

The Font – Chapter 1

Elisha Midyet slipped through the throng in the vampire king's hall. He nodded at the gathered, saying a word of greeting in response to hails and trying to make himself as inconspicuous as possible. He carefully controlled his thoughts, lest Heriolf read them and learn of tonight's plans.

Still, he couldn't quite suppress an inward sneer at the situation. Everything about tonight, about the last seven years, brought loathing to the fore. King. Hall. Swearing of fealty to the self-styled Lord of Southeast Georgia. Grandiose words for a grandiose ego. Elisha could only pray Heriolf's high estimation of himself would be his ultimate undoing.

The 'hall' was actually once nothing more than a dining room. Large, yes, that must be admitted; big enough to serve great feasts like tonight's. It had been built with an eye towards entertaining large parties. Elisha himself remembered hearing how the now extinct Seward family had entertained the most illustrious people of Savannah here. Their parties were legend two hundred and fifty years ago when Elisha had still breathed.

Once the Seward mansion had been grand and gorgeous. Now, had some intrepid soul braved the spindly pine woods smothered in shrouds of kudzu to reach it, they would discover a seemingly decaying wreck, though its outer face did retain a measure of its earlier glory.

Where a shipping magnate's family had once dwelled beneath the sweltering light of the Georgia sun, now the vampires reigned. Elisha wondered what the Swards would have thought of tonight's menu, his watchful gaze glancing to the feast set up along one long wall. He looked away before hunger could cloud his purpose.

As for the *king* – Elisha's lip curled at that title before he could stop himself – well, Heriolf was more a dictator, a vicious tyrant that no one could depose. Yet.

Despite telling himself not to be a fool, Elisha couldn't help but glance at Heriolf seated at the head of the room. The intricately carved chair he squatted upon indeed resembled a throne. Despise him as he might, Elisha had to admit the 1300-year old vampire was an intimidating sight. Heriolf might have inspired legends of the Viking gods that he once prayed to. Well over six feet tall, the vampire lord was massive with muscle. He showed off his impressively chiseled chest and bulging arms by not wearing a shirt beneath a red cape, which closed at his throat with a gold clasp. A beast of a man, he commanded fear if not respect.

Crystalline blue eyes swept those who had gathered at his order. The forward part of his thick gray hair had been twined into thick braids to frame his craggy face; the rest hung loose down his back. A matching gray mustache and beard, also braided, made his fierce face even more bestial. Old by the standards of his day, Heriolf had still been hale and hearty when he'd been made vampire at the age of forty-eight.

Elisha felt bile rise in his throat and turned his eyes away.

His gaze found Mariel looking at him, her dark eyes warning him. Her black hair caught the red tints of firelight, making it almost seem as if it would burst into flame. Elisha took a breath and nodded. He noticed how her skin looked almost ruddy in the flickering light of the blaze in the mammoth fireplace and smaller flares of the sconces. There was no electricity fed to the house. At least Heriolf had shown that small bit of sense to stay off the humans' power grid. It was one of the very few things he'd done right.

I must stop thinking of these things. If he looks at me, reads my thoughts...

Well, that would be calamitous. Not just for Elisha but for all the conspirators, and ultimately every vampire under Heriolf's sway.

A brief lull in the hushed conversations of the gathered vampires alerted Elisha. He looked once more towards where the self-described king sat. A human woman had come into the room to stand at Heriolf's side.

Her name was Naya Woods. Out of Heriolf's hearing, many referred to her as the Font, the suggestion being that she was the source of Heriolf's powers. Powers he possessed beyond those of any other vampire. Powers that had allowed Heriolf to seize sole rulership over the once democratically controlled southeast Georgia sect. This suspicion that her blood had special properties had been borne out by a captured member of the king's inner circle. Other than the fact that feeding on her had gifted Heriolf incalculable physical strength and the ability to read minds, nothing of note was known about her.

Taken piece by piece, she was not a beauty. Her pale blond hair, reaching to her waist, was too flyaway and untamed. Her eyes, as green as the ubiquitous pine needles of Georgia, were too large and too round to balance her tiny chin. Her nose was long and straight, and her lips, while well-formed, were thin slashes of pink. Her body was so willowy as to make her appear taller than she actually was; especially in the sweeping gown she wore tonight, its green skirt that matched her eyes reaching the marble floor. There was an aloof restraint in her demeanor that suggested she was above the pettiness of the world around her, but gazing at her for only a few seconds told the observer this regal bearing was but a mask she wore. Beneath it, there was a nervous fluttering of fingers, a jerkiness of the darting eyes that took in everything, and a tension in her stance that spoke of a willingness to take flight. She was at her heart a wild thing, as untamed as the floating froth of hair that moved with its own life around her torso.

In parts, Naya was not quite pretty. But put together she was striking, lovely even, a pale will o' the wisp that pleased the eye even as it confounded it. That such a dainty ethereal being gave Heriolf his power over all other vampires made her even more compelling.

"So she has emerged," a quiet voice said in Elisha's ear.

He turned his head slightly to look into Sebastian's brown eyes. The other man's dark skin glowed warmly in the firelight. Though Elisha was Sebastian's sire, having brought his lifelong friend over to the ranks of the undead, there was no hint of rank between the two men. Not even Elisha's father's will that granted ownership of all the property and slaves had made him a master over Sebastian in more than name. Their friendship had been kept carefully hidden in the pre-Civil War South, to protect both. They had grown up together, white and black, side by side with no concern for their difference in color. Elisha had always considered Sebastian his equal. His brother.

