

My First Hunt

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The skull was cool to the touch, just like all the hundreds piled on the towering, creaking wooden shelves in the crypt. But what makes it unique is that it is one of Father's earliest trophies, and one of the most damaged I have ever seen. Most of the skulls have chips and cracks gracing their lower jawbones, and quite a lot possess fractured cheekbones. No skull, other than the one I hold, has a such a sizeable gaping hole on the cranium's front. It was roughly the size of my fist. I finger the hole's jagged edges, marveling on how light and brittle the skull feels in my hands. How humans can live with such breakable bones, I will never know. But what fascinates me the most of every human skull on Father's shelves, was the teeth. I love rubbing my fingers across human teeth, feeling the edges and bumps of each one. And they are so different compared to mine! My teeth are as long and sharp as steel stakes, but theirs are so soft and smooth and small... and frail and weak. Glancing at the skull's shattered top, its eyeholes staring back at me, I wince. How painful was this human's death, or any of the humans Father drained? How did they react when Father drained them – how will they react when I must do the same tonight?

The growing sounds of shouting from above the staircase snaps me out of my thoughts, but I start to sweat. Father's expecting me, and he sounds impatient, but I am not ready to join him yet. I do not want to go. Gingerly placing the skull back on the shelf, I creep silently on the frigid, damp, and ancient stone steps towards the head of the stairs.

Fighting the urge to run and hide; I crouch down, letting the shadows shroud me, and raise my ear. Maybe Mother will convince him to postpone the trial.

"No, we will not delay this test. All Hallows' Eve is nigh, it is time!" Father grumbles.

"Maximillian, he does not feel ready, and he's still a boy. Most start their first hunt later, wait until then!" Mother's tone sounds orderly, but there's a shakiness in her voice.

"Nonsense, he has come of age. His fangs are fully developed, and his abilities have matured. He is old enough to start hunting and the only way he will become skilled is by utilizing his instincts and techniques!" He spat. "He should be more than capable by now. I have trained and educated him on how to drain humans. But he still lacks the willingness to do so! I catch him fiddling with my trophies, and he bombards me with questions about human lives and emotions I know little of and care about even less! He is becoming too

attached towards that species. The longer he waits, the harder hunting will be for him. He must start now, otherwise he will never thrive with his soft-heartedness.”

“And what if he fails?” The quavering of Mother’s voice is even more noticeable. “What if he is unable to do it? What if he is caught or even killed?”

Killed. The mere mention turns my stomach into a bubbling, churning cauldron. Father told me about how a stake through the heart or the sun’s rays can turn vampires to mere ash and dust, blown away by the wind. Like they never existed. If the sun rises before I get a human, or if a human gets me...I shudder.

“Humans are fragile.” Father says nonchalantly. “And nowadays, they carry no protective charms or symbols. They run rampant like rats, even on All Hallow’s Eve!”

“That is the problem! There is too many of them outside at night now, enough to overpower him! Maximillian, see sense! I want our son to grow, but do you want to endanger Vlad by forcing him to hunt humans before he has ever properly drained one on his own before?”

“I have completed this test at a younger age than he with no such issue, as our ancestors have done! The von Schreck family have drained humans since time first began! Our lineage’s strength has earned undying admiration from our kind – strength which Vlad has inherited and will continue to uphold.” He remarks coldly. “Completing his test will prove himself worthy of his responsibilities as my heir and of being able to survive as a vampire. The only way he and our legacy will be respected and feared, is if he establishes himself as fully-fledged by completing his test.”

“Can you think more of our son’s safety and less on your legacy?” Mother scorns.

“My son *is* my legacy Bella, and yours as well.” He growls, low and chillingly determined. “I am doing this for his own good, and for the good of the family. It is the only way he’ll grow to live independently and strongly, otherwise we’ll be bringing him blood forever. My son will become a true vampire tonight. I have decided. We will depart.”

I scramble downstairs, darting towards the nearest coffin to seal myself away before he saw me. But a pitch-black gust blows behind me when I turn to flee, and I am met with my Father’s glaring face. His eyes are blazing crimson hollows, and his thin, scowling mouth displays his yellow fangs. His robe, blending into the shadows, makes his hairless, skull-white head appear to float out from the darkness. He clutches my trembling shoulder. His slender, yet fiercely strong talons dig into my shivering flesh.

“Did you really think I could not hear you Vlad?” He sneers angrily. “I am glad you heard our conversation, now know the importance of your test, and

why you must do it as soon as possible. This rite of passage is a momentous occasion for fledgling vampires to prove themselves,” He grimaces as I cringe, his grip getting tighter. “But your dawdling has wasted precious time. Do not disappoint me again.”

