was exactly her size and style, from the seductive to the chic to the comfy. Her husband had been clearly paying attention, and while the combative part of her brain told her to gather the thousands of dollars' worth of clothes and chuck them out the window, she couldn't bring herself to part with them.

She'd been ignoring him, taunting him, punishing him, and he'd responded with gifts. It made her unreasonably angry that Vlad was trying to be kind after his appalling behavior at the church, and it enraged her that she loved it. She loved how this new wardrobe had been carefully selected for her enjoyment with no strings attached. Her husband simply wanted her to have a fresh set of outfits to torture him with, and she smiled, stripping off her clothes to slip into the giant witch shirt. It hung all the way to her thighs. The fuzzy socks came to her knees, and she wondered how he would react if she paraded around the house like this instead. She'd already had dinner, but the TV was bigger in the main living room downstairs. She could always make popcorn and apple cider and watch a Halloween movie. It was a little early still, the holiday a month away, but she enjoyed the thought of blasting a witchy tale loud and late.

She turned to leave her bedroom but then twisted back toward the bed and snatched a lacy orange thong off the mattress. She removed her more practical panties and slipped on the new pair. If she was going to cause a raucous, she liked the idea of wearing a pair that Vlad had personally selected for her under her pajamas.

Belladonna raced down the stairs, grabbed the popcorn out of the pantry, and yelped as she turned toward the window. Yellow eyes stared at her through the glass, and she almost slipped on her fuzzy socks before she realized the eyes didn't belong to a monster come to kill her. They belonged to a kitten. She placed the popcorn on the counter and opened the window. The small black cat took that as an invitation and jumped inside.

"Hi, sweet baby." She scooped up the cat, and the animal burrowed deep into her arms. She'd never seen this kitten on the property before. She didn't take the angel of death as a cat owner, which meant this tiny creature had arrived for her. Cats and witches had a bond that extended throughout history, and if a cat had followed her here, it was a sign it sensed her magic.

“You’re so pretty.” Belladonna hugged the kitty before setting her on the floor. “Are you hungry? Would you like a snack?” The cat curled around her ankles, purring enthusiastically, and Belladonna returned to the pantry to dig out a can of tuna. She pried off the top and dumped it on a plate while she made herself some popcorn, and the kitten ate half of the meal before drinking some water. The animal then sat by her feet while she heated the cider, and Belladonna knew she’d found a friend in this mansion.

“You need a name,” Belladonna said as she walked to the living room, kitty in tow. “What about Broomstick? Witches don’t actually fly on them, but I think it’s cute.” She turned on the TV and settled into the couch, the cat leaping into her lap. “Broomstick it is, sweet girl. We’re going to be best friends. I can already tell.”

“Since when do we have a cat?” a deep voice asked.

“Since ten minutes ago,” Belladonna answered, completely forgetting to ignore Vlad. “She was outside the kitchen window, and I let her in. Cats often flock to where witches live.”

“She looks small.” Vlad settled behind the couch, his eyes slipping good-naturedly to her outfit choice. “Is she sick?”

“Don’t think so,” Belladonna said. “Broomstick is still a baby.”

“Broomstick?” he repeated, a deep chuckle rumbling through his chest, and the sound wrapped Belladonna in warmth. She decided against her will that she liked it.

“What? It’s an excellent name for a witch’s cat.”

“It is.” Vlad leaned over her shoulders and stroked the kitten’s soft head with his tattooed hand, and it was strange to see the skull-inked skin that had caused so much

pain and death scratch a baby animal behind the ears. “She’s pretty,” he said in a tone that told her he wasn’t talking about the cat, and as he straightened back to a stand, his palm brushed her shoulder. “What are you watching?”

“A Halloween movie.”

“Already?”

“Yes, already. It’s fall. The leaves are turning. The weather is cooler. It’s time to fill this house with witches.”

“What? No vampire movies?” he teased.

“Absolutely not. It would frighten Broomstick.”

“Okay then,” Vlad chuckled, and for a second, Belladonna considered asking him to watch the movie with her. She was married to this vampire. Gabriel wasn’t the man she hoped he was, and the longer she remained in this house, the more she realized her marriage was permanent. Vlad would never let her go. Not only because he’d forced her to wed him for some unexplainable reason, but a divorce would be a clear sign of breaking the peace. Vlad discarding her would be akin to him tearing up the treaty he’d signed with her mother, and while an annulment might have been feasible in the days following the wedding, she’d been married to the vampire leader for almost two months. This was her life now. He was her future, and she wondered if she should offer a truce to the husband she would spend eternity with. Could she forgive his sins? Could she sit on this couch with him and share her popcorn? Her thoughts? Her kisses? What would it be like to kiss Vlad? Would he?—?

She shut down that thought. She couldn’t think like that. Not when the man was pure beauty and strength in the flesh. Not when he was the kind of man who would ruin your life if you let him between your thighs. Not when he’d forced her to wed him.

No, she wouldn't ask him to stay and watch the movie with her. Not yet. Maybe not ever.

"Have a good night, little witch," Vlad said, clearly picking up on her internal argument. "Goodnight, Broomstick."

"Goodnight, Vlad."

Goodnight, Vlad. She'd spoken to him, and what's more, she'd said his name. His name on her tongue was magic he would sell his soul for, and that she had on the witch tee shirt he bought her made his un-beating heart race. She hadn't ignored him, and he didn't know if that was progress or a side effect of the sudden cat, but if that kitten softened his young wife toward him, Vlad would gladly tolerate the animal. Hell, he'd buy it fresh tuna steaks and organic milk if it encouraged Belladonna's warmth. He didn't understand himself around the witch. He lost all rational thought, lost all control, and all he could focus on was the overwhelming desire to have her in his life, in his house, in his bed. He didn't care that they'd been married for two months and hadn't even kissed. As long as she was close by, filling the mansion with the scent of pumpkin spice and her fragrant skin, he was content. He realized she was mad at him for forcing the marriage, but his restraint crumbled in her presence. She was everything he wanted, all he thought about. He hated witches. Despised them his entire existence, and now all he craved was a witch. He coveted her smiles, her voice, her touch. He didn't recognize his own mind, and while he should purge himself of this obsession, he knew he wouldn't. Vlad couldn't bear the prospect of anything taking that beautiful young witch from him.

So, he left the living room, but he remained close by. He grabbed his laptop and moved into the adjacent room. He worked while she laughed. He listened to her converse with the cat, but by the time the second film ended, her voice had fallen silent.

Unable to resist any longer, Vlad slipped into the living room. The movie's credits were playing, but Belladonna was fast asleep on the couch; the kitten curled up against her belly. She lay on her side, one leg straight and the other bent beneath her, and Vlad froze at the sight. The funny witch shirt he'd bought her had bunched up around her hips, and he realized the top wasn't the only new item she'd sampled. One of the lacy orange thongs he'd purchased clung to her skin, leaving her ass on display, and his cock twitched in his pants. She was so beautiful; it was almost painful. It took all his self-control not to trail his tattooed hand over the back of her thighs, not to take hold of those perfectly round cheeks. He'd been alive for a long time, some might say too long, and he'd seen a lot of women. He'd been with a lot of women, but none could compare to his wife. She called to him as if she'd cast a spell, and he might believe his obsession was because of magic if he hadn't double-checked that the wards were blocking her abilities. His desire for her, that deep-rooted need in his chest, came from something else. Something he was terrified to admit because if it was true, if his craving for her was more than lust, it would change everything. It would explain why his son was livid about his wedding, but not because he loved her. Gabriel couldn't love her, not if Vlad's suspicions were correct. He still didn't know why his son wanted to marry the woman, and he didn't understand how anyone could resist her beauty, but that nagging theory might point to why.

Vlad exhaled and grabbed the remote, forcing himself to stop fantasizing about slipping onto the couch and wrapping his arms around her bare body. He clicked off the television and then draped a blanket over her, covering those glorious legs he kept picturing wrapped around his waist.

"Good night, little witch," he said, allowing himself one moment of weakness to brush her hair off her face. "Sweet dreams."

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:38 am*

Vlad started leaving his office door open while he worked in the hopes that Belladonna would pass by in her daily efforts to make his life miserable, and while she was doing a magnificent job of tormenting him, she was also the highlight of his day. Who knew being ignored by a young witch in shorts could be so exhilarating? Perhaps he'd spent too many decades interrogating and torturing the vampires' enemies because he'd clearly lost his mind. He rarely saw the witch, the unrest outside this home setting his fangs on edge, but this war with his new wife oddly brought him a sliver of peace.

Until she walked by his office wearing just a tee shirt that barely covered her ass and a pair of ghost socks with two cats in tow. Vlad stood up and blinked his dark eyes. Two cats? Since when did they have two black cats? Maybe he was seeing double. He had to be.

He stepped into the hallway and followed as his wife wandered toward the courtyard. His office was located at the rear of the mansion, meaning she went out of her way to spite him. The cooler the fall weather became, the more time she spent outside... and the smaller her clothes became. Seemed she thrived on Halloween weather, and he thrived on the glorious sight of her beautiful form.

"Why do we have two cats?" Vlad chased after her, hoping she would stop before she reached the door, and to his relief, she turned around. She never answered him unless he asked about Broomstick, which was why he'd suddenly become a cat lover. "And why is that cat so big?"

"That's Fang," she said with a pointed look at Vlad's mouth. "He was a stray with a bit of a temper and a torn ear, so naturally, I named him for you." She scooped up the



big cat as if he were the sweetest angel, and Vlad wondered if she was lying about the cat's attitude until the animal hissed violently at him.

"You're hysterical," he said dryly as Fang cuddled against Belladonna's chest with a mocking expression, taunting him with the reality that the cats received more of his wife's affection than her husband did. "Although if you truly wanted to name him for his attitude, you should have named him after yourself, little witch. You certainly have me beat in that regard."

"Says the angel of death who forced me to marry him," she said, and surprise flickered across her face, as if she hadn't meant to say that out loud.

"Better I marry you and trust my ring to keep other men away than let you go and be driven to kill anyone who looks at you." Vlad stepped forward until he hovered over her, watching with a sick sense of pride as her chest heaved at his words. "I knew you were mine the minute I laid eyes on you, little witch. Marrying you was the only civil choice, but your safety in my house has made you forget who I am, so let me remind you." He reached out and gripped her chin with his tattooed hand, forcing her to meet his gaze. Fang hissed at his closeness and sank his razor-sharp fangs into his flesh, but Vlad didn't so much as blink as the cat drew blood. Maybe she'd named him after the right person, after all.

"Do you know how many men I've killed with this hand?" he asked. "How many witches I've murdered? Other vampires I've butchered?"

Belladonna shook her head, and while fear didn't plague her eyes, there was a healthy dose of wariness.

"I'm not a leader who doles out punishment, then hides from the bloodshed. I believe he who orders the execution should have the balls to carry it out, which is why I tattooed this skull on my skin. It's to remind my enemies that I do not cower in the

face of death. I don't back down from the violence. I've ripped men's heads from their necks with this hand, and when I saw you, I knew I would rip apart anyone who so much as thought inappropriately about you. It's why you're safe in my house. Why you can parade around wearing practically nothing smelling like divinity in the flesh. My vampires know what I would do if they made you even slightly uncomfortable." Vlad stepped closer until their chests almost touched.

"So, yes, I married you. Seemed the better option than me stalking you for the rest of eternity and slaughtering any man who dares come near you, don't you agree?"

Belladonna swallowed, her chest heaving at his words, and he smirked at how fast her heart beat, at how the scent of her arousal coiled through the air. He knew she must suspect what he was fairly certain of. She must be feeling the effects of why he claimed her. Her desire curled thick and sweet between them, and her reaction made him want to lean forward and finally taste her lips. She could fight all she wanted, but their story would end the same. He could feel it deep in his soul. This woman was his.

"I have business at a club tonight." Vlad dropped her chin when she didn't answer, remembering his reason for following her, and he watched her stumble back with amusement. "I want you to come."

"With you?" she asked. "Outside of this house?"

"Yes."

"You're not afraid I'll run."

"No. But if you do, I'll chase you. That's a promise."

Her eyes flared, and for a split second, Vlad wondered if he should be nervous. She seemed too interested in that idea.

“I’m meeting some colleagues,” he continued, trying not to fantasize about chasing her. “They prefer to do business in clubs. They think it stops me from shedding blood. I bought you all those beautiful dresses, but since you refuse to wear them around the house, put one on and come with me. You can dance while we talk.”

“No,” Belladonna spat, but he saw the lie in her eyes. She was refusing out of spite, but she desperately wanted to go.

“We’re leaving at 11 p.m.,” Vlad said, petting Fang’s head as his blood dripped onto the cat’s fur. “I would prefer you wear one of those expensive dresses I gave you, but if you’re still wearing this tee shirt and socks when I come to collect you, then so be it. I’m sure you would rather party in a designer ensemble, but it doesn’t matter to me either way.” He turned and strode toward his office. “11 p.m., little witch. And test me if you like. I don’t care if everyone in this city sees you in this cute tee shirt, but are you really willing to walk into a vampire club dressed like that?”

It was 10:55 p.m., and Belladonna stood in her underwear before her bed, staring at her outfit options. She had five minutes left to decide, and if she didn’t don one of them, she predicted Vlad would make her go in her bra and panties out of spite.

“What do you guys think?” she asked her cats, who were currently lounging on her pillows. Despite his attitude toward everyone who wasn’t a witch, Fang had instantly taken to Broomstick, and Belladonna tried to ignore the metaphor for her and Vlad the animals offered. “Do I wear sweatpants to spite Mr. I’m-So-Scary-Yet-Way-Too-Sexy, because let’s face it, that would be funny, or do I wear this gorgeous little black dress that still has the price tag on and... holy shit, that’s a lot of numbers.” She slammed the dress onto the bed with an irritated groan. “I haven’t left this house in two months. I’ve seen no one but vampires. I’ve worn nothing but shorts and bathing suits, and I need to wear this dress.” She snatched it back up and held it before her body, showing off for her cats as if they understood her dilemma. “It just feels like surrendering if I wear this, and I can’t surrender. Not to him. Sure, Vlad isn’t who I

thought he was... okay, yes, he is. He's absolutely the monster my mother warned me about. He forced me to marry him... but he also hasn't hurt me. He doesn't touch me. I assumed he would make my life hell here, but oddly enough, it's been pleasant."

Belladonna groaned as she fell backward onto the mattress. "I hate men."

Footsteps interrupted her pity party, and she bolted upright. "Shit." She grabbed the little black dress, tore the tag off it, and shimmied into it faster than she thought possible. "Shit, shit, shit." She raced for her shoe rack with the dress still unzipped as a knock rattled the door. "One minute!" she called.

"I said 11 p.m." Vlad shoved the door open, and Belladonna yelped, tripping on her undone heels.

"Don't just barge in. I could've been naked!"

"Little witch, this is the most clothes I've seen on you in weeks," Vlad said. "Come on, let's go."

"I need to put my shoes on."

"I told you that you would wear whatever you had on at 11 p.m."

"You're an asshole!" She chucked her stiletto at him, but he caught it with perfect reflexes.

"And you're late," he said as he caught the second heel she launched at his head, and then he lunged for her and threw her over his shoulder. "Bye Fang. Bye Broomstick. Don't wait up."

"Put me down!" Belladonna pounded his back, her bare feet flailing and her dress

hanging open. “Stop being a dick and put me down.”

“As you wish.” Vlad picked up his pace as he carried her down the stairs and out the front door, where he deposited her in the waiting car. He slammed the door in her face and then walked to the driver’s side, tossing her heels into her lap as he slid behind the wheel. “Put your shoes on and let me zip you up. Did you really think I would let my wife out of the house undressed and embarrassed?” He grabbed the zipper and pulled it up her spine, his knuckles brushing her bare back as he moved, and Belladonna had emotional whiplash from his sudden shift in demeanor. “Inside our home, you can do whatever you want, but out here in the real world, you are my wife. You’re an extension of me, of my family, and my power. Whether you like it or not, you hold a position of respect, and I’ll be damned if I let anyone disrespect you.”

Vlad extended his arm, and Belladonna slipped her hand around his biceps as the attendant parked the car. The club was teeming with life, the line already down the block, but Vlad led her toward the VIP entrance. A secret thrill ran through her as every woman watched with jealousy, both at their instant access and the sex appeal of her date. Combined with the freedom to cast magic, Belladonna couldn’t resist the urge and shot a jolt of electricity through her fingers into her husband’s suit-clad muscles.

“Little witch,” Vlad warned.

“What? The angel of death afraid of a shock?” she teased. Belladonna wasn’t stupid. Antagonizing Vlad at home was one thing, but his words rang true. As his wife, she was an extension of him now, a part of his reign, and if she attacked him in public, it would be a declaration of war. Hundreds, if not thousands, of witches and vampires would die if she betrayed the unprecedented peace her marriage had delivered, and she refused to be responsible for the bloodshed. The skull inked on Vlad’s hand heralded violence, but she was no such monster. She wouldn’t incite a war for her mother to fight.

Vlad grunted and tugged her closer as he led her through the packed club toward the VIP seating. “As Rowena’s heir, I’m sure you can take care of yourself, but you are also the first witch to marry a vampire,” he said. “Please don’t leave my sight tonight.”

“Ok, Dad.”

“I’m serious, Belladonna.” He pulled her to a stop and forced her to face him. “As my wife and a witch, you have a target on your head. You should be safe here, but this isn’t up for negotiation. You stay where I can see you, or I send you home.”

Bella gazed up at him, readying to give him a piece of her mind, but his expression gave her pause. It wasn’t control or dominance. It was genuine concern, and as sour as surrender tasted, she conceded. “Fine. ”

“Thank you.” Vlad started walking again, and together they bypassed the tight security. Belladonna rarely went to clubs, and she’d never been invited into a VIP section. A thrill rippled through her against her will, and for a second, she let herself pretend that the handsome vampire on her arm wasn’t a ruthless killer who had forced their marriage, but was her date of choice. How thrilling would this night be if she could dance and drink with a man she cared for? Her dress was short. His black suit was sin stitched into fabric. If Vlad was the husband she loved and not an arrangement, she would eagerly surrender to his intoxicating gravity. She would let him drag her into a darkened corridor where they could kiss in the shadows as his tattooed hand slid up her thigh to cup her hips. She might even allow his fingers to slip inside her panties and make her come in the middle of the dancefloor. She had no doubt he would do it too, that he would have no qualms about pinning her to the VIP wall and fucking her hard and fast before someone caught them. She’d never had sex in a public place, but this vampire with his imposing height, powerful muscles, and a face that women fantasized about might convince her to throw caution to the wind and let him show this entire club who she belonged to.

But Vlad was not her husband of choice. He was a brute who stole her from her fiancé. A man that hadn't asked, but demanded, and she could never truly surrender her heart to such a monster. Granted, she wondered if he'd saved her from Gabriel's true feelings, but their wedding hadn't been her decision or romantic. It was a business deal... even if he was built for pleasure.

"We're early," Vlad said, releasing her, and his distance instantly annoyed Belladonna as she surveyed their surroundings. The sexiest women in the club hovered around the VIP section like vultures, their predatory eyes on Vlad as they readied for the kill, and a sudden possessiveness rose in her chest. She'd never kissed her husband, but she would hex anyone else for even looking at him. He was hers.

Hers.

Belladonna swallowed at the word, desperately needing to escape his magnetism. It was easier at home when she could torment him and then flee to her room, but in public, politics demanded they present a unified front. Her mother had trained her well. Perception was half the battle. People didn't question leaders who seemingly never faltered, and war wouldn't come to the witches if she played the vampire's wife convincingly. It was just an act, a performance for strangers' benefit, but it was also torture because it almost felt like they were truly united partners.

"Enjoy yourself tonight," Vlad said with a smirk, and Belladonna had the distinct impression he could read the damning thoughts racing through her brain. "I'll have to leave you when my contacts arrive, but I'll be right there where I can see you." He pointed to the couches hidden in the shadows, and as his tattooed hand lowered, it fell to her hip. With a quick glance at the hovering women, he jerked her closer until their chests collided, and she hated how triumphant she felt at his actions. With one simple move, he'd just screamed an announcement to the club and those lingering beauties. Vlad belonged to the witch.

“Oh, I plan on thoroughly enjoying myself before you lock me back up in your castle.” Belladonna swayed to the thundering music, grinding seductively against her husband. “The question is: can the angel of death loosen up, or is he too old to keep up?”

She threw him a challenging look before pulling out of his hold. With a spin in time to the beat, she sauntered to the bar, enjoying his eyes on her swaying ass, and she smiled with pride as she waved the bartender down. It was a dangerous game she was playing. Tormenting her husband had somehow become her favorite thing to do, and she worried it was less about angering him and more about him watching her. His gaze was so intense, so focused, her magic could practically feel him touching her. She’d looked forward to his attention, to his longing, to his appreciation. His gifts hadn’t stopped either. He bought her something daily, whether it was clothes, the food she liked, supplies for her new cats, or fall-scented candles and lotions. Vlad spoiled her when all she did was frustrate him, and he’d kept his promise. He hadn’t touched her, nor did he ask for anything in return. He was thoughtfully generous, and his refusal to touch her no longer seemed like a blessing. Now she feared it was a curse.

“What can I get for you?” the bartender asked.

“Whiskey, straight up,” she said. She didn’t like whiskey, but Vlad did, and she was committed to consuming things he enjoyed without sharing. She still hadn’t let him try her pumpkin-spiced lattes. “Just one,” she added when the bartender’s eyes flicked over her shoulder to her approaching husband.

“Yes, ma’am.” The bartender grabbed a bottle and poured the whiskey, but before Belladonna could grab it, Vlad’s tattooed hand shot out and captured the glass.

“I don’t think so,” Vlad said, throwing cash on the bar as he lifted the whiskey to his lips. “I don’t know if you’re old enough to drink, little witch.” He smirked, reversing



her insult on her. “Besides, bad girls don’t deserve to have fun. They get punished, so you can’t have this unless you promise to behave.” He stared down at her with a challenge. “How about it, wife? Are you going to be a good girl?”

“Screw you,” Belladonna said, holding his gaze, and Vlad’s eyes brightened at her resistance. With swift movements, he tilted his head back and poured the whiskey into his mouth, but before Belladonna could blink, his tattooed hand shot out and gripped her jaw. She gasped at the sudden contact, and he pulled her open mouth toward him until their chests collided. She inhaled at his closeness, at his scent, at how hard he was against her belly, and his eyes burned with such intensity that her magic grew unbearably hot. A man had never affected her magic before, and she moaned at the overwhelming sensation.

Vlad’s fingers gripped her chin harder, forcing her lips to part, and then he leaned forward with a dangerous wink. Without warning, he spat the whiskey into her open mouth, holding her gaze the entire time, and Belladonna swallowed as her body hummed with arousal. Her thighs pressed together in a desperate search for relief, and her breathing faltered. She drank down every drop of the alcohol, her magic tasting him in the whiskey’s burn. She wanted more, but not the faint taste of him in the liquor. The taste of his tongue against hers, and she rose onto her toes.

“Good fucking girl,” Vlad growled, lowering his mouth to hers. They were inches apart. Centimeters. A single breath away. Belladonna had never longed to kiss anyone so badly, but just before her husband’s lips crashed into hers, a familiar voice muttered a string of vulgarities behind them with disgust.

