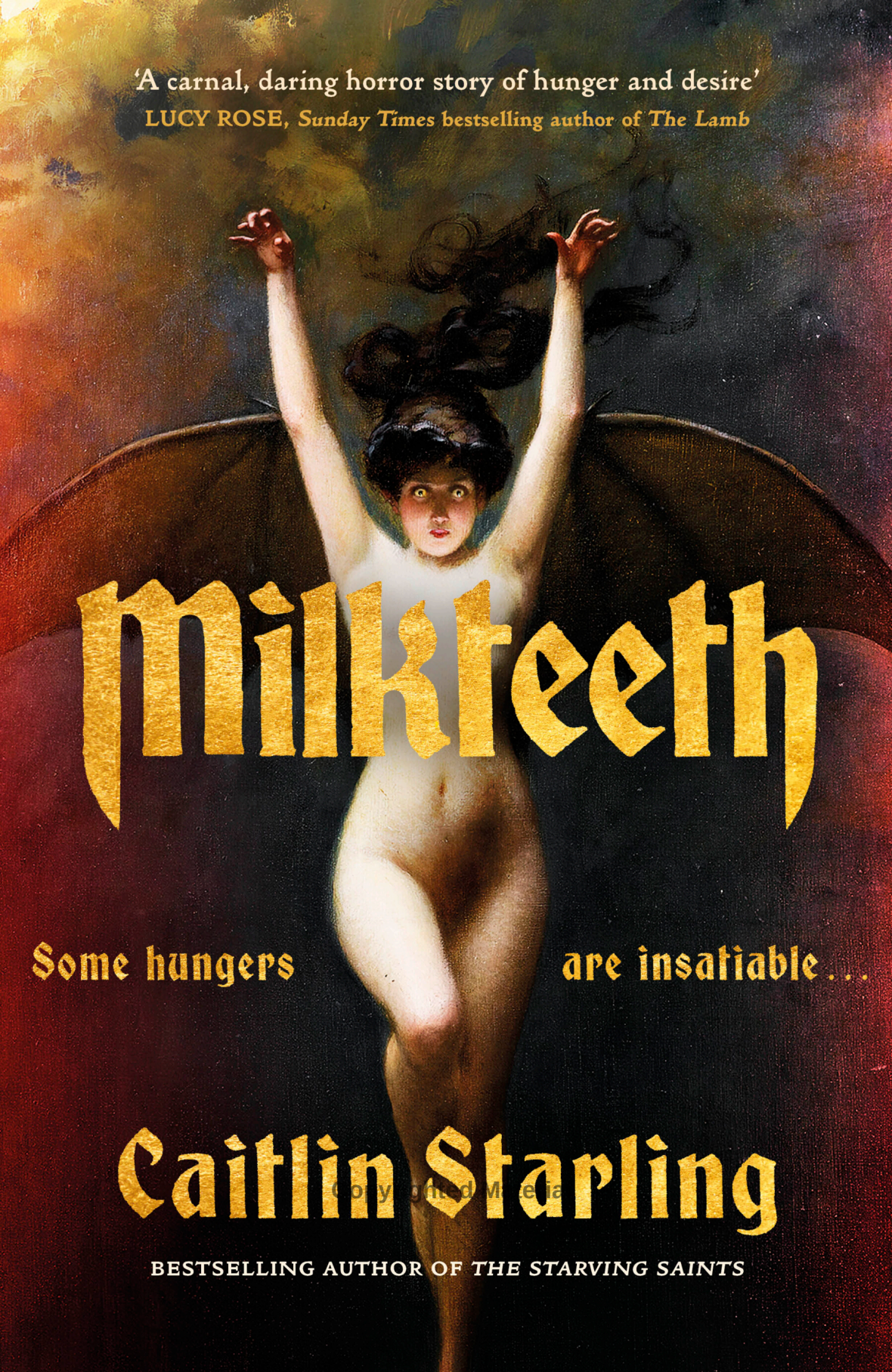


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For everyone who has ever made milk for another's child—
willingly or not

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CHAPTER ONE

She doesn't remember her name.