“I-I am s-sorry Father,” I mumble. Fiercely, he snatches my arm and drags me up the stairs, cowing me into silence. I wince at his fury and my own pitifully visible fright. There was nothing I could do or say to object to this, I knew this would come, it has been a tradition carried out for eons. I just did not think it would happen to me so fast; has reaching maturity always been this sudden?

Mother stands near a large window, rapping her clawed fingers on the pane. The beaming moonlight illuminates her smooth, bare head and her fog-grey dress. Her poise appears strong and proud, as if there is nothing to fear, but her hands are shaking, and her eyes are downcast. We approach her, and Mother’s hand briefly reaches to touch my face. But reflectively, she draws it back.

“Do everything your Father tells you,” she says softly. “But...” she whispers, “be careful.”

“Open the windows Bella,” Father orders. She hesitates, but then unlocks the latch and swings the windows open. I swallowed hard. There was no going back now.

Father glowers down at me. “Vlad, tonight, your transition into hunting will display your capabilities and growth as a vampire who has reached maturity, thus proving yourself worthy of your mighty lineage.” I nod glumly, wishing I was back in the crypts playing with Father’s trophies.

Stretching out his arms, he launches himself into the air, and I reluctantly follow him. Fur sprouts all over my body as I start to shrink, and leathery sheets burst out from my arms. I flap them, the sensation of flight elevating my spirits, if only for a moment. With a stern cock of his head, Father beckons me to leave. Two bats fly out from the castle window, making their way towards the town close by. To complete my test, my first hunt as a vampire.

I catch a glimpse of a sign reading STOKER STREET as we fly, and my twitching ears captured the growing sounds of music below us, rising louder and louder until we were engulfed in the cacophony. My heart sinks. We have arrived. We land on an apartment, and my fur and wings instantly retract into my body as we grow back to our original height. Father walks over to the building’s edge, and leers below.

“Vlad, come here. These are the humans that you will hunt tonight” Father directs, raising his voice over the racket. I meagrely approach him and follow his gaze...and my eyes grow wide upon seeing the crammed herds of

humans; all dancing and cheering wildly as musicians and performers paraded before them in the streets.

“Wow, look at them all!” I exclaim in wonder. “I have never seen so many! Why are they dancing? And why are they all dressed so strangely, with face paint and masks? That one is covered in loose bandages, is he injured? And one over there, look at him, he is green! They never dressed like this during flying practice. Why are they now? And why in so many strange forms? And why are they all celebrat—”

Father sharply silences me with a look, dark with disapproval. “Your fascination with humanity will impair your performance.” He snarls. “I do not understand why humans wear these ridiculous disguises every All Hallows’ Eve. Perhaps they feel emboldened, as if they think it helps protect them.”

I frown, thinking back to Father’s trophies. Pity wells up inside me like water from a spring. Their skulls are so thin, no wonder they need protection. They live such short lives in constant terror of being killed. Even if Father says that is their purpose, it must be hard.

“Now remember Vlad.” He sternly instructs, jabbing a talon at my chest. “Do not let them spot you, do not interact with them, do not run away, and DO NOT let one get away. You will not be allowed to return home until you drain a human before sunrise. Do you understand?”

Staring at the sea of humans, vertigo strikes. Draining one, like how Father drained all those whose skulls he mounted, how can I go through with it? What if I cannot?

“...I understand Father, but —”. I turn to face him, but I am alone. Save for the carefree, oblivious hundreds below. The dizziness slowly fades away, but the nauseating anxious feeling in the pit of my stomach sticks like tar. In the starless night blanketing the sky, the moon is still floating high, but it will not remain that way forever. If I cannot drain a human before the sun alights the earth, then I will let down my family name. I will disappoint my father and break the heart of my mother. And perish through my failure. I must kill a human. I have too...I need too.

With shaky resolve, I leap off the building and take flight. I flutter over the partying hordes in the streets, observing their movements and actions, all the while trying to quell the growing sensation of thirst I feel while watching them. Father says I must let go of my interest in humans and embrace my instincts, since they exist to be food for us to prey upon. But I cannot help but be fascinated. They are so full of life, despite their mortality. Or maybe because of it. All those broken, empty skulls Father keeps, did the humans who possessed them like this? Those skulls no longer carry such overwhelming energy and joy as these people do, and...when I drain a human, neither will they.

After flying for what feels like an eternity, my wings grow heavy with fatigue. I teeter into a nearby darkly lit alleyway, away from the festivity. Fur shifts into sweat-soaked skin and wings morph back into sore arms when they slap onto the rough pavement. I groan on my hands and knees, as if I am bowing in submission. Out of frustration, fear, and crippling self-pity, I finally start to sob. I just...I cannot do it. I am not ready. Father's right, I am too soft-hearted to mature into a hunter, too timid to rely on my instincts. He would think I was not worthy of being his son and heir. What kind of a vampire am I?

