

## Prologue

Although the sun was reaching the zenith of its arc over the village of Corageni, few of its rays managed to break through the gloomy covering of gray clouds that coated the sky. The humid air gave a smell of rain and must to those who encountered it, but nonetheless, the village square was bustling with midday activity. Farmers, having made a trip in from the countryside, displayed the bounties of their harvests, craftsmen offered wares and creations born from their labor, and the citizenry perused the stalls with mild interest.

Corageni was a quiet village, with a peaceful people who kept to their own business. Their humble homes and business were nestled into a valley beneath the shadow of a large hill, sparse forests of black trees and gnarled bushes breaking up the landscape of wild yellow grass. Most striking was the black and red mansion at the crest of the hill, Falger Manor. Casting a shadow over the village, the mansion's pointed spires and rigid walls inspired awe in those passing through, even in the faded light of a cloudy day.

That was the sight first seen by a colorful caravan of wagons, kicking up dust on the dirt-covered roads that lead into the village. The red and green flags drew curious eyes and the vibrant vestments draped over the animals brought delight to the eyes of passing children. Those who are familiar with such sights would quickly identify the caravan as a travelling circus.

The wagons moved through the streets, passing near the square. Performers of all shapes and sizes briefly emerged, throwing out leaflets that advertised their acts. Curiosity and caution was most of what Corageni had to offer, but the caravan clearly had made its choice. As it moved beyond the center of the village, circling a small clearing, people poured out of the wagons and began to prepare for a show.

The circus had come to Corageni.

## Part 1: The Circus

“A circus?” Khryso was intrigued by the idea of a circus arriving in Corageni.

“One of the girls made sure to fetch you one of their papers, Baron.”

Baron Khryso Mallus stood still in his dressing room as he drifted into thought. Meredith, one of his brides, fussed over his outfit, making sure his black tie was perfectly straight and his waistcoat was smooth. She was strikingly beautiful, with sharp features, clear pale skin, and raven black hair. Her feminine form remained clad only in her nightdress for the time being.

Khryso's thoughts were elsewhere, however. He'd only been to the circus once, as a child. Before his birth mother had died, he'd attended one with her. A memory he valued more—so for its connection with his old family than for anything that actually transpired within it. Back then, a circus had seemed like an exotic fantasy of miraculous wonders. Now, however, when considering what a circus represented, his considerations were elsewhere. A spectacular show, perhaps, but more interesting was the variety of foreign souls that would be there. People from outside Corageni: an infrequent occurrence.

“Have her bring it to me,” he eventually decided, addressing the paper Meredith had mentioned.

Meredith nodded, smiling. “Of course, Baron.”

“How do I look?” Khryso inquired, stepping back and spreading his arms. He was a handsome man with a square jaw, someone who could pass for being in his thirties. Pale skin, black hair that was almost blue, and clear red eyes with a strong but lean build. His golden shirt beneath a black silk tie and waistcoat alongside black trousers with golden trim and slick black boots put his wealth on display.

“Beautiful, as always,” Meredith practically swooned, though Khryso was never sure how much of a show she was putting on. One of the things he missed most about his old life was the ability to check his own reflection. The unfortunate reality, however, is that he became a living undead, a creature of the night many years ago. Baron Mallus was, indeed, a vampire. The details behind that, however, are a story for another day. For now, Khryso merely has to believe that Meredith adheres to his same high standards of dress.

“My thanks, darling,” Khryso replied, smiling slightly. “I'll be in the sitting room. After you've sent the girl, awaken Mira and the both of you prepare for a night out.”

“Of course, Baron,” Meredith smiled, flowing forward and pressing a quick kiss upon Khryso's lips before she departed from the room. Meredith had been the first woman he turned, when he was still trying to find his way. She proved herself a valuable

servant and confidant, eventually earning her status as a bride, Khryso's second in command. She was always looking after him, sometimes to an obnoxious extent, but had become even more persistent and fawning since he had taken his second bride, Mira. Evidently, she felt threatened in her position.

As Khryso moved out of the dressing room and into his bedroom, however, his thoughts began to shift. Like most evenings, Falger Manor was quiet and calm. Most of the staff went to sleep during the night, with only a skeleton crew remaining awake during the night to serve the house's master, Baron Mallus. The beautiful detailing and decor of the mansion was constantly under its master's scrutiny, often shifting and changing to suit his whims. He refused to allow the place to fall into any kind of disrepair or ugliness. Just like him, he wanted Falger Manor to remain eternally beautiful.

