

# **A Tempest of Tea**

Hafsah Faizal

February 2024

ADVANCE READER'S EDITION—NOT FOR SALE

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On the streets of White Roaring, Arthie Casimir is a criminal mastermind and collector of secrets. Her prestigious tearoom transforms into an illegal bloodhouse by night, catering to the vampires feared by society. But when her establishment is threatened, Arthie is forced to strike an unlikely deal with an alluring adversary to save it—she can't do the job alone.

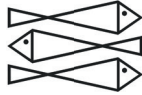
Calling on some of the city's most skilled outcasts, Arthie hatches a plan to infiltrate the sinister, glittering vampire society known as the Athereum. But not everyone in her ragtag crew is on her side, and as the truth behind the heist unfolds, Arthie finds herself in the midst of a conspiracy that will threaten the world as she knows it.

From the *New York Times*–bestselling author of *We Hunt the Flame* comes the first book in a hotly-anticipated fantasy duology teeming with romance and revenge, led by an orphan girl willing to do whatever it takes to save her self-made kingdom. Dark, action-packed, and swoon-worthy, this is Hafsah Faizal better than ever.

Hafsah Faizal is the *New York Times*–bestselling author of *We Hunt the Flame* and *We Free the Stars* and the founder of IceyDesigns, where she creates websites for authors and beautiful goodies for everyone else. A Forbes 30 under 30 honoree, she was born in Florida and raised in California. She now resides in North Carolina with her husband and a library of books waiting to be devoured. Visit her at **[hafsahfaizal.com](http://hafsahfaizal.com)**.

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A  
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OF TEA

## PRAISE FOR HAFSAH FAIZAL

*WE HUNT THE FLAME:*

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An Ignyte Award Winner

A TIME Magazine Top 100 Fantasy Book of All Time

A Teen Vogue Book Club Pick

A Barnes & Noble Teen Book Club Pick

A Paste Magazine Best YA Book

A PopSugar Best YA Book

★ “A fresh and gripping story.”

—*Booklist*, starred review

★ “A debut series not to be missed.”

—*School Library Journal*, starred review

★ “Zafira’s courage will teach readers the power of the human spirit.”

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—*Seventeen Magazine*

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—*Entertainment Weekly*

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—Kiersten White, *New York Times*–bestselling author

*WE FREE THE STARS:*

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★ “A memorable story at the height of the fantasy genre.”  
—*Booklist*, starred review

“This Sands of Arawiya duology closer will not disappoint readers . . .  
Faizal’s prose truly shines.”  
—*Kirkus Reviews*

“Those who were left breathless by the previous installment will heave  
a sigh of relief.”  
—*Bulletin of the Center for Children’s Books*