"Hey kid, you okay?". I slowly peer up, and there, standing with his hand outstretched before me, is a human man! Occasionally I would spot a few walking at night whenever I practiced flying, but never have I seen one this close! His face is sloppily smeared with white powder, and he wears a garish crimson suit and cape. What surprises me the most was his teeth. They are not the feeble pebble-like teeth found in human jaws that I so often play with, but they do not resemble my fangs either. His are translucent, dull, and wobbly, not even close to looking real. Why would he give himself fake fangs? To try and protect himself, like Father said? Was he trying to resemble what *we* looked like, blending in to avoid detection? But he has no pointed ears, elongated sharp fingers, burning eyes, or even proper fangs.

Despite his efforts to mask his human appearance, he still looks just as utterly fragile and defenseless as the rest of his kind does. He cannot hide what he truly is. If I listen closely enough, I can hear the soft sound of his blood, flowing through his veins like water in a stream. And the smell of it, though faint, is still palpable! The scent wafts in the air, and it is so rich and so near and so...n-no, this is happening too soon. What are the chances that a human would just blissfully wander towards me, when I could barely brace myself to attack one when his back is turned? Ignoring the hand in front of me, I hoist myself up, unable to look him in the eye.

"Wow, your costume is awesome! Your mask is so lifelike! Right down to the teeth and pointy ears, it's like they're real! How'd you pull it off? And gosh, did you shave your head? That's some commitment! You should enter the costume contest, you'd definitely win!"

I do not know whether to attack or run. We are alone in the alleyway and his neck is bare. But he seems so cordial and unassuming, with no hint of malice or suspicion in him at all. Only kindness. All that trust and sincerity towards me, as if I was a friend...how will he react when I drain him? My stomach twists and writhes like a whirlpool, yet it is not just from the trepidation of what I should do and must do alone. There was another force alongside it which made it growl like a ravenous beast anticipating its kill. Hunger.

The scorching sensation in my throat sears even more as the tantalizing scent of his blood lingers – urging me to drink! It will be so fresh, especially compared to the stale droplets I would suck out from the severed limbs Mother and Father would bring me back from their hunts. Maybe I should – no! No, not like this! Not this way! I force my rising mouth shut, clenching my fangs to conceal them. The hinges of my jaws ache from the tenacious force I summon to just barely restrain them. My body violently trembles with adrenaline and voracity, but I manage to remain still. He looks young, too young, young enough to have companions and a family. Who am I to rob him of that, to rob them of him? I start to sweat. Images of my Father’s trophies burst in my mind as my head swims with anxiety. Attacking him will inflict the same pain, terror, and death that Father inflicted onto all those humans whose skulls and lives he has claimed. But if I spare him, then my harrowing appetite will continue to grow, and I will be left to the mercy of the morning dawn as a weak fledgling who failed to pass into vampirehood.

“Hey, what’s the matter?” His smile fades away like mist. “It’s alright bud. Relax, you’re shaking like a leaf. And you’re sweating pretty good too.” He reaches over to touch my shoulder, but I push him away, barely restraining myself from biting into his arm.

“I’m not going to hurt you, I promise.” He says, his face full of empathy. “Believe me, I’m just trying to help. Are you lost? Where are your parents? Do you need help?”

I turn away, unable to look at his warm, concerned face any longer. I can scarcely breathe, my pants barely managing to rise louder than the sound of my quickening heart and roaring stomach. How can he not hear it? Are his human senses so unperceptive that he is this ignorant of danger? He shows no alarm, why does he not run away? I cannot let him flee, it would be shameful, and Father ordered me to catch my prey, and yet...

A dim glow from above catches my eye. Instinctually, I glance at the sky, searching desperately for some reprieve, some clarity, some form of hope or help. But instead, staring down at me like a great pale eye, is the moon. It is almost down.

My throat emits a small whimpering cry. The bitter indifference of time, and the realization of how swiftly it passed, chills me more than the cold, howling autumn wind ever could. Fear floods me. Not for the human’s life, but for mine. Every inch the moon treads across the horizon is another moment heralding the sun’s accession. Every passing fleeting second is dragging me closer to my demise! Towards burning and fire! Ash and dust! Evaporation and death! Agony! Nothingness!

Yet even through this panic; even as all the muscles in my body tighten and shake with an intensity only brought on by utterly primal fright, even as

my throat constricts and I gasp for air, that man's scent still prevails! And it's maddening! Another bolt of pain strikes my stomach as my craving rises to a crescendo. Drool pours out my gaping mouth. I cannot hold back anymore; I am powerless – utterly engulfed by anxiety and near-starvation, and I must escape it or die! I must drink or die! I must do this now – I must survive!