A small detail, in the writhing mass of them she claws her way through. No name, no memory of what she looks like, no knowledge of anything but hunger. The room is dark. There is blood on the air. She can smell it, taste it; orients to it like there is no difference between her and it, like they are part of the same thread. She pulls herself along that thread, knots herself up, and slams into skin and muscle and fabric.

It has the smell of blood, but no heat, and the combination is wrong. She thrashes. Bares her teeth, and oh, yes, she does have teeth. They are sharp little syringes in her mouth. They have pierced through her gums and shredded her lips.

"Easy. Easy now," a voice says, a voice that she knows, a voice that some part of her loves. Instinctive adoration toward a parent. *Parent?* The word feels foreign in her mind, slippery, fugitive. Her eyes have not adjusted to the dark, but she is close enough to make out details in the layered shadows around her. A face, close to hers, not breathing. Skin drawn tight over bone. Blood on lips. Smears of foundation, mostly gone, clinging to the few creases on a strangely unwrinkled brow.

She whines. The animal timbre of it surprises her. But then,

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her stomach is a snarling pack of dogs, all salivating for the next scrap from the table.

"Drink," the thing holding her says. Its voice is hoarse, the throat emitting it parched. A wrist is pressed to her lips, papery and cool. Not warm enough, not full enough. She snaps at it, and the voice sighs in relief—then shrieks as she doesn't drink at all, but savages. The arm is snatched away from her. She lunges past it.

Down a passageway, tripping over things she can't see in the dark, doesn't remember navigating before. But she is fast and strong and desperate. The creature behind her, giving chase, is only one of those things.

A sliver of light, down by the floor. A door that she connects with, hard. She scrabbles for purchase until she finds a knob. It gives way. She spills out into a hallway, into overhead lighting. She sees her hands, pallid and clawed. She sees naked skin, her legs, bite marks bloodless on her thighs. Bare feet. She doesn't recognize any of it.

But she does recognize the sound of a heartbeat, faint beyond the pounding footsteps behind her.

"Luisa, come back!" the voice calls behind her, and she almost does. *Luisa, Luisa, Luisa*—is that her? It sounds so needful, the way the voice shouts it. She almost turns around to see who owns the voice she so craves. But there is something she needs more, fresh blood, hot blood, and there is a heartbeat just a little farther on.

She darts away, down the hall, past one door, two. So many doors. Locked, locked, she doesn't even have to try the knob to know. But this one, *this* one, it is opening already, and the heartbeat behind it is loud. Growing louder and faster the

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more that the voice behind her shouts what might have been her name.

There, in the door: He is wrinkled but his hair is neatly trimmed. He is wearing a robe over pajamas. He freezes when he sees her. It doesn't matter; he couldn't have closed the door quickly enough.

She is on him faster than he can blink, between one slamming heartbeat and the next. She drives her teeth into his neck. The blood wells up, thick and hot and perfect, and she drinks greedily. Tears at his flesh, widens the gash. Chews tendon and muscle and arterial wall. His throat gives way with a crackling, his voice silenced before his scream can escape.

She eats, and eats, and is halfway into his rib cage, heedless of weak hands pulling at her shoulders and arms and legs, when her stomach sours.

It is as abrupt as her awakening, the way she seizes and falls away from her meal. She feels herself thrash. Hears the shattering of glass; her body has knocked something over. Her body? Hers. She knows it is hers only from the agony.

And through it all, the begging, sobbing voice:

"Luisa, Lu, stop, fuck, *fuck*, you can't eat him! You need to eat *me*!"

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CHAPTER TWO

The lactation support group met at six PM, on the fourth floor of the closest hospital. Late enough for me to be able to attend, and I'm not sure what I would have done if I hadn't found it. I arrived just as it was getting started, the small, warm bundle in my arms happily napping. An easy, lucky day, even in hindsight.