## ALSO BY HAFSAH FAIZAL

*We Hunt the Flame*

*We Free the Stars*

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TO ASMA,

*because you are my sister*

*but more often than not, my sanity*





WHITE ROARING



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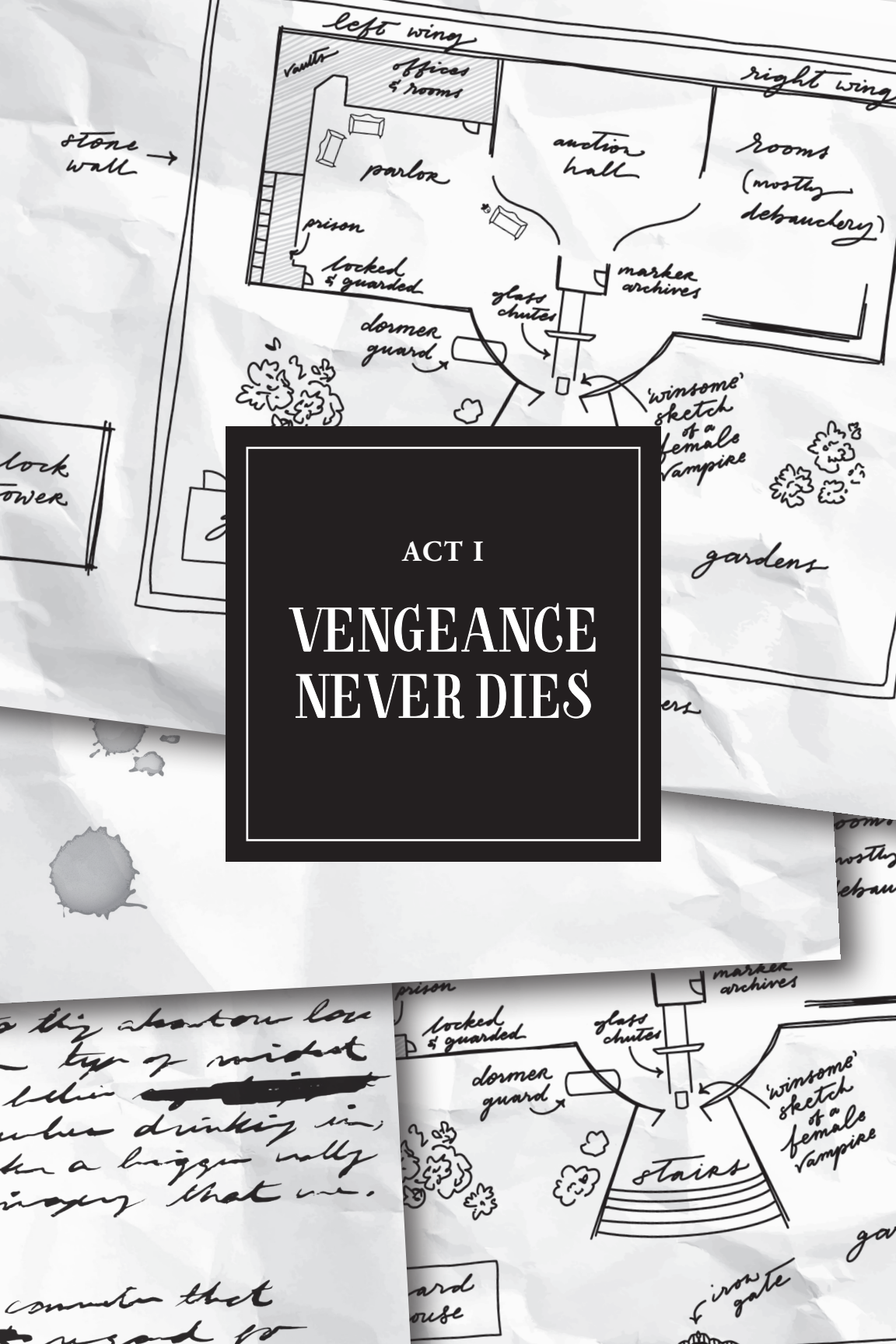
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where people  
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ACT I

# VENGEANCE NEVER DIES



# ARTHIE

The streets of White Roaring grew fangs at night. When the moon dragged a claw and the shop fronts cut dim and those who craved blood walked bold. Arthie Casimir couldn't be bothered. By the cold, by the dark, by the vampires.

Business never stopped.

It was long past midnight and the foundries were silent. The sparks that lit the evening now simmered in coals left to cool, and dirty aprons had been cast aside as workmen hobbled into hovels. Coffeehouses, butchers, and betting shops slumbered in preparation for dawn, the capital kept alive by sin and a tearoom nestled at the crossroads of slum and wealth.

Spindrift, it was called.

Arthie's pride and joy, with its gleaming wood floors and the aroma of fresh tea as it filled a sparkling pot, in turn filling the coffers of her crew. The snobbery of her patrons was amended by the secrets they spilled in front of a staff of orphans who *most certainly* wouldn't understand the refined tongue of the rich.

She'd much rather be there than here, in the late autumn chill.

"I could go alone," Jin said, slowing his pace to match hers. His hair fell straight and sharp as a knife, his umbrella as elegant and clean-cut as he was, all lean limbs and broad shoulders sauntering down the gaslight-peppered streets.

Arthie didn't make a habit of visiting patrons who were racking up tabs, but this one had turned away too many of her crew.

"So I can come looking at dawn to find you nattering away with him?"

"With *the* Matteo Andoni?" he asked, as if the idea were preposterous. "Really, Arthie."

Jin was the sort of charming even a king would draw a chair for if he flashed the right smile—and he knew it, so she didn't bother with an answer. They crossed down to the quieter Alms Place, where dirt was nowhere to be seen and the houses were posh and brick-faced.

A carriage trundled past the uniformed men standing guard at the top of the street, horses snorting under the coachman's direction. Ettenia's capital of White Roaring rarely slept, and with the recent vampire disappearances, whispers kept the city ever more awake; not because the people cared for the welfare of vampires, but because if something nefarious could happen to *them*, how would weaker human-folk fare?

As alarming as the disappearances were, Arthie disliked the increase in the Ram's Horned Guard even more. They were everywhere, keeping watch. It was unfair for the masked Ram to see so much when the people of Ettenia couldn't even see the face of the monarch that ruled them.

Arthie tucked a fold of paper into her vest and stopped before an imposing black fence. "Here we are. 337 Alms Place."

Jin whistled at the mansion set behind a trim lawn. "Now that's what we call money."

The estate demanded attention, from the frills along the windows to the fervent red of the front door. Fitting. Men lauded Matteo Andoni's name on the streets, women whispered it into their sheets—though very rarely with him in them.