Belladonna jerked away from Vlad, eyes landing on Gabriel’s scowl, but it wasn’t his expression that made her instantly cry. It was his words. It was what he’d called her. His voice had been low so that none of Vlad’s entering colleagues heard him, but she had. She’d heard the vile and degrading things he’d called her, and unable to face him or her husband, she fled to the bathroom in tears.

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:38 am*

What is wrong with you?" Vlad grabbed his son's biceps and yanked him away from the group as Belladonna raced beyond his reach, tears streaming down her face.

"What's wrong with me?" Gabriel challenged. "You're the one who stole my fiancé on my wedding day, and the little slut doesn't seem all that upset about it. She looked pretty cozy with you there, Dad."

"You can be angry at me all you want," Vlad said, his tone dangerously cold and sharp. "I realize I took what was yours, but you aren't in love with her. She isn't right for you."

"And how do you know that? You've been in Europe for years. You didn't see us together."

"Because if you loved her, you wouldn't have let me take her. You would have burned down that church to get to her."

"How could I?" Gabriel spat, ripping his arm free of his father's hold. "You wouldn't let me anywhere near the church."

"Do you think that would've stopped me?" Vlad asked. "Do you think someone just handed me my role as leader of the vampires and wished me luck? No, I took it with blood and sacrifice. My predecessor had reigned for too long, his rule too corrupt, and I was nothing. I was young and unimportant, but I saw something I wanted. I let nothing stop me, and I would do the same for Belladonna. If you truly loved her, the earth would have thundered with your rage. You would've challenged me in that church, but you didn't, which proves my point. She isn't your mate."

“Mate?” Gabriel froze. “You can’t seriously think a witch is your mate?”

Vlad fell silent, unable to put the intense draw toward his young wife into words yet. The minute he voiced it, the second he confirmed what he suspected, it changed everything, and not just for him, but for vampires and witches for generations to come.

“You’ve lost your mind,” Gabriel said. “There’s no way that slut of a witch is your mate.”

“Watch your mouth.” Vlad loomed over his son, and the man had the decency to look nervous. “You can be mad at me all you want, but you keep my wife’s name out of your mouth. She’s not to blame. She was upset, hoping you would come for her. It’s one reason why I haven’t touched her. I wanted to see if I was right about you. If you really loved her or if you had some other motive for marrying her, and I know she begged you to take her from me.”

Gabriel froze at his father’s words.

“I know everything that goes on in my house. Everything,” Vlad said. “I know what you said and how you treated her. You don’t love her. You were using her. Why? I’m not sure, but you broke that poor girl’s heart. You were cruel, and that ends now. Belladonna is my wife. Mine, and no one, not even my own son, gets to disrespect her. Is that understood?”

“Whatever. ”

“Is that understood, Gabriel?” Vlad’s voice deepened, his aura darkening, and his son nodded. “Good.” Vlad relaxed and threw an arm over his son’s shoulder. “I love you. I may not always act like it, but I do. I’m not a soft or comforting man. My world is violence and bloodshed, but I do love you. I should say it more. And for what it’s

worth, I'm sorry about how I acted, but you don't understand what happened to me when I saw her. I couldn't have walked away even if I tried."

"It doesn't matter, anyway. It's water under the bridge," Gabriel said. "Nothing has changed. In fact, maybe it's better that it was you that married her instead of me."

"What do you mean?" Vlad asked, but his colleagues approached, interrupting their private conversation. The vampires whisked him away, consuming his attention as Gabriel faded into the background, and Vlad felt uneasiness settle in his gut, which only worsened as he watched his wife finally exit the bathroom and aim straight for the bar.

Belladonna forced herself to leave the bathroom, her eyes red and puffy from sobbing. Two different girls knocked on her stall to ask if she was okay, but she refused to come out until her face hurt. How had this become her life? One minute she was marrying a man she loved, and the next, she was marrying the enemy to save her coven. Then, when she'd begged Gabriel to take her away, to deliver her from her fate, he'd told her she wasn't worth it. She'd been willing to fight for their relationship, but he'd spat in her face. And those names he'd uttered in front of his father... a man who loved a woman would never say that. A man in love would've fought, would have stormed the castle and carried her out, but instead, he'd called her words no one should ever speak.

That whisper broke her heart. She hadn't realized she was still holding out for Gabriel, that she'd been hoping he would fight for her, but a single sentence told her how mistaken she'd been. He didn't love her. She feared he never had.

Belladonna stumbled to the bar and started to order a drink, but then stopped and changed her request to two whiskey shots. She still tasted the one Vlad gave her despite the salt of her tears, and while she refused to look at him, his eyes burned holes in her skin. Vlad. The angel of death. The vampire named for the Impaler. He

was a brute. He was the source of her heartbreak, yet he'd sworn to rip apart anyone who so much as looked at her inappropriately. He was the one who bought her gifts, who refused to touch her without consent, who never once spoke disrespectfully to her, even though she was his enemy's daughter. If someone took her from him, would he fight for her? As insane and power-hungry as he was, as violent and selfish as he was, would he storm the gates of hell for her? Or would he call her vile words in a cruel tone?

Belladonna slammed both shots and ordered a cocktail because she didn't need to ask that question. Vlad might be the most ruthless vampire to walk the earth. He might be delusional and the type to steal his son's bride, but Gabriel hadn't come for her. He hadn't fought, but Vlad would have. She knew it in her soul. Her husband would've rescued her.

Belladonna peeled herself off the bar, loathing her emotions. They felt like traitors, but something had shifted inside her. Vlad affected her magic, and it was as if her power was feeding off of him, growing as he fueled her. She hadn't noticed it at home, but here, with her magic humming below her skin, she knew it had changed. It was burning, pulsing, swelling. It was as if a living creature had surged to life within her, and the implications were alarming. That only happened when a witch found their mate. Her magic lay dormant around Gabriel, but it raged to life in his father's presence. And she despised it. She hated how the man who forced this marriage might have done the right thing. Granted, he'd gone about it in the wrong way, but if Vlad was her mate, then she couldn't marry another man. To ignore a mate was to live an excruciating existence. No witch had ever bonded with a vampire. She didn't think it was possible, but why else could she physically feel his sight? Why was her magic vibrating? Why was the taste of him in that shot consuming her?

Belladonna didn't want to like him, but all she could concentrate on was Vlad's promise to kill anyone who harmed her, his gifts, and his tolerance for her aggravating behavior. She was safe in the home of a vampire. Safe enough to

antagonize him, and the emotions swirling through her chest threatened to make her sick. She needed to dance. To let her magic flow through her until all her focus was on her power.

“Hey, beautiful, can I buy you a drink?” a man interrupted her movements, and she looked up to find four handsome men circling her. For a split second, she told herself to flirt with them to piss Vlad off, but the idea crumbled to ash. She didn’t want to entertain strangers. She aggravatingly wanted to flirt with her husband, to ease the heartache by being around someone who didn’t spew venom at her.

“No, thanks.” She turned away and swayed to the music, sipping her cocktail. The bartender had made it unusually strong, and she savored the burn as her brain grew fuzzy.

“A woman as pretty as you shouldn’t drink alone.” He stepped behind her and slid a hand around her belly, cementing her to his chest. “At least dance with me.”

“I don’t...” she trailed off, confused as to why he was touching her. Had she asked him to join her? How much had she drunk? Wasn’t she here with someone? She wore a ring, so she must be married... right? “I’m okay...” she slurred. “I can dance by myself.”

“Oh, come on.” The man yanked her, and with sluggish fingers, she formed a spell. An electric shock blasted him, and he shouted before tightening his hold. “So, the bitch wants a fight.” His voice darkened, the flirtation gone, and panic flooded Belladonna’s alcohol-soaked brain.

“Looks like a witch wandered into our midst, boys.” The man hoisted her up by the waist. She tried to pull on her magic, but neither her mind nor her fingers would work.

“I say we teach her a lesson,” he continued, and even though Belladonna couldn’t focus, she knew enough to realize the four men had moved her to a back alley. She started to cry as they shoved her into the shadows because her power had vanished, and she knew what happened to witches when vampires found them alone and helpless in the dark.

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:38 am*

“Where’s my wife?” Vlad stood up, interrupting his colleague mid-sentence. They were approaching the end of their meeting, but his attention had been divided ever since Belladonna had escaped the bathroom and rushed to the bar. She’d obeyed his request and remained in sight, and while his stomach cramped at the vision of her dancing alone and drunk after Gabriel’s insults, he had a business to run. He hadn’t become a god among monsters by ignoring his responsibilities, so he’d resolved to simply monitor her from a distance until his meeting was over, but she’d suddenly disappeared. Not even his predatory senses could locate her.

“Wasn’t she just right...” Bartholomew trailed off as his colleagues shifted to scan the dance floor.

“Belladonna?” Vlad strode toward the bar, shoving people aside as he searched for her. “My wife?” He glared at the bartender, and the man shrank beneath his gaze. He worked in the VIP section every weekend, so he understood exactly who Vlad was. “Where did she go?”

“She was dancing right there.” The bartender pointed to the last spot Vlad had seen her and froze when he realized he’d lost track of the woman. “I swear she was right there. She’d slammed a few shots, so I was keeping an eye on her, but I had a big group of customers. I looked away for only a few minutes.”

“Was she with anyone?” Vlad growled.

“I... I don’t think so,” the man stuttered. “She was dancing in her own little world.”

Vlad clenched his fists so hard that his bones ached. The crowd pulsed, the late hour



beckoning dancers with its thundering music, and it was as if the throng had swallowed Belladonna alive.

“You looking for that brunette?” a woman asked in a sultry voice, and Vlad glanced down to watch as a pretty blonde in a slinky silver dress ran a manicured finger down his chiseled abs. “She was dancing with four young guys and then left with them. I guess she doesn’t appreciate a mature man like yourself, so why don’t you come with me, baby? I’ll make you feel good.”

“Where did they go?” Vlad captured her wrist, stopping her exploration of his body as panic poisoned his chest.

“Probably off to have a good time,” she crooned, oblivious to his fear. “We should do the same. I don’t live far from?—”

“Which way did they go?” Vlad growled, his voice more animal than man, and the woman released a startled squeak.

“That way.” She pointed toward a rear door, and Vlad dropped her arm, cutting through the dancing crowd like a blade through wheat. Intense fear coiled through his limbs as his mind begged for him not to be too late. He couldn’t be too late. He’d promised Belladonna nothing would happen to her, and he knew she was mad about Gabriel. Livid about how brutish he’d been at their wedding, but the witch was no fool. She hadn’t willingly left with four men, and his terror was so strong that he thought he might vomit.

Vlad burst out of the back door, and the second the night air hit him, he smelled it. Fear. Her fear. She was close, and she was scared. He lifted his nose into the soft breeze and inhaled. The intoxicating fragrance of Belladonna’s skin mixed with the scent of four distinct male vampires, and he launched into a run. He pushed his legs faster than he’d ever moved, and an all-consuming rage settled over him when he saw

them.

One vampire held Belladonna by the waist, forcing her listless body to remain still and upright as the other three revealed their fangs. Vlad knew she was drunk, but by the way she hung from the stranger's arms, he knew her lethargy wasn't alcohol induced. His wife had been drugged, and all traces of Vlad vanished as the angel of death assumed control.

"If you let her go, I'll kill you quickly," he said so low it was as if he was born of darkness and malice. "I will sever your heads from your body and end your lives swiftly."

"Fuck off!" One vampire shouted over his shoulder, clearly unaware of who he was addressing. "This bitch is a witch, and she wandered into our territory. The treaty states we can't go looking for fights, but I'll be damned if I let those scum cross into our districts and get away with it."

"That is not just some witch," Vlad said. "That is my wife. And you will fucking pay for putting your hands on her."

"That is my wife."

Belladonna recognized that voice, and she cried out as its menacing tone echoed through the dark alleyway. "Vlad!" she screamed, her hazy mind focusing on his presence. Her magic latched onto his strength, and her overwhelming intoxication faded slightly. She didn't think she could cast a spell yet, but her vision cleared enough to see her husband, only it wasn't her husband standing before her. It was the angel of death. The vampire named for the Impaler. Terror had come to this alley. Terror in the most beautiful form.

"Vlad?" the vampire holding her repeated, and he threw her to the ground so hard,

she slapped the wall. Her shoulder instantly bruised, and she cried out, watching Vlad's image darken with unbridled rage as she hit the pavement.

“Sir, we apologize.” The vampire bowed, prostrating himself before death. “We didn't realize this was your wife. If we had, we never would have?—”

Those were all the words Vlad allowed him. With the speed and precision of an alpha predator, he lunged forward and seized the vampire who'd been holding her. With unmatched power, his tattooed hand gripped the man's head and tore it from his body, blood splattering the pavement. Belladonna gasped at the violence as her other three assailants fled for their lives, but Vlad simply turned and grabbed one by the neck. With a single swipe, he ripped the man's throat out, and then he captured the third's wrist. He yanked him back, grasped his head, and shoved him into the wall, caving his skull in until it was pulp.

Belladonna screamed as the corpses fell around her, and she scrambled backward over the ground on unstable limbs, watching as the fourth vampire raced for the main street. He was almost out in the open, almost too far from Vlad's reach, but her husband simply bent his powerful legs and jumped. He landed heavily in front of the fleeing assailant, and with eyes as evil as the devil's himself, he grabbed the vampire with his tattooed hand and yanked him to his mouth. His fangs exploded, and Vlad dug his teeth into the vampire's throat. The man screamed. And screamed, and screamed, and screamed, but Vlad didn't stop until he drank his victim dry. Only once the body was nothing but a hollow corpse did he race to Belladonna's side.

“I didn't go outside with them,” she sobbed as he scooped her into his arms, blood dripping from his jaw. She didn't know why that confession captured her focus. She'd just watched the angel of death slaughter four vampires as if it were a walk in the park. Her husband's sheer display of violence should terrorize her, but as she gripped his suit, all she could think about was telling him she hadn't left him. She hadn't wanted to leave him.

“I know, little witch.” Vlad pulled her closer as Bartholomew burst out into the alley.  
“Don’t worry. You’re safe now, I promise.”

Belladonna collapsed in his embrace and sobbed against his shirt as he held her close.  
“You came for me.”

“I told you I would, and I do not make idle promises,” he said. “You are my wife. I will always come for you.”

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:38 am*

Vlad parked in the underground garage, but before Belladonna could open the door, he rounded the car's hood and scooped her into his arms.

"I can walk," she protested, but he ignored her, carrying her up the stairs and into the mansion. The moment he found her in the alley, the fog in her brain instantly began to clear. She'd consumed a decent amount of alcohol, but the intoxication seemed too intense for the number of shots. She couldn't think. She could barely see. She couldn't even call upon her magic. One night in college, she, Juniper, and Hazel had gotten so drunk that they snuck out of their dorm rooms and wandered to a local rock quarry. They then proceeded to blast the stones with their magic, which caused a cave-in that they tried to fix. They thought they'd restored it perfectly only to wake up to a news report about the miraculous stone structure that had suddenly appeared overnight. Seemed in their altered states, they reasoned an elaborate design was the remedy. It had been incredibly stupid and dangerous, an act Rowena had chewed their ears off for, but even drunk off their asses, their spells had been at full capacity. She'd never experienced such a lapse in her power, but her head hurt too much to process what that meant. All she knew was the moment her husband stepped into the alley, her magic had begun to heal. By the time they arrived at the mansion, her intoxication had reduced to a hazy buzz.

"A guard will be posted outside your door all night," Vlad said as he pushed open her bedroom door. "If you need anything, he'll get it for you."

"Thank you."

Vlad grunted and lowered her to the mattress, but Belladonna threw her arms around his neck to keep him from leaving. She wasn't entirely sure what she was doing, but

seeing him charge out of the club to rescue her had sparked a fire in her chest. That's what she'd expected Gabriel to do. He'd taken to calling her derogatory words instead, but Vlad? He'd unleashed the angel of death and killed four of his own for her. For a witch.

Belladonna lifted her lips to his, but before she could kiss him, he jerked backward. Embarrassment washed over her at his sudden rejection, and tears pricked her eyes. It was painful enough that her fiancé didn't want her. Now it seemed neither did her husband.

"Not like this," Vlad said, peeling back the blankets to tuck her into bed. "Not when you're drunk and unsure of your actions. I only want you when you can give your full consent, when you're desperate and begging for me, and this isn't that moment. I'm not sure you'll even remember this come morning." He brushed her hair off her face as Broomstick and Fang curled up next to her. "Goodnight, little witch."

"Goodnight," she whispered, crying into her pillow as the room spun, and she couldn't be certain, but she thought she heard him apologize as he closed the door.

Belladonna woke up with a loud and self-pitying groan. Had she really tried to kiss Vlad? How drunk had she been?

She sat up slowly, her brain feeling like it was on fire, and she glanced down at her chest. She still wore last night's dress, and the sight answered her question.

"I feel like someone ran me over with a truck," she groaned, scratching her cats' heads as she hyped herself up to get out of bed. Everything hurt, including her eyeballs, and it took her three tries to climb off the mattress. She stripped out of her clothes and stepped into the shower, the steam making her feel semi-human, but no amount of soap... or pumpkin-spiced lattes would revive her. She needed to brew a proper hangover potion, and as much as she hated the idea of having to face Vlad

after her actions last night, she desperately needed a cure for this pounding headache.

Dressed in an oversized sweatshirt with a cluster of pumpkins on the front that hung past her thighs and fuzzy cat socks, she peeked out of her door. The coast was clear, her guard obviously relieved of duty, and she crept down the stairs to the kitchen. Not a single vampire crossed her path, and she breathed a sigh of relief as she pulled herbs out of the pantry. She didn't want to deal with anyone in this state, especially her husband.

"That's definitely not a pumpkin-spiced latte," a sexy voice said behind her, and Belladonna flinched at Vlad's sudden appearance. She hadn't heard him enter the kitchen, yet he hovered over her shoulders, trying to see what she was stewing. So much for avoiding the man she'd drunkenly tried to kiss, and she clenched her eyes shut. Things were already strained between them. This would only make it worse.

"It's a hangover brew," she answered, stirring the brown liquid .

"You're going to drink that?" Vlad leaned against the counter beside her, folding his arms over his muscled chest, and Belladonna ground her teeth at the sight of him. She looked—and felt—like something dragged out of a dumpster. But dressed in his black jeans and thin sweater, Vlad looked delicious enough to devour. Every day she spent with him, he grew more handsome, and it made her want to slap him.

"It smells awful now," she answered. "Once it stews, it'll smell and taste sweet. Plus, it works wonders."

"Hmmm," Vlad grunted, and she noticed him staring at her fingers.

"What?"

"This isn't a tea, is it?" he asked. "It's a witch's brew."

She nodded.

“And it’s working inside the wards?”

“Seems to be.” Belladonna froze, realizing why he was suddenly quiet. This potion was technically natural magic, and the brewing process shouldn’t work within the vampire’s home. “I’m sorry,” she blurted. “I didn’t mean anything by it. I just want to feel better.”

“No, no, by all means,” Vlad said. “I hate that you’re ill and want you to recover. I’m just surprised you got it to work.”

“I am the coven’s heir.” She nudged his arm with her shoulder, and he smiled. The flash of his teeth reminded her of how violently he’d drained that vampire of blood, and she realized he wasn’t acting awkward. His smile was inviting, as if he didn’t remember her humiliating attempt to kiss him. His behavior was normal, and a wave of relief crashed over her. She hadn’t realized how much she’d dreaded this moment until nothing happened.

“Listen, about last night,” she started.

“You were drugged,” Vlad cut her off before she could apologize, and his expression told her his timing was deliberate. He didn’t want her apology. He didn’t care that she’d acting oddly. He never cared about how she acted, and safety flickered in her chest. This was a man she didn’t have to hide around.

“Drugged?” she asked, her mind finally registering what he’d said.

“Yes. Bartholomew interrogated the witnesses and the bartender. Best guess is those vampires were extremists who refused to live by the treaty. They won’t venture into witch territory, but if one wanders into ours, they take it upon themselves to purge



our district. We think they flicked something into your drink while you danced.”

“That’s why my magic wouldn’t work.” Belladonna stirred the brew as her mind put the puzzle pieces into place. “I’ve been drunk before, but never useless. I’m sorry I wasn’t paying attention. You were in a meeting, and I acted carelessly. It’s just last night was the first time I’ve left the house in weeks, and then with... well, I was upset.”

“I shouldn’t have kept you locked up in here,” Vlad said, and Belladonna stared at him, shocked that the angel of death was admitting he was at fault. “I don’t regret marrying you, but my actions were brutish. I shouldn’t have brought you last night. I put you at risk.”

“But I wanted to go,” Belladonna said, nervous he planned to lock her away in his expensive prison. “I just wasn’t expecting the evening to end so horribly.”

“Well, there’s always next time.” Vlad shrugged, and relief washed over her. This home was lavish and entertaining, but being confined to these walls would wither her spirit. She liked the idea of repeating their outing without the bloodshed.

“Oh wow, that does smell good.” He leaned over the pot and inhaled deeply.

“Told you.” She smiled and gestured at the cabinet behind him where the mugs sat, but Vlad refused to budge. His eyes challenged her, as if to ask what she planned to do about his presence, and she understood. He didn’t want things between them to be uncomfortable. He wanted them to go back to normal, and that realization shocked her with electric excitement. She’d stopped ignoring him, and while she could resume that punishment, she no longer wanted to pretend this god in the flesh didn’t exist. She knew he didn’t want her to return to avoiding him either, which left only one explanation for his challenge. He wanted her to tease him, to drive him crazy, to taunt him at every turn.

With a small shrug, Belladonna leaned across his body, brushing her chest against his to open the cabinet. She pushed the mugs at the front out of the way and brushed her breasts against him with torturing slowness as she captured the cup at the back, and to her surprise, Vlad's palm slid against her leg. He moved slowly, his hand memorizing the curve of her thigh and the swell of her hip, and he applied the slightest hint of pressure as she pulled the mug down. She couldn't bring herself to part from him, so for an endless moment, they stood chest to chest, hip to hip, breath to breath. His palm burned her hip with an unholy desire, and suddenly she didn't need a hangover brew. She needed him. She wanted to taste his mouth, to feel his tattooed hands slip under her sweatshirt and grip her skin. She longed to know how he kissed, how he fucked, how he sounded when he came inside her, and the hunger became all-consuming, a forest fire reducing everything in its path. What was happening between them? What was this unquenchable longing that made her chest ache and breath quicken?

"Little witch," Vlad moaned, and Belladonna rose onto her toes, dragging her breasts over his solid chest as she angled her head, readying to take her husband's mouth in a kiss she knew would change her life. His breath washed over her as she closed the distance, and a gasp fell from her lips at the intoxicating presence that was the angel of death.

"Sir?" Bartholomew charged into the kitchen, all concern and urgency, and Belladonna jerked back, the moment and their almost kiss vanishing into nothing.

"What?" Vlad growled, murder in his tone.

"There's a call for you."

"Take a message," Vlad said.

"Sir." Bartholomew glanced at Belladonna with an apology, and she understood.

She'd lost her husband to this call, and she flipped off the stove, spooning the brew into her cup.

"You'll want to take this," Bartholomew continued, and he'd barely finished his sentence before Vlad was moving for his office, Bartholomew's tone enough to frighten both of them.

