

## Ailise

“Ash Grey forty per cent, burnt ochre thirty per cent and yellow ochre, maybe ten percent; ermmmm, not so sure now, maybe I need a dash of indigo.”

Ailise whispered to herself as she retreated into the colours that she now spread upon the table. The final rays of sunlight drifting in through the window were warm and embracing, perfect.

“Ailise! Where are you?” Ailise wanted to preserve the light; it was the perfect portrait light, so warm and invigorating it could make any sitter look alive.

Anton pushed open the studio door; he hovered on the perimeter not daring to enter. “Please tell me you are not getting your colours ready for the painting.”

Anton glanced over at the small square card table; quiet and unassuming. Thick layers of paint from her decades of work covered its surface; the distorted coloured landscape of mountain peaks and wide ravines whispered their dark secrets.

It had been a source of great pride to her father; he had loved the green baize cover and its smooth pristine legs. He had refused to let her paint, to express herself as she felt she should and as she contaminated its soft covering, every day adding another peak or extending the paint plateau, she remembered how lucky she was to be able to focus on what she loved.

As she span around; her long blonde, almost white hair curled around her shoulders like a swathe of luminous silk. Her face was angular and to his devoted eyes, perfect. Blue eyes, pale skin and hair, she was his dream woman.

“Anton,” she purred. “How long have you known me now? You know before I meet a known sitter I need to gather some colours, they act as my frame of reference. It’s been so long with Joseph, I just don’t have an accurate sense of his eye colour.” She couldn’t focus on Anton; the light was drawing her gaze out of the window.

“It’s been thirty eight wonderful years and I know how you work, but this time, today, we can’t be late. We can’t afford to antagonise Richard, you know that.” He instinctively touched the right side of his face. The scars always itched when his name was mentioned, for years he had been unable to utter that name but lately he had felt more, what was the word, forgiving?

Actually no, that really wasn’t the correct word to express his feelings; being in the same room with Richard was painful. Tonight would be torture on a grand scale. Richard luxuriated in his power over people, and even though it was over three decades ago, he liked that merely sharing the same room would make Anton relive his experience.

Anton would never get used to the stares, even those who knew him well were always shocked at his level of disfigurement; somehow they couldn’t remember it as being as horrific as it actually was. Of course, Anton wouldn’t be allowed to hide away; Richard would want him near, he was the ultimate warning.

Ailise didn’t need to look at Anton to know he was flushed red with embarrassment

at his appearance, but she refused to let that dampen her spirit. This was a special night, and yes, Anton would be on show again, but somehow, she felt that this night would change their lives forever.

“You’re right, I need to dress. Any suggestions?” Anton smiled at his feet. He had chosen her dress and her accessories, they were lying on their bed and she knew it would be the perfect combination. She balanced her obsession with painting with her total lack of interest in clothes. Anton supported her in this, as with many other irrelevancies, leaving her to focus on her painting. The money she made, and it was considerable, supported their expensive bohemian lifestyle.

Ailise interlaced her arms through his and despite being over six feet tall; she still gazed up at him in her bare feet. “Tonight is special. I feel it; we just need to keep away from him as much as possible.”

Ailise kissed his lips gently. He pulled his eyes away from the ceiling to look down at her with a matching pair of blue eyes. She squeezed his body in a rib shattering clinch.

Anton smiled. “Call that a squeeze, you’re such a girl.”

She pouted, “It’s not fair, I’m your Sire; you should bow before me.”

He kissed her cheek and whispered seriously. “You know I do.” She closed her eyes contentedly, gave him a gentle hug and then escaped to prepare.

Anton turned to follow her. Ailise had always had a connection with Joseph. Before she had chosen Anton to be her companion; everyone had thought Ailise would choose Joseph as her mate. Joseph had been alone a long time, but he had never developed a close relationship with anyone, even his wife.

Anton slipped into a reverie. He reached out and gently tapped the very tip of the swirl of paint on the table; he gazed at the mix of colours. He had always wondered if she had chosen him as second best because she couldn’t have Joseph. He rubbed the paint between his fingers, the soft silky texture made him smile. He separated his fingertips. The colour was an almost perfect match for Joseph’s eyes. Anton couldn’t control it, jealousy surged through his veins. What a night, Richard with his ability to ritually humiliate and Joseph with his ability to make him feel inadequate.

“Anton! What are you doing? We’ll be late!”

He grinned at her playfulness. He left his concerns on the paint covered towel on the table and bound down the stairs to her waiting arms.