I wasn't the first to arrive. A few women stood clustered around a rack of baby clothes and swaddles available for purchase. Two held their infants, one of whom was squalling. A car seat sat at the third's feet. Even from where I stood, I could hear the rise and fall of their conversation: comparing birth stories, subtly arranging themselves by natal philosophy. Doula? Midwife? Oh, a C-section?

They all downplayed the blood. I wondered what they would think of my own story; I wouldn't have edited anything out.

"Are you here for the support group?" the woman at the desk asked. I shifted my gaze back to her. I didn't say, *Why else would I be here?* And anyway, it was free to the community, no registration required. I nodded, when she began to look pained at my silence, and then I took the sticky label she gave me and wrote BEATRICE, carefully affixing it over my breast.

"My first time," I said, because she seemed to need some

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further context. She relaxed instantly. Perhaps she thought I was anxious.

Really, it was just nice to get out of the house.

"Well, we're going to sit over in the circle in just a few minutes," the woman said. "And then Nurse Tiffany will take over. I think Dr. Bajracharya will be joining us as well. Do you have any particular concerns you'd like me to flag? This isn't a clinic," she added, "and we can't perform any procedures or prescribe any medications, but we can certainly give advice."

I looked back at the knot of women at the far wall. Did they have specific concerns? Were their babies starving?

"Just trying to learn more," I said.

There were a few new people queuing behind me. I stepped out of their way.

They'd set up a series of recliners in a loose circle. The chairs looked heavy; it felt strange that they'd made the effort until I sat down and realized how much easier it was to maneuver my charge with the extra space and support. The rocking motion soothed us both. I looked down at him and stroked his cheek, supple and flushed with vitality.

What a strange, delicate little thing. Wondrous, in his way.

Others sat around me and I lifted my head.

"Thanks for coming, everybody," said a young woman in scrubs. "I'm Tiffany, I'm an International Board Certified Lactation Consultant as well as a mother-baby nurse. I know some of you already, and I'm so glad to see some new faces."

Beneath her scrubs, her belly was firmly rounded. Her breasts were swollen.

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"We have scales available if you'd like to do a presession weigh-in for your little ones, and I can help with any questions you might have about positioning, proper latch technique, pump operation, supply maintenance . . . or we can just talk. Lactation is a very rewarding but potentially very challenging time in your life, and your baby's. Let's see how we can make the road a little smoother."

There is something about pregnancy: the fullness of the body, the glow of the skin, all driven by so much extra blood, all to support the tiny creature always growing inside. I could see it in every sinew of Tiffany's. And it was something that was missing in all those people around me; they were all varying degrees of haggard. Sleep-deprived, underfed, their bodies burning fat to make milk almost uncontrollably. A hormonal cascade at work.

In my arms, a shift. A cranky gurgle. As if he had read my mind, he was waking up, hungry, searching.

I fumbled with the nursing top, the clasp of the bra flap. A few people looked my way. Others carefully averted their eyes. Tiffany made her way over, peered down at me.

"Would you like to do a weighted feed?" she asked, all smiles.

"Oh, no," I said, fixated on her a moment too long. "No, he eats well."

He answered with a sharp, insistent cry. I looked down, startled out of my reverie. I must have been clumsy as I brought him to my skin, because he fought. He seemed set on a wail, and wouldn't take my nipple as I tried to shove it into his mouth.

"May I?" There was a box of gloves nearby and she pulled

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a set on before I could decline. She positioned me and the infant so that he was cradled in my right arm, feet pointing to the back of the chair, head just below my breast. "Have you tried a football hold before? It can help keep some babies a little calmer."

He rooted with his whole head, lips wide, face red with frustration. A tiny beast, but he knew what he needed. He only had poor aim, and I was awkward.