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:38 am*

Lucian?" Vlad answered the office phone. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong per se, but whispers have reached my ears," his old friend said. "I felt you should be made aware of them."

"Whispers of what?" Vlad sat at his desk, wondering what one of his greatest allies learned that he hadn't.

"That's the thing. We aren't sure, but something is coming. Something dangerous, yet the more I search for answers, the less I find. The streets are teeming with unrest, but nothing is clear."

"So, you're calling me with news of nothing?" Vlad asked, annoyance rippling through him at what this pointless call had interrupted.

"Vlad, I've known you for a long time," Lucian said. "When have I ever called you with nothing?"

"Never," Vlad conceded.

"I wanted to warn you," Lucian said. "Of what, I don't know, but I feel it in the air, in the tension of the wind. Uneasiness is rippling through the ranks, and you should be prepared."

"How have these rumors not reached me?" Vlad asked. "Nothing escapes my ears."

"That's the other reason I called," Lucian said, his voice suddenly hesitant. "And I

say this with the utmost respect and greatest hesitation.”

“Spit it out.”

“Your wife. This uneasiness whispers her name.”

“My wife?” Vlad’s defensiveness boiled over, and he had to force himself to loosen his grip on the phone before he shattered it as his mind flickered to her attack. “Is she in danger?”

“I’m not sure. Nothing is definite. Only that her name is whispered in the shadows. Whether she’s in danger or she is the source of the threats, I cannot say. Your wife is Rowena’s only child, and her mother kept her well-guarded. Little is known about the girl, but one thing we’re certain of is her power. Rowena wouldn’t declare her daughter her heir unless she was a witch of unmatched strength.”

Vlad’s mind flicked to Belladonna’s hangover brew. It was a simple potion, one most witches could conjure blindfolded, but his wards blocked all magic. Spells, hexes, potions. All of it was impossible within his walls, yet his wife had brewed a potion in his kitchen as easily as she brewed her morning coffee. How powerful was she that she could bypass his defenses?

“Belladonna is safe in the mansion,” Vlad said. “And she wouldn’t betray me.”

The moment the words left his mouth, his memory recalled Gabriel’s insults at the club. His son had been moments away from marrying the witch, and he would’ve gone through with it if his father hadn’t stepped in. The rumors that reached Vlad’s ears in Europe promised Gabriel loved her, yet his son’s hatred of Belladonna was visceral. He didn’t care for her. He never had. His wedding had been to serve a different purpose, and icy dread pooled in Vlad’s gut. Gabriel’s change occurred after the witch had moved into this house. A house with protection against magic, meaning

any spell Belladonna had cast over his son would've evaporated. Had she hexed Gabriel to coerce him into marrying her? Was her interest in his family a power play coming from Rowena herself?

"I hope she won't, but you welcomed the enemy into your home," Lucian said. "And before you get defensive, I'm not saying this to question your judgment or your decisions. You've been the greatest leader our kind has seen in centuries, but this peace treaty with the coven can't erase hundreds of years of violence and animosity. You married our enemy's daughter, and while I want to trust that you know what you're doing, there's a chance that your wife is the force behind these whispers. She also might be the victim. Your marriage has angered many on both sides, and while I hope she isn't the threat, you are where my loyalties lie. Most wouldn't tell you this to your face, but it's why I called. Something is coming, and somehow your wife is involved. I'm just not sure if she's the target or the instigator."

"I wouldn't allow most to speak to me like this," Vlad said, and Lucian chuckled. "But you're a good and loyal friend, so I appreciate the heads up. I'll look into these rumors."

"If you need anything, let me know," Lucian said. "And for what it's worth, congratulations to you and your new wife."

"Thank you. We'll talk soon." Vlad hung up the phone and ran a hand through his hair. It unnerved him he hadn't heard so much as a hint of what his friend was warning. Was Lucian part of the problem, calling him to encourage paranoia? Was Belladonna a beautiful Trojan Horse, slipping inconspicuously behind their ranks to destroy the vampires once and for all? Had he become the negligent leader he'd purged from their race decades ago?

Vlad stood up and stormed from the office in search of his wife. He'd spent most of his days avoiding her, hoping she would come to him when she was ready, but maybe

it was time he kept a better eye on the witch in their midst. She'd been drugged with a pill version of the wards that prevented magic, yet she'd woken up with only a hangover. He hadn't told her the truth about the drugs because he hadn't wanted to terrify her, but witches didn't walk away from those unaffected. Her magic had to be incredibly resilient to resist wards within her body. And not only had she resisted it, she'd recovered the strength to brew a potion in a matter of hours.

Vlad cursed under his breath. Why had he brought this woman into his house? How could he have been so impulsive? He never acted without careful calculation. He never let women blind him. Not even his love for Gabriel's mother had pushed him to act so irrationally. If he was smart, he would interrogate Belladonna, but as he searched the house for his young wife, he found it impossible to believe she was the enemy. He refused to consider she was the mastermind behind whatever evil was spreading through their underworld, which left only one option. She was in danger.

What's going on?" Vlad asked a guard as he passed the door to the courtyard. The vampire was standing watch, but his body was angled awkwardly, his sight not where it should be. Only the most competent vampires guarded his home, but this man acted like he'd forgotten how to use a window.

"Sir." The vampire nodded respectfully and then shifted his weight, his eyes flicking toward the pool without actually looking outside. The windows were UV-treated, meaning he and his men could enjoy the sunlight while inside, but this guard was acting like the glass was poison. Had Belladonna somehow stripped his home of its protection? Lucian's phone call from the other day nagged at him. Is that what she'd been using her solitary hours for?

After her attack, they'd settled into a new normal. She tortured him endlessly, but the malice had left her actions. Her spite no longer felt like a punishment but rather a reward, and she'd stopped ignoring him. He wouldn't call their newfound harmony a marriage, but they'd established a friendship he cherished. He found himself asking

about the cats, which led to him asking about her day, which turned into him asking about herself. Their conversations were deepening, and the more he learned about his wife, the more he liked her. What was more, she seemed to like him. Her office visits grew more frequent, and unlike before when she merely strode past his door, she now wandered inside to sit on his desk in her too-short shorts and ask him about nothing. Her questions never really had a point. It seemed she simply wanted to listen to him talk, so he obliged her. He had centuries of stories to tell, and Belladonna enjoyed every one. She pretended she didn't care how his tales ended, but he saw the truth in her eyes. His history excited her. She used the guise of teasing him to cover up her sudden desire to chat, but he didn't mind. Her tears and anger had stopped, and she was filling his home with her joy. They'd yet to do anything a normal couple would, like eat meals together or have purposeful communication. Their discussions were born from roundabout encounters, pranks, or utter ridiculousness, but she was changing around him. He was changing around her. He was becoming friends with his wife, which was why he was confused about the sunlight. All this progress. All these days of venturing—albeit slowly—into new relationship waters, and she was suddenly trying to burn his men? Had his refusal to heed Lucian's warning cost him his house?

Vlad stepped forward and reached an experimental finger into the sunshine, but only cool air greeted him. His windows worked, so why on earth was this man acting like he didn't know?—

Vlad froze, his body going impossibly still when he saw it, and with a growled threat, he spoke loud enough for all the guards on this floor to hear.

“Get out.”



*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:38 am*

V lad opened the door and stepped out into the courtyard. He'd installed a covered seating area by the pool so he could enjoy the outdoors during daylight hours, and he silently strode to the edge of the shade. The air was cool; the afternoon pleasant, and he settled into a chair, his body only just shielded from the sun. It took every ounce of willpower not to step into the light at the sight that lay before him, though. His control wavered, whispering that death by fire would be preferable to this torture, for lounging just out of reach was his topless wife.

Witches thrived during the fall, Halloween fueling their magic, and while most women would be too cold to sun themselves almost nude on an October afternoon, Belladonna seemed to feed off the autumn sunshine. His guards' peculiar behavior made sudden sense as he studied her young and inviting body. She was on her stomach, her breasts hidden, but the lack of bikini straps made it clear she was topless. She wore one of the bathing suit bottoms he'd gifted her, and he suddenly hated himself for buying those. She was mere feet away, yet she might as well have been across the world since he couldn't risk the sun. It was torture staring at her in that suit, the curve of her ass begging him to sink his fangs into the softness and mark her as his. To watch her sugary sweet blood drip down her curves while she rode his cock. How could she be the enemy? How could she be evil when everything inside him promised she was his destiny, his future, his mate? He wanted her with such a primal need that he doubted it was lust. He'd experienced lust before, but this desire went deeper than the craving to feel her skin against his. It was all-consuming and inescapable, and the sight of her bare back begged him to brave the sunshine so he might taste her.

Belladonna twisted to glance over her shoulder as if realizing she was being watched, and she smiled when she registered it was him and not a guard. Pride swelled his

chest at her expression. She looked genuinely happy to see him, and for long minutes, she lay there studying him. Her gaze started at his shoes and worked their way up to his face as if she was seeing him for the first time. She savored the sight of him, her appreciation making it impossible for him to breathe. Her admiration was an intense form of worship, and his skin felt too small for his body. He wanted to explode, to burn, to scream, and her eyes on him filled him with pure power. There was nothing he couldn't do when she gazed at him like that.

With a soft smile, Belladonna's eyes fell to his tattooed hand. Her expression changed the moment she registered the skull, and the change surprised him. It wasn't fear. It was longing. His inked fist turned her on, and then she lifted her gaze back to his eyes, letting him witness her desire. It shocked him even as it made him hard. She liked the sight of his skull, and he wondered if that night at the club inspired her appreciation. Most saw the angel of death before they died. Very few witnessed it rescue them.

Belladonna's eyes dipped to his pants, lingering on the bulge he didn't bother to hide, and then she sat up. Vlad's entire body stilled. He didn't blink. He didn't breathe. He didn't so much as twitch. He became solid as stone as he saw her for the first time.

She smiled, twisting on the lounge chair to offer him an unhindered view of her breasts. They were the perfect size for his hands, and her pink nipples pebbled in the cool air. They rose and fell with her every breath, and he thought he might pass out at the sight. He longed to suck them into his mouth, to watch her writhe beneath him as he licked them to hardened peaks. Her young breasts were firm and full, and he couldn't stop himself from picturing how they would bounce and sway as he thrust inside her. Vlad groaned at the image, and she smirked as if she could read his mind. This woman would be the death of him.

Belladonna let him look his fill, and then she stood up and dove into the pool. She swam a few laps, her movements lazy as if she enjoyed his eyes on her. He couldn't

touch her, yet he'd rarely felt happier. Yes, he loved the way the water caressed her smooth skin, but it was more than that. She dressed sexy every day, but this felt different. At first, her attire had been to punish. Then it morphed into a tease, and over the past few days, she'd changed, both with her words and her body. She was letting him in, breaking down her walls to allow him entrance. This show was for him and him alone, and that conviction resurfaced again. This wasn't lust. It wasn't an obsession, and she wasn't the enemy. Not when she felt like his mate, like the woman his ancient soul was meant to find.

Belladonna took her time in the water, savoring the way Vlad watched her. She was convinced he was the most handsome man to walk this earth, but her attraction to her husband went deeper than his angled, masculine features and penetrating gaze. The way he'd saved her that night at the club. The way he'd cut through four vampires as if they were blades of grass to save her... a witch. It changed her down to her core. Her mother would sacrifice anything for her, but Rowena was her parent and the coven's leader. Saving her daughter and one of her own was expected, but no one else had ever displayed such protectiveness of her. She'd thought she loved Gabriel. Thought he loved her in return, but his cruelty when she'd begged for help proved his true feelings. A dark part of her soul whispered that if Gabriel had been her date, he would've let those vampires have her, but Vlad? He'd killed for her and then carried her home. As embarrassing as it was, he'd also rejected her advances when she was drunk. He didn't want to take advantage of her, and that knowledge was what led to her swimming half-naked for him. His respect for her was as sexy as he was, and they'd evolved over the past few days. She wasn't sure when it happened, but she'd been sitting on his desk yesterday, trying to aggravate him while he worked, and she'd purposely worn a new lacy thong under her skirt. Her thighs kept falling open as she chatted about nothing for twenty minutes straight, and she was convinced that after her mindless conversation and taunting pose, Vlad would be ready to scream, but he'd been leaning back in his seat, watching her face. His gaze never once dipped to her legs. He observed her lips move, her eyes dance, her hands gesture, and it was like an electric shock to her system. Her husband craved her body, but his desire had

deepened beyond the superficial. He craved all of her. He paid attention as she spouted nonsense, and suddenly twenty minutes turned into an hour. Her knees fell closed, her stories became more interesting, yet his eyes remained on her face.

She'd left that conversation and cried in the bathroom, but her tears didn't fall in sadness. No one had listened to her with that much awe before, with that intense interest. She didn't know when it had happened, but yesterday was when she first realized it. Vlad was no longer the enemy. He was becoming her friend... a friend her entire body craved.

The chill of the pool finally seeped into her skin, and she climbed out of the water and sat on the lounge chair, facing her husband so he could see the water droplets dripping off her hard nipples. He leaned forward with an expression that warned he would eat her alive if he got his hands on her, and her cheeks flushed at the idea. What would it be like to experience Vlad's bite? What would it feel like to let him drink her blood while he was inside her? Her blush intensified, and Vlad growled at the sight.

He stood up so fast that his chair toppled over, and he lunged forward, his tattooed hand escaping into the sunshine. Smoke curled off his skin as the sun singed his flesh, but he didn't make a single sound at the intense pain. He leaned forward again, forcing more of his body into the light as if he was willing to burn for her, but when his blisters blackened, he retreated. He returned to the shade, but he hovered on the edge, toeing the line between life and death for her as his fingers healed.

Belladonna smiled a wicked grin, a dangerous idea taking root. She shouldn't tempt a vampire of Vlad's strength, but the intense hunger in his eyes had her throwing caution to the wind. He made it impossible to act rationally. Something about her husband called to her. His power fed her magic, and if she reflected on it, she knew she would understand why.

But she couldn't think about that. Not yet, so she hooked her fingers on her bikini bottoms and did something she thought she would never do. It was foolish and irresponsible. It might be a mistake, but she didn't care. Not when sex and sin wrapped in the body of the devil gazed at her as if she was his goddess.

Belladonna pulled her bathing suit off, watching Vlad's fangs descend at the sight, and with a heady sense of power, she parted her thighs. Her breasts felt heavy as he examined how wet she was, and she loved how he couldn't rip his gaze away from her bare pussy. His unbridled desire fueled her bravery, and she shifted so he could get a better view. He growled at her movements. A low and feral growl, and suddenly just showing him her body wasn't enough. She'd only intended to let him see her, to show him what he'd married, but arousal coated her thighs. Encouraged by his appreciation, she slipped her fingers between her legs.

"Little witch," Vlad warned, his voice as cold and sharp as ice as he struggled to maintain control, but his voice had the opposite effect on her. It flooded her with pleasure, with desperation, with power, and she stroked herself as she moaned. He wasn't even touching her, and she thought she would explode.

Her fingers moved faster. Her breaths heaved, but she kept her eyes on her husband, savoring the way his gaze devoured her, the way he stood as close to the sun as he could without dying. It made her feel alive and powerful, and as he groaned in appreciation, she slipped her fingers inside her, imagining it was his thick cock as she pumped.

"Fuck," Vlad growled, making a fist until his knuckles turned white, and she moaned, her chest heaving as her breathing grew erratic at the sound of his voice. She wanted him to speak again. She wanted to come to his words.

"Vlad," she whispered, teetering on the edge. She was so close. So desperate and out of control, but she couldn't take the plunge. Her body wouldn't let her. She needed

him.

“Come, little witch,” he ordered, understanding her plea, and the instant his voice left his lips, she climaxed. Fireworks exploded inside her, stirring her dormant magic so forcefully that she started shaking. Her magic had never ignited with a man before, but just the sound of her husband’s voice had her contained power breaking free. The waves of bliss were endless, so powerful she was afraid of what they meant, and when she finally came down from her high, she found Vlad’s eyes and smiled. Seeing him so tense awakened her desire all over again, and she knew if she didn’t flee his presence, she would beg her husband to take her. The thought suddenly terrified her. If she let Vlad touch her after her release like she wanted him to, it wouldn’t be because of her pent-up frustration. It would be because she was done fighting him. Because she wanted to be his wife in every sense of the word, and unable to handle the intensity of those emotions, she wrapped her towel around her body and fled.

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:38 am*

Belladonna contorted her fingers, pushing her magic as hard as she could in this warded gym. She still couldn't believe her actions by the pool, and her emotions were chaotic and confusing as unwelcome thoughts slipped into her brain. A few months ago, she hated Vlad for what he'd done at the church, for taking her choice in her future away, but now she thought she understood his motives. Had he truly stolen her choice, or had he simply been the first to recognize the tug of destiny?

The ideas floating around her mind had become overwhelming, so she'd donned leggings and a sports bra and wandered into Vlad's personal gym. She liked the open space and the wall of mirrors when she practiced casting. The wards stopped the spells from escaping her body, but she felt it flowing within her again. The pulse of magic in her blood centered her, and the mirrors helped her perfect her movements. Her mother would be proud of how well her hands formed even the most impossible spells, and she wished she'd had these growing up. How skilled would she be if she could actually cast while studying her form from multiple angles?

"Oh god." Belladonna tripped as Vlad's face came into view. She hadn't heard him approach, but based on his relaxed position in the doorway, he'd been watching her for a while.

"I'm just exercising," she said, unsure how to explain her actions. "I'm not trying to break the wards."

"I know." He smiled at her, and it was baffling how such a terrifying and bloodthirsty vampire could have such a beautiful smile. "I don't mind. I'm confused, but I don't mind."

“Confused?” she asked as she grabbed her water bottle.

“The wards prevent you from casting spells, so why practice? Don’t get me wrong, you look fantastic, so by all means continue, but why bother if you can’t actually cast anything?”

Belladonna tried not to blush at his compliment, but she failed miserably. It was one thing to see him weak at the sight of her bare body, but to witness him appreciate her practicing magic had her insides knotting like a schoolgirl with a crush. She took a long drink of her ice water to cool her overheated cheeks, then she crossed the gym until she stood before her husband.

“Being a witch means more than being born with magic.” She captured his tattooed hand, loving how the skull was both beautiful in its masterful design and terrifying in its realism. “You have to cast the spells with your hands.” She contorted his fingers into a simple shape, and he watched her carefully, making her both nervous and excited. “The more powerful the spell, the harder the movements, and I’ve spent my life perfecting these. Just because I can’t release my magic into the world doesn’t mean it’s not still inside me. I feel it flowing in my veins when I practice, and I don’t...” she trailed off, her fist involuntarily tightening around his for emotional support. “I refuse to be helpless like I was at the club. If you hadn’t come for me, I would’ve died. I can’t relax my training because next time, you might not be there.”

“There won’t be a next time,” Vlad said. “And if there is, I’ll be there.”

“But you don’t know that, and I’m the coven’s heir,” Belladonna said. “I should have been able to save myself, but I failed. Those men took me, and I can’t let that happen again.”

“Little witch, before you stress yourself out, I wasn’t completely honest with you,” Vlad said, and she pinched her eyebrows at him. “They didn’t merely drug you. They



slipped wards in pill form into your drink. Wards prevent witches from casting spells, but those drugs suppress magic on an internal level. It's incredibly dangerous, and that you survived the attack without lingering side effects proves how powerful you are."

"Wards in pill form?" Belladonna ripped her hands from Vlad's in horror. "That's the equivalent of forcing a vampire to swallow sunlight. How can you allow that drug to be used?" Just when she started to like her husband, his cruelty reminded her of the savage she'd married.

"I don't, little witch. I may approve wards in physical spaces, but I don't condone drugging witches with them," Vlad said, his expression harsh yet kind. His voice explicitly confirmed he wasn't the villain she feared he was... at least in this regard, and she almost cried in relief knowing he didn't support a drug that would torture her from the inside out. "I've made many changes to how the vampires conduct themselves during my reign, including outlawing pharmaceutical wards, but my predecessors were monsters," he continued. "Unfortunately, some still live by their example."

"I was born after you took control," Belladonna said, realizing just how much older her husband was. Their age difference didn't matter in the long run. Witches and vampires were immortal creatures, but it was strange to think that he was leading rebellions while she was in diapers. "I don't know what life was like under their rule."

"There's a reason your mother hates vampires, yet signed the treaty with me. Why she agreed to you marrying my son before I claimed you. Rowena remembers the bloodshed before I seized control. They call me the angel of death because of my tattoo. I live up to the name, but those who preceded me were depraved minds. My violence serves a purpose. Theirs was for sport. I don't condone drugging women in clubs, and you witnessed my judgment firsthand."

“So, there was nothing I could’ve done to save myself?” Belladonna asked, feeling marginally better about her failure.

“You could watch your drink closer. Or just share my whiskey shots.” Vlad winked suggestively, and she blushed all over again. “Anyway, that’s not why I’m here. I’m making dinner, and I wanted to ask you to join me.”

“You cook?”

“I’ve been alive a long time. There are many things I can do.”

“Um...” Belladonna tried to summon a reason to turn him down, but nothing came to mind. They’d been talking more frequently, often for extended periods, but those conversations were always the result of her aggravating him. She’d never sought him out under the guise of genuine interaction, but as she searched for an excuse to decline, the realization that she loved the idea of eating dinner with him like an actual couple flooded her being. “Let me shower, and I’ll be right down.”

“Take your time. I need at least another half hour.” Vlad turned to leave and then paused. “Thank you. ”

“Of course.”

“Oh, and have I gone crazy, or is that a new cat?”

“Um...” Belladonna twisted to where Fang and Broomstick lay sunning themselves and was surprised to find that somehow a third black cat had joined her pets. She didn’t know how the animal had found her way into the gym, but she wouldn’t tell Vlad that.

“That’s Jinx,” she said, using the first name that came to mind, and while Vlad

obviously saw through her charade, he simply crossed his arms over his muscular chest and strode for the exit.

“I hope this one doesn’t bite.”

“She doesn’t,” Belladonna called after him. “Only the one I named after you does.”

“Oh my god,” Belladonna moaned as the pasta hit her tongue, and Vlad smirked at her response. He knew she loved Italian food, so he picked this specific dish just for her. By her reaction, he’d chosen well.

“Did you make the pasta from scratch?” she asked, twirling the noodles around her fork, and taking a slightly unladylike bite that most would find rude, but he took as high praise. Sauce reddened her lips, and combined with the black dress with a decidedly witchy vibe that she’d worn for their first meal together, she was the cutest thing he’d ever seen. He didn’t understand how a woman could be so sweet yet make him so hard, but he thoroughly enjoyed the enigma that was his wife.

“I did.” Vlad bit into his own pasta, watching her wash hers down with a sip of wine. He could tell by her little eye flutter she liked the red he’d selected as well, which brought him pleasure. He’d gone into the cellar and pulled the most expensive bottle he owned down from the shelf. He’d been saving it for a special occasion, and the first time his wife joined him for dinner seemed appropriate.

“Not only can you cook, but you make pasta from scratch? I thought I was a good cook, but this is incredible. Plus, the wine... I want to bathe in it, it’s so delicious.”

Vlad shifted in his seat, picturing Belladonna’s soft skin dripping with blood and wine, and he winced at how painfully hard she made him. He was also annoyed at his reaction. He’d invited her to dinner to learn more about the woman he was currently obsessed with, not fantasize about that moment at the pool. She was beautiful, but

appreciating her beauty wasn't enough. He needed her to share her soul with him.