The last man in the Falger bloodline had been Khryso's adopted father, Timothy. A man who had taken him in after the death of Khryso's birth parents, he had been a Baron in almost name only. Ownership of this mansion and stewardship of Corageni was all that was left to Timothy Falger. Upon Timothy's death, that had passed on to Khryso. In the future, Khryso had every intention of restoring the full Barony of the Falger line and growing his own nobile title further. For the time being, however, he did his best to preserve the mansion and the Falger legacy while continuing to watch over Corageni.

The village had few problems and rarely caused trouble. They were a humble people, without many wild dreams or worries. Khryso could never tell for sure how much they knew about him. Rumors about his youthfulness and reclusivity. Nervous whispers when the simple townsfolk who worked at his mansion slowly became zealously loyal. Curious musings about the occasional villager who would suddenly "leave town" without letting anyone know. Perhaps on some level, they knew his new nature. Their acceptance of his stewardship might come from fear of just what might happen if they defied him. Who was to say?

As the Baron arrived in the sitting room, his thoughts faded. He strode over to his chair, sitting carefully, and folded his hands. The soft clicking of the grandfather clock in the corner was the only sound that reverberated through the room as Khryso sat perfectly still, almost as if he were a statue. Time passed and he remained patiently waiting for the arrival of his brides.

Before either of his darlings arrived, however, a girl, still in the prime of her youth, entered the room nervously. She was dressed in the frilly black and white dress that

marked her as one of the servants of the Baron. She was entirely unremarkable in appearance and her cautious demeanor betrayed the anxiety she was feeling. Even if her body language hadn't given away her feelings, Khryso could smell the mixture of fear and admiration that so many humans gave off in his presence.

"Please, don't keep me waiting," he said, turning to look directly at her. The sudden movement startled the girl and her eyes went wide as she bowed her head and approached skittishly.

"Apologies, Baron. Baroness Meredith ordered me deliver this flyer to ya..." she held out her hands, offering Khryso a discolored poster. Khryso reached out and took the paper gently.

"Back to work, dear," he said, dismissing her with a wave of his hand. She bowed quickly and backpedaled out of the room as the Baron's eyes scanned over the advertisement. What once was perhaps a colorful illustration of various circus acts had faded and yellowed, but the text was still plenty readable. Dragavei's Traveling Circus, featuring talents and wonders from across the world. The claim was dubious, but still worth investigating.

Neatly folding the leaflet, Khryso tucked it into the inner breast pocket of his waistcoat. Silence broken only by the ticking clock once again enveloped the room. Fleeting thoughts passed through the Baron's head as he waited, noting details about the room's decor or musing about the conditions of the weather. Long waits didn't bother him like they had in life. Of course, there was always something to be said for brevity, but a certain sense of urgency had left his mind along with his mortality.

At last, Meredith and Mira arrived. Where Meredith was a picture of statuesque elegance, clad in a sultry black fitted Victorian gown, Mira was a vibrant bombshell. Mira's dark blonde hair was arrayed luxuriously over one shoulder, spilling over her revealing red and purple dress. Her hourglass figure and ample assets complimented her pretty, soft features and round face.

Mira had been born in Corageni not long ago and, when Khryso had first seen her, he'd been smitten. A steamy love affair between the two ensued and, after a time, the Baron decided to take her as a wife. Her commitment to Khryso had been so great that upon hearing some dissent from her family, Mira had slaughtered all of them to cut her ties entirely with the world of the living. This earned her quite the reputation amongst the residents of Corageni and served as a potent reminder of what she was capable of despite her cheerful and vacuous demeanor.

“Good evening, beloved!” Mira smiled, sitting on Khryso’s lap and planting a kiss on his lips. “Is it true that we’ll be visiting the circus tonight?”

“That was my plan,” the Baron responded, wrapping an arm around her waist. “Do behave yourself, dear. Of course, I don’t want to keep you from having fun, but I don’t want to make a scene.”

“I promise I’ll be on my best behavior!”

“Lovely,” Khryso responded, giving her waist a quick squeeze.

“Baron, we should probably leave before they close up for the night.” Meredith said, drawing Khryso’s attention.

“Right, of course,” Khryso said, standing up and causing Mira to slide off his lap. She caught herself after a brief stumble, managing to stay on her feet. “Baroness Meredith, Baroness Mira, would you kindly accompany me to see Dragavei’s Traveling Circus?”

“Of course, Baron,” Meredith said, hooking her left arm around his right.

“Happily!” Mira said, hooking her right arm around his left.

The Baron and his brides strode through the halls of Falger Manor, making their way to the front door. There, they strode out into the cool evening air. A mostly cloudy sky only let the hint of a moonbeam through every now and then as a pleasantly cool breeze sifted through the mist settled on the hillside. As the three creatures made their way down the path, the sounds of rustling branches and chirping insects quieted. The air smelt of incoming rain and smoke. Even from here, the sight of the large tent in the distance, surrounded by lanterns and campfires, drew the eye.