Ailise was wearing the short black dress he had laid out, she had three inch heels and her hair was up. She had two inch long earrings that dangled close to her dress, and her legs were bare. She looked stunning. Her legs extended far beyond anything that was natural.

The majority of the time she was oblivious to her attractiveness. If she hadn’t been so animated about tonight, she would have stayed home to paint. Ailise normally refused to attend functions, they were an irrelevance to her and since the incident with Richard, Anton had become more comfortable with this arrangement.

Anton would sit with her whilst she sketched and painted. Occasionally the sitter

would try to escape, but he was fast enough to ensure they remained in the room.

Ailise was a gifted artist; even if there was an accident, she would always reproduce their image in such a lifelike manner. Though, for some reason the skin on their neck sometimes gave the game away; that's really why she preferred them alive, to ensure that particular part of the anatomy was aesthetically pleasing.

Take the picture of the young woman with red hair; the composition, and colour were outstanding. Her skin glowed. But the neck, it wasn't the best, and despite her sleeping repose, she did look very dead. That had earned a six figure sum at auction.

It is a very small but rich group of people who like to have paintings of dead people on their walls, and really, is there any difference between a painting of an ancestor from a century ago or a recently deceased corpse? But she did prefer them alive if possible, and not just for the first sketches but throughout. Then when the painting was complete the sitter stayed for breakfast.

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Ailise loved the car and Anton loved driving. He felt at one with the machine; he knew how to propel it forward at such outrageous speed. It was the sense of control; in his car it was absolute.

It concerned him that Ailise silently stared out of the window, her mind wasn't in the car with him and he felt the sudden surge of hatred for Joseph. He was right, her mind was preoccupied but it was all about the light, she was considering the way it affected the colours. Her dress was developing a deeper colour range; the late afternoon light had produced varying tones in the folds of the skirt. She watched the light move across the creases, and she saw the colours darken as Anton changed direction.

"Ailise" Anton whispered. She didn't dare look up; she would miss the colour changes.

"Just one moment, the light is so – amazing."

He felt more at ease. She was focused on her work, it wasn't about meeting Joseph again after all these years; she looked divine, and everyone would be jealous of him.

He enjoyed that thought, but what would Joseph think? He wanted him to be jealous but Joseph had created his own mate, to his own specifications; surely he wouldn't want Ailise now. Nevertheless, the possibility that he could take her away crouched in the back of his mind and tugged incessantly at his self confidence. Surely after all this time he could be confident about her feelings for him.

They turned the final corner; the streets surrounding the house were overflowing with cars. Even as they crawled slowly down the drive it was almost as busy. Anton spotted a small gap beside the garages and as he slowed Ailise opened the door and leapt out. The sky called to her, it was past dusk and it was developing the colour of dark bruised flesh. Her ear caught her name drifting on the breeze; she turned and acknowledged a face.

Her eyes were drawn to the higher rooms at the top of the house. There at a

window, a small face illuminated by artificial light looked out. That was the one, Evelyn. Ailise walked towards the house without moving her gaze, she could feel her presence so strongly, this was the one, but then again, that wasn't the whole truth. This creature would eradicate Richard she knew it now; she knew it as sure as she knew Anton was staring at her. Evie stepped away from the window.

Anton wrapped his arm around her. "Joseph?" he whispered anxiously. Ailise sighed as she turned to him.

"No. This night isn't about Joseph, if it was just that I wouldn't have bothered to come. This is more important, Evie will change the way we see the world, everything is different now." She turned to the sky.

"She will destroy him, maybe not tonight, maybe not tomorrow, I can't feel a timescale, but she is the most important thing ever to happen to us all. I wanted to see her, to know her just a little. This is definitely not about Joseph."

Anton relaxed slightly. How could this creature get rid of Richard? Richard was one of the most powerful vampires on the continent, and she was a new born. He didn't understand but she had convinced him not to be concerned about Joseph and that was comforting.

Ailise moved her arm around his waist and he draped his arm on her shoulder. Lewis was standing on the steps.

"Hey Lewis!" Anton shouted, he liked Lewis, he was fun. Lewis smiled at him. Anton stopped for a second. Ailise and Anton turned to each other simultaneously.

Everyone always looked at his scars, even his friends; they couldn't help being drawn to them. They would always wonder about the level of pain that had been inflicted. Only Anton knew the real truth that the pain inflicted on that day was nothing compared to what he had suffered since; to the shame he experienced every time he looked in a mirror and saw his weakness stare back at him. Lewis looked him straight in the eyes; to him there were no scars.