"When you've lived as long as I have, you pick up a lot," he said. "I've spent years in Italy."

"You learned to make pasta in Italy?" Belladonna leaned forward with a dreamy expression as she twirled more noodles around her fork.

"And pizza, and gelato, and tiramisu."

"I hate you." She took a bite and then captured her wine glass. "I would love to learn to cook in Italy. I'm so jealous. I've never left the country. My mom..." She trailed off as if she suddenly realized who she was speaking to.

"No, please, continue," Vlad encouraged, topping off her wineglass. He found the alcohol delicious, but she seemed to love it, so he wanted her to have her fill.

"Thank you." She watched him pour, studying him as if trying to decide if he was being genuine. "My mom never let me travel, and not because she was controlling, but because she understood the power I would hold if her heir was kept a mystery. So, I've never done anything as cool as making pizza in Italy. I'm still young, and I've had fun over the years, but I hate being hidden away."

She fell silent, and Vlad berated himself for his part in trapping her. "I'll take you to Italy," he blurted without thinking.

"As a vacation or a business trip?" She raised her eyebrows at him. "Because we both know how the last work outing ended."

"A vacation, little witch." Vlad stood and crossed the dining room to the whiskey decanter. "If you think I'm going to let you moan like that in public without me, you

have another thing coming.”

“Moan? Whatever do you mean?” She teased, using a slice of crusty bread to soak up her remaining sauce. Vlad glared at her as he poured himself a drink, but she maintained her clueless demeanor as she finished her meal. She didn’t leave so much as a single drop of his homemade sauce on her plate, and it turned him on to watch her eat his food with appreciation. If she dressed this beautifully and behaved this friendly because of noodles, he would learn to cook every pasta dish known to man.

“That was amazing, thank you,” Belladonna sighed, sipping her wine as she leaned back in the chair. “I hope you realized the can of worms you opened feeding me because now I’ve learned your secret. I can’t return to eating regular food knowing you cook like this.”

“How about we strike a deal? You let me try one of your pumpkin-spiced lattes, and I’ll make pasta whenever you crave it.”

“Oh, you drive a hard bargain.”

“Every vampire in this house has tried it but me.”

“I know.” She winked. “That’s the fun of it.”

Vlad shook his head and emptied the wine bottle into her glass as he settled back in his chair. He genuinely wanted to taste her latte, but he would make her pasta whether or not she let him try it. He enjoyed eating with his wife. He loved that she was opening up to him, and her attention was like a drug. The more he used, the more addicted he became, and suddenly their random interactions weren’t enough. He wanted more. He wanted meals together and date nights and conversations where she wasn’t teasing him... not that he wanted that to stop. Watching her waltz into his office and hop onto his desk was the highlight of his day.

“Would you be willing to make dinner a standing date?” he asked. “You’ve been a stranger in my house long enough. I want to know the wife wearing my ring.”

“Like once a week or every night?” she asked, twisting the stem of her wineglass between her black polished fingertips.

“I couldn’t commit to every night since my position demands much of my time, but we can discuss a frequency you’re comfortable with. This isn’t a demand, but a request.”

“You genuinely want to get to know me?” Surprise colored her features, and he realized that from her point of view, he was the ruthless man who’d stolen her from her life. She wasn’t wrong, but something inside him had awakened. Just looking at her wasn’t enough. He needed to understand her soul.

“No strings attached,” Vlad said. “But I enjoyed this dinner. I’m eager to do it again.”

“Hmmm,” Belladonna grunted thoughtfully.

“What?”

“I’ve come to terms with the fact that you and I are both immortal creatures, so till death do us part will take centuries. I wanted to hate you, but forever is a long time to hate the man you live with. I would prefer we were friends.”

“So, you’ll have dinner with me?”

“Under one condition,” Belladonna said firmly, placing her wineglass down. “I’ll eat with you every night that you’re available if you agree to one thing.”

“Of course.” Every night he was available was more than he’d hoped for.

“My parents. My friends. I want the freedom to call and see them. I cannot live as your wife if you keep me from the people I love, so I would like to invite my family over for dinner.”

“You want Rowena here... in my house?” Vlad leaned back uncomfortably.

“I want my mother here... in our house,” Belladonna corrected. “Your son is welcome in your home. My mom should be welcome in mine.”

“I don’t know.”

“Then we don’t have a deal because I can’t respect someone who keeps me caged. It was one thing when you were just the brute who stole me from my fiancé, but you’re proposing we form a genuine relationship. I won’t sit here and pretend I enjoy the company of a man who refuses to let me see my mom.

“Besides, our marriage is supposed to further the peace. What good is our union if you cannot have dinner with the in-laws? This house has wards for your safety. All I’m asking for is a meal with my parents. Two people.... And pasta and wine. That’s it. Surely you have the decency to allow my mother to remain in my life.”

Vlad took a long sip of whiskey. She had a point. He’d forced her to marry him and cut her off from her old life. She went from being a daughter and a friend to a wife overnight, and in her shoes, he would despise her for locking him away.

But then his mind flickered to Lucian’s words. Something was coming, and his wife’s name was among the threatening whispers. Was this a plot to destroy the vampires? Was allowing Rowena to breach his walls the mistake that would burn his reign to the ground? Or was this simply a young girl in desperate need of her mother?

“One dinner with your parents, that’s it,” he said finally, hoping he didn’t regret this

decision. “If your mom doesn’t try to kill me, we can go from there.”

“She won’t, I swear it.” Belladonna’s face lit up, and Vlad decided that even if Rowena killed him, his agreement was worth it for his wife’s smile.



*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:38 am*

A triumphant thrill ran through Belladonna. She hadn't expected him to agree to her terms, and this shift in their relationship excited her. She hadn't spoken to her parents or her friends in months, and loneliness had started to set in. Broomstick, Fang, and Jinx were excellent company, but cats weren't people. She missed the coven and her family, and against her will, she missed Vlad when he wasn't around. Their marriage began with turmoil and anger, but the more her magic swelled in his presence, the more she wondered if he was her destiny in disguise.

"Thank you," Belladonna said as she stood up.

"Don't thank me until after dinner," Vlad said. "Your mother and I have yet to be in the same room without a conflict of some sort. You could have a disaster on your hands."

"I've never been there, though." She moved to his chair and leaned against the table. "Neither of you wants to hurt me, so your dynamic will be different."

"That's true." Vlad leaned back, and the way his eyes lingered on her witchy black dress told her it had been the right choice for dinner. "For your sake, I'll try my best to uphold the peace."

"I appreciate it." She gestured to his drink. "Can I have some?" She preferred the wine, the bottle an exquisite vintage, but her request wasn't about the alcohol. And by the look in her husband's eyes, he understood her meaning.

Vlad handed her the crystal glass, and she accepted it, lifting the liquor to her lips. She took a sip, the whiskey burning as it slid down her throat, and while she didn't

savor the flavor, she loved that the glass tasted of him. Staring down at her husband, she read the feral need flooding his dark eyes, and she lifted the glass again. She moved slowly, this sip for his pleasure, not hers, and she tipped the glass back. Vlad's voice rumbled in his chest at the sight, but he kept his hands to himself. He simply watched his wife drink his whiskey, and when Belladonna pulled the last of the liquid into her mouth, she leaned over him.

With a heady sense of power, she savored how Vlad's chest heaved at her closeness, and with her sharp, black-manicured nails, she gripped his jaw. She forced his head back and stepped between his thighs, holding his chin with a grip of ownership, and after a long but silent exchange, Vlad opened his mouth.

Belladonna leaned over him until they were almost kissing, and mimicking their encounter at the club, she spat the whiskey shot into her husband's mouth. Vlad swallowed every last drop she offered, and suddenly, she couldn't breathe. The intensity in his gaze sucked the air from the room, from her lungs, and before she could register his movements, her husband caught her by the waist and shoved her back onto the table.

She gasped as he pushed himself between her thighs, and with powerful hands designed for death, he gripped her face with rough possession.

"Beg," he growled, pushing closer until her legs wrapped around his hips.

"No." She stared up at him defiantly.

"Beg," he ordered.

"No."

"Beg for it, little witch." He lowered his lips until he was barely a centimeter away.

“Now.”

“Never.” Her legs tightened around his waist, forcing him against her until her head was spinning. It was too much. She craved him with every fiber of her being, with every breath in her lungs. She wanted her husband. So, she slid her hand over his abs, down to the bulge in his pants. She gripped his thick cock, loving the way his grip hardened on her jaw, and she tilted her mouth until her lips just brushed his.

“But I will say please,” she moaned, and that was all the permission Vlad needed. His mouth slammed against her, kissing her ruthlessly, and Belladonna felt dizzy from the intensity. She instantly felt drunk at his touch, at how his lips owned hers, and she kissed him back with a ferocity she’d never gifted a man before. Her arms wrapped around his neck as her legs tightened around his hips, and she pressed her chest into his. Their kiss deepened, and she was vaguely aware of his hands in her hair, pulling her with such dominance that she thought she might come from the kiss alone.

“Open for me, little witch,” Vlad said against her mouth, and she obeyed, letting his tongue taste her. Whiskey still lingered on his lips, and she bit down, desperate for more of him. She felt out of control, like she would let this vampire do anything with her body, but what made the sensation so powerful was she suspected he felt the same. His kiss was primal and raw, filled with a longing she knew he’d never experienced with another woman, and her magic burned her from the inside out. It was pure bliss to sense a man touch her magic, and if this was how her husband affected her with a kiss, how would her power blossom if he consummated their marriage?

“Ow,” Belladonna jerked backward, her hand flying to her stinging lips, and her fingers came away bloody.

“Fuck.” Vlad cupped her face and stared down at her bleeding mouth. “I’m sorry. My fangs came out by accident. I normally have excellent discipline, but you smell so

fucking good. You taste even better, little witch.” He lifted his thumb to her lip and brushed the drop of blood off before lifting it to his tongue. He licked it off his finger while holding her gaze, and Bella almost climaxed at the sight. She knew vampires fed off their mates to help create bonds. It was similar to how her magic grew stronger in his presence, and she swallowed with nerves. If he couldn’t control his fangs around her...

“It’s okay.” She seized his face and kissed him, letting him lick the blood on her lips as the implication his fangs presented raced through her white-hot and shocking. “I want you... I want you to taste me.”

“Be very careful what you’re asking for, wife.” Vlad grabbed her thigh and yanked her against him, letting her feel how hard he was. “I am not a good man. And while I refuse to take anything from you without your consent, I must warn you. I crave you in the most unholy way. You’re a beautiful woman, inside and out, and I desire you in ways that might scare you.”

“You don’t scare me, angel of death,” she challenged.

“I should.”

“Well, maybe I want to be afraid. It’s almost Halloween. Maybe I want you to terrify me.”

“Wife...” Vlad warned, but he only managed the single word before she slammed her lips against his. Belladonna kissed him roughly, biting his lip as she moaned. His kiss was like a drug, and she was already addicted. She never wanted to kiss another man after this because no one could compare to her husband.

“Fuck.” Vlad gripped the bottom of her dress and ripped it from her body in one swift motion before grabbing her bare waist and yanking her against him. His eyes

darkened dangerously at the realization that she had nothing on under her clothes, her soft breasts pressing against his still-clothed chest. Belladonna smiled at his temporary shock. She hadn't expected to end up naked on the dining room table, but something about having dinner with her handsome husband without a single undergarment beneath her clothing had excited her. She liked the fantasy of his tattooed hand sliding up her thighs to enter her without resistance, and by the almost violent expression on his face, Vlad felt the same.

"Do you trust me not to hurt you?" he asked, his voice thick with need.

"Yes," she whispered.

"Good girl, little witch." He sat in the chair and dragged her to the edge of the table, forcing her thighs wide. "So fucking beautiful," he whispered to himself as he studied her. "Tell me if you need me to stop, because I could feast on this perfect pussy all night and never be satisfied."

Vlad lowered his mouth to her, giving her a long and torturous lick before he started. His tongue moved inside her, licking and sucking and biting like a man possessed, and Belladonna grabbed his head as her eyes fluttered in pleasure. His mouth knew exactly what she needed, exactly how she wanted it, and it was as if they'd been a couple for years. He knew her body as if it was his own, as if it was his job to bring her the stars, and before long she couldn't contain herself. She writhed against his face, riding him as she screamed. It was the most exquisite form of torture seeing him feast between her thighs. Watching the angel of death fuck her with his tongue was more than she could bear, and she tangled her fingers through his hair, pulling so hard she knew it must hurt. If it did, he didn't let on. He only increased his efforts, making it impossible for her to breathe.

"Vlad, I'm going to come."

“Not yet, little witch,” he ordered. “You’re not allowed to come, not until I give you permission.”

“Vlad, please.” She writhed against him. “I can’t hold back any longer.”

“Don’t you dare.” He ripped his mouth away from her, but before she could protest his loss, he pushed two fingers inside her. She gasped at the sight of his tattooed hand fucking her, and then he lowered his lips to her thigh. He kissed her softly before meeting her gaze.

“Are you sure you want this?” he asked. “I’ve never drank from a partner. You would be my first.”

“Yes,” she moaned. “I want to be your first.” And she meant it. Pride filled her chest as she watched his fangs descend. She was his wife and the only woman he’d been open to bonding with. She was suddenly happy she’d been celibate for the past year because she wanted this moment to be a pure and unadulterated memory.

“Good fucking girl,” Vlad said as his fangs pierced her skin. He dug deep into her thigh, her blood pumping from her veins as his fingers pumped inside her. The pain stung for a second, and then her magic exploded within her chest. It was an entire body high, her power mixing with his as he drank, and the sight of her husband feeding from her as his fingers fucked her pushed her over the edge.

“Now, wife,” Vlad ordered. “I want to taste your orgasm in your blood. I want you to come while my fingers are deep inside your cunt.”

Belladonna’s climax took her by surprise. She shook as she came on his hand. He groaned against her bloody leg, his fingers continuing to thrust until she was too sensitive, and then he pulled back to meet her gaze. Blood dripped down her legs to mix with her wetness, and even though she’d just had the best orgasm of her life, it

wasn't enough. She was still desperate for him.

"Fuck," Vlad whispered, as if he was in shock. "You... your blood... how is this possible?" He stood up, a thin trace of her blood on his jaw, and she leaned forward, kissing it off him. Her magic pulsed out of control as their lips met, as if the wards no longer worked, and she knew. Fate had brought her to this man. There was no other explanation.

"How did I taste?" she asked as he dragged her off the table and spun her around, bending her over. Her hands slapped the wood, and she thrust back against him, grinding her ass against his thick length with desperation. She needed him to shed his clothes, to learn how his skin felt against hers.

"Like heaven and hell." Vlad grabbed her chin and twisted her neck so he could kiss her as he covered her spine with his still-clothed chest. "Like perfection and power and the only woman I want for the rest of my life. You are mine, Belladonna. Mine for all eternity. My wife, my lover, my little witch."

"Vlad, please—" she started, but he suddenly lunged away from her, putting too much distance between him and her overheated skin. "What's wrong?" she asked.

"Someone's coming." The vampire ruler resumed control of her husband, and he grabbed his suit jacket off the chair and wrapped it carefully around her shoulders.

"Sir?" Bartholomew's voice said as he peeked through the door.

"What?" Vlad angled his body to conceal her.

"It's bad. We need you. "

"Shit." Vlad looked at her, and her blissful glow sickened to fear at her husband's

sudden seriousness. “Belladonna, I want you to go upstairs to my bedroom.”

“Okay.” She nodded, scooping her dress up from the floor. He cupped her cheek and kissed her lips softly, and it surprised her he willingly displayed such tenderness for her in front of another vampire.

“Do me a favor,” he said, as he and Bartholomew left the dining room. “Lock yourself inside until I get home.”



*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:38 am*

Belladonna gathered Broomstick, Fang, and Jinx and ushered them upstairs. She never ventured to this section of the mansion, careful to always avoid Vlad's room, but his tone had her climbing the stairs two at a time until she reached the upper level. Only one bedroom occupied the top floor, the rest of the space inhabited by a personal gym, library, and office. He never worked up here, at least not since she'd moved in, but it was still invitingly peaceful. If he'd given her permission to enter his room any other night, she would've snooped through his private quarters, but her nerves stopped her from deviating from his instructions.

She ushered her cats through the darkened doorway at the end of the hall and fumbled for the light switch. Vlad's bedroom was both exactly what she predicted and nothing at all like she pictured. Unlike her white and bright room, this massive space was dark and elegant. It had a hint of gothic charm mixed with modern comforts, and while she'd expected a vampire's bedroom to look like something Dracula would inhabit, she wasn't expecting it to be so comfortable. The windows were large and high, offering a picturesque view of the rear gardens that was undoubtedly breathtaking during the day. A black couch sat against one wall, the soft fabric inviting, and the king-size bed had a classy and understated bedframe. She was no fool, though. The mattress blended seamlessly into the space, but it was unquestionably the most expensive item of furniture present.

A large walk-in closet stood next to the en-suite bathroom, but the beauty of the bedroom paled compared to the mirror. Contained by a black ornate frame, a massive mirror hung across from the bed, its size consuming the wall, and Belladonna blushed at the bed's reflection in the glass. For a moment, she imagined Vlad's naked and tattooed body fucking her from behind as they both watched her take his cock, but then a flush of rage transformed the image of her face into another woman's. She

realized it was irrational. Vlad was decades if not centuries old, and while her life span would match his, she hadn't even been born when he seized control of the vampires. His history predated her. He'd had women before her, possibly dozens, including Gabriel's mother. Had he been with them in this room? On that bed? Had he watched the women who'd come before her in that mirror?

"Good lord, get a grip," Belladonna shouted at herself as she stormed to his dresser and rummaged through his clothes until she found his tee-shirts. She was still dressed in his jacket, dried blood coating her thigh, and she needed a shower and a fresh outfit. Ignoring the mirror, she jumped into his luxurious shower with its all-glass doors and washed her surprising jealousy away. She wasn't a prude. Gabriel had refused to sleep with her—a fact she was growing more and more thankful for—but she'd had her share of fun in college. She had a past just like her husband, but she couldn't stop the jealousy. She hated how badly she longed for Vlad to be hers, and not just legally. She wanted to be the only woman in his mirror, in his bed, in his heart.

After the quick shower, she dressed in his soft shirt, and double-checking that the doors and windows were locked, she climbed into the bed with her cats. The sheets wrapped her in Vlad's intoxicating scent, and she buried her nose in the pillows. His scent was like inhaling a drug. Her magic pulsed, her leg aching slightly where he drank from her, and if she hadn't known the wards were blocking her magic, she would've sworn her power was healing his bite.

The hours drifted by slowly, and as she relaxed in his bed, she tried to stay awake until he returned. A stack of novels sat on his bedside table, and she made it almost halfway through a crime thriller, but her eyes were unbearably heavy. The house was silent. There was no sign of her husband, and she?—

The sound of running water woke her, and Belladonna stretched, pushing the luxurious sheets off her body. She'd had one of the best sleeps of her life, and based

on how high the sun was in the sky, she'd slept late too. Her body felt gloriously rested, but then her brain registered why she was hearing water, and she bolted upright, her peace evaporated.

Belladonna slipped out of bed and walked to the half-open bathroom door. Steam fogged the mirror and glass doors, but she didn't need sight to know who stood in the shower. She sensed him in her bones, in her magic. Her body thrummed at his presence, and the knowledge that he'd returned lifted the weight from her chest... until she saw the blood.

His clothes from last night sat on the tiles in a crimson heap, and bloody hand prints smudged the glass. Panic overtook her ability to behave rationally, and she lunged across the floor, flinging open the shower door without thinking .

Vlad's towering body came into view, his skin covered with more tattoos than she'd realized, but it wasn't the artistic ink etched into his flesh or his powerful form that captured her attention. It was the blood. There was so much red, and a strange fear swelled in her chest. A few months ago, his demise would've been cause for celebration, but now? Now it filled her with terror. She couldn't lose her husband. She wouldn't survive his death.

With trembling fingers, Belladonna stripped off her shirt and stepped into the steaming spray. Vlad didn't so much as flinch at the sound of her intrusion, and her hands flew to his broad back. She used the water with panicked movements to wash his skin as she tried not to cry, but she couldn't locate the wounds the blood was coming from.

"It's not mine." Vlad's low voice vibrated his ribs beneath her palms, and Belladonna froze. Her haze of alarm vanished at his words, and she forced herself to focus on the fact that the red water was fading to pink. It wasn't his. He wasn't hurt, and she collapsed against him in relief. Her cheek pressed into his back, the shower's heat

wrapping them in its embrace, and she lingered against her much taller husband for long and silent moments as her heart rate slowed.

When her rationality returned, Belladonna realized the blood hadn't come from an accident. It also hadn't come from one death. Vlad had slaughtered people while she slept, and she froze at the reality of who she clung to. Vlad had earned the title angel of death with his brutality, but she'd never witnessed her husband's ruthless nature. She'd been drugged when he killed her attackers, but seeing the sheer amount of blood washing down the drain forced her to face the truth. She didn't truly know the man she currently held onto.

Belladonna slipped her arms around Vlad's waist, her small hands coming to rest on his chiseled abs. She should leave this shower. She should flee this room and put permanent distance between herself and the vampire named for the Impaler, but instead, she clung to his powerful body. Her words from the night before rang true through her memory. She wasn't afraid of the angel of death.

"What happened?" she whispered.

"Nothing I wish to tell you."

His voice felt like a slap as he cut her out, but he must have sensed her hurt because he rested his broad palms over her hands, welding them to his stomach with an almost gentle nature. The intimacy surprised her.

"Something is coming," he offered instead. "Unrest is brewing, but I can't find the source. I'm worried last night was only the beginning."

"Are we in danger?" Belladonna asked, pulling him closer, and her magic sensed his delight at her use of the word 'we'.

“I don’t know,” Vlad answered as the water beat down on them. “And that’s what terrifies me because I genuinely don’t know.”

Belladonna didn’t return to her room after that bloody shower. For a week, she slept in Vlad’s bed, and for a week, she slept alone. Each night when the sun dipped below the horizon, she locked herself in his bedroom with her cats, worrying about her husband until he finally found his way back to her in the last dark minutes before dawn. They barely saw each other, the unknown threat fraying him at the edges. Two months ago, his absence would have pleased her, but now the empty house felt haunted. Only the ghost of his scent remained.

“What are you doing up?” Vlad asked as he barged into the kitchen. It was still dark, and at this early hour Belladonna was normally asleep and locked away in his room, but a week of sleeping alone in his sheets had her ready to climb out of her skin.

“You always arrive home right before dawn and then eat,” she answered, spooning the scrambled eggs onto two plates. It wasn’t the best display of her cooking skills, but the eggs were cheesy and the toast buttered. “You go to sleep when I get up, and it’s like I’m married to a ghost, not a vampire.” She set the food on the kitchen table, watching the way his eyes dipped to her bare legs. She’d taken to wearing his shirts to bed, and she could tell by his harsh expression that this was his favorite look of hers.

“Careful, little witch,” Vlad warned as he sat. “It almost sounds like you miss me.”

“Of course, I miss you,” she said, removing a blood serving from the warmer. She’d been in this mansion long enough to learn where Vlad kept his supply and how the vampires preferred to drink it, and judging by the circles under his eyes, he hadn’t consumed human blood since he drank from her thigh.