The mist shifted and washed over the landscape like gentle waves as the trio moved into town. Corageni would normally be quieting down at this time of night, but the presence of the circus had led to a slight increase in nocturnal activity by its residents. Nonetheless, as the Baron and his wives made their way through the streets, gliding so smoothly they may as well be flying, anyone who crossed their paths remained quiet and gave them a wide berth. Occasionally, an older citizen would bow their head respectfully or pause to watch them pass, but most avoided any kind of prolonged exposure to the group.

As they neared the circus, the soft sounds of jovial music and simple revelry began to cut through the night ambience. The smell of baking sweets and captive animals wasn't entirely pleasant to Khryso, but he found no repulsion in it. Sounds of laughter and chatter quieted into hushed whispers as the Baron crossed onto the circus grounds. Even the foreign festival workers recognized the need for reverence, some of them staring at the new arrivals with awe and curiosity while others lowered their voices.

A couple of the workers attending the concession stands were brave enough to approach the trio, offering their wares. Mira seemed quite interested, so Khryso bought her a few candies and treats, all while his eyes curiously scanned the circus workers. Meredith viewed their surroundings with mild scorn while Mira seemed genuinely excited at the prospect of a night out.

It didn't take them long to arrive at the large tent that served as the centerpiece of the circus. A man in a colorful suit stood at the entrance, taking people's coin as he waved them through. When the man spotted Khryso, he hesitated for a moment before calling out. "Last show of the evening will be starting soon, good sir! You look like a man of taste, why don't you come in and enjoy yourself?"

Khryso approached the man, opening his mouth to speak, but Meredith beat him to it. "This is the Baron Khryso Mallus, steward of Corageni," she announced smugly, "please address him properly."

"My apologies, Baron," the man said, a bit nervously. He smoothed over his slick black hair with one hand. "Allow me to offer you a discount and the best seats in the big-top!"

Khryso smiled, his lips pressed tightly together. He reached into his coin purse and produced the appropriate payment. The man smiled toothily in response, leaning into the tent as he waved them through. He quickly whispered to a nearby worker who led Khryso, Meredith, and Mira into the front row at the center of the seating area. Many of the people sitting nearby shifted uncomfortably or quietly moved to a different row.

The tent wasn't terribly crowded, most of the people had probably come to the earlier shows. Khryso could smell the lingering aura of the crowds that had previously kept the circus quite busy. He wouldn't be surprised if most of the town had been here throughout the day. The inside of the tent was arranged with a large circle walled off in the middle of the room, surrounded by chairs and benches. It wasn't the largest operation, but it was big enough to at least get Mira excited. More-so than the spectacle itself, however, Khryso was interested in seeing the performers.

They didn't have to wait long, fortunately. The ringleader soon appeared, a man with an over-the-top fashion sense, large hat, and thick mustache. He welcomed the crowd and gave the Baron a special shout-out before taking time to hype up the various acts that would be performing.

First up were the clowns. A collection of half a dozen goofy actors in eye-catching make-up. Their comedy didn't leave much of an impression on Khryso, but they seemed to be a hit with the crowd. Perhaps it was their overly expressive demeanor or their preference for slapstick, but Khryso found them largely uninteresting. Mira sat at giggling attention while Meredith leaned against Khryso, mirroring his emotional state.

After the clowns, a handful of animals were paraded around and made to do simple tricks. Goats, sheep, dogs, nothing particularly interesting. Mundane animals Khryso had encountered before were led by trainers of various shapes and sizes. A couple of the beasts got a reaction from the audience, but it was almost duller than the clown act.

After that, there were some performers doing small magic tricks and simple acts like juggling and fire eating. At this point, Khryso was on the verge of calling the show a bust. He was more bored than he had hoped, leaving his attention split between the acts and Meredith as she nuzzled against his neck to keep herself occupied.

For the next act, several acrobats appeared and began to do some advanced gymnastics and fairly dangerous feats of dexterity and prowess. This particular performance finally drew the Baron's attention. It was a bit more interesting due to the danger a lot of the actors were putting themselves in, but what drew Khryso's eye was one of the acrobats in particular. A spry young Eastern woman performing on a trapeze. She was clearly one of the most talented among the troupe, pulling off stomach-turning flips and pinpoint maneuvers in mid-air, but was also quite an exotic beauty.