They turned back to Lewis and he reached out to Ailise. He took her hand in both of his and she almost pulled back in shock, she turned to Anton. Lewis was chatting politely as he rested his lips on her hand. He hugged Anton and patted him on the back. Neither of them spoke; they were too stunned.

He was calmer, happier, he looked at peace.

"How are you Lewis?" Ailise asked, her voice like liquid silk.

"Don't practice your charms tonight Ailise, or if you do, not on me."

She stilled. Lewis had never before acknowledged she had the capacity to charm with her voice; up to this point she could have found out any piece of information she wanted. How was it he was aware of her ability now?

"So what's Evelyn like? We are all very excited." Anton asked. Lewis shrugged, "She's really nice."

"Really nice? Really nice? She's a genetically modified vampire clone, how can she be 'nice'? Surely you can manage something a little more eloquent."

Lewis blushed and looked over their heads, "Ah Handrak, good to see you again. Sorry guys must usher you in, there's a lot more guests behind you."

Anton moved to his left and pulled Ailise after him. Her eyes refused to leave his animated face. "Since when have we been guests? We're vampires. What a bloody idiot."

Anton laughed. "He's happy."

Ailise muttered. "He's in love with her; his humanity has returned."

Anton was mingling now. Ailise followed but her head constantly turned back so she could watch Lewis. Perhaps it was the party; he loved parties.

"You may want to turn around now," Anton whispered sarcastically.

Joseph was moving through the crowd. She could see flashes of his face. He was grinning. Anton felt his body still. Joseph's face was perfect. He looked at Ailise and he saw her eyes survey his face and sigh with pleasure. The revulsion at his own made his head fall in submission.

Joseph saw Ailise and moved towards her. Ailise reciprocated. Anton felt her release the grip on his hand. Vampires were crowding around him and soon Anton had been pushed to the wall away from them. She was mesmerised by his face, the perfect symmetry and proportion, its angular lines and fine cheek bones. His skin glowed and his smile was wide and generous; joyful. "Joseph." She whispered softly.

"Good to see you again Ailise. Where's Anton? You've not ditched him for someone shorter have you?" He glanced about, saw Anton and waved. Joseph had looked into his eyes too; suddenly Anton wasn't a symbol of Richard's power, or a warning to others; he was a person.

Joseph looked really happy to see him, he had gestured for him to join them and his body language with her was different, he didn't hold his body tense and alert, he was relaxed; she was inconsequential.

Anton moved forward through the crowd whilst Joseph turned back to Ailise.

"How are you? You look stunning as usual. Anton, I've just been telling Ailise how amazing she looks." Joseph leant towards Anton and hugged him,

"Where did she get those legs? You are a lucky guy."

Anton stared at Ailise. He could see her face changing; his behaviour shocked her. Anton patted him on the back.

"So how's Evelyn?" He enquired becoming increasingly fascinated with the change in everyone. Joseph smiled.

"She's perfect. Oh don't get over excited, she's not as stunning as Ailise. She's small and fragile and funny and clever and," he shrugged. Joseph was grinning wildly now. Anton grinned back; he felt genuinely happy for him and hugged him in excitement.

"So where is this perfect woman?"

"Oh she doesn't really like crowds, so she's hiding until the last possible minute. She will only stay as long as she has to and then she'll go back in to hiding."

"So her best feature?" Anton enquired cheekily.

Joseph faced Anton now; they grinned back at each other.

"She has too many."

Anton laughed. "Just tell us one."

"Oh her hair, like silk, but its curly, long beautiful spirals of silk. There is a rainbow of colours. My favourite," he closed the gap between them and focused intently on Anton's eyes.

"My favourite is a really light coloured spiral, almost blonde really and it sits next to a dark chocolate brown one that matches her eyes. Oh, her eyes, like molten chocolate, so warm. Her skin, almost olive, and like velvet." Joseph saw Anton smile and he blushed.

"How old is this goddess then?"

Joseph smiled, "Mid thirties."

"What!" Anton roared with laughter.

"You're a toy boy. That's really cool."

"She's a Doctor, a biochemist, she's clever and funny, oh have I said that already and incredibly sexy."

"Listen Joe, go get her for Gods sake, she sounds amazing."

Joseph was shining; he shrugged his shoulders and almost giggled, drunk on the very idea of her. "She really is amazing." He repeated sincerely.

Then, for a moment, they looked into each others eyes and all the rivalry had gone. Anton pushed him, "Go get her!" Joseph tuned to Ailise and hugged her quickly and dispassionately and backed away grinning.

Anton watched him move quickly up the stairs.