“It’s boring in this house without someone to aggravate.” She handed him the cup

with a wicked grin as she sat in the chair opposite him.

“I’m sure you were a delight as a child.” Vlad smirked and then downed the blood in one gulp. His face contorted slightly at the taste, and Belladonna couldn’t help but wonder if that was her doing. Vampires preferred drinking from a living donor, and by the way he’d practically attacked her on the dining room table, she knew he found her blood intoxicating. It sent a thrill through her to think he was addicted to her, but then a shiver ran down her spine. She was a witch, and witches never willingly let vampires drink from them. It was an act of treason, one that warranted the most brutal punishment. Growing up, she believed she would die before she allowed a vampire to sink his fangs into her flesh, yet she’d begged Vlad to take her. She realized his words were a joke, but she had been a delight to her mother as a child. But now? What would Rowena think of her now? If she discovered what her daughter had done, what her daughter had so thoroughly enjoyed that she wanted it to happen again, would she disown her? Belladonna didn’t want to consider it, but she knew the answer. The coven might forgive her marriage, but they would never forgive her for this.

“I was an absolute angel,” Belladonna said, forcing a fake smile to her lips, and if Vlad noticed her falter, he didn’t let on. “But it’s more fun being the devil in this house.”

“Little witch, there is only one devil in this home, and it’s not you,” Vlad growled softly as he bit into the toast.

“No, you’re right,” she agreed with a wink. “It’s definitely Fang. He’s bit five guards this week alone.”

Vlad burst into laughter, and this time, Belladonna’s smile wasn’t fake. She liked the deep sound. It rumbled through her chest, vibrating her magic, and she wondered how many people had the honor of hearing the angel of death laugh.

“Speak of the devil.” Vlad nodded as the cats sauntered into the room, meowing for their breakfast, and as if he knew he’d been summoned, Fang hissed viciously at him before curling around Belladonna’s ankles.

“Wait...” Vlad paused as he brought his fork to his lips and squinted at his wife’s legs. “My god, now there are four?”

“Oh, yes, Cauldron joined us last night,” Belladonna said. “Another girl, and I think she was abused. I found some scars under her fur, and she was pretty skittish.”

“She doesn’t look skittish.”

“I brewed her a special bowl of milk. She knows she’s safe here with me.”

Vlad shook his head as he dug back into his breakfast. “ So, it’s Broomstick, Fang, Jinx, and Cauldron? How come only one vampire name?”

“I only give the cranky cats vampire names. Seems only appropriate.”

“You’re cruel, wife,” he said, and Belladonna waggled her eyebrows at him. “But all teasing aside, it’s good the cats are here with you when I’m not.”

“Careful, husband,” she said with a sweet smile. “It almost sounds like you care about me.”

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:38 am*

What on earth happened to my house?" Vlad asked as he stood dumbfounded on the main staircase. After their early breakfast, he'd crashed, his exhaustion so severe that not even Belladonna's intoxicating scent on his pillow kept him up. He'd requested she stay in his room because it was the most secure point of the mansion. He claimed it was for her protection, but he secretly wanted her to stay because of how delicious her fragrance was on his sheets. Climbing into bed every morning with her essence wrapped around him was a beautiful torture, and he wondered if she would remain with him when the threat passed. It would ruin his sanity to sleep beside her, but he would willingly burn in her presence if it meant she never returned to the guest bedroom.

Her breakfast had surprised him this morning, and while he couldn't figure out how she'd gotten into the blood supply without triggering the alarms, he was thankful she had the foresight to feed him. He was running on empty, and he hadn't wanted to frighten her with the truth about his absence. The blood she'd warmed from him was a pale comparison to what ran through her veins, but it had been enough to keep him rational. The constant deaths were taking their toll on him; his body pushed to the limit as he confronted every lead, but everything was a dead end. It didn't matter who he tortured, who he interrogated. He learned nothing save the two rumors Lucian had already warned him about. Something was coming, and his wife was somehow at the center.

However, at the moment, all she was at the center of was a horde of orange.

"It's almost Halloween." Belladonna looked at him as if he'd lost his mind. "I used the laptop in your private office upstairs to order decorations, because I'll be damned if I have to live in a house that doesn't decorate. I tried looking through the closets for



stuff, but your guards didn't think you had any decor. Honestly, Vlad, are you even a vampire?"

"You used my laptop?" Vlad froze, that nagging concern slipping back into his mind. Was his beautiful young wife the Trojan Horse meant to topple his empire? In a matter of hours, she'd revealed her ability to both break into his blood supply and his secure devices. Not even his own son had figured those out. "How did you get the password?"

"Easy," she said, as if this wasn't a potential security threat. "I've seen you log in enough times to figure out which keys you were hitting."

"I never let you see my hands." Vlad's emotionless tone was serious, but Belladonna seemed oblivious as she pulled decoration after decoration out of the multitude of boxes.

"I could read it in your movements. Besides, it's not that big a deal. All I did was order decorations... okay, maybe it's slightly a big deal because I spent a fortune, but you won't let me leave this house, and I refuse to let Halloween pass me by without this." She shoved the cutest cat ornament into his face with a smile. "Come on. You love it. The entire mansion will be festive and spooky and smelling like cinnamon. I'm thinking of creating themes. Some rooms will be cozy and cute, and others will be so terrifying even you'll be afraid of the dark. Then when the kids trick or treat, I can?—"

"Kids?" Vlad asked, his head suddenly spinning.

"Yeah, don't you give out candy on Halloween?"

"No."

“Heathen,” Belladonna gasped.

“I don’t let people onto the property.”

“They aren’t people,” she said. “They are children. Tiny humans dressed in cute costumes who eat candy until they are sick. Surely a big, bad vampire like yourself can survive the frightening prospect of kids ringing the doorbell.”

“Belladonna.” He gripped her wrist, and she gawked up at him, finally registering he was upset.

“I...” she trailed off, her excitement dying, and he felt like an asshole for stealing her joy. “I love Halloween. I love the Jack-o'-lanterns and the ghost stories and the costumes. I love pumpkin-spiced lattes and black cats and how Halloween makes a witch’s magic come alive. It’s like electricity running through our veins, and then I eat candy until I’m sick, but now I’m locked all alone in this house without my friends or my family or my power. I wasn’t trying to make you mad. I just want to decorate.”

She looked like she was about to cry, and Vlad suddenly didn’t care if she was a wolf in sheep’s clothing. He’d hurt her, and he swore to kill anyone who hurt his wife.

“You can decorate.” He pulled her into a hug, and she stiffened in surprise. “And you can give candy to the trick-or-treaters. I’ll let my men know, and security will make a plan.”

“Really?” The warmth in her eyes was enough to thaw even his icy heart. “Thank you!” Belladonna flung her arms around his neck before bouncing across the floor to her boxes. For the first time since their wedding, he realized how young she was, and he felt guilty for ripping someone so precious away from the life she loved. He was also annoyed that someone so young had managed what no one had ever

accomplished in the past centuries. She made him feel.

“I still need an outfit,” she said, oblivious to his dilemma. “Are you going to dress up? Please say you will. I swear I won’t make you wear an embarrassing costume...” she stared at him with mischief in her eyes. “Actually, I can’t promise that.”

“Little witch,” he warned.

“Okay, okay.” She raised her hands in surrender. “See, this is why only grouchy cats get vampire names, but I promise, only sexy costumes for you.”

“And you,” he blurted.

“Garbage bag it is.” She smiled as she sauntered over to him, wrapping a strand of orange tulle around his neck. “But I’ll tear it in all the right places.” She brushed her lips against his in a barely-there peck before wandering teasingly through her boxes. “Normally Juniper, Hazel, and I plan our outfits together, and we go all out for Halloween. One year we went as those three sister witches from that kids’ movie. It annoyed the hell out of my mother, but I thought it was funny. I guess I’ll have to find an outfit by myself this year.”

“You can use my laptop to call your friends,” Vlad groaned, hearing what he was saying, but unable to stop his words. “But!” He held up his tattooed hand when her eyes brightened. “I have the ability to monitor all calls.”

“So, no plotting your demise, got it,” she smiled, completely oblivious to his concerns that she might be the very one behind just that. He didn’t want to believe it. Not when the young woman before him was so damn cute in her ghost hoodie, fuzzy socks, and bare legs.

“We’ll gossip about you instead, I promise.” She curled her fingers in a spell. “If my

magic worked, that spell would bind my promise, but it doesn't, so hopefully it's the thought that counts."

"Have fun, little witch." Vlad navigated a path through the boxes and cats to where Bartholomew waited for him.

"I will!" she called over her shoulder.

"Sir, is that wise? Letting her call the witches?" Bartholomew eyed him warily.

"Probably not," Vlad said. "But I didn't marry her to make her my prisoner. Our marriage is to further the peace."

Bartholomew nodded, accepting his answer, but bile burned Vlad's throat at his lie. He hadn't married her for peace. He'd married her because he wanted her with an unholy desire. The kind of need one only experienced when they found their mate.

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:38 am*

Has anyone seen my phone?” Vlad asked as he buttoned up his black shirt. It was Halloween Eve, and he was a man of his word. Belladonna’s parents were due to arrive for dinner any minute now, causing him to sweat like a vampire in the sunlight, and his men were watching him with expressions that hid nothing. They thought him insane for welcoming the enemy into the mansion, and as he stormed through the house looking for his cell, he had to agree.

“It was in the fridge!” Belladonna shouted from the kitchen. She’d been cooking all day, the mansion was decorated within an inch of its life, and Vlad wasn’t sure if he was thrilled or horrified at the changes. The stunning decor ranged from cozy to witchy to downright horrifying, and it amazed him she’d pulled this off in a matter of days. He was also terrified to check his credit card statement and witness just how much his wife had cost him. In truth, she’d been costing him for months because he had a weakness for gifting her anything she wanted... and everything he longed to see her in, and she didn’t disappoint. He found himself on multiple occasions wishing it was illegal to look that delicious every second of every damn day.

“What the hell was it doing in the fridge?” Vlad shouted as he stormed into the kitchen, but he barely made it two feet into the room before he tripped on something soft. An ear-piercing shriek emanated from the object, and he stumbled to regain his balance while not killing the poor creature. “And is that a fifth cat?” He scanned the floor, hoping he was hallucinating, but his eyes didn’t lie. There was a fifth black cat swarming around his wife’s ankles; the newcomer currently hissing at him.

“You shoved it in the fridge when you were looking for a snack earlier.” Belladonna handed him his phone, but he didn’t take it. He couldn’t. Not when she was dressed like that.

“And yes, that is a fifth cat. He showed up as I was cooking. He seemed pretty hungry, so I fed him, and he keeps hanging around Cauldron. I think they came from the same place, my poor babies.” She bent over to scratch the new kitten, and Vlad tried to focus on the animal that had lived an abused life until his saint of a wife welcomed him into their home, but he couldn’t take his eyes off her ass. What on earth was she thinking wearing that to dinner with her parents? Did she want her mom to witness him become a barbarian?

“I haven’t named him yet, but since you tripped on him and made him mad, I figure a cranky vamp name is an order. What do you think of Batty?”

“What are you wearing?”

“What’s with the twenty questions?” Belladonna whirled on him. “It’s a dress. You bought it for me.”

“I know I bought it for you. But not to wear around your parents. To wear during dinner with me. ”

“I am having dinner with you.” She grabbed the salad bowl and walked to the dining room on her designer stilettos, and that sight made her outfit worse. He remembered buying those impossibly thin heels, but he hadn’t gifted them to her for functional use. He’d purchased those specifically to bend her over in front of his massive mirror and take her from behind while she wore nothing else.

“That’s not what I meant,” he growled as she placed the salad on the table and started distributing the plates and silverware. The dress was floor length, so at first glance it was modest, but upon closer inspection, it was clear the fabric was sheer. The black long sleeves gave her a vintage movie-witch vibe, but the sheeress left little to the imagination. She’d thankfully donned a sexy black teddy he’d purchased on a whim under it, but all of her—and then again none of her—was covered, and combined

with the heels, he thought he might pass out.

“Vlad, it’s just dinner with my parents.” She pinned him with a glare that said she knew he was panicking. “It’s not anything scary. This isn’t some threat. It’s a girl asking to see her family, okay? And my mom doesn’t care about this dress. Have you seen her? The woman is how old, but she looks barely forty? Trust me, my parents are very much in love. Disgustingly so, which means my mother has worn more than her fair share of sexy outfits. Besides, revealing clothes are literally all I own thanks to some crazy vampire I know.” She patted his chest as she left the room, and he charged after her.

“For you, this is just dinner with Mom, but you need to see it from my perspective. This woman has tried to kill me.”

“And you’ve tried to kill her.” Belladonna grabbed the basket of sliced bread and aimed back for the dining room, vampire hard on her fuck-me heels. “And you stole me. Both of you have done horrible things, but this isn’t about you. This is about me. The girl who did nothing but get married.”

“I know, I know.” He ran his hand through his hair, feeling like an asshole... again. “I just?—”

“Need to calm down.”

He growled at her, but she whirled on him and shoved him forcefully against the table. He grunted at her sudden movements, but it was the fire in her eyes that froze him in place.

“I said...” she spoke slowly, her perfectly manicured black nails dragging down his chest to his belt. “You need to calm down.”

Belladonna undid his buckle before he could process what she was doing, and then she was on her knees, unzipping his pants as if she were unwrapping a treat.

“Little witch,” Vlad hissed. “What are you doing?”

“Helping my husband relax,” she cooed, reaching into his pants, but he grabbed her hand before she could grip him.

“Are you insane?” he grunted, unbelievably hard at the sight of her kneeling. “Your parents will be here any second. I can’t have them walking in on us with my cock in your mouth.”

“Then you better come quickly,” she said, her voice dangerous as she tugged her arm from his grasp. Belladonna yanked his pants down further, and then with those lovely hands, she pulled him out.

“Fuck, husband,” she moaned obscenely. “I knew you were big, but this is the most beautiful cock I’ve ever seen.”

“Don’t talk about other men when I’m in your hands,” he snarled, and she looked up at him with a teasing expression.

“Careful, Vlad. It almost sounds like you’re jealous.”

“You are playing a dangerous game, little witch.” He gripped her chin gently with his tattooed hand and forced her to hold his stern gaze. “Are you trying to make me hunt down every man who has so much as flirted with you, because I will? I’m a jealous man, and you are my wife. Mine. Do you understand me?”

“Yes.” She nodded with flushed cheeks.



“Yes, what?” His eyes hardened, and he watched with pleasure as his meaning registered.

“Yes, sir,” she moaned, and her voice alone almost made him spill in her hand.

“Good fucking girl.” He slid his fingers from her jaw to her beautifully styled hair. “Now show me how this pretty little mouth is mine and mine alone.”

Belladonna parted her pink lips with a gasp and leaned forward eagerly. Her tongue darted out, and she teasingly licked his shaft as his grip tightened on her hair.

“Don’t tease me, wife. Your parents are almost here. Do you want them to catch you on your knees for me?”

“No, sir,” she said seductively, and his knees felt weak. He loved that she let him take control when she was truly the one in power as her fingers gripped his aching length.

“Or maybe you want to be caught.” He smirked down at her. “Maybe you want people to know how badly you crave your husband.”

His words were all the challenge she needed, and Belladonna wrapped her lips around him, taking him deep until he hit the back of her throat. She gagged slightly at the intrusion, but instead of pulling back, she pushed deeper. She opened her throat as she swallowed him, and then she increased the pressure, sucking so hard, he worried she would pull the soul from his body.

“Fuck, little witch.” He captured her hair with his other hand, guiding her as she moved faster. “You look exquisite on your knees with your lips wrapped around my cock.”

She glanced up at him with pride and then grabbed his balls, and he was certain he

would have fallen if it weren't for the table at his back.

"I want you to choke on me." He thrust like a man possessed, and Belladonna encouraged his frenzy. She shoved her manicured hands up his shirt to his abs and then clawed her nails over his skin, drawing blood with the sharp tips. Vlad roared at the pain mixing with the pleasure, and he opened his mouth to speak those three words that would change everything. Those three dangerous words that were brewing in his soul, but he bit his tongue, afraid to say the truth out loud.

"You take me so well," he said instead. "I want this to last all night, but we don't have the time, so take me deeper, wife. Make me come."

She nodded, increasing both her speed and the pressure on his abs. Her nails dug in deep, but what made this moment perfect was her expression. She held his gaze the entire time, refusing to break their eye contact as she hollowed out her cheeks and sucked him harder. Her tongue danced around his swollen head, tasting him like he was her greatest obsession. It was the most intense experience he'd had with a woman, and those three damn words threatened to escape his lips again. It was the first time in centuries he'd felt alive, and not because of her skill, but because she looked at him as if he was who she'd been waiting for.

"I'm going to come, little witch." His grip tightened in her hair. "Make me proud and show me how much you love my cum down your throat. I want you to swallow every drop like a good girl. I know this perfect little mouth can handle it."

Belladonna nodded, her eyes eager, and one of her hands dragged down his abs to grasp his shaft. She pumped him hard as she took him to the back of her throat, and Vlad lost all control. He shouted as he came, shooting his release in thick pulses as she swallowed, and the sight of her drinking him down made it last endlessly until he thought he would pass out.

“Holy shit, you are perfect.” He grabbed her by the arms and hoisted her to her feet, wrapping her in a powerful embrace as he kissed her deeply. He could smell her excitement, and his chest puffed up with pride knowing that pleasuring him turned her on.

“Do you feel more relaxed?” Belladonna asked as she deepened the kiss.

“Immensely, thank you. But now that I know how well you swallow me, I’ll want you on your knees all the time.”

“Yes, sir,” she moaned into his mouth, and Vlad was seconds away from throwing the food off the table and replacing it with her bare body when footsteps approached.

“Shit.” He tightened his hold on her. “We’ll have to revisit this later. Zip me up.”

Belladonna obliged him, kissing him slowly as she fixed his suit, and by the time Bartholomew entered the dining room, they looked innocent and presentable, simply a couple sharing a sweet embrace.

“Sir. Ma’am,” Bartholomew said. “Rowena is here.”

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:38 am*

Belladonna blushed sweetly, and Vlad obsessed over how this woman was pure sin one minute and an angel the next. He loved how she could be absolutely filthy, literally pushing him against the table so she could have her way with him, yet she was also excited about dinner with her family, Halloween decorations, candy, and cats. She was sweet, intelligent, and ungodly sexy, and he longed to say those three words so badly that his chest hurt.

“Um...” Belladonna darted to where he kept the liquor. “You can let my parents in. Dinner is almost ready.” She smiled at Bartholomew as she poured herself a shot and knocked it back. Vlad had to agree with her need for liquid courage until she swished the alcohol around her mouth. Their gazes met, and she burst into laughter as she swallowed, pouring more whiskey into the glass before rejoining him.

“Can’t kiss my mother with that mouth,” she said with a shrug as she handed him the shot, and Vlad threw his head back in a deep laugh. Lord, how he wanted to confess those three damned words now.

A masculine voice cleared his throat, and Vlad turned to find Bartholomew leading Rowena and her husband Magnus into the dining room. Belladonna’s parents gawked at him, clearly shocked to hear the angel of death laughing, and when their eyes dipped to where his tattooed hand rested on his wife’s back, their gawking increased. Belladonna was standing with her chest pressed against his, smiling at his laughter as she offered him the whiskey. The moment was honest, their happiness too genuine to be staged, and it was obviously not the scene Rowena had been expecting.

“Mom! Dad!” Belladonna shrieked, racing for her parents, and the sight of her throwing herself into Rowena’s arms reminded Vlad how young his wife was. She

looked so sweet and youthful as the coven leader held her close, and he was sick of how often he felt like an asshole. He shouldn't have imprisoned her in this home without outside contact.

"I'm so glad you're here," Belladonna said, and Vlad downed the whiskey before joining them, thankful his wife had the foresight to both relax him and give him courage. He realized their interaction was more than just relaxation as he stepped beside her and met his enemy's gaze. Even though she'd been on her knees and sexy as hell, it had been an incredibly intimate and profound moment for him, and those three words lingered ever-present in his subconscious. It made hating Rowena difficult when her daughter had wormed her way beneath his tattooed skin.

"Rowena. Magnus." Vlad extended his inked hand to his in-laws, and the couple stiffly accepted his greeting. "I realize tomorrow is Halloween, so thank you for taking the time to join Belladonna and me for dinner."

"Thanks for inviting us," Rowena said uncomfortably. "Your home is lovely. The decorations are perfect. I didn't expect you to celebrate so enthusiastically."

"That, I'm afraid, was all my wife," Vlad said, resting his tattooed hand on Belladonna's lower back, and again, her mother gawked at their intimacy.

"I refuse to live in a house that doesn't decorate or accept trick-or-treaters or drink pumpkin-spiced lattes," Belladonna said. "I may have gone overboard, though. I decorated almost every room."

"I'm afraid to check my credit card bill." Vlad smirked, and Belladonna rolled her eyes, shoving him playfully off her as she grabbed her mom's hand.

"Come help me get the food out of the oven," she said as she dragged the bewildered woman into the kitchen, leaving him with her dad. Magnus was a powerful witch, and

even though his wife was the coven leader, the man was a reckoning force. Vlad was suddenly thankful for the wards as they stared uncomfortably at each other. What the hell was he supposed to talk about with the husband of his enemy and the father of the woman he constantly fantasized about?

“Can I get you a drink?” he asked.

“Please,” Magnus blurted too quickly, and Vlad heaved a sigh of relief as he strode to the bar. They hadn’t killed each other yet, which was an incredible feat, but the air was so thick with tension that his fangs ached.

“Broomstick was first and then came Fang,” Belladonna said as she and her mother returned, arms laden with steaming trays of food.

“Fang is nasty, so watch your hands,” Vlad interrupted, which earned him a scowl from his wife.

“He just doesn’t like grumpy old vampires,” she shot back. “I’m sure he’ll love you, Mom.”

“That feral cat?” Rowena asked, watching as the horde of black cats sauntered into the room as if summoned .

“He is not feral!” Bella scooped him up. “He’s rough around the edges, but I love him.”

“Like me,” Vlad said without thinking, and the witches fell silent as they stared at him. For a long and awkward moment, he had the urge to kick everyone out of his house to appease his humiliation, but then his wife walked toward him, the mean cat still clutched in her arms.

“Exactly like you,” she whispered, but Fang hissed with such violence that he broke the spell of his wife’s confession.

“Right,” Belladonna laughed, putting the angry animal down. “Then came Jinx, followed by Cauldron, and Batty showed up today. I think he and Cauldron were abused, but they’re safe with me.”

“I didn’t know vampires kept cats,” Rowena said.

“We don’t,” Vlad answered. “They just keep showing up, and suddenly my credit card statement has all sorts of cat supplies on it.” He shrugged as he extended his hand to the table, signaling they should sit. “Just when I think she’s done collecting strays, another one pops up, so now I’m resolved to constantly trip on animals with ridiculous names for the rest of my life.”

“That’s...” Rowena paused as if she wasn’t sure what to make of Vlad’s unexpected friendliness. “It’s a sign of a powerful witch, you know?” She looked at her daughter. “Black cats sense a witch’s magic, and the more that flock to her, especially around Halloween, the more power that witch has. The night you were born, twenty black cats showed up in our yard.”

“I didn’t know that,” Belladonna said.