Khryso's eyes tracked her the for the entirety of the acrobat's performance and even as they gave their bow and left the tent. The clowns came out again for another performance, but the Baron wasn't interested in them. Standing up, he turned towards the exit. Meredith, who had evidently picked up on his interest during the acrobatic display, stood to follow him wordlessly. Mira looked up, confused.

"Come, Mira," Khryso commanded. She pouted but stood, watching the clowns as they made their way towards the exit.

“Uh, Baron, is something wrong?” the stout man who had been working the tent’s entrance approached them, wringing his hands somewhat nervously.

“No,” Khryso said, turning to look the man in the eyes. “I found what I want.” He focused intensely on the man, bringing the full force of his presence into a piercing gaze that could not be broken. “Where did the acrobats go?”

“To their wagon...” the man said, his voice distant and weak. “I can show you-”

“Directions will suffice,” Khryso said, not breaking eye contact as the man meekly described the wagon and how to get there. “After this show,” the Baron said, “you may want to get back on the road.”

The man nodded slowly, his eyes remaining locked with Khryso’s. Finally, the Baron broke his gaze, turning back towards the exit. The man stood frozen for a moment before shaking his head briefly, as if coming out of a daze. After a quick nervous glance towards Khryso, he shuffled off.

Khryso followed the directions he had been given, making his way back around the tent to where most of the wagons were gathered. It was not hard to find the wagon in question. All of the vehicles were decorated with various advertisements for the circus and the acts within it. *Lahovary and his Amazing Aerialists* was painted on the side of the wagon in a garish green and yellow pattern, emulating the colors on the acrobats’ leotards.

As the trio approached the entrance of the wagon, a bare-chested man with a decorative sword on his belt held up his hand. “Not so fast,” he said in a deep, gravelly voice.

Khryso glanced over at Meredith, inclining his head slightly towards the guard. Meredith nodded in understanding, sultrily sauntering up to the man, leaning against his chest as she put a hand on his shoulder. His eyes quickly were drawn to her, but he didn’t put his guard up.

“You’re probably pretty lonely standing out here all by yourself,” she whispered, “there are much better ways to be spending your time.” The man, completely caught up in her attention, tilted his head curiously, as if trying to decipher what was happening.



“Let me show you,” Meredith whispered, grabbing his arm and leading him around to the side of the wagon. He didn’t put up much resistance, following her and seemingly forgetting entirely about Khryso and Mira. With the guard out of the way, Khryso made his way up the small set of stairs that led to the door. As he opened it, he heard the guard grunt in surprise and shock as Meredith tore his throat open.

The interior of the wagon was separated into two different sections. One section, where the entrance was, had been outfitted like a small dressing room, with some mirrors, wardrobes, and stools. The back, slightly larger section, was a somewhat cramped living space. Small bunks were stuffed wherever they fit and a worn green rug had been spread out on the floor beneath them. A rickety table stood in the center with a trio of chairs around it and a pile of various items on top of it.

Five acrobats were within the wagon, and when the door opened, all of them turned to see it. “Who are you?” one of them asked, the tallest man with a wiry frame. Khryso ignored the question, searching their faces to find the one he had taken interest in. It didn’t take him long to identify her. She stood in the back, one of her feet propped up on a bed as she had been in the middle of stretching. They had eye contact for several seconds before Khryso was interrupted by the acrobat who had spoken putting a hand on his shoulder. “You shouldn’t be in here.”

Khryso snorted indignantly, grabbing the man’s wrist and quickly twisting it. The bones snapped and splintered, causing the man to cry out and the rest of the acrobat’s to react. One of them stepped forward to help the now-injured man while a third approached Khryso angrily. The Baron had never broken eye contact with his target and she remained frozen, staring back at him, as if she hadn’t even noticed what was going on.

“Mira,” he said, “do what you will with the rest, but that one,” he gestured towards the woman in the back, “is mine.”

Mira giggled happily leaping forward and throwing the angry acrobat against the side of the wagon. Her movement suddenly bestial and quick, completely caught the rest of them off-guard. As she began to happily rip and tear her way through them, laughing cheerfully the whole time, Khryso calmly walked towards his target.

“Your name, please,” he whispered, cupping her face in his hand.

“Kagawa Kazue,” she whispered, her dark eyes wide and unblinking. She was still quite warm, in the midst of the process of cooling down after her performance. Her

skin was clear and firm, her body molded to excel at her craft. She was petite and yet a powerful confidence and presence made her stand out. Still smelling of sweat and exertion, it took Khryso a few moments to separate her scent from that of her fellows. Once he did, however, he could sense her blood pumping, her body pulsing with living energy.