"Wow, she must be special for Joseph to be so different. I mean he's just crazy for her. Its great he's not alone isn't it?" Ailise didn't answer.

Anton turned and she had gone. He felt sick, she was his Sire, he loved her and she was undoubtedly pissed. He started to weave his way through the crowd to the stairs. He continued up and saw a shadow disappear into one of the open rooms off the corridor. Anton followed her.

"Hey" he said. She growled and pulled him behind her. She pressed her finger on his lips and she stared into his eyes, her eyes flicked to his lips and he moved to kiss her, but she had turned away to watch and listen.

"Where's Evie?"

"Back off Lewis. I'm going to get her now." Joseph replied.

"Just explain that she doesn't have to stay all night it's just for a little, just so everyone can see her."

Josephs tone changed, his words became clipped.

"Don't tell me what to do, she's mine."

"Don't push me Joseph. If you love her so much why did you have to modify her? You changed her hair, made her taller. Why? Wasn't the so called love of your life

perfect enough for you?"

Ailise could feel the tension building.

"She was and is perfect. She's still my Evie. I only did those things for her; she wanted to be taller, she wanted to have curly hair; I love her as she is. You should just leave her alone. You've had your fun and the damage is done, just leave us alone."

Joseph turned to go and Lewis pounded his body into the wall.

"Don't push me too far. You brought her smell in here; you brought your memories of being with her. You know how I feel about her, you know what I would do for her; never ever reduce my feelings for her to some physical act. I would kill everything in this house for her if she asked, but more importantly just like you, I will fight my innate urges everyday for the rest of eternity to be close to her. You know what that's like; you know how impossible it is. But you know that we'll do it, just to be the people she wants us to be."

Lewis turned to go, they could hear his footsteps. Then Joseph followed him hesitantly. "I'm sorry Lewis." He whispered.

Lewis had stopped on the stairs. "I know so am I, but we both know that no matter how painful this is, the alternative is worse." Others came up to talk to them and they both went downstairs again.

Ailise slipped down the corridor heading for Evie's room.

"Hello Ailise." Jess was leaning on the wall outside Evie's door.

"I just wanted to meet her." Ailise replied smiling.

"Sorry," said Jess, she didn't even try to sound sorry.

Jess hated Ailise; she hated her perfect face and body and her absolute lack of compassion. Jess had to acknowledge that her paintings were sublime; there was always something so real and alive about them. It was as if because of her 'gift', she could almost capture the sitters' life-force, and store it in the picture. When Jess had noticed her moving towards Joseph she had been worried; but Joseph had been disinterested. He acknowledged her beauty, but she was just 'another stunning vampire'; that had made them both laugh.

Ailise walked away and tucked herself back in by the wall again. Joseph came bounding back up the stairs. "How are you doing Joe?" Jess asked. "Great. Fine, you know, alright really."

Jess laughed. "It's ok to be happy. It's alright to like being praised and meeting people. It's about time you had some fun."

"Is she nervous?" He asked quietly.

"Ohh yeh, terrified."

Jess caressed his cheek. "She loves you so much; I'm so happy for you, my best female friend in love with my best male friend – perfect."

Joseph tried to shape his mouth in sympathy, but he knew his lips wouldn't curl to make a matching smile.

"Except for Lewis."

“Yeh well, he is a problem. It’s your fault, you made her too perfect. You even gave her adorable failings, so not being perfect makes her perfect, if you get what I mean. He does love her, you know that don’t you, but then almost everyone does. I don’t know what you did but she is positively adored.”

Joseph shivered in horror. “It wasn’t intentional. I don’t want everyone in the world obsessed with the love of my life, it’s a nightmare.”

Jess laughed, “This party should go well then, go get her, let’s see if you can entice her into the arena.” Joseph growled playfully and Jess laughed in response. Lewis arrived and they all disappeared into her room.

Ailise leant back to wait. Suddenly she was walking down the hall. Evie turned her head as she walked past the open door looking directly into her blue eyes, she never changed pace as she continued to the stairs. Ailise saw her power, it crackled across her body as faint neon light simmering as she walked; it was magical.

Ailise could feel her strength. She swallowed, her throat hurt with all the future pain Evie would suffer. They maintained eye contact until they reached the top of the stairs. Evie didn’t turn away, and just before she headed down the stairs she smiled. Ailise could feel tears build and then spill down her cheeks. Ailise waited, shocked, she couldn’t.

Anton appeared by her side. “What happened? Did you see her?”

Ailise nodded weakly. “We’re going now? We need to be away from everyone, I don’t know for how long for, and we need to do it now.”

Anton frowned. “But Richard?” He replied in concern.

