

Runs in the Blood



Ma Fleur

The fire is warm as I sit in front of it, holding my wife for one last time.

She's as beautiful as the day I met her twenty years ago, though now her dark hair is kissed with silver strands, luminous eyes now closed forever, and a neck as elegant as any swan's, marred only by four tiny red holes.

How did those fang marks come to be? There is a...I'm not certain how to explain this. A rightness, I feel when I first see my prey. I've broken off stalkings when I lacked that sensation, always trusting my impulses. And to my horror, I felt that same sensation as I looked at my beloved Diane. I told myself it was because she was ill - a predator's instinct to cull the herd of the weak and unhealthy. I swore to myself I would never act on it.

If there's anything my long unlife should have taught me, it's never say never.

She was the first to speak of it, as I sat facing her, perched on the edge of the mattress. When once she would be dancing gaily, she now spent most of the nights now in our bed, propped up by pillows. Or wrapped in blankets on the ornate divan by the fireplace where she could watch the stars. Or being held securely in my arms, which I took every opportunity to do. Almost as if I subconsciously knew.

"No." I shake my head, horrified by what she asked of me. "I can't, ma fleur. I cannot." There already was enough death that my existence caused. "Do not ask me to do this."

"Anton," she said softly, staring at me with those once luminous eyes. Though illness had wracked her body, it was the change in her eyes that was like a stake to the heart, how the once clear green orbs alight with mischief were now cloudy and dull. "Mon ange, I am weak, and I grow weaker by the day." To emphasize, she clasped my hand with all her strength. I have held newborn babes with a stronger grip. "There is no hope for a cure." The doctors, the best money could procure, had been optimistic at first. Their hope had waned almost as quickly as Diane's weight. "You have already sacrificed so much for me--"

"Hush, Diane." I whispered, kissing her temple lightly. "It was not a sacrifice."

She graced me with what had become an all too rare smile. "Liar." It was a rare honor for a vampire to be asked to join the Council at such a 'young' age. At 770, I barely passed the age requirement, something Diane took as much pride in as I did. But as she grew ill, I could not both serve and properly tend to her. So after a scant five years, I resigned my position. Lilith was not pleased, but there were no recriminations.

I reached out to cup her cheek, trying not to wince as I felt the skin stretched tight over the bones. "And if I was?" It is an empty question, one that I am trying to use to deflect the inevitable. She knows me too well. She knows that I cannot sit by idly and watch her suffer. "I will do this for you," I say softly. Even though it will break my heart.

"Thank you, mon ange." She leaned forward to kiss my forehead.

I put my arms around her, supporting her slight weight as I kissed her mouth. Now that the decision was made, there was one thought that haunted me. When?

When I pulled back, afraid of tiring her, Diane saw the unspoken question on my face. "Not tonight," she whispered, easing my misery. "I do not wish you to leave you tonight." Her hand gripped mine with something approaching her old strength. "You will know when."

So I stayed by her side, treasuring every bittersweet moment with her. I knew it wouldn't last. And as time

went on and she grew weaker and weaker, I did something I had not done in a long time. I prayed. Not for her healing. She was long past that. I prayed that she slip away in her sleep, that I be spared what I had promised her.

Selfish? Yes. But I prayed for it all the same. But my prayers would be in vain. For although she grew weaker, she awoke to greet me each night with a bright smile and light shining in her eyes. But slowly that light dimmed. Each night, that instinct to feed from her grew stronger and stronger. So strong, I grew afraid that it would take over before she was ready to let go. Until one night, she didn't smile as she awoke next to me. "Anton," she whispered, her voice laden with pain. "Tonight."

I had expecting it to be soon. But still, the suddenness of her choice surprised me. I swallowed the lump in my throat and nodded. As much as I wanted her to stay with me, I couldn't watch her suffer any longer.

The first thing I did was send servants with apologies to my engagements for the next few nights. Not that I had many, given that most of my time was taken up with nursing Diane. But I had promised Gabriel that I would make an appearance at a dinner he was hosting while visiting Paris, and I had to let my best friend and mentor know what was occurring. I dismissed the servants, who were happy to have an unexpected evening of leisure (with their usual pay). I did not wish for any unexpected interruptions. Only Jacques, my manservant and a loyal human confidant remained to ensure our privacy.

Then with my own hands, I drew a bath and washed Diane. She was as unresisting as a rag doll as I cleaned and dried her. I dressed her in her favorite gown, perfumed her with her favorite scent, but she refused to let me do more than brush her hair. Then we settled in front of the fire that Jacques had built earlier, soaking up its warmth.

Her hand stroked lightly over my thigh. "I wish we could make love one more time. But I am exhausted," she admitted.

"Hush," I whispered into her hair. "I understand, ma fleur." That was probably what had signaled to her that it was time to let go - that my efforts to bring her pleasure only caused her more pain. And the simple act of caring for her toilette left her ready to sleep the night away. I gently combed my fingers through her hair, turning her face towards mine. "I will always love you, Diane."

"Mon ange," she whispered with a ghost of a smile. "My Anton." She pressed her lips to mine, and for one moment, our passion flared hot, as it had in the court of the Sun King when we first kissed. But it faded all too soon, and she fell back against my supporting arm, breathing heavily not from desire, but an attempt to get air. Her words were a movement of lips with no voice behind them. "I love you." And then my love, ma fleur, my heart, tilted her head too one side, baring her throat.

And still, I stalled.

I brushed a lank lock of hair back from her throat. There had been many times when we had made love that I had to restrain myself. I had wanted to taste her, to savor her blood much as I would savor a fine wine. Two instincts were warring within me - the instinct of a husband to protect his wife, and the instinct of a vampire to take one. And eventually one won.

I hadn't fed that evening yet, and given how worried I had been about Diane, I hadn't been careful about maintaining a well fed state. So as I leaned over her neck, it didn't take much coaxing for my fangs to extend. I closed my eyes as my lips brushed against her skin. For one perfect moment, the tips pressed against her flesh, denting it just above her jugular. And then they slid into place.

Diane moaned, clutching at me with surprising strength. But instead of pushing away, she pulled me closer, as she would at the height of our passion. And it was almost like making love to her. There was a rhythm as our bodies moved together, and each draw of her ambrosial blood. I could feel her heart fluttering in her chest. The sensation, which started strong, quickly began to fade.

I pulled away from her neck, running my tongue over my teeth, half afraid to look at her. My greater fear wasn't that she was dead without having a last chance to say goodbye, but that I hadn't taken enough from her, that I would have to psych myself into feeding from her again. But one look at her ashen face, her eyes weakly gazing into mine, confirmed it. She was dying.

Her lips parted, but she didn't have the breath to form the words. But I knew what she was trying to say. "I love

you too, ma fleur," I whispered and pressed my lips to hers. I could feel her cool lips return a butterfly pressure, and her body stiffen in my arms. Then she relaxed sagging heavily. The hand resting on my shoulder slowly slid to dangle limply.

I looked into the face of my beloved. Although it had her form and features, it was clear that the spark that had made Diane... Diane was gone. Gently I closed her eyes, and pressed my lips to her forehead. And then I tuck her under my chin, rocking her, never wanting to move from this place again. There are no tears yet, just the numbness of knowing that she was gone. The fire is warm as I sit in front of it, holding my wife for one last time.

End Ma Fluer

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