“It’s why we always kept you hidden,” her mother said. “It was a sign you would be the heir to the coven. That you might one day surpass my power.”

“But this house is warded,” Magnus said. “How are the cats finding her?”

“I don’t know.” Rowena glanced at Vlad with a horrified expression as she put the puzzle pieces together. When vampires fed off their mates, it strengthened their bond, but when a witch found their soulmate, it heightened their magic. If Belladonna’s

mate was a vampire, how powerful would her magic swell, especially if they shared blood?

“Bella?” She pinned her daughter with an alarmed expression. “Have you?—”

“Hi, Dad,” a male voice interrupted, silencing the gathering, and ice ran through Vlad’s veins as Gabriel strode into the room and locked eyes with his shocked wife.

Anxiety flooded Belladonna’s chest as Gabriel’s eyes locked with hers. They purposely hadn’t invited him to this dinner. Not because they wished to exclude him, but with his sudden hostility, Vlad felt it was safer to host his enemy for the first time with as little confrontation as possible. The last thing either of them wanted was Gabriel insulting her and causing Rowena to declare war.

“What are you doing here?” Vlad asked, his voice ice and razors.

“Eating dinner with my dad and my stepmom, of course,” Gabriel said as he plopped down into an empty chair and started shoveling food onto a plate. “Wow, this smells good. I didn’t know the witch could cook.”

“Gabriel...” Vlad warned.

“What?” His son played dumb. “It was a compliment. Right, Bella? I didn’t know you could cook, but I guess you were holding out on me. Saving all the good things for my dad.”

“I would have cooked for you if you’d asked,” Belladonna said, hating how small she felt beneath his words. Even when she and Vlad verbally sparred, he never made her feel inadequate, but Gabriel made her want to wither and retreat. “You never wanted to stay over. You never came to my house. Infatuation blinded me around you, but let’s face it. We moved too fast. I don’t think we truly understood what we were



getting into. You never even slept over during our six months together.”

“I bet you sleep with dear ole dad all the time though, don’t you?” Gabriel sneered.

“Watch your mouth when you talk to my wife.” Vlad’s tattooed fist pressed down on the table so hard that Belladonna feared the inked skull would shatter the wood. She longed to reach out and place her palm on her husband’s hand to calm him, but the looks on her parents and Gabriel’s faces warned her not to move.

“You can be angry all you like with me, but you keep my wife’s name out of your mouth. Do you understand?” Vlad continued. “I won’t tolerate her being slandered in my house.”

“Why, Dad?” Gabriel leaned back disrespectfully and shoved chicken into his mouth. “Why do you get so mad when I talk about her? She’s just a witch. Rowena’s daughter, no less. She was engaged to me first, and do you know she used to beg me to sleep with her, but I couldn’t degrade myself by sticking my—ufff.” He grunted as Vlad grabbed him by the chest, hoisted him out of the chair, and pinned him against the wall.

“I told you to watch your mouth,” he roared.

“Vlad!” Belladonna jumped up, distraught that dinner had been ruined because of her relationships. She understood Gabriel was hurt, but there was something off about his temper. She’d been ready to run away with him, willing to anger the angel of death to escape with him, but he’d rejected her. He’d made it clear he never truly cared, so she didn’t understand why he was trying to ruin her marriage.

“I warned you,” Vlad ignored her shouts. “You don’t talk about my wife like that. You are my son, and I love you, but I’ve killed vampires for less.”

“What, you going to kill your own kid over some witch?” Gabriel asked.

“No!” Belladonna shouted. “No, he’s not killing anyone. Vlad, please let him go. Please, can we just eat?” She started to cry, and anger boiled over in her chest. She didn’t want to cry. Not over Gabriel. He’d had his chance to fight for her, and he’d thrown it out the window. He hadn’t even tried, yet Vlad had proved time and again that he would kill for her, that he would welcome his enemy into his home for her. Gabriel wasn’t her mate. He couldn’t be. Not when her soul was screaming Vlad was.

“Can we eat in peace?” Vlad asked his son. “Belladonna put a lot of effort into this meal, and she’s far more gracious than I am. She wants to enjoy dinner with her parents, so can you sit down and shut up? Can you act like an adult and discuss your grievances with me instead of insulting the woman who didn’t have a choice?”

“Why do you care so much about her?” Gabriel asked, staring at Belladonna with malice. “What’s so special about that witch that has you acting insane? You aren’t the man I knew.”

“Gabriel,” Vlad growled.

“You can’t really think she’s...” Gabriel laughed with disgust. “What the hell happened to my father?”

Vlad’s expression darkened, and for a terrifying moment, Belladonna feared he would rip his son’s head from his body, but then he surprised everyone by pulling the vampire into his arms .

“I’m sorry,” he said as he hugged his son. “I’m so sorry for what I did. When you’ve lived as long as I have, you forget sometimes what it means to have emotions. My reign is dominated by violence, so in my need to make her my wife, I didn’t think. I love you, Gabriel. I have since the day you were born, and I will until I die. So,

forgive your father. Put me out of my misery and stop talking about my wife with disrespect.”

The room fell silent, and Belladonna’s heart broke as she watched the scene. This violent vampire that was her husband was evolving before her eyes, and while he’d royally screwed up their wedding and his relationship with his son, she couldn’t help but care for him.

“Come on, Gabriel. Forgive your father,” Vlad pushed.

“Whatever, you can have her.” Gabriel half hugged his dad, and Belladonna gave a small sigh of relief. It was a start.

“It doesn’t matter,” he continued, and her relief died in her chest. “It’s all the same in the end.”

The rest of the meal passed with excruciating discomfort, and when her parents finally stood to leave, Belladonna felt an overwhelming sense of relief.

“I love you, Mom.” She hugged her mother tight, counting down the seconds until she could curl up in bed. This wasn’t how she’d expected the evening to go. When she woke up that morning, she’d pictured a nice if not slightly awkward meal where the two houses made real steps toward peace. With how delicious Vlad looked in that all-black suit, she’d fantasized about him taking her to bed for the first time after their successful dinner party. It was partially why she’d shoved him against the table earlier and fallen to her knees. Her actions were to help him relax, but most of her motivation came from her unquenchable thirst for her husband. She was beginning to understand why he’d barged into that church and pushed his signet ring onto her finger. She didn’t belong to Gabriel. She never had, and she never would.

But now? Now she longed to curl into a ball and pretend the world didn’t exist.

“Say the word, and we’ll get you out of this house,” Rowena whispered in her daughter’s ear. “I don’t care what it takes. If you need me, I will rescue you.”

“That would break the treaty,” Belladonna said.

“I don’t care. You are my daughter. You always have and always will come first.”

“I appreciate it, Mom, but I’m fine.”

“Fine isn’t good enough,” Magnus said. “I’m worried you aren’t safe in this house.”

“Actually, I might be the safest I’ve ever been here.” Belladonna glanced over her shoulder at her husband, who was talking to his son again. She hoped they could work it out and forgive one another because, while she would always be pissed about how Vlad married her, she’d come to terms with the realization that she didn’t regret it. Marrying him had been the right choice. She sensed it in her bones, in her suddenly volatile magic.

“Don’t worry about me.” She embraced her father. “I... I think I’m in lo... I’m okay,” she stumbled on her words, unsure how to confess her true feelings after that disaster.

“Well, the offer still stands,” Rowena said. “One word, and I’ll come for you.”

“This is why I have the best mother ever.” She hugged her mom again. “Vlad’s personal laptop is basically mine now, hence all the ridiculous credit card charges, so I’ll video chat you soon. Maybe we can try another less disastrous dinner party.”

“Maybe we should do lunch next time instead,” Rowena said. “We’ll host since the wards make me nervous. If something were to go wrong.... It’s why I hate you living here. I feel horrible, like I’ve abandoned my only child to this monster.”

“He isn’t a monster,” Belladonna said.

“Don’t be fooled by that handsome face,” her mother reprimanded. “That man is the worst breed of danger to walk this earth.”

“Well...” She glanced at Vlad again, and this time, their eyes met. She read the apology in his gaze. The hurt, the frustration, the affection. “He isn’t a monster to me.”

Vlad crept into his dark bedroom, the outline of his sleeping wife and all her cats just visible in the moonlight. He’d offered to clean up the kitchen after Gabriel, Rowena, and Magnus left. It was the least he could do after he’d screwed everything up. He only hoped he could mend his relationship with his son. He hadn’t set out to steal his fiancé, but no vampire, not even one as strong as him, could fight fate.

Belladonna’s soft breathing told him she was asleep, and while she’d stayed in his room every night over the past week, their opposite schedules ensured they never shared the mattress. He wasn’t sure how she would react to sleeping beside him, but his entire body screamed for her. After the evening they had, he needed to hold her in his arms, to assure her that his son’s cruel words were not his own.

Vlad stripped down to his black boxer briefs and climbed under the sheets, sliding Broomstick and Batty out of the way. Fang eyed him warily, but Vlad was smart enough to leave the little demon where he lay. Thankfully, the cat let him get into the bed without drawing blood, and Vlad wrapped his wife in his arms. She wore one of his tee shirts, and he was once again struck with awe at how perfectly precious she was, protected by his clothes and surrounded by fluffy cats.

“I’m sorry about tonight,” he whispered into her hair as he pulled her to his chest. She was fast asleep and couldn’t hear his apology, which was why the words came easier. Vlad wasn’t a man who apologized... ever, yet he’d done so twice in the same

evening.

“I wanted this to be an enjoyable night for you,” he continued, his broad hand gripping her belly as he dragged her further against his chest, his heart swelling at how perfectly she fit against him. “I always want you to have nice things because I... I lo...”

He couldn't say it. Even with her asleep, he struggled to voice the words. He'd never said them to any woman, and the reality that he'd finally found his other half terrified him. If he admitted the truth, everything changed. And not just for him, not just for his marriage, but for every vampire and witch that walked the earth.

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:38 am*

A weight settled on Vlad's chest, the pressure pushing him into the mattress, and instincts had his fangs readying to rip out the intruder's throat when the scent of fragrant skin filled his nostrils... and pumpkin spice.

"You're up early," he groaned, gripping his wife's thighs as she straddled his waist.

"It's Halloween," Belladonna said, her tone signaling that the holiday would be her explanation for everything. "Are you going to get up, or are you going to be a grumpy old man like Fang and stay in bed?"

"Stay in bed." Vlad's hands traced her bare thighs to her hips. The lacy thong did little to shield her from his abs, and the sensation urged his exploration to continue up her toned waist to her ribs. When she didn't protest, he slid his broad palms to her bare breasts. She moaned, and he pinched her peeked nipples between his fingers, rolling them slowly as he enjoyed how wet she grew on top of him.

"Yes," he growled. "I'm going to stay in bed." He opened his eyes, catching sight of her straddling his torso, and the vision of her wearing only his tee shirt with tussled hair framing her makeup-less face and a mug of coffee clutched in her hands made his chest tighten. They'd never slept side by side before, had never greeted the morning as a couple, but if this was how she woke him up, he was pissed he hadn't climbed into bed with her sooner.

"But it's Halloween," she moaned, gripping her coffee with white knuckles as he tugged her delicate nipples harder. She gasped, nearly dropping her latte onto his chest, but she didn't stop moving. She ground her soaked panties into his abs, and it was possibly the hottest thing he'd ever seen. Just the sight of her trying to keep her

drink from spilling as he tortured her made him almost come in the sheets.

“We have... we have things to do.” She struggled to breathe as she rocked against him, and while every part of his body wanted to grab those talented hips and shove them down until her dripping pussy sank onto his cock, he forced himself to watch her mesmerizing movements. She’d cried herself to sleep last night. He’d held her and stared at her puffy eyes, angry that her heartache was because of him. He’d been the one to disrupt her life, to steal her from her parents, to lock her away and force her to forget her fiancé. He was at fault, so this wasn’t about him. The sunshine bathed her in a goddess glow. His black tee shirt clothed her in sin, and her face was perfection. He wished he could video her so he could forever remember how magnificent she looked.

“I want to make you feel good, little witch.” He twisted her nipples, and she yelped with pleasure. He knew they would be swollen and red when he was done, and that image made him tug harder. “Last night was a mess, so let me make it up to you,” he groaned. “I want you to start Halloween off right. Don’t you want that?”

“Yes, sir.” She gripped her mug so hard that he thought she might break it, and his abs were dripping with her bliss. He felt a god with his hands on her body.

“Don’t you want to come?” he growled as his thumbs rubbed over her pebbled peaks until she was panting.

“Yes, sir.”

“Then let me hear you scream.”

Belladonna did not disappoint. Her hips moved faster as she leaned into his palms. She ground her clit against his abs, and as he pinched the swollen buds hard, she gave him her voice. She threw her head back without restraint and came so magnificently



he thought he might pass out at the sight. She moved so well on top of him; he was almost nervous to fuck her. Being inside her would irrevocably change him, altering him to his core, and he was afraid to let a woman—a witch, no less—have that level of power over him. It would be absolute and consuming. If he slipped inside her, she would own him. For the rest of his life, he would belong to Belladonna.

“Hmmm, and here I thought I was waking you up with a treat,” Belladonna said wistfully as she crashed from her entire body high. “I made this coffee for you. I figured it was time I let you try it, but your surprise was much nicer.”

“You made this for me?” Vlad reluctantly pulled his hands from his wife’s breasts and sat up, shifting until he leaned against the headboard. He dragged her forward until they sat chest to chest, and he sucked in a pained breath. He was an idiot, but he wanted her close, even if it meant her dripping wet core landed on his rock-hard length. He’d slipped out of the top of his boxers, and the lacy fabric of her underwear was now all that prevented him from slipping inside her. “You’re finally going to let me try your famous pumpkin spice?”

“It might be a little cold, but it’ll taste just as good.” She handed it to him, wiggling her hips mischievously .

“Stop.” Vlad’s firm voice froze her in place, and she looked at him with confusion. “Don’t get me wrong, little witch. It’s taking all my self-control not to rip that lace you call underwear off and show you what it really means to be fucked by a vampire, but this isn’t about me. I want to give you a good day since last night was so shitty.”

“It’s why I made you a latte,” she said, tracing the artistic black tattoos on his chest with delicate fingers. “I’m determined to have a great day, and I...”

“What?” Vlad urged.

“I want you to spend it with me,” she blurted. “I would like to spend Halloween with you, Vlad. From the pumpkin-spiced lattes to the movie marathons to the trick-or-treaters.”

“You want to spend the day with me?” Vlad looked at her with shock etched into his features. He knew his young wife was attracted to him, and he would accept any attention she gifted him, but this? It sounded like she enjoyed being around him, and he had to force his face not to overreact.

“Yes... You’re my husband,” she said. “For better or worse, you and I will live for eternity together, but I don’t want centuries of hate. Vampires and witches have waged war for thousands of years, and honestly, I don’t want to fight a battle that has nothing to do with me. Someone hundreds of years ago declared war, and now I have to despise vampires? I’m not even thirty yet, and the idea that I’ll inherit the coven and have to oppose you for the rest of my immortal life sounds fucking exhausting. Maybe I’m too young and too naïve. Maybe I don’t understand the truth about why the violence started, but I prefer to be married to a man I like and not one I’m expected to annihilate.”

“You are young, but you aren’t naïve.” Vlad brushed her hair back from her face as he sat in awe of her. “No one has ever spoken so many mature and sensible things in the same breath. You’re going to be an amazing coven leader, and what’s more, I believe you’ll make an even better wife. So, Hell forgive me if any of my men hear the angel of death saying this, but it would honor me to spend Halloween with you.”

Belladonna smiled, moving toward him so fast that he didn’t understand what she was doing until their lips collided. She kissed him, and even though it was a quick kiss, it was his favorite one they’d shared.

“Now try the coffee.” She grinned against his mouth. “If I could use magic, I would warm it up, but room temperature will have to do.”

“I don’t need it hot. I’m just glad you brought it to me, but I have one request while I drink.”

“Okay?”

“Show me your nipples. I want to see how red and swollen they are since you enjoyed me being rough.”

Belladonna blushed four shades of crimson, but she leaned back and grabbed the hem of his shirt. She slowly dragged it over her breasts, revealing the peaked and abused buds, and Vlad groaned.

“You are perfect,” he said as he lifted the coffee to his lips.

“I know,” she teased, holding the fabric just high enough for him to see her, and he took a sip as his eyes worshipped her.

“Holy shit, so is this.” He glanced at the mug before looking back at her.

“I know.”

“And you really let all my guards try this before me?” He took a big gulp, eyes never leaving her beauty.

“Don’t get used to it, husband. I’m being nice because it’s Halloween.”

“Little witch.” Vlad shook his head as he finished the coffee. “You are going to be the reason a lot of heads roll.”

“A cat?” Vlad chuckled, and Belladonna spun for him with an exaggerated flare.

“Cats keep showing up, so I figured it would be the perfect costume,” she said, adjusting the ears protruding from her curled hair. She’d attached a tail to the back of her black dress and applied cat-like makeup to her face that was both elegant and absolutely adorable. Judging by her husband’s expression, he agreed.

“I got you a costume too,” she said, enjoying how the idea made him nervous. She’d promised him a sexy outfit, but she could tell he wouldn’t believe it until he saw it.

After her unexpected morning, they’d showered, cooked breakfast, and watched movies together. Then she’d insisted they make homemade treats for the trick-or-treaters, which Vlad pretended not to like, but she saw through his act. She ate too much. He tripped on too many cats, and she even practiced some spells, showing him which ones she would normally cast on Halloween. His reaction had been odd, though. On one hand, he seemed to enjoy the way her fingers contorted with expert skill, but he also seemed too guilty to allow himself the freedom to completely relax. She didn’t want to bring it up and spoil their fun, but the entire afternoon, she wondered if he was upset that he was making a witch live in a home without magic.

“You can dress up,” he said, “but I’m good.”

“What? You don’t want to dress up like the mouse that my cat brutally kills?” She wagged her eyebrows at his scowl. “You’re going to ruin the couple's costume.”

“A mouse?” His voice was dangerously low as he stepped forward, gripping her throat as he forced her to look up at him. “I’ll make as many caramel apples as you like, but I’m no fucking mouse. Do I need to bend you over the counter and remind you of that?”

“If I’d known that was an option, I would’ve actually purchased a mouse costume,” she shot back, stepping closer to him until their chests touched. His tattooed hand around her throat filled her with an unholy desire, and she wasn’t sure if it was

Halloween or this man, but her magic was champing at the bit. It threatened to explode from her skin, wards or not, and if she didn't break their contact, she would let Vlad take whatever he desired from her.

"I just got you ears, Mr. Grumpy Cat," she said, pushing a pair of black ears onto his head. "You and Fang can be grumps together."

"Stop calling me a grump." He slammed his mouth against hers, and she wrapped her arms around his neck. They'd kissed more today than they had their entire relationship, and the more they touched, the stronger her magic burned. She'd entered this marriage expecting to hate him for the rest of her life, but now? Now she worried she might kill for him. Might defend him against all others. Might lo.... No, she couldn't admit that because, as kind as he'd been, Vlad was the angel of death. He was destruction and violence and bloodshed. She was afraid a man so steeped in carnage could never love, and if she fell for him, his inability to reciprocate would destroy her.

"The ears look good on you." She stepped away from the kiss, suddenly upset, and she could tell he noticed her change in demeanor. Their day had been perfect, and she wished this feeling could be permanent. The truth shocked her, but it was there all the same. She wanted an actual marriage with Vlad. Not just the sex. Not just the teasing. She wanted him. Every inch. Every emotion. Every day and night and moment in between. She wanted her husband to love her.

The doorbell rang, interrupting her sudden longing, and she plastered on an enthusiastic smile. "What do you say?" She took his hand. "You ready for trick-or-treaters?"

Belladonna and the security team had constructed two safe trick-or-treating posts for the neighbors, all of whom were shocked that the mansion had opened its gates for the first time in decades. One door led to a cozy station, meant for small children or

people who scared easily. It was all pumpkins and cats and fluttering fall leaves, and she wished she could access her magic so she could add a special charm to the décor. Kids and parents alike loved it and her homemade treats, vowing to return next year if this is what the house offered, and Belladonna secretly loved the idea of being here a year later.

Vlad manned the second station, and she could tell by how hard he tried not to smile that he was having a blast. His door led to the haunted house option, and the vampires were doing an excellent job of scaring the shit out of the older teens and thrill seekers. Word of the amazing old mansion spread throughout the neighborhood, and kids would leave her station only to loop back to be terrified by Vlad. Belladonna watched her husband enjoy himself with a dangerous emotion. He'd been wary of her celebrations, but as he chased a teenage boy who was screaming like he was dying—after receiving a massive number of treats—Belladonna had the urge to throw caution to the wind and admit the truth. This man who waited for her consent, who bought her everything she wanted, who defended her, teased her, humored her cats and her Halloween extravagance and her desire to invite her parents over for dinner. He was a good man beneath the terror. Or at least he was her good man .

“I think that kid screamed the loudest yet.” Vlad joined her during a lull in trick-or-treaters. “It’s fun to show my fangs without worrying. They all assume I have cool prosthetics.”

“Just imagine how amazing it would be if I could cast a spell on the décor,” Belladonna said as she popped chocolate into her mouth.

“I was thinking... and don’t get too excited because this is just an idea,” Vlad said, “but I’m considering?—”

“Sir?” A guard rushed into the foyer, interrupting him.

“Where’s Bartholomew?” Vlad asked, scanning the area as if suddenly realizing his right-hand man was missing.

“There was an issue, and he left to handle it,” the vampire answered.

“An issue? Why wasn’t I made aware of it?”

“Bartholomew said not to interrupt you, but something’s wrong,” the vampire said. “He’s missing.”

“Missing?” Belladonna asked.

“We lost contact with him, and we’ve received news of a massive gathering on the outskirts of our territory,” the guard said. “Something is going down, sir. We need to go.”

“Shit.” Vlad looked down at her.

“Sir, we need to go now,” the vampire urged. “Reports of unprecedented unrest and bloodshed are pouring in. Vampires are dying.”

“Go.” Belladonna gripped his arm to convey her understanding. “Go take care of what you need to.”

“I won’t be gone long.” He captured her face in his broad palms and kissed her before racing from the room, leaving Belladonna with an acrid taste in her mouth and a rock in her stomach. She didn’t know why, but something in her gut whispered that Vlad wouldn’t be back. That she’d watched the man she was falling in love with walk out of her life for the last time.

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:38 am*

Vlad and his men raced across town, anxiety thick in their midst. Vlad's body pulsed with adrenaline as concern consumed his brain. All this violence and unrest, yet he hadn't the faintest clue what was causing it, and as he readied to plunge headlong into the fray, his mind turned to his wife. Was she making him weak? Was his obsession with her blinding him? For decades, he'd ruled with an iron fist and brutal laws, yet suddenly his reign was threatened. Had he lost his edge? Was his sudden desire for peace a death sentence? Was the witch consuming both his house and soul destroying him?

Only Belladonna wasn't an obsession. She wasn't a weakness. He'd felt it the moment he first saw her at the church, and it had become crystal clear when he left her with a kiss barely an hour ago. Belladonna was his mate.

"Where is everyone?" Vlad asked as their cars skidded to a stop. He launched out of the vehicle, expecting to plunge headlong into battle, but there was... nothing. No fighting, no vampires, no blood. There wasn't even a decent streetlamp present.