“He will have something more important to focus on. Now she’s arrived he has a limited life span. We have to go.”

Anton kissed her forehead and expertly managed to get their car out of the drive without anyone noticing. Anton pressed hard on the accelerator and they sped off home.

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They travelled in silence. Anton checked in the mirror occasionally to confirm she was still in the car. “So, is she beautiful? Is she amazing like Joseph described?” Ailise turned from the window. She looked at Anton’s face; he kept turning from the wheel.

“What’s wrong Ailise? Is everything alright?”

“I need to paint.”

“Alright, so do we need to get a sitter? The Warehouse or the beach?”

Ailise looked out of the window, this time she didn’t turn to Anton when she replied. “No. I need to paint her. I need to capture her essence before it changes.” Anton turned to her; then he quickly looked back through the windscreen.

“What do you mean changes? What’s going to happen to her?”

Ailise shrugged, “She will be loved by so many, but she will suffer repeatedly. She is the only one who could deal with the ordeal to come.” Ailise turned to Anton, “We need

to get away from here until it all blows over. It could be years.”

Anton swallowed, he had never seen her so certain. Her visions were often only partial set against a backdrop of feelings, and though she didn't know any details, she was absolutely certain of this outcome.

Anton pulled up by the house as Ailise leapt out. He knew she was going straight to the studio. He gathered her work clothes and followed at a rush. She was already rummaging in the box of paints. “Ailise, you look gorgeous, please take that dress off and put your work clothes on.” She ignored him.

He unzipped her dress, and pulled her away from the paints, she rounded on him snarling. “Arms up, darling.” She calmed slightly and he lifted up her dress. She was standing in front of him in just her high leg black lace panties shaped to emphasise her long legs. Her breasts rested perfectly on her body. Her nipples pink and pointed rested against her glowing skin. The moon glistened on her perfect body. She turned to look for another colour in the drawer. He slipped the baggy shirt over her head and for a moment her arms were trapped, then she manipulated them through the arm holes and pulled the shirt down.

Placing the trousers over the back of her chair, he gathered her dress to him and inhaled her scent. These were exciting times. He would have liked to have met Evie, but he had Ailise and who he loved, so he was happy. Anton left her as she concentrated on the paint.

As the organiser, Anton opened the suitcases and started to pack her clothes. As he flattened his favourites in the bags he considered what had happened that night. Joseph and Lewis were so different. They were both so alive. How could she have had such an effect on them in such a short space of time? They seemed so human.

He had always felt contented, he loved Ailise and she was happy with him, so how could he be anything else other than happy? He thought about how delighted Joseph had been. Anton suddenly stopped his packing. Joseph wasn't lonely anymore, that was the difference. Joseph had found his companion and he was at peace. If Evie loved him like that, so absolutely, he could see why he would be happy.

Anton stopped moving, his eyes flicked upwards, he thought about Ailise. Did she love him? Did Ailise love him like Evie loved Joseph? Anton felt himself shiver. If he could only believe that she did love him, really love him; then he would be content. The problem was now he felt doubt, clear and sharp. What would it be like to be Joseph and have Evie love him as much as Joseph loved her?

He wondered how this mysterious woman could have such an effect on people, vampires, on vampires. He laughed; even he was becoming considerate, concerned about the feelings of others, empathising. When he had finished packing he put the cases in the car.

Anton picked out her latest completed pieces and wrapped them. He rang the agent and they agreed to send out a van within the hour. Anton stretched; it had been three hours since they had arrived home. He felt thirsty; he waited for the van to arrive and left the paintings in the hall.

He moved upstairs, he could smell them, their warm luscious blood pumping around their body. He felt it was safer to be away from them during his hungry time; it really wouldn't be acceptable to kill the agent's courier.

Anton went up to the studio to update Ailise. He stopped in his tracks at the door. There were three canvasses in front of him and all three were of Evie. Ailise was mixing paint again.

The first was just her face. Her cheeks and the top of her head were bleeding off the edges. Her eyes stared at you, into you, through you.

Evie was just as Joseph had described her and more, somehow so much more. He usually waited to be invited in, but he was drawn to her eyes. The deep dark brown colour stared at him, as he peered deep into them he could see a rainbow of colours. The colours merged into each other and they swirled around, until he could feel himself falling. He could smell raspberries, large ripe raspberries.