"No, that's what we call too much." She didn't care if Matteo

Andoni was the country's beloved paint slinger or a vagrant on the streets. If you couldn't pay, you shouldn't drink.

"The gentleman clearly has enough duvin to spend," Jin agreed.

They stepped through the gate and made their way up the wide steps. Arthie rapped with the iron knocker, and Jin leaned back against the porch wall, his grip loose around the black umbrella.

The door opened to a thin man with a thinning scalp; whatever hair that might have once been on his head had now relocated to the thick mustache curling above his lip.

"Yes?"

Arthie tucked her hands into her trouser pockets, the pistol in her holster glinting in the light. She'd rather not shoot the thing, but it was the only one of its kind and she sure as blood wouldn't keep it hidden away. "Paying a visit."

"Don't mind the hour," Jin added with a grin.

The butler looked from Arthie's mauve hair and brown Ceylani skin to Jin's monolid eyes and back to Arthie, glancing from the short crop of her hair to the lapels of her open jacket, then to the shine of the chain that led to the watch in her vest.

*Look all you want, bugger.* He'd find no slum in them. Her crew might have hailed from the worst of White Roaring, but what Arthie lacked in status she made up for in dignity, thank you very much.

"Weapons?" the butler asked, palm outstretched.

"No, thank you." Arthie smiled. "I have my own."

"What we'd really like is a kettle on the stove," Jin said. "It's quite the chill you're letting us linger in."

The butler looked chagrined. Jin rapped his umbrella on the ground and invited himself inside, his frame engulfing the narrow hall. "Much obliged, good sir. Come along, Arthie."

She tipped her hat and followed him into a receiving room with

brocaded walls and shadowy shelves, most of the lamps banked low so the coffee table gleamed the same crimson as the rug.

“You—” The butler worked himself into a fit behind them. “You cannot—”

“It’s quite all right, Ivor,” someone said in a smooth voice.

A match hissed, and a bob of light illuminated a man lounging on a settee with one arm slung across its back, sleeves rolled to his forearms. His shirt was untucked and open at the collar, the loose strings framing a vee of cream skin down to his navel. The ruffles looked like petals kissing his skin. It was far more flesh than Arthie was accustomed to seeing from members of high society.

Jin coughed, throwing out a word in the midst of it. “*Ogling.*”

She was not.

“Matteo Andoni,” said Arthie, ignoring Jin.

He had the fine aristocratic features unique to the neighboring country of Velance, making him as much an immigrant as she and Jin, but without the struggle.

“Arthie Casimir.” He matched her slow drawl. Onyx and brass rings glittered from his fingers. “Ivor and I have been making bets. He believed you’d show twenty duvin ago. How many of the Casimir crew had dropped by my doorstep at that point, Ivor? Three?”

“Six, sire.”

Matteo waved a hand. “Never been fond of numbers, me.”

If his prowess in the arts wasn’t evident from the faint smudge of color on his fingers and every fool crowing it on the streets, it was overwhelmingly so from the way he observed. There was a greed in his gaze, as if he feared missing the world by giving in to a blink.

“Needless to say, Ivor lost.” His smile carved a dimple in his cheek, and she was irritated that she noticed.

“And now you can use those winnings to settle your accounts,” Jin said.

Arthie nodded. "All two hundred and twenty-four duvin."

"Hefty," Matteo noted, and his brief pause told her this was the moment of truth, of answer. "You know, for the longest time, I've wondered if those of us who come and drink tea can taste the blood you serve in those very same cups."

And there it was.

Since learning the name of the patron who was leaving tabs unpaid, Arthie had known something was amiss. He wasn't short on money. No, he'd set his lure, and she'd come to see why, armed with a little information of her own.

"Not that you drink much tea at Spindrift," she said, holding Matteo's gaze and making her implication clear.

"Come now, Arthie," he drawled, regarding her a little more intently and a little more seriously. "I only wanted to meet you."

"Look at you wooing the men," Jin cooed at her, then he snapped his fingers at Matteo and held out his hand. "Our money, if you please."

Jin tightened his grip on his umbrella when Matteo leaned forward, but he was only withdrawing a purse from the table at his side. The man had the money waiting.

He tossed it at Jin and frowned when he slipped it in his pocket. "Aren't you going to count it?"

"No, and if I have to come here again, you will regret it," Arthie said. "You're not as out of reach as you think."

Matteo sat back. The emerald of his eyes went flat, a forest at dark. "We all have our secrets or the world would be out of currency. Isn't that right, darling?"

The lamp flickered on the table, reflecting off the glass cabinets behind him.