"Oh, ouch, that really is some cracking," Tiffany said as she got a closer look at my exposed nipple. Deep red scabs criss-crossed it, livid and arresting. "That can't be comfortable. Do you use Silverettes?"

I shook my head.

"That and some lanolin cream should help. And let's check his latch. I'm sure we can make this a lot less painful." She smiled. She was tired, though. Worn thin. I could smell it on her as she leaned in again. "Here, no, it's easier if you grasp the breast like a sandwich. There. And watch as his mouth opens, you're aiming for the top of his mouth. Is your scarf getting in the way? I could take that for you."

"No thank you," I said. My audience was more attentive now. Studying and, I suspected, judging. How could I not know? How could I be so uncoordinated at this?

It was just the arrangement that was unfamiliar. The positioning.

It hurt, when he latched. He had no teeth, but his jaws were strong, and he was as uncoordinated as I was. But he drank with a greedy thirst. Tiffany crouched beside us, head bent, listening.

At first, there was nothing to swallow. But then the scabs

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gave way and my blood dripped into his mouth like milk. He shivered, his eyes closing. He sucked hard, fast, his jaw pulsing.

"There," Tiffany said, tracing the movement of the muscle. "See that? And can you hear his swallows? That's what you want."

Of course it was. I knew what I was doing.

"Thank you," I said to make her leave.

She moved along.

I watched her the rest of the meeting, positioning babies, comforting mothers. Halfway through, another woman, whom I took to be the doctor, emerged from the hallway leading back to exam rooms, taking up a post by a laptop on a wheeled stand, dividing her attention between whatever recordkeeping she was doing and the conversation at large. Everything was likely familiar to her, the litany of complaints, of sorrows, of anxieties. One little girl wasn't eating enough at all, and I watched as Tiffany slowly coaxed her mother into accepting combination feeding with formula.

Formula. Now there was a thought.

I had hoped that the conversation would naturally turn to more conceptual topics, pulling away from the mechanical operations of feeding babies, but half an hour in and it didn't seem likely. I cleared my throat.

"What happens during extended breastfeeding?" I asked. "Physically, I mean."

Nobody cared about the answer. It was clear in their faces, even in Tiffany's. Her answer was short, though she glanced over to the doctor before she spoke. "Feeds become spaced further apart. Your child will likely become a little acrobat,

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and have trouble sitting still. You only need to continue for as long as you're both comfortable, though, of course, we recommend trying to stick it out for six months to a year if your schedule and health allow."

"I understand that," I said (and thought, *But you don't*). "I was more wondering—internally. Does prolonged nursing impact . . ." I searched for the words. Perhaps I should have done more research. Come more prepared. But I was so tired in those days. My mind felt uncommonly foggy. "Does it change the way my body works? Is it just an on-off switch, or does it vary with time?"

"You need a certain hormonal state to lactate, but there can be some variability. I think that's a question you should take to your primary care provider, though, so you can get an answer specific to *you*. Does that help?"

No. I didn't have a primary care provider. The thought was so inane it almost made me laugh.

Well, I had tried, at least.

I stayed quiet through the next ten minutes as the meeting wound down, as parent and baby duos filtered out two by two. I almost left then. But I was enjoying the break, even if it was awkward. I'm grateful now that I stayed as long as I did.

It was the doctor who approached me. Not too far out of her schooling, I think; overworked but still idealistic, not yet burned out. Her black hair was pulled into a plait, and her brown skin had a rich red undertone. She had faint lines at the corners of her eyes and in the middle of her brow. A smiler and a thinker. I liked her immediately.

"You were wondering about hormonal shifts over time during breastfeeding?" she asked, voice warm and accented. I

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couldn't place it then, but later she'd tell me she'd grown up in Kathmandu. Left as a preteen, so America had pushed some of the lilt out of her, but not the way she'd gently rock her head sometimes for emphasis.

But time can still change that. Can still erase. We'll have to see.