"Where the hell are we?" He whirled on the guards who'd escorted him to this supposed battlefield. "What's going on?"

"I'm sorry, sir," the vampire from earlier said, cowering before Vlad's intimidating height. "We had no choice."

"No choice?" Vlad stormed for him, grabbing him harshly by the throat. "I suggest you start talking, otherwise I'll begin at your ankles and peel your skin off your body inch by inch while you watch."



“It’s for your own good!” The vampire could barely speak as Vlad’s fist crushed his vocal cords. “We had to! We’re doing this for you.”

“What are you doing for me?”

“Please, sir,” the vampire said. “Just stay here. It’s for your own good.”

“What’s for my own good?” Vlad’s body went still with icy fear. He didn’t like this. Something was wrong, but he couldn’t put his finger on it. “Answer me!”

“Please don’t make me,” the vampire begged as the other guards closed in around them, boxing him in on all sides. “We had no choice. This is how it must be, but it’s for the best.”

“You have five seconds before I break your neck,” Vlad growled.

“We had to get you out of the mansion, but you’ll thank us in the end.”

Vlad stilled. Even his breathing stopped as his body became still as stone. He’d been wary about this report of unrest, but the vampire’s words about getting him out of his house instilled fresh fear inside him. Bartholomew was missing. The older guards he normally trusted were absent in favor of these younger vampires. He’s been so consumed by the rumor of bloodshed that he hadn’t seen the wrongness of the situation until it was too late.

Vlad leaned forward, increasing the pressure on the vampire’s throat. The guards closed in around him, but he didn’t see their movements. He didn’t register that he was outnumbered. He couldn’t process anything but that one horrible realization.

“Where is my wife?”

Belladonna sipped a hot apple cider as she examined the remaining treats on the counter. Between her homemade goods, the expert décor, and the production of their house, the neighborhood families were already salivating over what she might do next year. Normally the high praise, the thrill of the trick-or-treaters, the increased magic Halloween brought her, and the sweetness of the left-over snacks left her blissfully hazy, but instead, she kept watching the clock. Vlad still hadn't returned. She hadn't heard from him or Bartholomew, and as she finished her drink surrounded by her cats, she contemplated calling her mother. With all this unrest, maybe Rowena's contacts could offer some insights.

Ding-Dong.

The doorbell interrupted her thoughts, and she glanced up at the clock. It was a little late for trick-or-treaters, but her Halloween display had been a smash hit. Perhaps some adults were coming back to see the scary side after putting their children to bed, or maybe it was older teens choosing to gather candy rather than get into trouble. Either way, she was thankful for the distraction.

"Happy Hallo—" Her smile froze when she saw the horde of vampires waiting at the door for her. She didn't recognize a single face in the crowd, and the wicked expressions painted on their youthful faces electrocuted her heart with pure fear.

Belladonna's fingers instinctively curled, readying to cast a protection spell on the front entrance, but her magic slammed against the wards, unable to escape her body. Panic consumed her at the realization that she was powerless in this home, and she grabbed the door, trying to slam it shut in the intruders' faces. She just needed to get the guards. Vlad's men would protect her.

"No, no, witch." The frontmost vampire caught the door, and his strength ripped it free of her grasp. "We're here to trick-or-treat... actually, more like we're here to trick while you're the treat."

Belladonna spun around, gracefully leaped out of her heels, and raced down the hallway. “Help!” she shouted, desperately searching for the guards. They had been here just seconds ago. “Help me, please!”

Two older vampires lunged out of the kitchen, their mouths stuffed with leftover treats, and when the taller one registered the horde of young vampires chasing her, he seized her by the arm and yanked her behind them.

“We have a breach on the main floor,” he shouted into his radio, and then he shoved her deeper into the mansion as the intruders gained on them. “Get upstairs and lock yourself in Vlad’s room. We’ll hold them off.”

“No!” Belladonna shrieked. “They’ll kill you. Come with me.”

“And Vlad will kill us if we let anything happen to you. Now run!”

The older vampires whirled around and bared their fangs, readying for the fight, and Belladonna darted down a side hallway, aiming for the back staircase. Tears pricked her eyes, but she didn’t slow. Without her magic, she couldn’t help the guards. Her only hope was to reach her husband’s laptop and call her mother. Rowena would save her.

“Belladonna, here!” another guard called, beckoning her to follow him, and she bolted toward the man. “What’s going on?”

“A group of hostile vampires broke in,” she gasped, thankful she’d found help. “I need to get upstairs.”

“Okay, this way.” He seized her arm and led her through the house. They arrived at the back stairwell undetected, and together they scrambled up the steps. They made it to the top in record time, and Belladonna raced into Vlad’s personal office. Her

fingers hit the keyboard, waking the screen up, and she clicked on the secure phone app when a prick stung her neck.

“What the...?” She stumbled backward, grabbing her stinging skin, and she stared at the vampire with horrified understanding. He smirked at her, all traces of the concerned guard gone as he strode for her with malicious intent.

“What are you doing?” Belladonna slurred as the drug raced through her bloodstream. Panic pulsed in her chest at the familiar feeling. It was the same narcotic from the club. Wards were currently flowing through her veins, ensuring she wouldn’t be able to perform magic, and judging by the intensity, the vampires had upped the dosage. “Vlad will kill you for this.”

“Vlad’s obsession with your tight young body has blinded him,” the vampire snarled. “He’s ruining our legacy. It was bad enough that he signed a peace treaty with the coven, but then marrying you and bringing you into this home? No witch has set foot inside this fortress in thousands of years, and suddenly he marries you. Not only are you running around free to do whatever the fuck you want, but he welcomed your mother onto the property. Vlad is no longer capable of leading us.” He grabbed her by the waist and hoisted her over his shoulder. Belladonna tried to fight him, but her limbs refused to obey. Her vision blurred, and her magic suffocated within her.

“My mom will kill you for this,” she could barely speak as he carried her downstairs to the waiting horde, and although her vision was blurry, she didn’t need clear sight to recognize blood on the tile. These intruders had killed the older vampires, and the image of such powerful creatures dead on the floor made her cry. If two ancient vampires weren’t strong enough to fight, she had no hope of surviving the night.

“No, she won’t,” the traitor said as he carried her out the door. “But she will die for you.”

But Belladonna didn't hear him. She'd passed out.

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:38 am*

Belladonna's eyes felt like they'd been glued shut. Her head throbbed, and her magic was suffocating within her soul. Every cell in her body ached, and she didn't know how long she'd been unconscious. She didn't know where she was or if Vlad was alive. All she knew was she was chained to a chair with a rough burlap sack over her head. It seemed the vampires learned from their mistakes at the club. They'd gotten rid of her husband first and upped the drug's dosage, leaving her alone and on the verge of death.

The sound of footsteps grew closer, and a hand ripped the bag off her head. The sudden light was painful, but her fear was worse. Belladonna understood the gravity of her situation. She wasn't walking away from this.

She blinked her sluggish eyes, forcing herself to focus. Panic wouldn't help her, and while she realized this was her end, she would not exit this life easily. As Rowena's heir, she'd survived harsh training, and while this might be her death, she would greet it with a bravery they would talk about for generations to come.

"Glad to see you finally joined us," a familiar voice said, and Belladonna froze, horror washing over her.

"Gabriel?" she croaked. "What are you doing?" She scanned her surroundings. The room was too dark for her to make out where she was, but Gabriel and the horde of vampires surrounding her were painfully clear. "What's going on?"

Her ex ignored her as he dragged a folding chair across the floor to sit before her.

"Gabriel, is this about your dad?" she pushed, her ex-fiancé's presence changing

everything. “Because there’s nothing else to say. I cared for you, but I had no choice but to marry your father. Then when I begged you to help me escape, you spat in my face. So why are you still punishing me? Why are you so angry when I know you can scent it on me? You know I’m not your mate. I never was, and whether or not Vlad loves me in return, it doesn’t change the fact that I’m his, and not just legally. I’m his mate, and when other men smell a man’s true partner, they instantly lose feelings for her, so I don’t understand why you?—”

“Oh my god, you really thought I was in love with you?” Gabriel’s cruel tone felt as if he’d ripped a layer of skin off her. “Wow, you’re naïve. Can you guys believe this?” He twisted toward the vampires guarding them. “She really thought I loved a witch?”

The vampires laughed, mocking her with their overdone theatrics, and while she wanted to withdraw from the taunts, she forced herself to sit unaffected.

“I don’t understand why everyone talks about Rowena’s heir as if she’s a goddess reincarnated because you’re a fool. I never loved you. It was all an act, and you fell for it. I had you eating out of my hand, and you were so in love that you were ready to throw away centuries of tradition and family dignity for sweet words and a cheap proposal.”

“They were more than sweet words to me,” Belladonna spat. “And maybe instead of becoming our parents and continuing a war that began in a different era by people who no longer exist, I wanted to further the peace my mother started and lead by example.”

“You’re pathetic.”

“Then why date me? Why propose, Gabriel? If I’m so disgusting to you, why did you approach me at that bar?”

“Because I want war.”

Belladonna sat back in her chair and pinched her eyebrows at her ex. “War? I... I don’t understand.”

“My father signed that disgrace of a peace treaty with your mother, and any act of violence against the witches would violate the agreement. It might lead to war, but it would be a weak attempt. Too many vampires have grown complacent in this peace. If I were to attack, most would view me as the villain and call for my head instead of following our true purpose,” Gabriel said, leaning forward with anticipation. “No, if I want war, I need a cause every vampire can rally behind... like the death of a beloved wife.”

Belladonna recoiled, his words like a punch to the gut. How had she been so blind? How had she been so stupid to believe him? She’d been ready to marry this madman, but then another thought slipped into her brain. She’d tried not to love Vlad. Tried to hate him for his actions at the church, but she could no longer lie to herself. She loved her husband. He was her mate, her true partner, and her connection to Gabriel had brought him into her life. She hadn’t been a fool. It had been fate drawing soulmates together in the only way it saw how .

“You’ll be dead in a few minutes, so I suppose I can tell you my plans,” Gabriel said, his chest puffed up like a damned peacock. “Do you recognize where we are?” He waited for her to answer, and when she shook her head, he gestured behind him. The vampires lit the candles, and the room came into brilliant view, the sight freezing her heart.

“We’re in the Coven’s sacred gathering place,” Gabriel said. “I figured out where it was when I was dating you, and we were able to get past the protection spell tonight because of your DNA. When I heard Rowena kept her special daughter hidden, I made it my mission to learn everything I could about you. I used my father’s deep



pockets to loosen lips, and when I finally approached you, I was a man tailored specifically to your preferences. I molded myself into a boyfriend you would date, and you played right into my plan. I did whatever it took to ensure you fell in love and then married me, and now that it's Halloween, I'm going to kill you."

"My mother will destroy you for this," Belladonna growled. "And the vampires who enjoy this peace will never rally to your cause."

"I know," Gabriel said, completely unbothered. "It's why I'm not killing you... well, I am, but the world won't see it that way. It's why we're here, in your coven's sacred space. I'm going to kill you and frame your murder on the fanatic witches. I'll spread their manifesto that claims you're a traitor for marrying a vampire. So, as you can see, your marriage to my father makes this plan work even better. Imagine how the vampires will rally to their leader's cause when he learns the witches he tried so hard to make peace with slaughtered his young wife."

"You'll never get away with this."

"You actually did me a favor by marrying dear ole dad. Seems like you've got him under your spell, and he'll be all too eager to declare war when he sees what I've done to your body. He'll push the vampires to annihilate the witches, and then Halloween will finally be ours. Rowena loves you, and your death will cripple her, making her incapable of leading her army. A few cheesy dates and a brutal murder, and you've destroyed a race that has lasted centuries."

"You're wrong about my mother," Belladonna said. "She's stronger than you give her credit for. She won't crumble."

"She'll believe her own people tortured and killed her only child," Gabriel said. "The bitch will cave."

Belladonna swallowed her tears, forcing herself to remain stoic in the face of unspeakable agony. Her heart broke for her mother, knowing that tomorrow's dawn would destroy her life. Her heart shattered for the husband she'd fallen in love with. She regretted she would die without telling him that despite his poor behavior in the beginning, he became the husband she always dreamed of. A man who respected her boundaries, who never tried to make her feel small or young or ridiculous. He let her dress how she liked, act how she pleased, speak how she chose. He made sure to always stock her favorite things, never once forbade her from keeping yet another cat, and even invited his sworn enemy into his home for dinner at her request. Vlad was a good man hiding within the skin of the devil, and she hated that she never got to tell him he was the love of her life.

"I understand my fate," she said, her voice shaking despite her resolve. "I cannot stop you, nor can I change your mind, but know this, Gabriel. You will never be your father. You want to rule. You want power, but you'll never have it. Not like him because you are too blinded by prejudice to realize that Vlad's peace has been the greatest reign our races have seen. You're nothing compared to him. I thought I loved you, but you were merely my path to finding Vlad, and I love him. He's my true mate, and I hope you live forever knowing that you were the one who killed your father's soulmate. You should be ashamed of your?—"

She gagged, choking on her words as an enraged Gabriel lunged for her and closed his fingers around her throat.

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:38 am*

Vlad ripped the vampire's spine from his body and dropped the vertebrae onto the pavement with a wet thud. The vampires tasked with keeping him from his wife had surrounded him, assuming because he was outnumbered, they could contain him, but they learned the painful way what it meant to defy the angel of death. They screamed Belladonna's whereabouts in the end, and Vlad raced into witch territory, arriving at the coven's sacred grounds with record speed. A small army was stationed outside to protect the holy space, but the skull on his hand craved blood. Its thirst had not yet been quenched, and Vlad slaughtered every last guard, putting his name to the test.

He'd called Rowena on his drive over. Normally begging her for help would humiliate him, but he felt no embarrassment as he pleaded with the witch. At first, the woman assumed it was a Halloween prank, but when she heard the fear in his voice, she promised him the entire coven's aid. Only it seemed he'd beaten the witches there, and something told him he shouldn't wait for their support. He didn't know who had stolen his wife, but the dread festering in his gut urged him to enter alone. So, he obeyed, fearing that if he waited for Rowena, Belladonna would pay the price.

Vlad slipped through the darkness, becoming one with the shadows, and voices reached his ears. He angled toward the sound, and both relief and panic overwhelmed him as he recognized the feminine voice. Belladonna was alive, but the despair in her tone warned she was running out of time.

Vlad picked up his pace, his immense size invisible as he melded with the night, and as he rounded a corner, a candlelit room came into view. Vampires obscured his wife from his sight, but her terror echoed off the cavernous walls.

"You should be ashamed of your—" she gagged as someone cut her off, and Vlad

knew what had caused that sound. He'd inflicted it hundreds of times, and his vision went black with rage. Not his wife. Never his wife.

Vlad surged forward, breaking the necks of two vampires with a single blow. He then ripped out the heart of a third, and with a roar of vengeance, he lunged for the man choking Belladonna.

"I won't kill you quickly," he roared as he seized the vampire. "You will suffer for putting your hands on my wife." Vlad twisted the vampire around, but the eyes that greeted him felt like a punch to the face. He stumbled backward, his voice strangled in his throat, and he dropped the man as if he were a burning flame.

"Gabriel?" He couldn't breathe. He couldn't feel. His son. His only son. The boy he loved yet failed so many times stood before him, his handprint on his beautiful wife's throat. "What..." Vlad choked on his own breath. "What are you doing?" He glanced at Belladonna, her small body chained to the chair, and his rage burned white hot. He couldn't kill his son. He refused to, but Gabriel had put his hands on his wife, the woman he would sell his soul for .

"What you should have," Gabriel snarled. "Seize him."

"Vlad! Look out!" Belladonna warned, but he couldn't focus on anything except the shock of his only child readying to murder his soulmate.

"Vlad!" Belladonna screamed again, waking him from his trance, but it was too late. Vampires descended upon him, and unlike the guards he'd interrogated earlier, these men were prepared. They pinned him on his knees, driving stakes into his limbs to immobilize him. It wouldn't kill him, but the pain was overwhelming, and he spat blood onto the ground.

"Vlad!" Belladonna sobbed. "Please stop! You're killing him."

“My father has survived worse,” Gabriel said. “You won’t though.”

“You are my son, and I love you, but if you touch her,” Vlad growled as he pulled his broken and bleeding body over the floor. The vampires watched him struggle, but before he could reach her, a vampire kicked him in the gut, shoving him across the room.

“Stop!” Belladonna cried. “Please, stop.”

“Let her go!” Vlad roared as he forced himself to his hands and knees. “You can have me instead.”

“You would die in her place?” Gabriel asked, his harsh features contorting in disgust.

“She is my mate.” Vlad met her gaze, his heart breaking at the tears streaming down her face. “I love her. Do you hear me, little witch? I love you.”

“I love?—”

“Shut up!” Gabriel cut her off, but Vlad’s chest swelled despite the pain. She didn’t need to finish the sentence. He knew. He felt it. His wife loved him, and he would die before he let them take her from him.

“What happened to you?” Gabriel asked. “You were the most fearsome vampire known to history, but now you’ve lost your dignity to a witch.”

“No, son. I haven’t lost my dignity. I’ve done what no other vampire was brave enough to do. I learned to love the enemy and embrace peace. There’s enough power to go around. The witches aren’t our enemies. Hatred is.”

“Someone shut him up,” Gabriel said. “It’s pathetic. To think I worshipped you as a

boy.” He shook his head. “Belladonna will die, and I’ll have my war... perhaps I’ll seize your reign as well. You’re too weak to lead our people. It’s time for a regime change.”

Vlad launched to his feet despite the pain and leaped for his wife. The vampires flinched at his speed, at his ability to move with so many stakes anchored to his flesh, but he couldn’t let them touch her. He would use his own body as a shield if it meant she survived long enough for Rowena to arrive. It didn’t matter if he died. She just had to hold out until her mother’s army saved her.

Vlad slammed into Belladonna’s seated form, capturing her in his embrace. “I got you, little witch. Your mother is coming for you.”

“Vlad, no.” Her voice panicked as he clung to her.

“It’s okay,” he said. “I’ve lived a long life.”

“Please don’t leave me,” Belladonna sobbed as the stakes dug into his flesh. “I love you, Vlad, but we haven’t had enough time together. Don’t make me live forever without you.”

“But you will live forever, and that’s what matters.” Vlad spat blood as the vampires beat his body, yet he did not yield. They could not have her. “Kiss me, wife. Kiss me as I leave this world.”

“No. You’re not dying.”

“Little witch,” he slurred, his vision blurring. “I waited my whole life for you. At least I’ll die holding you. Your mother will be here soon. Tell her I loved you and make her swear to uphold the peace. Tell her you did the impossible. You made me love a witch.”

“And I love a vampire.” Belladonna’s lips crashed down on his, his blood filling her mouth, but she didn’t pull away. She kissed him fiercely, delivering him to death on the wings of an angel. Vlad could barely keep his eyes open, but he put his soul into his last kiss with his wife. He often thought he would die in battle, but dying as the woman he loved pressed her lips against his was far better. He didn’t want to release her mouth until he breathed his final breath, but then pain ripped through his back.

He roared as the killing blow struck true, but as his world faded, a shockwave of power exploded throughout the room. It was unlike any magic he’d ever experienced, and he wondered if he had died and gone to the afterlife because through hazy vision, he watched Belladonna scream so loud that heaven and earth broke apart.

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:38 am*

The moment Vlad's blood touched her tongue, Belladonna's magic woke. It stirred within her veins like a dragon waking from its slumber. Her fingers twitched. Her skin burned, and the wards inside her shattered. Vlad screamed in agony as his own son ordered his death, but Belladonna would not let him die. She would not let him leave her. How often had she practiced casting spells within a warded mansion? How often had she brewed potions in a kitchen that should've prevented her magic? There was a reason Rowena kept her hidden. A reason she was the coven's heir, and after months of honing her skills in a magic-less house, her body exploded. She'd trained for this, had grown stronger for this, and she roared her rage.

A shockwave emanated from her chest, throwing the attacking vampires onto their backs. With an expert twist of her fingers, she cast a spell, and her chains shattered, collapsing to the floor in broken shards. Belladonna launched to her feet, arms outstretched as she absorbed the magic of Halloween night, absorbed the energy of her true love's blood. Vampires drank from their mates to strengthen their bond, but because no witch had ever loved a bloodsucker, they didn't understand the power of blood sharing. But she did. She'd sealed their marriage with that single taste, and Vlad's strength now flowed through her.

Belladonna launched into the air, rising high above the shocked vampires as her hands contorted. Spell after powerful spell, she cast magic at her enemy, and even though she was outnumbered, they were no match for her. The world hadn't felt power like hers in centuries. Power born of love and not war. Power that not even wards could contain.

"Surrender, or I will flay the flesh from your bones," she growled, her voice deep and otherworldly, as if every witch who'd come before her, and who would come after



her, spoke through her words.

“Never!” Gabriel shouted. “Kill her!”

The vampires rushed forward, and with a flash of her eyes, her fingers twisted in a spell. Her attackers screamed in agony as magic peeled their flesh and muscles from their bones, and when only their skeletons remained, Belladonna lowered her hovering body to the ground.

“You see what I can do,” she boomed as she cast a healing spell over her husband’s collapsed form. “Surrender, and I will spare you. Your father doesn’t want your death.”

“Never!” Gabriel snarled. “I will never bow to a witch.” He turned to his remaining army. “What are you waiting for? Kill her!”

The vampires looked from Gabriel to Belladonna, and then, with hesitant movements, they fell to their knees among the bones of their fallen brethren. They understood defying the witch was a death sentence, and for a silent moment, no one moved until a massive vampire shifted to meet her gaze .

“We surrender,” he whispered. “I only ask that you have mercy on my family. I understand my life is forfeit, but I beg you to please spare my children.”

“You will pay for your actions here tonight,” Belladonna roared, casting a spell to chain the vampires on their knees. “You’ll pay for your crimes against my husband, but not with your lives.” Her voice softened as the army stared at her with open mouths and wide eyes. “My mother knew what I was. She prepared me for this day, but I stand before you with my full power realized to tell you I don’t intend to use my magic for war. I don’t wish to destroy the vampires because I love one, and I believe Halloween is big enough for all of us. I’ll leave your punishment to Vlad and my

mother's discretion since they're still our leaders. But I won't demand your deaths. If we're going to achieve true peace, the fighting has to end, and I choose to stop it here and now."

The vampires bowed in respect, but Gabriel's eyes flashed with murder. Without warning, he leaped for her. Belladonna's fingers flinched, her magic spread too thin as she contained the army on their knees and healed her husband. His predatory nature was too fast for her to cast a protection spell, but just before the tip of his sharpened stake dug into her heart, a massive frame lunged in front of her.

Vlad grunted as the weapon plunged into his ribs, his body crashing into hers as he stumbled. Belladonna knew his incredible height meant the stake was aimed too low. Her heart barely reached his ribcage, but she was blind to logic as the man she loved was skewered by his own son. The only reason Gabriel had the upper hand was because Vlad couldn't kill his only child, but she didn't blame him. No matter her sins, Rowena could never harm her, and her husband was no different. His love for his child stayed his hand, but his devotion to her surpassed his own need to survive. He willingly took her place to save her, but she wouldn't let him sacrifice himself on her behalf. Not when her life was meaningless without him, so she raised her arms, praying Vlad's strength would hold out long enough for her to draw from their bond.