Every aristocrat had their fair share of dark secrets, from affairs and extortion to distasteful dealings that built the ladder upon which high



society had climbed so high. In that regard, Matteo Andoni almost *was* out of reach—*almost*.

“You know it more than any of us, dropping notes in official mailboxes, whispering private affairs to prim ladies,” Matteo said. “Stirring up chaos.”

“Vengeance,” corrected Arthie. “I have no interest in chaos.” Not directly. Nor did she have any reservations about making her intentions clear.

“Semantics,” he replied with a shrug.

Arthie kept her seething to herself.

Matteo took that as permission to continue. “And your offerings? Vampires can easily find thralls on the streets, especially when there’s nothing quite like the euphoria of being pierced by their fangs. You decided to take what’s freely available and turn a profit. Thievery at its finest.”

“Innovation,” Arthie corrected again, flint in her bones. Before Spindrifft, before her pistol, she was nothing. An orphan on the street, picking pockets and nicking blankets with a stumbling tongue and fumbling hands, eyes round as the moon and just as hungry. “Or is it a sin when it’s me and an achievement to be applauded when it’s those in power? When it’s that wretched trading company leeching resources from the east?”

Matteo blinked. “You know, I mostly *was* applauding you.”

“You’d do well to remember,” Arthie said, ignoring him and turning to leave, “that some secrets are worth more than others.”

Matteo hummed. “You know it more than anyone, Arthie, the girl who pulled pistol from stone.”

Arthie didn’t flinch. All of White Roaring knew about Calibore, the breechloader that no one but she had been able to pull free. It was nothing. Only a few more seconds and she would have left, money in her hand and brittle peace in her mind, but Matteo wasn’t finished.

“Arthie, the girl who came to Ettenia in a boat full of blood.”

She froze and turned back.

Matteo was on his feet now, and that damned dimple made another appearance. But it wasn't because he was gloating. No, something unnerving sparkled in his gaze, as if he could understand what she'd been through. As if he was on her side.

She couldn't let that stand. She refused. Arthie stepped closer. Close enough to rile Ivor, and she heard Jin hold the butler back with a soft *tsk*.

“I've always wondered why you never visit Spindrift after hours,” Arthie said, shifting the conversation away from herself. She wanted him to know she had been watching him, long enough to figure him out. “We both know you have no appetite for tea.”

Yes, Matteo Andoni was almost out of reach except for one glaring secret.

Jin drew a quick breath. “You—you're a vampire.”

Matteo said nothing. He was young, too young for his work to have spread so far and so wide without immortality on his side.

“Most artists only ever see success long after they've rotted in their graves. But here you are, early twenties and a household name. Imagine what White Roaring would think,” Arthie mused, “if they knew their beloved painter wasn't even alive. Terrible for business, really. You might not even have a place in society anymore.”

“Yet you won't tell a soul,” the vampire said quietly, not at all alarmed.

“And why's that?” But it was true. Arthie didn't sell her goods for cheap. Secrets were meant to ferment, they aged well. The longer they sat, the higher their value.

“Because you can't resist the power of a threat. I, on the other hand,” he continued, drawing attention to his fingers, which were twisting a Spindrift syringe sparkling with blood, “only need to shout

about your illicit affairs, and I promise you the guard at the top of the street won't hesitate before galloping over. It's funny how quickly they can move when you least want them to."

It would take more than a syringe to bring her down, but Arthie was nothing if not careful.

"Jin," Arthie said.

Jin sighed, recognizing the tone. "As you wish, little sister." In one move, he tossed his umbrella to his other hand and snatched up the revolver she'd told him—several times—to pack.

Matteo's gaze widened. She liked her men a little afraid of her.

"I do think we can talk—" he started.

Jin squeezed the trigger.

The sound of the gunshot blasted in the chamber. Matteo crumpled to the ground with a surprised yelp, and Arthie shook away the ringing in her ears.

The vampire started quivering. Arthie frowned until he fell back, laughter rattling the glass of the cabinets behind him. Thick blood oozed from his wound, darker than crimson against his pale, ivory skin. Dead skin. Dead blood. "I liked this shirt."

The butler cried out in anguish.

"Oh don't worry, old boy," Matteo said, carefully extracting the bronze bullet with two slender fingers and a grimace. The skin around the wound was bruised a deathly shade. She almost felt sorry for him, until he looked up at her and winked slowly, with vanity. "Every good love story starts with a bullet to the heart."

Arthie didn't like the way those words shot through her veins. She picked up the syringe. "Next time I'll make sure you stay dead."

"I abhor violence!" Matteo called after her.

She shoved out into the night, Jin at her side. She knew before she looked to the top of the street that the uniformed men would no longer

be there, not because she believed Matteo Andoni had any sway over them, but because she recognized the footsteps of her young runner pounding through the fog, approaching 337 Alms Place.