"Yes," I said. The infant at my breast had stopped nursing and fallen into an easy sleep some time ago, so I carefully unlatched him, this time making sure to hide the state of my nipple. He'd been a tidy eater; there was only a small dot of blood to smear from the corner of his mouth.

Her eyes remained on my face. More interested in me than him, a difference from Tiffany.

"And in particular if anything is different during—what was it? Tandem nursing."

"Do you have another at home?"

I weighed how honest to be. The group had already seen what Tiffany had decided was inexperience in positioning, and I was at a support group mostly filled with people lactating for the first time. "No," I said, "but I think it will happen eventually."

"Well," she said, "it can be difficult to sustain the initial relationship during pregnancy."

"Oh, I was considering adoption, actually."

Her brows went up. Yes, that would sound strange, wouldn't it?

I hastened to add, "My cousin . . ." Time was unreal in that moment, and I groped for a sequence of events that would make sense to her. "My cousin is pregnant, but I don't think she'll keep the child. I'm offering to take it on, once it's born."

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"Well," she said after a moment, "if you're still producing . . . but newborns do require a more calorie-dense milk than toddlers. I'm honestly not sure how your body would respond. I'll have to do some research. Would you like to leave a phone number or an email with me, and I can send you what I find?"

"That would be wonderful," I said, and felt a rush of relief that I'd thought to set up an email address the week before. "Do you have a pen?"

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CHAPTER THREE

That clinic trip was my first time away from home in several years. The city had changed. I'd heard the new construction going up nearby, and it had gone on long enough that I wasn't surprised when I saw the shining new hotel towers stretching toward the sky, but I was startled at how empty the streets were. When I'd left, it should have been rush hour. The streets should have been packed with cars and buses and pedestrians. And they'd been there, yes, but as I returned through entirely empty streets only a few hours after sundown, I realized that it had been an anemic showing.

New construction but no people. Strange and unhealthy.

I did run some errands that evening; I was just able to catch an electronics store before it closed and buy myself a tablet. No need for a phone; where I was going there was, as I understood it, no phone service. But the tablet was nicer than the old computer I'd been given, and would give me something to do during the long night-feeding sessions.

From there, I got something to eat. Fast food, as fast as I could make it. I'd already been away from home too long.

Back then, home was beneath an office building owned by my patron. It was all but deserted when I came back, shopping bag in hand. There was only a security guard, who buzzed me

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in without seeing me. I made my way to a side hallway and took the freight elevator down.

Hm? What's that?

What did I do with the baby?

I'm so pleased you're asking questions. It's a good thing. But you don't need to worry about him.

When the office building had first been constructed, my patron had paid for the addition of excess office space down beneath the city. It took some clever dealmaking and some cleverer theft; the offices extended far past the building's aboveground footprint. The halls and rooms that made up the lower levels were seemingly endless, their carpeted floors nondescript, their walls a dingy shade of off-white, inexorably aged toward senescence. The few lights that remained on carved islands out of the darkness, little oases for the senses.

I made my home in the center of the lowest level, as far away from the sun as I could be. I could smell my nest from several twists and turns away. The carpet beneath my feet was pocked with small stains growing larger the farther I walked. The light in this hallway never turned on. It was easier that way.

One detour: a side office where I unboxed my tablet and plugged it in to charge. It lit up immediately, and I took a moment to access my email. But there was no service; it wanted Wi-Fi. There was no port on the side of the tablet to fit the bulky cable that ran to the computer that sat against the back wall of the room. I frowned at it, then left it to feed.

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My own charges needed their fill, too.

I shed my clothing at the doorway. Walked naked out into the hall.

They were waiting for me. Fortunata crouched just around the next corner, while Gorgeous stood, arms crossed petulantly over his withered chest. Ready to argue with me, as he did so often in those days. But the sight of me, the smell of me, made his limbs go lax. Just for a second, just enough to return him to a more neutral, less adversarial position.

