

A Tempest of Tea

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1 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.

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

"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 humanfolk 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. Look sharp." She didn't care if Matteo Andoni was the country's beloved paint slinger. If you couldn't pay, you shouldn't drink.

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 Jin 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 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. His hair was dark and long, a carefully arranged mess. "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 Spindrift, 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 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.