Chester emerged from the fog, breathless and panting, gripping the gate from the street side. His blond head was bright in the moonlight.

“Horned Guard on the way to Spindrift. There’s going to be a raid.”

## JIN

“Welcome to Spindrif. Here’s what you need to know,” Jin had said to the new recruit before they opened that morning. “At seven bells, the tearoom doors lock shut. No patrons in, everyone out. No exceptions, no matter how dashing the smile. Slide the shutters over the glass and come round to the back. Now, shuffle this bookcase and take down those frames. Will you look at that, the bloodhouse is nearly open for business.”

The new girl shivered. Jin couldn’t blame her.

“Make your way to the booths,” he continued. He had enough to do, but no one else could show her the workings better than the one who had made it all, bit by bit, idea by idea.

“Take that vase off. Set it on the table that unfolds from the right. Come back to the shelf, reach for the latches on either side, and a bed will unfold. Better if you don’t think about what happens in here, eh? Unless that’s your thing.” He winked. “Step out. That gap between the stall wall? Reach in, pull out the door, angle it closed.”

He paused to take in her awe. “Now our booth is a bedroom. Do it again, and again, and again. Oh, and make sure you have your uniforms ready. One’s for serving our prim, aristocratic patrons, and the other’s a little more alluring for our vampire friends who come from all walks of life.”

She followed him out to the floor, where the tables were set with

small bowls of depleting sugar cubes and cream pots to be cleaned. The smell of tea clung to the air. Jin plucked a tray from a passing server and shoved it in the new girl's hands, sweeping the ceramics onto it.

"Every other table folds away. First in half, then directly into the floor, like so. Slide the chairs to the wall and while you're there, push on this lever and sit back—a settee will come out and meet you."

Jin fell back, slipping through air as the sofa unfolded. He propped up his legs and lifted his eyebrows. "That's Spindrift. Tearoom by light, bloodhouse by dark."

Now, hours later, it was time to do the reverse.

As the clock tower struck two, Jin and Arthie burst through the back doors of Spindrift, sign as sharp as its owner, bricks as bright as her ambition. The place couldn't have been more alive. Jin paused as he always did, allowing himself to savor its warm embrace.

Arthie glanced at her pocket watch. "Seventeen minutes until the peace posse arrives."

They only needed nine. Four to clear the floor and five to transform the place. They had this down to a science.

The lights were down low, softening the edges to a bewitching glow over the midnight crowd: the undead who came to feast and the blood merchants who came to get paid. The crew bustled among tables, decanters glittering as they topped off teacups full of red. Vampires lounged, their conversations hushed, laughter dulcet and deep. Some relaxed with the day's papers while others converged near the dark wainscot walls, slips of shadow against the floral damask decorating the upper half. At the far end, a vampire and a blood merchant tucked into one of the private rooms as another pair exited the room beside it.

These weren't the vampires with exclusive access to the elite society

of snobbery known as the Athereum, but they dressed and acted as if they were lords and ladies anyway, and it made Jin even more proud of Spindrift and the allure he and Arthie had created.

Spindrift was more than a business. It was a safe place, and not just for their crew of orphans and castaways. In Ettenia, vampires had lived for decades in relative secrecy, indistinguishable from the living, until a massacre had thrown their existence into sudden blinding light.

Twenty years ago, the Wolf of White Roaring brutalized the streets, ripping out throats until rivulets of red ran down the district. It was a rampage, pure slaughter, and though the Wolf did not drink from his victims so much as he mauled them, survivors spoke of fangs and a scarlet stare. He was a vampire, though no one had known at the time. One vampire had exposed them all, one rogue attack so vicious and unusual—it was strange they'd never found the one responsible.

"Almost as if the attack had been created for a purpose," Arthie would sometimes say.

After all, fear became hate when it festered long enough. Jin had never known life before, but his father claimed it was no different. The world always teemed with darkness, Ettenia had just given it a new name.

A far from difficult task, for vampires were predators to begin with and it was almost too easy. A mysterious man murdering women for hire? Blame it on vampires. A woman who up and decided to kill her cheating husband? She had to be undead. It didn't matter if the majority of vampires acted with decorum, the country was determined to paint them as villainous. And though the richer vampires could assimilate into high society with no one the wiser, the commonalty had no place but the shadows and, thus, rare access to blood.

Vampires might have to exercise restraint when feeding so as not to drain their marks, but they weren't rabid. They didn't go on killing

sprees when they could quietly slip their fangs into their victims for a treat. What most people didn't know was that the Wolf of White Roaring—at the time of his attack—and the others like him were half vampires, torn between the living and the undead.