Unable to hold himself back any longer, Khryso leaned down, slowly pushing his head against her shoulder. The hand he had against her face shifted to a firmer grip as his other hand held the small of her back. With their eye contact broken, he could feel her awareness slowly returning. If he waited too long, she would see Mira tearing her troupe to pieces. The wagon splattered with red blood and gore. He had no intention of waiting, however. With a practiced grace, Khryso opened his mouth and clamped down on her throat.

He held himself back, resisting the urge to tear it out and instead let his fangs sink in deeper and deeper, penetrating her external carotid artery and creating a passage her lifeblood could follow to the surface. The warm, metallic liquid began to pour into his mouth. Khryso quickly shifted his grip as her body became weaker in response. Hungrily, he slurped down what blood he could, immersing himself in the taste but constantly having to remind himself not to go overboard. Unlike the rest of the acrobats, he had no intention of letting her die. At least, not yet.

The Baron reluctantly withdrew, licking her neck clean. Her scarlet life force still stained his lips as he caught her now weak body in his arms. Khryso smiled down at Kazue's mystified and distant expression. Looking up, he finally bore witness to the carnage Mira had wrought.

All four of the other acrobats had their throats torn out entirely, with most of them also missing one or more limbs. Their clothing and bodies were rent with slashes and claw-marks inches deep and most of the scene was covered in various amounts of blood. Mira was crouched over one of the acrobats, greedily sucking down the geyser of liquid that was pouring out of one of their wounds.

"Mira," Khryso said, grimacing at the gruesome scene. "It's time to go."

She paused for a moment, glancing back at Khryso. She was grinning from ear to ear, her entire face dripping in blood. "Already?"

Khryso nodded. "I don't want to hold up the circus' departure. You haven't had enough fun?"

“Oh, well,” Mira stood up abruptly, her more ferocious demeanor quickly evaporating as she straightened her now stained dress, “I suppose that’s enough. Though I wish we could have finished seeing the show.”

“Next time, perhaps,” Khryso mused, beginning to walk towards the door. He strode carefully, not wanting to dirty his shoes on the carnage. The Baron held Kazue in a bridal carry as he approached the exit. “The door, please,” he said, glancing over at Mira.

“Oh, of course!” Mira jaunted over to the door, taking none of the caution Khryso had, and opened it for him.

Meredith was waiting outside, standing guard. When she saw Khryso carrying the acrobat, an eyebrow raised warily. “What do you plan on doing with that, Baron?”

“We will see,” he said firmly, clearly indicating to Meredith it wasn’t up for discussion at the moment. She relented in her questioning, glancing back behind Mira and into the wagon. With a resigned expression, she joined the two of them on their way back to Falger Manor. Khryso made sure to take a different, less populated path out of the circus. While the citizens of Corageni would not question them on the woman he was carrying or Mira’s current state of cleanliness, the residents of the circus might.

By the time they arrived at the top of the hill, the circus was already beginning to pack up. Mira insisted on sitting on the balcony to watch them go while Meredith accompanied Khryso and Kazue inside. With the circus gone from Corageni, the town would return to its normal quiet atmosphere. At least, for the time being.

## **Part 2: The Comedown**

“Another excellent offering,” Khryso decided, lifting the champagne flute to eye level. Thick red blood swirled within it as he gently rotated the vessel, keeping an eye out for any impurities. “Make sure Sarah gets a bonus. Keep it meager, though.”

“Of course, Baron,” Meredith said in response, smiling. Khryso was in the sitting room of Falger Manor alongside his brides. Meredith, who had just presented him with another gift from some of Corageni’s residents, was standing by his side. Mira was lounging on a couch, idly flipping through the latest issue of Corageni’s weekly newspaper. His newest bride, Kazue, was kneeling beside him, on the opposite side as

Meredith. While Khryso was dressed in an elegant robe, the three women were clad in skimpy nightdresses.

In the months since the Circus had left town, Khryso had been taking the time to transform and adjust Kazue to her new role as his third bride. The transition hadn't been easy for her and she hadn't been thrilled at first, but over time she was learning her place. The Baron had *encouraged* Corageni's residents to accommodate their new Baroness' position, which of course meant gifts of blood over the last several weeks. Khryso had no desire to transform or kill the entire town, so he'd learned to make exchanges transactional when he needed to.

"Have a taste," Khryso said, lowering the flute to Kazue's lips. She opened her mouth enough to let the crimson drink trickle through her lips. She was still relatively young in vampire terms, so Kazue was still learning how to manage her thirst. Khryso had to make sure she didn't drink too much, lest she become greedy and seek it out without his permission.

Mira had now turned and was watching Kazue drink, licking her lips. "Can I have some, dear?"