He preferred strawberries; his family had grown both raspberries and strawberries in their garden. His mother made the best strawberry pie. He would sneak to the larder and eat the leftover pie cold with cream. He could almost taste it on his tongue. Somehow there was always one piece of pie left and his mother never asked who had eaten it. He smiled, he missed the pie, and he missed eating; the tangy fruit exploding on his tongue. Anton missed his mother, and his sisters. He loved his home; he loved all his family very much. He had loved being alive.

He blinked, he hadn't thought about his family in decades; or about when he was alive. As he stepped back the next painting drew him.

She was smiling. Evie was smiling. He felt his eyes fill instantly with tears. She was a vampire. She couldn't smile like that; no vampire smiled like that. Evie was full of joy. He wanted to be like that; full of joy, happy. No that wasn't true, he had been happy. Evie was so much more than happy, she was? What was it about her? Evie loved. Her heart was full of love. He felt her love pouring through the image on the canvas, directly to him. She loved him, she loved Anton, he couldn't move; he was entranced.

"Anton?"

Ailise was staring at him now; she may have been talking to him, but he hadn't heard. He couldn't turn to her, Evie wanted him to keep looking at her and he couldn't disappoint. Anton blushed and tipped his head down. His eyes never left hers. Evie seemed to smile more. Her eyes pulled at him. He felt himself blush even more.

"Anton!"

He blinked and turned to Ailise. His eyes were sliding back to Evie's face. He didn't want her to think he was disrespectful. "What are you doing?"

Ailise had smudges of paint all over her face. It was so endearing, like a child with finger paints. Anton didn't notice; he wanted to turn back to Evie.

"I just, I have finished the packing and I've packed some of your favourite tools. The latest paintings have been picked up, so it's just when you want to leave. I, I." She called to him and as he began to turn to face her, his mouth reciprocated her smile.

“What the hell are you doing in my studio without being invited?” Ailise was confused, this didn’t happen; Anton didn’t disobey.

Anton frowned, he was puzzled. Ailise could be so petty and annoying. All he wanted was to look at Evie and she was distracting him. Then he caught sight of her last painting. It appeared at first that the whole canvas was covered by one big lilac swirl. In the centre was Evie’s face. She wasn’t smiling; she was simply staring at him. He reached out to her. She wanted him to touch her and he had to respond, he wanted to please her and she wanted to please him.

The pain was intense but thankfully short lived. His back ached as he pulled himself from the floor using one of the sitters’ chairs. He saw a silver bracelet with a heart shaped charm caught in one of the gaps in between the floor boards.

He remembered that sitter; she was so young, so slight. Ailise captured her fragility and fear perfectly. She didn’t try to escape; she was too frightened to fight the inevitable. She tasted of, apricots, that was it, apricots. He glanced at Evie, raspberries; Evie tasted of his home, of his human life. Evie reminded him of being alive and here she was encouraging him to come to her.

Ailise moved in front of him. “Get out of my studio now.”

Anton felt her power pulse through her body. He knew he had to obey. He looked past her and saw Evie smiling at him.

“No.” he said. He heard his voice, but couldn’t believe it belonged to him.

Ailise grabbed him by the shirt and threw him out of the room. The stairs leading up to the studio were narrow and he fell backwards down them to the first turn. He considered getting up but he closed his eyes instead and there she was, smiling at him. He pressed the silver heart charm into his hand harder until he could smell the blood. How could Ailise have killed someone so vulnerable? Evie would have protected her. He let his head fall back and he heard it thud on the wooden stairs.

Ailise was angry, he had never disobeyed her before, and he never would again. There was no time for his petty childish behaviour. She turned to the picture and surveyed her work. She turned to the other two canvases and blinked, how could she have completed them so quickly. Ailise hadn’t been aware of working any harder than normal, and she usually barely managed one portrait a night. Sometime she had to keep painting into the day, usually stopping when she felt too hungry to concentrate but these, Ailise stepped forward and reached out her hand to touch them.

These portraits were beautiful, Evie was beautiful and painting her had been effortless. She felt more alive than she had felt in years, really alive, full of enthusiasm, full of intensity, full of life. She stepped back.

Evie was making her feel all these human emotions. How could she do that? Ailise had seen her for such a short space of time and she had somehow changed her. Ailise turned her head to the door, she considered Anton; he had felt it. He had felt Evie through her image; she had replicated Evie’s personality too well. Ailise looked at the unfinished painting. She couldn’t finish it, she understood its raw power now and she turned to pack up her paints. She closed and locked the box and collapsed the table,

gathering both from the floor as she stood. The table trapped the skin of her hand between its folding legs. She scowled down at the table, recognising a small chip out of one of the legs.