Traditionally, a vampire was born when a person on the brink of death ingested vampire blood. Whether they were exsanguinated by an undead or died of other means, the process was the same: Drink an adequate amount of vampire blood in those precious seconds, and the deed was done.

Half vampires were different. They were fed vampire blood while they were still alive, and often against their will, giving them all the energy of the living and *then some*, enough to unleash their pain upon the innocent without even realizing it.

They were suspended between life and death, weaker than their counterparts, but still able to become a full vampire the same way a human could. Both full and half vampires drank blood to survive, both bore no reflection in a mirror. Full vampires cast no shadow, half ones did. Unlike full vampires who were frozen at the age they were turned, half vampires matured at a pace much slower than humans until they eventually stopped. While full vampires did not need to breathe—even if they kept at it after a lifetime's habit—half vampires did.

Regardless, here in Spindrift, vampires could be themselves for a while. They didn't need to pretend. Jin struck his umbrella on the floorboards, drawing the room's attention. Crimson eyes turned his way, the sign of vampires who had gorged their fill.

"Wrap it up," Arthie announced. "Spindrift closes in ten."

The din rose to a soft buzz. Vampires were a quiet lot, fazed by little. With heightened hearing and increased speed, it only made sense. Several flagged down last-minute teacups of blood—many asking for Jin's signature coconut-blood blend, which Spindrift had been out of



for quite some time—others departed with satisfied sighs, retracted fangs, and chaste kisses to the backs of one another’s hands.

Jin and Arthie got to work.

“You want to tell me what that was back there at Matteo Andoni’s house?” Jin asked her, dragging the shutters down.

She spotted a dark spill and tossed someone a mop. “You shot him.”

“Because you used the tone,” Jin said, and Arthie tipped her head at one of their more popular and scantily dressed blood merchants.

Though most blood merchants filled large glass syringes and called it a day, this one offered her services in the private rooms, where a vampire could drink directly from the source. The euphoria from a vampire’s fangs and whatever else transpired in a room had its perks, Jin supposed.

“What tone?” Arthie asked, picking up a decanter. Her eyes reflected the scarlet of its contents.

Jin lifted his eyebrows. “The one that says, ‘Jin, please shoot the pretty man.’”

“Well then, you can’t blame me for your lack of morales.”

“Morals. The word you’re looking for—”

“You know I can say all that and more in two other languages, both of which have far more letters than Ettenian, so don’t patronize me, Jin,” she snapped. He jerked back and paused. Arthie paused too before grabbing a rag. “Don’t look at me like that.”

“Matteo really has you riled up, hasn’t he?” Jin asked, holding in a laugh. It was cute, he had to admit, Arthie being all worked up because Matteo had flaunted a dimple and taunted her with the suggestion of a love story.

She snapped her pocket watch closed with a muttered *riled*.

Jin clapped his hands and addressed the room. “Sorry to cut the

night short, good friends, but if you would kindly leave the premises, I would be much obliged.”

Chairs were pushed back, coins clinked. The last of the vampires stepped through the back doors with nods, waves, and hat tips. Everyone had a heartbeat, a flush to their skin. Well-fed vampires were as close to living as they could get.

It took three minutes and forty-nine seconds for the floor to clear, and then the true chaos erupted.

“Reni!” Arthie yelled. “Tea!”

Reni brewed good tea. Always the right steep, the perfect shade. It was the only reason Arthie let him wander the floor during morning hours, considering he preferred blood himself. An odd fellow. Fresh kettles thudded onto stovetops, ready ones whistled, and before long, steady hands were pouring steaming tea into bowls to mask the stench of blood.

It was a rhythm in Jin’s veins.

“Pick up the pace,” Arthie shouted, sliding the bookcase in place and sealing the back door. “Leave that, unlock the front. Chester, the glasses. You three get in uniform, and the rest of you out of sight.”

Spindrift being a bloodhouse was no secret. White Roaring knew it. The crew knew it. Every member of the Horned Guard knew it. The difference was in the proof: None existed. Except for that syringe Matteo had, of course. Jin still didn’t know how he’d managed to pilfer it. Only the crew was allowed to handle the supplies used for bloodletting, and they were instructed to do so with care and precaution.

“Reni, fetch the mirrors,” Arthie ordered as Jin passed her the tubes full of blood and sterilized bundles of surgical instruments to tuck underneath the floorboards in the front.

Every few weeks, the Horned Guard would try something new: elaborate raids, claiming incorrect paperwork to stall shipments of tea and coconuts, all but defaming Spindrift in the newspapers.

“Maybe we ought to hide your pistol,” Jin suggested, wiping down the counter. Sure, everyone knew about it, but there was a difference between knowing about it and having it shoved in your face. He glanced at its grip etched in black filigree that gave it an ethereal look, once smeared with the fingerprints of those who had tried to pull it free using chisels and axes and everything in between.