Khryso pulled the glass away from Kazue. It was now mostly empty. Ignoring Mira, he downed the rest himself before setting the flute on his side table. "There's more in the cellar," he said quietly, "but I don't want to waste it all at once."

Mira pouted and went back to reading. Khryso put a hand on top of Kazue's head, slowly petting her. "Perhaps we should-" his voice immediately fell silent as a distant banging could be heard. Someone was at the door. That was entirely unusual. "Meredith, see to that," he said curiously.

Meredith hesitated before going to the door. Of course it was entirely within the purview of the servants to answer the door, but Khryso was intrigued. Anyone arriving at this hour and knocking on the door so boldly surely had a purpose in mind. He wanted to greet them with something more than a simple servant girl.

After a minute, the knocking ceased. Khryso focused and he could hear the murmurings of conversation between Meredith and the guest. Then, suddenly, a shuffling sound, as if the two had started dancing. Something was going on.

Khryso jumped to his feet. He strode quickly and purposefully towards the foyer. When he drew within sight of the door, he froze, confused. He couldn't entirely

process what it was he saw. The door was open and Meredith was leaning against the door frame. Except, her head was absent and a stake had been driven through her heart. Before he even approached her, she knew she had died in the seconds it had taken him to arrive.

His head began to swim. The encounter had lasted less than a minute and yet, here she was, a corpse, well and truly dead. Khryso crouched down next to Meredith's body, putting a hand on her shoulder. She was dead and yet...he felt no grief. He wasn't happy, that was certain, but he felt no need to cry or mourn her. He was more concerned with the hows and whys and, most importantly, the who.

"Mira!" he shouted. In seconds, she was at his side, staring at Meredith with wide eyes. "Get dressed. We're going out."

It had been quite a while since Khryso had tracked someone through the underbrush. The killer's trail led them down the hill and back into town, so it wasn't a long trip, but crouching low to the ground and sorting through the myriad of scents took Khryso back. In the early days of his vampirism, when he had been adjusting to his thirst and hunted down his prey like an animal. They weren't pleasant memories—in fact, the Baron found them rather embarrassing. However, it had been quite a while since he thought about them.

Mira and Khryso made their way through Corageni. It was late, past midnight, so there were no residents roaming the streets. That made things easier, the scent of his prey easier to pick out and keep a hold of. Unsurprisingly, the trail went to Corageni's tavern, The Flying Pig. Whoever had killed Meredith had chosen to rest here. Khryso wasn't entirely sure how late the inn stayed open on a normal night, but the fact that there was light filtering through the stained windows made him cautious.

"Why did you stop?" Mira asked, clearly anxious. As soon as they had begun their hunt, an excitable energy had begun to waft off of her as she anticipated the kill. Khryso could tell she wanted to find their prey as soon as possible. While Khryso had dressed up in a suit up to his usual standards of dress, Mira was wearing a tight white blouse that was only half-buttoned up, a pair of tight brown leather pants, and black boots. Normally, Khryso would have asked her to dress up a bit more, but this was a unique situation and it wasn't on his mind.

"Is the tavern always open this late?" he asked her, unsure if she would know.

Mira shrugged in response. “Sometimes, I guess it depends on their clientele.”

Khryso pressed his lips together firmly. A bad feeling was starting to creep up the back of his neck. He listened for any sounds from within. Complete silence. That couldn't be a good sign either. Surely if this were a normal evening, there would be sounds of people eating, drinking, or socializing. He glanced over at Mira. “Go, be wary.”

Mira grinned, happily baring her fangs. She dashed over to the door, kicking it open and barreling inside. Something came at her, Khryso couldn't see exactly what, but she was faster, moving slickly beneath it as she dropped to all fours and disappeared from view. The sounds of a scuffle started and Khryso was at the door mere moments later.

A figure in a black cloak was standing near the back of the main dining area, surrounded by a clumsy barricade of tables and chairs. In one hand, they held an odd contraption that resembled a crossbow and in the other, they held a large silver crucifix. Mira was dashing around the room, moving from floor to wall to ceiling, closing the gap between them while avoiding the bolts coming out of the cloaked figure's weapon.

Khryso hesitated at the door. He wanted to go after the prey, run in like Mira had, but the sight of the crucifix forced him to pause. The Baron felt his stomach sinking, like he was becoming ill. Something he hadn't felt in a lifetime.

Before he could process it clearly, a second figure jumped out from behind the bar, also cloaked in black but significantly larger than the first. They had timed their reveal just as Mira crossed their path, clotheslining her and sending the vampire bride hurtling into the wall. She quickly recovered, bouncing back onto her feet. Evidently, they had been so focused on the man with the crucifix that they had missed the presence of his friend.