And then he lunged.

I made him chase me. Fortunata, too. We all knew those hallways well, each corner and dead end. It was our maze, our labyrinth, our warren. I ran for myself, for the freedom I felt moving my body, the relief I felt evading their demands on me. That they benefited from the practice was secondary for those first delirious minutes.

I could have evaded them all night; I was older than they were, and better fed besides. But they were hungry, growing desperate, and that left them impulsive and vicious. I heard the scuffle as they collided with one another, Fortunata's howl as her older brother displaced some bone with a crack I could hear even as I ducked into a conference room. I let them find me there, heart softened by Fortunata's pain.

Gorgeous knew it was no triumph on his part. His anger burned in his teeth as he sank them into my throat and shoved me down onto the table. I did not go easily, full of rage at the imperative impertinence, but when my blood crashed onto his tongue, when his jaw began to work in sweet pantomime of the human infant's, my anger evaporated. Or transformed, perhaps. Shed its blanket of irritation and became a

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smoldering heat that warmed us both. A vicious bond, and in it, the certainty that without me, he was nothing.

Fortunata crept in on silent feet. She did not breathe, because, of course, we have no need to breathe if we are not speaking. But I could hear her bones rearranging, knitting back together. I could feel her thirst in that dark room, knew how much she needed me. I extended my arm to her, and she crawled onto the table, nestling into my embrace. I thought, for just a moment, that she would mimic the baby and try to nurse from my breast, but instead she turned to the soft skin of my armpit, and latched her lamprey mouth fast there.

She had better manners than her brother, but more force behind her pull.

And when they had all but drained me dry, they let me go and begged for more.

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CHAPTER FOUR

Did I love them?

No.

Or perhaps that is unfair: I did not love them in the way that I have come to love you. They were not my children, though I fed them and raised them, and they knew only me for long stretches of months, years. I cared for them. But love . . . ?

If somebody had asked me back then, I would have said yes, but I suspect that I would have had private reservations. They were mine and not mine. They would always leave. I resented them, for the way they clawed at me, suckled from me, drained me dry and kept me always swinging between ravenous and overfull. And I gladly killed for them, over and over. I guarded them fiercely. I tried to make them understand something of the world beyond our little nest, even as I couldn't take them into it.

I think it was impossible for me to love them, since I hardly understood myself.

They called me *broodmother*. An archaic term, old long before it was granted to me. To make a beast such as yourself is not an easy thing; there are many miscarriages, many stillbirths, many . . . what was it Dr. Bajracharya called it? So many simply "*failed to thrive*." A newborn cannot drink the

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blood of humans. It is poison to them. Curdles in the belly, burns out the brain. Meat can sustain them, though it does not lead anywhere you would want to go. No, a nursling must first drink from an elder, a mirror of mortal breastfeeding. The not-mother takes in the world, transforms it into succor, and, over the course of years, slowly weans their charge onto real food.

You have at least one more year left, my darling. Be patient.

Many sires, once they have created their progeny, find they are not up to the task. It is grinding, the constant need to eat, to be eaten, to shield the newborn from every temptation that would kill them. Sun and human skin and desire, none of it has any place in those first few years. Better to stay down in the dark, in abandoned offices or lonely sewers or fetid crypts. Even those willing to make the sacrifice cannot always produce enough blood of their own. They starve, or snap and kill their infant child, or throw themselves into the fire. Or they walk away, and let their nursling hunt as it wants, to its death or to its degeneration. Answers vary as to which is worse.

But a few of us can bear the weight. *I* can bear the weight. Sires would bring to me their wailing newborns, and I would take them in, one or two at any given time. In exchange for prey and shelter, I would feed and nurture. It has always been in my nature. I have always been—apart.

It is innate, I think. A necessity. A variant, a biological niche. I am still constructing my theories.

Do you remember who you once were?