She had tried to climb onto the table to get to her father. He was so tall and handsome; she had wanted to be tall too, so she could kiss him. He had glanced up from his paper to see her standing on his favourite card table. Ailise had opened her arms to embrace him as she felt the back of his hand on her face. She remembered the sensation of flying through the air, of landing in a heap on the Oriental rug; another of his favourites.

Her father hadn't made a sound, no shouting, no recriminations, just physical punishment. Ailise had still loved him even as she felt her bones ache and her muscles throb with shock. She could see him brushing the baize on the top of his card table. His finger tips brushed the felt so gently as he muttered to himself. He eventually felt comfortable that it was unblemished. That was when the leg became chipped but he hadn't noticed at the time. Then he returned to his reading, never once looking at her. She eventually struggled to her feet and limped out of the room.

Ailise slammed down the paint box on the floor. She turned to Evie's face in anger. Ailise was beginning to hate that face. She had been content for so many years; she had not even thought of her family especially her father for so long. Thinking of him made her feel uncomfortable. She had wanted to please him, but she was an irrelevance to him. Even as she surprised him in the garden he had barely recognised his daughter. He hadn't begged for his life, he had embraced his death with a smile.

Anton had been enthusiastic to become a vampire; he had been so in love with her. That thought made her smile. Anton had been devoted from the moment he had met her.

Ailise picked up her paint box again and turned to see Evie grinning back at her. "Why do you smile all the time? Stop looking at me like that. I don't regret being a vampire; I don't want to be a human again." Evie's smile seemed to grow. "I do not want to be human, do you understand; I am happy as I am." Her voice was becoming disjointed and her pitch varied as she grew more frustrated. Suddenly she felt her skin begin to burn.

She felt embarrassed now, she had been shouting at a painting; how utterly ridiculous. It was just a painting. Just some paints and a canvas, and Ailise had used her skill to make an image. She smiled, she had created it and she could destroy it.

Anton sat on the chair. He had been able to see her face when he closed his eyes; the details of her eyes and her hair had burned into his mind. He wasn't so sure of her lips; he would like to see her lips again. See that smile. Now he could see her image even when his eyes were open. It was as if her image was burnt irrevocably onto his retina. If Evie loved Joseph then he had little chance to be with her, but maybe she would meet with him, talk to him, he would like that. They could talk about their human lives; she would love to hear his stories about his sisters and his mother.

Ailise appeared at the door, she waited for a response. He did not move. Ailise was

annoyed, he usually stood immediately to greet her, but he was just sitting.

“Anton, it’s time to go.” Anton stood up and turned to her. Ailise tilted her head and smiled, her hair sliding across her shoulders. “What have you chosen for me to wear?” Anton blinked. Since he had seen Evie nothing had mattered, he had barely held another thought and now his Sire was waiting.

“Oh.” He exclaimed turning from her. He opened her wardrobe. He had packed all his favourite clothes; he had forgotten she was wearing just her work shirt. She had been too engrossed to put on her trousers. He picked out a pair of grey slacks and a black fine ribbed jumper. He also collected black socks and grey boots from the shoe cupboard. He returned to the living area. “Your clothes are ready.”

She put down the box and her table, she slithered over to him. She wrapped her arms around his waist and placed her hands on his shoulder blades.

“You look so sad sweetheart, are you alright? I mean I know it was a horrible night for you, but we’re going to be free soon and then it will be just the two of us.” Her voice slipped effortlessly into his head. He had never really felt her do this before, but he was fully aware now of her mind pushing against his. He hated the intrusion. He forced a smile.

“I’ll put your paint box and your table in the car.” He glanced around. “Where are your work trousers?” She moved her body against his. “Upstairs, forget them.” It normally felt sexy but today it made him feel trapped. She was suffocating him and he was beginning to feel frantic, he wanted her to move away. He thought about her trousers, and the fact they were in the same room as Evie. He wanted to be in that room. He forced himself to hold her. He whispered into her ear. “You get changed and I’ll get your trousers. You have painted some magnificent work in those clothes, perhaps they bring you luck?”

He pulled away and she smiled at him. She kissed him and her tongue rolled across his teeth. She moved away towards the bathroom. “I’ll take a quick shower; it will be less time than washing all the paint off my face.” “Fine.” Anton shouted. As soon as he heard the shower he raced up the stairs to look at her again.

He didn’t really understand what he saw. Evie had gone. Her brown eyes were now divided and they were curling back away from him. He reached into the hole and pulled back the strips of canvas. He turned to see her perfect smile. Her left eye peered out of the canvas, whole and undefiled. Her lips had been cut through.