Perhaps running in here had been a mistake. Khryso didn't want to risk losing Mira or even his own life to a trap that could have more surprises lying in wait. “Creatures of the night!” the crucifix wielding man announced in a gravelly but accented voice, “your retribution has finally arrived! Bow to your fate!”

Mira snarled in response, glancing at Khryso to try and gauge how he wanted to handle them. In the moment, the Baron's mind was racing, his senses trying to search out other traps that might be hidden in the room or nearby. His hesitation gave the speaker a chance to reload the weapon he was using. “I see no bowing!”

“Shut it, Elliot, this is an extermination, not a show!” The larger man’s voice was very deep but carried the same accent as his companion. The man slammed his fists together before dropping low into a fighting stance, pulling out two silver daggers.

In that moment, Mira struck, launching herself through the air towards the man called Elliot. A flurry of bolts shot from his weapon and, while it looked like some of them fit, they weren’t enough to stop Mira from closing the gap between them. Khryso didn’t have time to watch, however, as the large man had charged him.

Khryso quickly jumped backwards, out of the doorway. Pausing for a moment to focus, he forced his body to shatter apart, his consciousness remaining as his form divided into a swarm of bats and streamed through one of the tavern’s windows, shattering the glass. The group of creatures converged onto the fight between Elliot and Mira. Mira had Elliot backed into a corner, but the tussle didn’t seem close to resolving itself. Mira had taken her fair share of hits, but Elliot was bleeding as well.

The swarm quickly converged onto Elliot, biting and scratching at his eyes. Mira was able to press her advantage, but Elliot raised his crucifix defensively. Khryso instinctively retreated, the bats scattering as they tried to escape. Mira retreated cautiously, right into the other man who had charged back in with his daggers whirling.

Khryso quickly swarmed over Mira once again, forcing his body back together and hooking an arm around her waist. Like a streak of black, they shot out of the tavern door. Khryso carried Mira through back alleys and streets until they were on the outskirts of town. The whole time, Mira was punching, kicking, and biting, trying to get back at their prey.

Once he felt safe, Khryso threw Mira down, grabbing her throat with one hand and baring his fangs as he looked her in the eyes. The red haze that had overtaken her faded and she relaxed, laying still beneath him. “Focus,” Khryso said, looking her over. She had slashes and marks across her body, with two bolts sticking out of her, one in her shoulder and one in her abdomen. “We need to recover quickly and come up with a plan.”

Mira’s eyes went to a nearby house. Khryso nodded and the two of them stalked closer, Mira pulling the bolts out of herself. They entered the house and found the residents. Khryso left the children to Mira while he fed on the parents. It was a rushed, brutal feeding, but they needed to recover their strength and make sure they were in top form.

Once he was done, Khryso found Mira and they sat down in the dining room, Mira licking her bloodied lips while the Baron cleaned himself up with a towel.

“As long as they have that artifact at their side, it will be hard to take them on directly,” Khryso mused, crossing his arms. “We need to strike at them from behind, unexpectedly, and take them down quickly.”

“That shouldn’t be too hard,” Mira mused, sucking on one of her fingers.

“Theoretically, no,” Khryso agreed, “but we don’t know what other tricks they may have up their sleeve. I don’t like how easily they caught us off guard in there.”

“We have a trick up our sleeves, too,” Mira said, “bring along the little one next time. Then we’ll have a numbers advantage.”

Khryso considered the options. On the one hand, Kazue’s help could turn the tables in their favor. On the other, she was still a fresh new addition to the family. He didn’t want to risk losing her already and she hadn’t been properly tested in a situation like this.

“Oh, stop being so serious,” Mira purred, sliding onto his lap. “It’ll be fun! These ratbags are actually putting up a decent fight, that makes it interesting.”

Khryso looked her carefully in the eyes. “We need to take this seriously. I can’t risk the villagers seeing me struggling like this. If they got it in their head that they could oppose us...”

Mira snorted. “Right. If you’re so worried, then let’s just go deal with it already!”

Khryso sighed. “You’re right. Go back to the Manor, get Kazue and head to the tavern discreetly. I’ll provide a distraction and when their attention is on me, the two of you can sneak up and take them out from behind.”

“There, was that so hard?” Mira planted a quick kiss on Khryso’s cheek and jumped to her feet. “See you there, darling.” Just like that, she was gone.

The Baron stood up slowly, straightening his clothes and hair. He had to figure out a way to hold both of the enemy’s attention. With Mira gone, they would probably suspect something was up. He had to try, though. He couldn’t trust Kazue to take them both out in enough time.