Really, all they’d needed were the small hands of a small girl from a small island far, far away. A girl who had been wronged, cheated, stolen.

Arthie tucked away the night’s invoices and looked at him like he’d dropped his wits on the run here. “They’re regular old guards, Jin. Since when are we afraid of them?”

But Matteo’s words had struck a little too close. Something about this night had riled *him* too, and it wasn’t the artist’s dimple.

“They send a higher ranked guard with every new raid,” he said.

Arthie did that thing with her face, a dismissal that pulled back one side of her mouth. “Don’t start doubting your handiwork now.”

Everyone took the slip, slide, and click transformation of Spindrift for granted. Not Arthie. She never forgot the weeks it took to make it work, and the strain it had put on Jin. Arthie didn’t forget anything.

When Jin was seven he’d wished for a sister. When he was eleven Arthie had pulled him out of death’s embrace. She’d crossed oceans to give him a reason to live. Jin still remembered squinting up at her ratty and dirty figure, the kind of person his father, dressed in the finest wool and the shiniest shoes, would point out to him from the carriage window and say, “See, these are the people you will help one day, little heron.”

His father hadn’t been there to witness the roles reversed.

She was, simply put, a tempest in a bottle, tiny and simmering and ready to obliterate. White Roaring had whittled her sharp as a blade and her wits just the same.

How far she'd come from the girl in rags to a master in a tailored suit, baker boy hat pulled over the swoops of her mauve hair, a pin-stripe waistcoat snug over her crisp shirt, cuffs neat, collar popped, suit jacket always open *because I'm no straightlace*. The jacket matched the belt slung low and angled on her hips, positioned so the pistol was on full display.

"Any news on the coconut?" Arthie asked when Jin grabbed a coir brush for a stubborn patch of blood. Coconut husks really did make the best brushes.

Spindrift's imports consisted of tea and coconuts. Both were from Arthie's homeland of Ceylan, but with a blight affecting crops across the island as of late, they hadn't replenished their coconut stores in months.

Jin shook his head. He could have sworn the light in her eyes dimmed a little as she rearranged their tins of loose tea. They had a wide variety of plain and robust black teas to delicate white teas and curated blends infused with fruit and other flavors—though Arthie refused to brew any atrocity at Spindrift that wasn't truly *tea*, like chamomile or peppermint.

"At least our tea's safe, eh?" he said. Without it, they'd have no tearoom. Coconut, on the other hand, they only used to enhance the experience of the bloodhouse.

"And still no word from our palace snitchers. Pol heard today that they might be on lockdown," Jin said. They had a network of maids and stewards and household staff willing to trade whispers for coin but hadn't heard from anyone in the palace in nearly two weeks.

"The *palace* might be on lockdown?" Arthie asked, lifting her brows in surprise.

Jin nodded. He didn't know if that meant the Ram was worried about someone getting in or out.

“They’re almost here!” the lookout shouted over the ruckus of sliding tables and clinking teacups. Jin tensed.

“*Dulce periculum*, brother,” Arthie reminded him, holding up her left arm.

He knocked the back of his right hand against the back of hers. Their knuckles rapped. “We were made for trouble, you and me.”

Figures silhouetted through the frosted glass of Spindrift’s doors as the last settee folded into the wall and the rest of the crew disappeared. Jin yanked up the flip-top table and stepped behind it. Arthie was in front of him.

The doors flew open without a knock, and five uniformed guards stepped inside. The outline of a head with wicked horns was emblazoned on their breasts in silver thread. The mark of the Ram, Ettenia’s latest masked monarch.

A server scampered forward. “Hello, sirs. Can I interest you in a cup of White Roaring’s best tea? Royal Ettenian’s my favorite.”

The guards looked perplexed. No self-respecting tearoom would be open this late, but Arthie liked to swamp them, get the men a little dazed and distracted, taunt them with what they already knew—especially when the alternative was awkward silence.

“Try the Ceylani Supreme. Best tea in the country, really,” another crew member called, looking up from the sink. “Never mind the capital.”

“Always go with the Crimson Gem myself,” said a third, leaning close. “Nothing beats a good spiced pekoe.”

If Arthie was a tea, that was what she would be. It was brewed with care and steeped with just the right amount of spices that brought out earthy, smoky undertones as the leaves unfolded. It demanded perfection, conferred the best, and punished anything that wasn’t with downright bitterness.

“Gentlemen.” She inclined her head on cue. Jin could only see the back of Arthie’s mauve head, but he knew her smile was the edge of a razor. “Noise complaint? I understand the clinking of teacups can be a little . . . aggressive at two in the morning. Always a lot to clean and prepare for our morning guests.”