Gabriel shrieked, his body flying backward to hover in the air, and Belladonna stared up at his flailing form in shock. She hadn't completed the spell. Her fingers were still casting. Her incomplete magic hadn't done this, but then her power connected with a presence that filled her with warm relief.

"Not my daughter!" Rowena bellowed as she, Magnus, and the coven leaders swooped into the sacred space.

"Mom!" Belladonna sobbed as Rowena's twisting fingers shot a bolt of magic at Vlad. His chest healed instantly, and Rowena kept Gabriel suspended as she crossed

the floor of kneeling vampires.

“Thank you for calling me,” she said, surveying Vlad’s blood-soaked body. Her magic had restored his wounded flesh, but his eviscerated suit spoke of his torture. “And thank you for protecting my daughter.”

“I will always protect her,” Vlad said. “I love her.”

And then Rowena did something that was spoken about with reverence for generations. She hugged Vlad. A deep, thankful hug, and then together, they pulled Belladonna between them, showing both the vampires and the witches just how powerful Belladonna’s desire for peace was.

The hours that followed were long and fraught with tension since Vlad’s love for his son didn’t undo the fact that the vampire had tried to kill both him and his wife. The witches called for Gabriel’s head, but Belladonna insisted no more blood be shed. She knew Vlad would be forever changed if his son were executed, so she begged her mother to find another way. By the time the darkness waned, Rowena and Vlad had settled on a course of action. A faction of peaceful vampires lived in Europe as monks. They were sworn to abstinence and charity, consuming only enough blood to survive. It was a pious yet poor existence. The sect refused to live like the powerful creatures they were in favor of helping their communities, and they would oversee Gabriel’s care for the foreseeable future. The army of vampires he’d commanded was also sentenced to decades among the monks, and Belladonna hoped for her husband’s sake that the coming years of self-sacrifice would teach Gabriel to forgive his father and forget his need for war. She wanted peace, especially for the man who’d unexpectedly captured her heart.

As dawn approached, Bartholomew, Lucian, and an army of loyal vampires arrived to escort them back to the mansion. During Vlad’s years in Europe, his son had converted many of the younger vampires to his violent ways. They knew they stood

no chance against the ancients, so they'd devised a distraction to remove Bartholomew from Vlad's side. The man was distraught when he learned what had occurred in his absence, but Belladonna wouldn't accept his guilt. Horrors and deaths had transpired, but so had greatness. Her bond with Vlad combined with her constant training within a warded house made her the first witch to shatter a ward's barrier. She'd earned a new height of power and gained a devoted husband. She'd watch her mother hug the man she loved. Some good had come from the tragedy, and she hoped Gabriel and his father could eventually mend their obliterated relationship. Although she was thankful that he would be on another continent for the foreseeable future. After the fear he'd inflicted, she needed time before she could stand in the same room as him without panicking .

Belladonna and Vlad made it home just as the sun peaked over the horizon. Her explosion of power and the effort required to heal her husband's extensive wounds left her so exhausted that she could barely climb the stairs to their bedroom, and judging by the way Vlad tripped twice, he'd lost too much blood. It was all they could do to survive their shower without collapsing, and she wasn't even sure they scrubbed all the blood from Vlad's skin. All she knew was if they didn't get into bed soon, they would end up sleeping on the bathroom tiles.

Vlad didn't bother with a towel or a change of clothes as he collapsed on the mattress naked and wet, but Belladonna slipped one of his soft shirts over her head before she climbed in behind him and ceased to exist.

Belladonna woke in the same position she'd passed out in, her spine stiff from the awkward angle. Vlad still lay on his stomach, sprawled sideways across the mattress, and she lay curled up against him, his ribs as her pillow. She shifted to release the pressure on her neck, and with lazy fingers, she traced the tattoos on her husband's back. He was the most beautiful form of art she'd ever seen, the detailed ink complimenting his powerful muscles and smooth skin. The angel of death was a masterpiece.

“What time is it?” Vlad groaned, his deep voice rumbling through his ribs to vibrate her cheek.

“Almost midnight,” she answered, squinting at the clock. “We’ve been asleep for sixteen hours.”

“Shit.” Vlad rolled onto his back, shifting until his chest slipped under her chin. “It’s a good thing Bartholomew wasn’t injured. I’m going to need him to handle business for a bit. ”

“Have you ever been...” Belladonna hesitated. “Staked before?”

“Yes.” Vlad turned on the bedside lamp. “Not that many times, but I have. I’ve endured a lot of terrible things, but seeing you chained was the worst. I would rather burn alive than see that again.”

“Don’t say that.”

“It’s the truth.”

“But I don’t want to live without you.”

“And I can’t live without you.” Vlad grabbed her jaw and gently forced her to meet his gaze. “You are mine, little witch. My wife, my mate, my life. I’m not a good man. I love you, but do not mistake my gentleness with you as a sign of my charity. I’ll burn the world to ash before I let anyone take you from me. I would be careful who you spend your time with because if someone so much as looks at you with ill intent, I’ll rip their limbs from their body and watch them bleed out. You might be the death of hundreds of men over our centuries together because you’re mine, and I protect what’s mine.”

“I love you too.” Belladonna leaned forward until her lips brushed his. “So...” She kissed him slowly. “Fucking...” She kissed him again. “Much.”

“Say it again,” he whispered, sliding his fingers into her hair.

“I love you.”

“And I love you, wife.” Vlad deepened the kiss before lowering his head to the pillow. The light hit his face, and Belladonna finally saw his eyes. She froze at the sight before scrambling onto her hands and knees to trace his cheeks with concern.

“I thought I healed you,” she said, twisting her fingers to cast another spell. The wards no longer locked her power within her, and she felt her magic flowing through the air .

“You did.” Vlad grabbed her wrists, halting her magic. “I lost too much blood. I need to drink, that’s all. Once we eat, I’ll heal completely.”

“Oh, okay....” Belladonna trailed off, gathering her resolve before she continued. “Or you could drink from me.”

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Vlad pushed Belladonna off his chest and sat up, staring into her eyes as he held her an arm's length away. "This isn't like the last time I drank from you," he said. "That was merely a taste, but this? I could end up draining you because your blood is my drug of choice. You're so fucking sweet, so unbelievably delicious. I crave you constantly, and drinking from you when I'm starving isn't a smart idea. I love you for offering, and I want nothing more than to sink my fangs into that pretty throat, but I won't risk your life."

"But that's just it." Belladonna shifted closer to him, contorting her fingers in a spell, and vibrantly colored electricity sparked from her palm in a mesmerizing display. "The wards can no longer contain my magic. When you drink my blood, our connection grows, and when our bond is strong, so is my power. With how much magic I have pulsing through me, you could never drain me."

"Be careful, little witch," Vlad warned, his gaze turning predatory. "What you're asking for is dangerous. I will never purposely harm you, but my craving for you, combined with my hunger... you might see a terrifying side of me."

"It was just Halloween," Belladonna whispered conspiratorially. "What if I enjoy being scared? What if I want you to frighten me?"

Vlad seized her biceps and yanked her close as his predator emerged. "Are you sure you want this, wife? Are you one hundred percent certain, because if even a small part of you is hesitant, I can't?"

"I want you to drink from me," she confirmed.

“Do you promise to stop me if you change your mind?”

“I won’t change my mind.”

“Promise me anyway.”

“I swear it.”

“Good fucking girl.” Vlad grabbed her hips and yanked her into his lap, and with one swift motion, he gripped the collar of her shirt and ripped. The fabric tore in a long slit, falling off her shoulder to reveal her breast. Vlad’s eyes filled with lust as he stared down at her stiff pink bud, and then he lunged for her.

Belladonna gasped as his mouth latched onto her nipple, but it turned into a moan as he sucked it deep into his mouth. His tongue danced over the hard peak, and within seconds, she was writhing on his lap. Her breaths came fast as her body flooded with arousal, and Vlad released her aching peak with a wet pop.

“Your blood tastes sweeter when you’re aroused,” he growled against her breast. “I fucking love the way you taste, wife. Don’t worry. Because you’re my mate, this won’t hurt.”

Belladonna wasn’t sure what he meant until his fangs descended. She yelped as they grazed her skin, and then Vlad slipped his hands up her back to hold her firmly against his mouth. His fangs pierced her, and he growled as he began to drink. Belladonna hissed in surprise, but he was right. It wasn’t painful. It was pure bliss. His fangs on her breast were as arousing as his tongue on her nipples, and while it surprised her that he hadn’t bitten her neck, she was glad he hadn’t. She thought she might pass out from the intensity, though, and suddenly all she could focus on was how hard he was beneath her. His impressive body was completely bare, and all she wore was his ripped shirt. Nothing separated them as she started to writhe, sliding



over his impressive length as he drank, and with a wicked grin, she realized that if she ground against him, the head of his cock would slip inside her aching core. He was the biggest man she'd ever seen, thick and long and almost too much to handle, but she was destined for him. She knew she could take him.

She rocked forward, but as she moved, she caught sight of them in the mirror. They were sideways on the bed, their images unobstructed in the glass, and she fixated on her bare legs straddling his. On her exposed breast. On his fangs drinking her as his tattooed hand guided her hips. It was the single most arousing thing she'd ever seen, yet the reflection gave her pause. She stopped moving, and Vlad instantly registered her hesitation.

"Talk to me," he said, pulling back from her skin, and she stared at the bite mark on the swell of her breast with fascination. For a second, she forgot her nerves and focused on the idea of her body covered in his bite marks.

"Belladonna," Vlad's deep tone pulled her from her imagination.

"It's the mirror."

"You don't want to watch?" His eyes flicked to the glass, and he grinned at her through his reflection. "You look fucking beautiful riding me. Don't be shy. You are a magnificent sight to behold."

"I'm not shy," she said, grabbing his jaw and forcing him to meet her real gaze. "I've wanted to watch you fuck me in this mirror since my first night in this room, but I keep picturing the other women who slept here. I'm not mad that you had a life before me. You're much older than I am, so it's not jealousy... it's just I see them when I look at the glass. I know I'm special to you, that I'm different, but the mirror makes me feel weird."

“Every woman pales compared to you.” Vlad leaned forward and kissed her reverently. It was a kiss filled with respect and emotion, and Belladonna sank into his arms, basking in his love.

“I know,” she whispered against his mouth.

“But let me make myself very clear. I’ve never been married, nor have I ever drunk from a partner. You’re the first and only one to hold those honors, and I’ve never invited a woman into this bedroom.”

“You haven’t?” Belladonna’s eyebrows shot up.

“Not until you.” Vlad gripped her hips and rocked her slowly, making it impossible for her to focus. “This room is my sanctuary. The place I want to share with only my mate, so you, little witch, are the only woman I’ll fuck in this bed. When you look in that mirror, know it’s only ever been you. It will only ever be you.”

“Vlad...” Belladonna lost all inhibition and tangled her hands in her husband’s hair. She dragged his head back down to her breast, watching in the mirror as the vampire she loved sank his fangs into her. That same overwhelming bliss shot through her, and she slid against him until his cock pressed against her opening.

“Good girl,” Vlad growled against her skin. “Take me, wife. Take me deep.”

“You feel so good,” she gasped as she angled her hips and plunged down on him. Both of them moaned at the incredible sensation, and Belladonna paused at the sudden sting. Her husband was so big that he stretched her to her limits, but she loved the way he filled her to overflowing, and unable to resist, she began to ride him hard.

Pleasure coursed through every cell of her being, and the sight of their joined bodies in the mirror was too much to bear. His massive tattooed body held her half-clothed

one with sacred possessiveness as she used him, and with a scream she was certain would wake the dead, she came.

“Goddamn it.” Vlad captured her mouth in a fierce kiss as he slid off the mattress, carrying her with him. “I need you to come around me again. Your tight pussy is choking my cock, and I’m barely holding on.”

“Then don’t,” she challenged as he sat on the edge of the bed that faced the mirror.

“Nice try, little witch,” Vlad laughed as he ripped the shredded shirt off her body. “I will control myself because I’m not letting you off the hook so easily. You made me wait for months for our wedding night, and I’m going to make you come until you can’t stand before I fill this beautiful pussy with my cum.”

“Yes sir,” Belladonna moaned, loving the idea of taking him until she couldn’t walk. She wanted to be so sore when they finished that she would sense him inside her for days. She wanted the ache between her thighs to remind her who she belonged to.

“Do me a favor,” Vlad said as he lifted her off his lap and spun her until she faced their reflection. “Don’t use your magic to heal yourself until we’re done. I want to see my marks on you.”

“Yes, sir,” she said as he grabbed her hips and yanked her to a seat.

“Spread your thighs.” He hiked her legs over his, revealing every part of her to the mirror, and she blushed at how sinful they looked joined together as one. “I want you to watch me make you my wife in every sense of the word. ”

Belladonna opened, using her perfectly manicured hands to guide him inside her. She watched the reflection of his thick cock disappearing as she took every delicious inch, and then with a greedy moan, she lifted herself, staring at him withdraw. They moved

slowly, enjoying the sight of her taking his incredible thickness so deep, and then both of them got lost in the passion. Their movements became frenzied, their breathing labored, and when Vlad slid his tattooed hand to her breast to frame the bite mark, she climaxed so hard that she almost passed out. The world was hazy and her voice hoarse from screaming, but she forced her eyes to remain open. She didn't want to miss a single moment of their first night together.

“You take my cock so well.” Vlad lowered his fangs to her neck, still cupping her marked breast with his inked hand as his other dipped between her thighs to stroke her clit. “Don't shut your eyes, wife. I want you to watch as I fill you.”

Witnessing him make love to her so thoroughly was too much to bear, and as his fangs sank into her throat, she knew she was addicted. She could have this man every day for the rest of eternity, and never be satisfied. She'd heard rumors of how intense emotions were between bonded mates, but she hadn't fully understood how life-altering it could be until this moment.

She lifted a hand to grip his hair as she rode him, needing to anchor herself to her husband as he thrust harder and harder. She wanted to wait for him, to fall off the cliff together, but it was impossible. Her body convulsed, her pussy tightening around his impressive length, but the minute she came, Vlad pulled his fangs from her throat.

“Kiss me, little witch,” he demanded. “Kiss me while I come inside you.”

Belladonna obeyed, twisting her head to take his mouth. He tasted like blood and desire and love, and the instant their lips met, he exploded. His climax extended hers endlessly, and she reveled in the sensation of his cum filling her to overflowing. She'd never experienced this level of intimacy before, and it filled her with an overwhelming sense of love. This vampire was her entire world, and she didn't care that he'd forced her to marry him. He'd immediately recognized what it took her months to realize. They were destined for one another.

“I love you, Belladonna,” Vlad said, hugging her close as he buried his face in her neck. He was still inside her, the embrace incredibly intimate, and she leaned her forehead against his, breathing in the air that he exhaled. “Don’t ever leave me. I can’t survive without you.”

“I won’t, I promise.” She kissed his temple as she sank against his chest, feeling safe and warm and at home in his arms. “Who else would put up with my cat obsession?”

“Hmm,” Vlad laughed, kissing a trail from her neck to her jaw, but when he reached her lips, he froze, his gaze snagging on the cats sleeping on their beds in the corner of the room. She watched in the mirror as his eyes counted the black animals, and she suppressed a giggle when he got to number six. “Oh my god.” He rolled his eyes as he tossed her onto the mattress. “Why is there another one?”

“Because you love me,” she laughed, spreading her thighs for him as he entered her for round two.

“I do.” He thrust to emphasize his words. “So, what are you going to name him? Hurry up before I call it Pain-In-My-Ass for interrupting us.”

“Hmmm...” She captured his face and kissed him deeply as pleasure built between them. “How about Frank?”

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:38 am*

### HALLOWEEN: ONE YEAR LATER

Y ou'll never believe who's out there," Juniper squealed as she and Hazel rushed into the dressing room.

"Who?" Belladonna gripped her flowers, dreading the names about to fall from her friend's lips.

"Oh, not that kind of guest," Juniper added, realizing how her words were taken. No one blamed Belladonna for her nerves. Her first wedding had been a disaster. "It's Nick and Eira."

"Why do they sound familiar?" Belladonna asked, knowing they hadn't been part of the guest list.

"Santa and Krampus!" Juniper blurted.

"And that's not all," Hazel added, practically jumping up and down. "Valentin and Amorette AKA Cupid and his mate are here too."

"Shut up!" Belladonna gathered her skirts, nervous for a whole different reason, and bolted down the hallway to the sanctuary doors. She cracked them open and peeked inside to find Santa and Cupid standing by the altar with her groom. They blocked Vlad from sight, which she guessed was a good thing. She was dying to see him in his new suit, and because he'd ruined their first wedding, he'd vowed to do this one right. He'd proposed a few months ago, not bothering to gift her a diamond though since he liked the way his signet ring looked on her hand, and then he invited her

mother, Juniper, and Hazel over to plan her dream wedding. They'd had an engagement party, a bridal shower, and a rehearsal dinner.

He sent her out to buy a new dress and told her to organize the party exactly how she wanted it. He'd been expecting to go broke, but Belladonna had surprised him by choosing to hold the reception at their house. Their wedding was on Halloween, and while they'd outfitted the church to protect the vampires from burning in the sun, Belladonna requested they stay home for the holiday's evening. She'd invited the guests to take part in the trick-or-treat extravaganza she'd planned for the neighborhood, and Vlad had been more than happy to oblige her.

Witches and vampires alike would celebrate Halloween together for the first time in centuries, and when the festivities were over, Vlad had chartered a private plane for their honeymoon. He'd tried to keep their destination a secret, but she was a witch. She'd figured it out almost instantly, but she kept that knowledge to herself. When they touched down in Italy tomorrow to eat fresh pasta and pizza and drink Italian wine like he'd promised her a year ago, she would act surprised. She would shriek and cry and kiss him, and while the shock would be for his benefit, the happiness would be honest.

She couldn't wait to see Italy with the love of her life.

In the tradition of a real wedding, though, Vlad had insisted on not seeing the bride before the ceremony. For the past week, she'd stayed with her parents, but she was ready to crawl out of her skin. Ever since he'd ordered her to lock herself in his room over a year ago, she'd never left his side, so she had barely slept at her mom's. She missed Vlad to the point of pain, and she almost shouted at Santa to move out of her way so she could see him.

"I didn't realize Vlad knew Santa and Cupid," Belladonna said, slightly in awe of the massive Fae men. "How connected is he?"

“Oh, sweetheart, don’t fake your modesty now,” Juniper laughed. “You know just how powerful your hunk of a husband is.”

“Okay, fine. But Santa and Cupid at my wedding? How cool is this?”

“Incredibly,” her dad said as he led her mother into the back hallway. “You look stunning, sweetheart. I’m so happy we get to walk you down the aisle this time.”

“Me too.” She hugged her parents as they settled on either side of her.

“One thing before we go out there,” Rowena said. “Gabriel called me... don’t worry, nothing is wrong.”

Gabriel had been living as a monk in Europe for the past year, and while they didn’t hear from him often because of the vampire sect’s remote location, Vlad had recently received reports that his son was finally making progress.

“He’s trying to make amends,” Rowena continued. “He loves his father in his own way and wants to support him. He wishes to watch the ceremony via video chat if you’ll allow it. We have the connection ready to go, but it’s up to you.”

“What did Vlad say?” Belladonna asked.

“That it was your decision. He would like his son to be a part of today, but you have the final say.”

“It’s okay.” Belladonna inhaled a deep breath. “It’s Vlad’s wedding too. His son should be here. ”

Her mother nodded, kissing her on the cheek, and with a flourish of her fingers, she cast a spell to start the video connection and another to start the music. “Are you ready?”



“More than you know,” Belladonna laughed. “You may have to stop me from running down the aisle.”

“We’ll walk fast,” her father promised, and together, they stepped into the church.

The room fell into silent awe as she walked toward her groom. Her dress was simple but undeniably gorgeous, yet it was her expression when she saw Vlad that captivated the guests. Her eyes were only for her husband, and a tear trailed down her soft cheek the moment their gazes met. He was so beautiful it made her heart ache, and when she reached the altar, it took all her self-control not to throw herself into his arms.

“You are perfection, little witch,” Vlad said as he captured her hands.

“I missed you so much,” she whispered so her voice wouldn’t interrupt the priest’s ceremony. “Let’s never do this again. I can’t live without you.”

“I haven’t slept a wink.” Vlad pulled her closer, forgoing the traditional hand holding to wrap his arms around her waist, and Belladonna shoved her black flowers at Hazel so she could mimic his embrace until they were standing chest to chest.

Neither of them heard the officiant as they stared into each other’s eyes, the magic of their bond so palpable it danced through the air. They held each other close, saying “I do” with reverence, and when the ceremony came to an end, not a single dry eye remained in the church.

“Do you have rings to exchange?” the priest asked.

“No,” Vlad answered. “She’s already wearing my seal, and that ring is never coming off that finger. Promise me, little witch. ”

“You know I’ll never remove it,” she swore. “But what about you? You refused to let me buy you a ring, but I feel bad now. I should have ignored you and bought one.”

“I told you not to buy me a ring,” Vlad said, releasing her. “But I never said I didn’t want one.” He pulled his left hand from behind her back and offered it to her as if it were pure gold, and his reason was instantly obvious. She’d memorized every tattoo inked on his skin, tracing them with her fingers, her lips, her tongue, her magic. The man never slept with clothes on, and when he made love to her, she watched those beautiful tattoos dance on his glorious body in the mirror before their bed. But this addition was brand new. It hadn’t been there a week ago, and she captured his fingers with a gasp.

“Vlad!” She peered up at him through her tears.

“I love you, wife,” he said. “I want everyone to know I belong to you.”

Belladonna glanced back down at his ring finger; the tattooed wedding band unmistakable. It was expertly designed, the black ink embedded with skill, but it was her name that made her heart burst, the letters delicately woven into the inked ring. Her name was etched into his skin... forever.

“Do you like it?” Vlad asked.

“Father, if you please?” Belladonna ignored him and stared at the priest, who smirked at her meaning.

“I now pronounce you husband and wife,” he said with a pointed look at the bride. “You may kiss your groom.”

“Thank god.” Belladonna jumped into her husband’s arms, kissing him so fiercely the entire room blushed. “I love it,” she whispered into his mouth. “Out of all the gifts you’ve given me, this is my favorite.”

“I mean it, little witch.” Vlad deepened the kiss, not caring that they were embarrassing their audience. “You are mine, as I am yours. I need everyone to know

that.”

“I love you.” She wrapped her arms around his neck, nearly choking him.

“You are my mate,” Vlad said. “What I feel for you is greater than love. I wish I had the words to tell you.”

“Don’t tell me... Take me home right now and show me.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he teased, scooping her up bridal style and racing for the shaded car park where his vehicle waited. “We’ll see all of you at the mansion tonight for trick-or-treating and the reception!” he shouted as he ran down the aisle. “And I do mean tonight.” He turned and gave the guests a wicked grin. “Don’t any of you dare show up early.”

“Vlad!” Belladonna squealed. “My mother is here.”

“I don’t care.” He silenced her laugh with a kiss. “I love my wife, and I want the entire world to know it.”

Thank you for reading *Tryst or Treat*. The Season’s Reading Series continues in *Happy Hunting: An Easter Heist Romance* (Coming Easter 2025) . If you enjoyed this novella and feel comfortable leaving a review, I would greatly appreciate it.