It was time to begin. Stepping into the street across from the tavern, Khryso stood, doing his best to appear as regal as possible. “Strangers!” he shouted, his voice echoing through the dark, empty streets, “I am Baron Khryso Mallus of Corageni. You have violated the law here and therefore will be expelled!”

He was greeted with only silence. The lights of the tavern were still on and Khryso could sense that both of the men were still within. However, they chose not to respond. “If you do not surrender yourselves willingly,” the Baron continued, “I will have no choice but to kill you myself.”

“How do you plan to do that?!” Elliot’s voice responded from within. “Seems like ye struggled a bit that last time!”

Khryso focused on the voice, doing his best to estimate his foe’s position. “You have a big mouth, but for all your bluster, I am still here, standing free, while you are trapped within that building.”

“That’s what you think!” the voice responded and the door swung open. Elliot, the hood of his cloak now down, was standing in the doorway with his weapon and crucifix. He had messy rust-colored hair and a five o’clock shadow. “We can leave anytime we like. The thing is, we want to be here. We came here just for you.”

“Assassins?” Khryso asked, “I had not realized my station reached so high.”

Elliot snorted derisively. “Hunters. You left quite a mess in that circus. It took us a while to figure out where exactly it all happened, but when that undead wench greeted me at the door, I knew we had the right place.”

Khryso held his composure, unwilling to let his anger flare up at the mention of Meredith. “So provoking me was your intent? Drawing me into that pitiful trap?”

“I’ll admit, that didn’t work out quite—” Elliot’s eyes went wide as something pierced through his chest from the back. After the initial spray of blood and gore was out of the way, Khryso could see it was a forearm. As soon as he recognized it, the limb withdrew itself and Elliot fell onto the ground. Kazue crawled out from behind him on all fours and tore at his throat with her mouth.

Moments later, Mira appeared out of the tavern, grinning from ear to ear and half covered in blood. “You should have seen her,” she said cheerfully, “she was like a living shadow. Took out both of them like it was nothing!”

Khryso was stunned. His distraction had just barely started and somehow Kazue had gotten through both of the hunters. The big one hadn’t even been speaking with him and somehow the petite woman had apparently caught him unawares. He was entirely speechless.

Mira, still grinning, grabbed his arm and pulled him towards the tavern, offering him a drink from their victims. He considered the offer but, when he turned back to Mira, her head was gone. Looking around confused, he saw Kazue toss the head over her shoulder, turning her eyes to him.

“What do you think you’re doing?” He questioned, suddenly very focused.

Kazue flexed her fingers, her claws dripping in scarlet. “I can...” She paused, as if trying to find the words. “Hunt. I don’t need you.”

“Just calm down,” Khryso demanded, tensing up in preparation for a fight. “I don’t know what’s gotten into you, but this is all unnecessary. I can pretend that didn’t just happen.”

Kazue frowned. “I...this...” she clawed at her chest. “Why?”

Khryso’s lips tightened into a firm line. “This is why. I knew you had potential so I-”

“No!” She shouted back, her mouth twisting into a snarl. “Why do I have to listen to you? I...don’t.” She suddenly turned and ran. Before Khryso could respond, she was gone.

Looking around him, the Baron tried to process everything that had happened. The hunters were dead, but so were Meredith and Mira. Kazue had turned on him and had gone off somewhere. Perhaps the worst part, however, was that these hunters had found him at all. If they had, more could. He had handled the circus situation poorly, it would seem.

Khryso looked around at the carnage surrounding him. Someone needed to clean this up, but he sure wasn’t going to do it. He would have to get some of his servants to take

care of it. Hopefully they had the stomach for it. Turning towards the door, he made his way back towards Falger Manor.

## **Epilogue**

The people of Corageni were shaken by the bloodbaths that had taken place that night. They wanted answers as to what had happened and why, but the Baron didn't tell them much. Rumors began to float around town. Perhaps a serial killer was in their midst. The town was under siege from monsters. Some kind of magic ritual had gone out of control. Nobody knew for sure but everyone had their theories what had caused the deaths.

In the weeks that would follow, they heard less and less from the Baron. His servants began to be dismissed from their positions and, eventually, those that still worked for him reported that he had left the town on some kind of trip. More odd strangers began to show up in Corageni, asking about the Baron and his Manor. Graves around the town were exhumed and citizens interrogated. Even that died down eventually, though.

The town returned to its peaceful normalcy and rumors became legends. Falger Manor sat empty. Some nights, however, when the mist was particularly thick, the older citizens would sit at their windows, looking out into the streets as if expecting to see a well-dressed man stalking them. They never saw anything but the light of the moon.