The one in charge of the lot puffed out his chest and stomped closer. His livery was a light gray and stood in contrast to the solid black of the others. If only he knew that every last bit of proof the clods needed was underneath the floorboards at his feet. “You think you’re a king, Casimir. Defying the law.”

“Did you hear that, Jin? I’m King Arthie now.” She turned back to the guards. “Laws enacted by men like you scrawling words they believe they might understand? Laws vilifying anyone who isn’t as peaky as you?” She leaned back, slinging a hand across the bar top. He really did look peaky in the light: pale and an almost sickly white. “No, sergeant. Can’t defy a law that doesn’t include me.”

She was right. Ettenian laws were created for the white man, usually at the expense of anyone who didn’t share their pallor. This was how someone like Matteo Andoni could live a markedly different life than someone like Arthie.

The sergeant’s gaze lit up eagerly. “Touchy subject, is it? Having trouble keeping up with rent, I heard. That’s the problem when folk like you come to a place where we have rules. I hear it’s only a matter of time before they evict you and your lot.”

Jin’s brow furrowed. They made every payment for the building—on time.

“Time to get your ears cleaned then,” Arthie said, betraying nothing.

“Then why do you look like you want to kill me?” the sergeant asked with a smirk.

“Oh, that’s just my face,” Arthie replied. “One gets a taste for blood when they have to lick their own wounds, you see.”

The sergeant stared for a minute, very likely trying to find something to say, before he jerked his head at the others. “Start looking.”

Jin flinched as a table and chair struck the far wall, followed by several stools. The men treated the tearoom like a pen to play in, tearing up the floors near the private rooms that were now secluded booths, one of them ducking his head and coming up empty.

“I didn’t say ruin the place,” the sergeant said tiredly. “If you’re going to pull up the floors, find wherever it’s hollow.”

“How considerate,” Jin commented, and lowered his voice to ask Arthie, “What’s he on about us being behind on payments?”

Arthie said nothing. Something shattered.

Jin sighed and lifted his chin to the men ransacking the place. “Need some help over there?”

With a sneer, one of them crouched by the front doors and rapped his knuckles on the wood. Even here behind the counter, Jin could hear that damning echo.

The sergeant looked to Arthie.

Arthie looked back. “Have at it. I won’t stop you.”

Jin wanted to stop him. He wanted his life unscathed. He wanted *Spindrift* unscathed, and they were the same thing. The sergeant wedged his knife beneath the worn floorboards.

“Blow switch two,” Arthie murmured to Jin.

Matteo Andoni had clearly shaken her if she thought that would tip anything in their favor. Blowing a bulb was the oldest trick in the book. The silliest. The most amateur.

“*Jin*,” she bit out.

One of these days she was going to get him killed, and he’d be too dead to whine about it.

He pressed down on the faulty power switch he had long ago put together under the counter, cursing a stray spark. Above them, one of the many suspended bulbs popped and hissed. The men looked up as the light bloomed brighter and made an alarming buzzing noise before it shattered, raining glass down on them. The length of wire swayed, bereft, and the sergeant shook the shards off and returned to work.

Some bloody good that did. The light had dimmed the space, nothing else.

“Patience, Jin,” Arthie said when he glanced at her with exasperation. To the men, she said casually, “Apologies. You know how it is on this side of White Roaring. Power can be quite fickle around here.”

This was the side of White Roaring that society had discarded, where the sound of a gunshot was as commonplace as a horse’s whinny. Spindrift sat on the edge of it, half outcast, half gentry, rising from the rubble of its surroundings through sheer force of will. With every new secret a patron let slip, Arthie tucked some official or another into her arsenal, turning the slums into a kingdom of their own with Spindrift as their crown.

And the Ram, as the increasing number of raids made clear, was painfully aware of it.

Yet, with the guards seconds away from enough proof to hang them all, Arthie had never looked more at ease.

The sergeant yanked the floorboard out of place. There was a long pause and a murmur before he and the others rose, and Jin saw that the hollow beneath the floorboard was . . . hollow. Not a syringe or blood vial in sight, though he had watched Arthie putting both down that very hole mere moments ago.

“Seems you lost a good night’s sleep over nothing,” Jin goaded, setting his chin in his hands.



“Told you,” one of the Horned Guards said, yawning loudly.

The sergeant shot him a dirty look and fixed the same on Arthie.

“You think you’re—”

Arthie cut him short by swinging open the door. “Whatever you’re about to say, sergeant, I don’t think it, I know it.”

Power was indeed fickle, and in the ever-changing landscape of White Roaring, the Casimirs were untouchable.