A vampire is born only after the death of a mortal. So you, too, once walked in the sun, once breathed and ate food and

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drank water. Do you understand? Sometimes it takes a while, for the concept to feel real. I was human, once. I had a mortal son. I left him when he was just a boy; years later I would encounter him as an old man. I didn't recognize him at first, nor he me. But then, I wasn't his mother anymore, was I?

I do remember bits and pieces of my birth. Transformation, if you want to distinguish it from my mortal maturation. I remember a dark, wet place. My own broodmother was named Durand. He was young, I think. Young, and confused, and desperate to be loved. He tried to take on a second nursling, but failed; he told me once that he had been forced to drink her dry, to spare her from her suffering. He was too gentle. I despised him. But perhaps that was only because I could not escape him.

He named me Beatrice, or so I thought. I later learned that he merely regifted the name to me; I wore it as a mortal, too. And maybe it wasn't him that regifted it, but merely handed it on.

My sire I do not know. Whoever eyed me as a good choice for immortality didn't bother retrieving me from Durand's lair. Instead, when I could finally drink mortal blood, I stumbled out into a night I did not recognize. Durand serviced a loose coterie of vampires, none of whom laid claim to me as their progeny.

Are you surprised? Don't be. And do not fear; I will never leave you. But I will admit that it is common, that a sire loses interest in their progeny in the long years that a nursling spends half insensate, often addled, always childlike in strange and unexpected ways. The closer they stay, the more likely they are to grow weary, but even keeping careful distance,

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they often . . . move on. Three years should not be so long for an immortal vampire, and yet it is often enough to break the spell. The trophy is won; the mortal is transformed; and then the waiting period, the layaway, and the sire wakes up to the fact that they don't really need the companion they have made, who does not remember their life before, and may not remember their sire's touch or face. Who has been reduced to something writhing and blood-slick and temporarily not sentient.

There's a certain disgust there. And a disgust for what I am, too. If I think it is innate, so do they; it became clear what I was meant to be when I accompanied my new patron, Manon, back to Durand's a year later, to check on the infant who had taken my place, one made at Manon's behest. I had tried to forget the rotted stink of the abandoned paper mill Durand had set up in, but it slid into my nose with easy familiarity. Where Manon grimaced, I leaned in. And when we found Durand gone, and his nursling half starved, I bared my neck to those teeth like I was coming home.

I did demand a more central location in which to raise the ravenous whelp. I think, had Durand been kept closer to hand, he might not have fled.

If indeed that's what he did.

No, I will not tell you who you once were.

Don't you understand?

It doesn't matter.

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CHAPTER FIVE

The office building that surmounted the lair was, as I said, owned by my patron. Contact with the outside world was limited. I was fed regularly, well away from Fortunata and Gorgeous so there could be no accidents, by way of a specific freight elevator that only a few had the access code for. It would arrive just before dawn, when the children were instinctively drowsy and slow; I would hear the mechanism and make my way to the upper floor.

At the beginning, I had occasionally left my pasture to hunt more in the popular style of our kind. Back when I had only one charge, before my aptitude became clear, and I took a second into common rotation. I could spare the time, especially in the later years of nursing. But with two to care for, my world had dwindled down to where my outing to the lactation clinic had been a hard-won thing.

It was not, at the time, against the rules set upon me. It was only challenging for personal, logistical reasons. The freight elevator was easier. Being fed was easier. I saw it as my due; not as a placating, patronizing, slop in the trough.

Less than a week after my excursion, the sound of the freight elevator came too early. Just after the first light meal of the evening, the waking suckle, Fortunata and Gorgeous

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growing too alert too quickly. Gorgeous heard it just after I did, and he left the bathroom where he'd been studying his reflection. Even freshly fed, he was sallow-skinned. His suit, worn only between feedings and kept fastidiously pristine as a rare gift from his sire, hung too loose on his frame. The transformation had not been easy on him. I went whole weeks without using his name, so as not to draw attention to the disparity.