His heart was broken. How could she destroy something so wonderful? He turned to the lilac swirl; the slash marks were more obvious on this. Ailise had rushed this destruction. Evie stared back at him, Ailise had missed her face, she had sliced part of her hair, but she had missed her face. Anton was relieved. He saw the knife, its blade deep in the canvas surround. He prised it out and he carefully cut around Evie’s face. He replaced the knife in the deep groove and smiled. Evie was staring at him from the middle of his hand. Anton smiled inside; she would be with him always. He heard the shower slow down and turned and ran down the stairs. He picked up the box and the table and sprinted to the car. He packed them away in the boot, he climbed into the

front seat and hid Evie's portrait under his seat. He smiled and he rushed back into the house.

Ailise was calm now, the shower had driven away her annoyance, and her humanity had been washed away with the bubbles. She linked his arm. "Did you get my trousers?" she enquired. He paused for a second. "No, I didn't bother. Should I?" That thought had been surpassed by Evie's face. Ailise smiled, she mistook his concern as a sign of his love. "No silly, I have other pairs," she laid her head on his shoulder.

The car journey was long. As they boarded the ferry Ailise stayed on deck to watch the sunrise. Anton went down below to unpack. He laid fresh clothes out for her. He smoothed out the creases and stepped back. When did she last do anything for him? If he considered, it would probably have been prior to his death. She was selfish and he was expected to follow her around like a pet. It was worse than that, he wasn't even a pet, he wasn't kept because she loved him; he was here because he was useful. He was the servant. He slumped onto the bed.

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Ailise had killed him. Anton had been happy at home, he had been in his final year at Oxford, and he had a girlfriend. He suddenly looked up at the window. He had a girl friend, how could he have forgotten her.

Suddenly all his memories were returning, he could see his room in the college, he could feel her breath on his cheek. It was as if every minute he remembered more. He pulled out the bracelet from his pocket and looked at the heart.

She had come to him after the concert. He had played well and his friends were complimentary, there had been an after concert party where he had drunk too much. He didn't remember how she got through security or why she chosen him. All that didn't matter now. He was here and he didn't want to be.

He turned to the mirror. His blue eyes stared back at him. He swallowed and slowly turned his head to look at the scars. Richard had demanded he show loyalty, he had to give up something, something precious to him. Richard had demanded he give up his handsome face.

Anton stood up suddenly. Richard had described his face as too perfect, as too symmetrical. He shivered as he sat down. Ailise had said she would love him no matter what he looked like and he had submitted. He had given up his face for her. He had given up any chance of being loved by anyone for her and she treated him as a servant.

Anton rested his head in his hands and cried. He hadn't cried since he had become a vampire, he hadn't felt anything at all. He believed he had been happy, but now he knew he had been numb. He wondered what Ailise would say if she saw him now; then he realised he didn't care.

Ailise watched the ferry push through the water, the spray flying in the air. She wondered what Joseph was doing. Then she shook her head and allowed her hair to fly in the wind. She had wanted Joseph above all things, his perfection; his beautiful symmetrical face. She would have been content to paint his face until the end of time,

but she was irrelevant.

To be hated, despised, even abhorred would have been something, but Ailise had always been of no consequence to Joseph and that hurt. They would have been perfect, the beautiful couple, but no; he chose to live without a mate, with his dowdy wife and his freaky family. She had tried making him jealous with Anton, but Anton was too tall, too refined. Anton's face was just a little too lovely, his eyes too blue, his lips too full, too feminine overall. That's when she decided he would need to be modified.

It had worked out too well. Richard had demanded some sign of fealty and she had given him Anton's beauty. Anton gave it willingly as a symbol of his devotion, and Richard loved parading him around. Ailise however, still yearned for Joseph's face. She dreamt of holding it in her hands and painting him as he shared their pillow at night. Ailise turned out of the wind; she hated second best, just like her father did. He had wanted a son and she smiled, she appreciated the irony; she was indeed her father's daughter.

Anton went above deck; he pulled out his phone and contacted the agent. He was put on hold. Many years before the agent had hinted that Ailise should perhaps stop painting; the frequency of her paintings was reducing their value. When Ailise had flounced out of the office, he had turned to Anton and said, "I understand how she feels, but most artists only reach their financial peak when there are no more paintings available, when no more could ever be produced."

Anton had left confused, he didn't understand the darkness that was the foundation of that suggestion, but he understood now. She was his Sire; he could never raise his hand against her, but accidents can happen. He smiled as the sun rose and he listened to Ride of the Valkyries holding music. With money and freedom, he may yet get to see Evie.

Then the agent picked up the call.