“Oh my God kid, what's wrong? Can you breathe? Hang on, I'm going to call an ambula-“

I whip back, my back hunching over and my claws aiming at him, ready to strike. The man freezes when he sees my frenzied expression. When he sees my eyes – my wild, searing, desperate, utterly inhuman eyes – for the first time, he at last seems to recognize the grave peril he is in. His rosy face blanches into a ghostly pale, and his mouth drops open in shock. Like a frightened animal, he recoils, his instincts urging him to run. To live. But so must I.

With a shrieking wail, I pounce, hooking onto his back, sending him crashing head-first onto the stone pavement before he can scream. Pinning down the twitching body, my fangs intuitively pierce into his soft neck with the force of thrusting spears. Warm blood oozes out like sap from a tree, and I suck vigorously. The aroma is intoxicating – the taste so delectably sweet and flavoursome! Never did I taste blood so fresh, so pure! Oh, it is so satisfying and soothing, my hunger abating with each gulp, never in my life did I feel such utter elation!

Sheer frantic desperation drives me to drink harder and faster, until I can drain no more. Wrenching my fangs from his throat, I clamber off him, gasping and quaking. For an instant I am too rattled to think clearly. But from that exhilaration and relief, one thought manages to surface. I *passed*. The moon still hangs over me. I am alive. I almost grin. But then I see him, and realization sets in like a cold frost. He is hardly recognizable. What was so lively and amicable is now a shriveled, lifeless corpse. His face frozen in confusion, horror, and anguish. And his head. It is completely bashed open, with bits of brain and bone scattered alongside the ground like broken glass. All my relief dies out. It is then I notice how wet my face is. Tears stain my cheeks. Along with blood. His blood.

“Well done.” I whip my head around to see Father behind me, gazing at the corpse. “You have proven your strength. You are now a true vampire, my son” He smiles. It was a wisp of a smile, but a smile, nonetheless. Pride surges in me, but it dwindles away as quickly as it came when I remember the dead human's shattered skull.

“I see your sorrow, but it is unwarranted. You will get used to it Vlad. This is simply the way of things. With every hunt, it will feel more natural,” Father mutters, his eyes steely. “You may even come to enjoy it, as I do.” He then crouches down before the body, clasping his talons around the man's

busted head. With a mighty jerk, he yanks it clean off with a sickening snap. I do not yell or cry, but I cannot stop myself from flinching.

“This is a trophy well-worth keeping. A fine accomplishment to add in my collection. A sign that you have fully matured,” He states. “Come, we must make it back before sunrise.” Vaulting himself into the air, he flies off. Sparing one last sullen glance at the headless body, I follow.

We burst through the open castle window like lightning. The moment we set foot on the floor, Mother immediately rushes over to close the window drapes and meets with Father.

“He passed? He was successful?” She asks, alleviation beaming from her face.

“Yes, Vlad managed to drain a human,” Father states, holding up the head. “Though he is melancholic,” He shrugs. “I expect it will pass quickly. As for this,” he gestures to the head, his lip curling into a smirk, “I will place this down with the others. Vlad will assist me in cleaning and polishing it tomorrow. Though for now, I must rest for the next night.” With that, Father walks downstairs to the crypts. No sooner is he out of sight than Mother tightly wraps her arms around me. I bury my head in her shoulder, accepting the warmth of her hug.

“Vlad, I was so worried,” Mother murmurs. “You came back so late, I almost thought...” She hugs me tighter. “I am proud of you. We both are. You should be too; you have achieved a milestone in your life. Now you can fend for yourself. How do you feel?”

“Mother, I feel so tired,” I whisper, my heart heavy with reflection.

“...I understand, son. Sleep well,” She nods, letting me go. The climb down the crypts feels longer than usual, as exhaustion saps my strength. I am alive, but I feel different. Older. Wearier. What I must do to keep living is clearer than ever. Every night will bring a new death so I can survive. I cannot escape my instincts, and my prey cannot escape their fate at my hands. Lest I am willing to endure crippling starvation or embrace the sun’s inferno. That human will not be the last to be drained by me. I wish – well, it is pointless. I can wonder, I can lament, I can even mourn, but what good would it do for me? I cannot alter the order of things, or what has happened. He is dead, nothing can change that. Even if I wanted too, I cannot. Still, all I can think about is killing him. The surge of emotions. The strength of my attack. The taste of his blood. His mashed head. His face aghast.

I reach the bottom of the stairs, where thousands of vacant, shaded skulls greet me. I want to rush over them and examine the nearest one, to continue my innocent exploration of human features, but now, my curiosity is not peaking like it did before. They all look the same, all from dead blood-

sapped humans. Even the old skull with the cranium cracked open, which used to fascinate me for hours on end, is just another skull resembling the latest one in Father's collection. Placed on a shelf, with wide agonized eyes gazing at nothing, its forehead cracked open to create a large gaping hole, is the fresh head of the human I killed.