I see the curiosity—ask. Who named him? His sire. Before his second birth, back when they fancied themselves in love. I am told it fit him, a gift given without second thought. I think he clung to it, after, out of obligation and a desperate, fierce hope, both that it would become apt once more and that his sire would still want him when he emerged full-grown.

"Stay here," I told him. Fortunata was stirring, too, soft and slow as was her nature.

"What if it's him?" Gorgeous asked, with a strangled sort of breathlessness.

I couldn't rule it out, but it was unlikely. I didn't want him to get his hopes up, only to have them dashed. He was a bastard when he felt slighted.

"Stay here," I repeated, and went to dress.

I spent most of my time naked or in a ratty, bloodstained robe, but I kept a small closet in order to make myself presentable. Not knowing what I would find, I chose to look as human as I could. A wrap dress made of pristine silk. Heels. Something that belonged in office spaces. I had no time to brush my hair, so I pinned it quickly as I slipped back into the hall and made my way to the stairs. I listened for Gorgeous, either skulking along behind or racing on ahead, but heard

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no trace of him. The elevator had stopped. There was weak sobbing.

By the time I got there, the party was growing impatient. Manon was there, checking her phone; she was accompanied by her standard retinue of assistant Byerly and two nameless mortal thralls. And crouched in the corner: a drawn and bloodied thing bound in silver chains, cradled to a haggard, broken slip of a vampire similarly leashed.

Yes, my love, we must bow to the weight of silver. Why? I don't know. But it is strong enough to hold us, no matter how powerful we become. And these two were not powerful at all. They were pathetic.

The bloodied thing was an infant; I could smell it, along with a foul taint that spoke to improper rearing. Manon did not miss how my nostrils flared, how my jaw tightened.

"There's been an incident," she said, voice flat.

The broken beast beside the infant lifted her head then. She had beautiful blond hair, but it was matted with blood. Her throat and arms were the shiny pink of freshly healed wounds. That the marks were visible at all spoke to how drained she was. How tired.

"I tried," she whispered. "I thought— I wanted us to be together, I thought I knew how—" She broke off, sobbing.

Manon nodded at the infant. "I need your evaluation," she said. "Sofiya has begged mercy. But her fledgling has eaten human flesh. It may be too far gone to save."

"It was only the once," Sofiya pleaded. "I stopped her. The seizures stopped. They did. And I gave her as much of my blood as I could. Did I do enough?"

Pitiful thing. How pathetic she looked, how desperately she

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groped for some explanation that made this so unlikely, so unlucky, poor her, and how could love not have saved them both?

But love is not necessary. It is the blood. The body. The infernal furnace within me.

I looked down at the infant, this precarious creature of skin and bone, lungs and heart. Its lips were drawn back in its semiconscious state, and its teeth were sharp and crowded in the overhead lighting. Needlelike, appropriate for its age. Something in it called to me, and I pulled it into my lap. Ran my hand through its buzzed hair. "Sweet thing," I murmured, "you must be so hungry."

It twitched and gave a half-hearted snarl. Its head turned, though its eyes remained glassy, unseeing. Searching for a vein the way the human infant had nuzzled toward the breast. Even their mouths were the same, open, seeking.

"Beatrice," Manon chided, as if she knew better than I what was needed here. To her, this was simple: the youngest, most fragile of fledglings, already tainted with flesh it should never have tasted. Marked for the fire. Fit for nothing more than the sun. "How far gone is it?"

I stroked its temple, and it weakly gnashed its teeth. The dentition was promising, but not yet determinate. There was a risk, but I judged it low. I could see the child still, and none of the starving monster it might become. "Not so far gone," I said.

Sofiya gasped in relief.

"Her name is Luisa. Lu," she said, pulling herself closer to us until I lifted my head and snarled. There she stopped, staring. "You can—you can save her? Please. Please, I need her to survive this. I need her to come back to me."

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