"She is guarded as well as ever," he now said to his friend. Two of Heriolf's musclebound guards, their fangs showing to intimidate, had entered the room with Naya and stood near her.

Two vampires Elisha had been waiting for entered the room from the direction of the mansion's foyer. They flashed quick looks towards him and Sebastian and then melded seamlessly into the growing crowd.

Sebastian's deep tones were a pleasing rumble in Elisha's ear. "She will be ours, and many wrongs will be avenged."

"Watch your thoughts, Sebastian. It will take but one slip and all our hopes will die."

"Along with us. I know." With that, the other man slipped away.

Elisha resumed roaming through the crowd, surreptitiously keeping Naya within his peripheral vision. He never let her out of his sight.

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As always, Naya carefully schooled her expression to remain expressionless. She despised these gatherings for many different reasons, but uppermost was the apprehension. She was sure the other vampires knew of the extra strength Heriolf took from her blood, of the added advantage it gave him over his enemies, many of whom posed as supplicants. She felt it in the covetous glances they darted her way when her guardian wasn't looking.

She tried to feel safe. After all, Heriolf had provided her with his most trusted guards, big, dreadful men who had physical strength and fearlessness. And there was Heriolf himself, buttressed by the power of drinking her blood. He could read any mind but hers, and he could hold off a dozen other vampires. The amazing strength she gave him added to his warrior expertise, honed by centuries of battle. She was well protected.

Naya didn't feel secure though. The dry leaf smell of vampire permeated the room, reminding her of how many owed Heriolf fealty. The others desperately wanted what she gave the vampire king. He had warned her time and again he was all that stood between her and death – or worse – at their fangs. They desired his position as ruler of their kind, and somehow they knew it was she who kept them in their place. Even now, she saw the calculating stare of a handsome vampire in the back of the group. Their eyes met, and he quickly turned away. She studied him, making a mental note of his appearance, just in case he should prove a problem later.

He looked of the colonial era, with his reddish-brown hair caught back in a ponytail that reached the bottom of his neck. He had an old-fashioned sense to him despite wearing a modern tan button-down shirt and jeans that outlined a powerful body. She couldn't tell the color of his eyes, not at this distance, but their briefly exchanged look had assured her of their piercing quality. His perfectly chiseled features were marred only by a slight bump on the bridge of his nose, as if he'd broken it at some point in his life. Most injuries suffered after one became a vampire completely healed.

The handsome man smiled a little as he nodded to his fellow vampires, but there was a distrustful air that made the corners of his eyes tight. And underneath all of that was a sad world-weariness that she felt even from across the room. It was as if he retained the humanity long cast aside by other vampires. Heriolf in particular retained barely anything of human civilization in his personality.

Naya was startled to discover she compared the other man to the vampire lord and chastised herself for it. Heriolf was her guardian, her friend, the one person she could count on. He'd been good to her since the death of her parents, and she wished she could love him as she thought she should. He hadn't spoken of it yet, but she knew he intended to make her his bride. He would soon give her his blood, making them eternal companions forever. If he was often brutal to vampire and human alike, well, she could understand his motivations. Vampires were a calculating and ambitious lot. For the peace of his kingdom, Heriolf was sometimes forced into doing what on the surface looked like despicable acts. And the human victims ... well, that was harder to accept. But their blood was needed for vampire survival. It wasn't necessary to kill them for that blood or to include the rapes that so often accompanied the devouring, but to keep his empire stable Heriolf had confided he must allow such predations. Must sometimes even indulge in those monstrous activities himself for appearances sake.

Naya couldn't help but look towards the celebratory feast. Laid out in a long line were naked and bound humans, their cries muffled behind the gags stuffed into their mouths. Their wide, frightened eyes stared at the vampires milling about the hall.

The soon to be devoured were killers. Child rapists. People who cheated the elderly and sick. Heriolf had assured her the victims weren't victims at all, but human monsters best culled from society in order to protect the innocent. Still it raised her gorge, knowing what they soon faced. The smell of old blood competed with that of vampire, a testament to many such feasts over the past years. Feasts usually presided over by Heriolf himself.

I will not find fault with him. He is my guardian. He took pity on me, an orphan with no money and nothing to offer, at least not that he knew of at the time. He loves me. I owe him everything, and I will not question my loyalty.

Her resolve bolstered, Naya moved closer to place her small hand on his where it rested on the chair's arms. Heriolf's wrist turned so that he could lace his fingers with hers. He smiled. "Quite the gathering tonight, isn't it my dear?" His brilliant blue eyes swept over her, and she knew she did not imagine the heat in them. "You look lovely, as always."

Naya forced a smile for Heriolf. She thought of him as a protective uncle. Knowing his thoughts were far more intimate made her insides churn. Just the feeling of his mouth at her throat as he took a few swallows of her blood each night made her squeamish. When he made her his bride, there would be much more than his fangs inside her, and she felt guilty over the curl of disgust in her guts at the thought.

She said, "Thank you." Then, because she couldn't help it, she confided, "I hate these things."

His brows drew together a little, but his tone was indulgent. "No one will touch you. They all know they will die if they do."

"May I retire as soon as the ceremony is over? Before the feast begins in earnest?"

He chuckled, seemingly a doting father with his cranky child. "Of course. I know how sentimental you are for the fodder, but I promise you they are little more than animals."

Naya kept her eyes on his face, where she couldn't see the frightened expressions of the naked humans waiting to be used to appease vampire hungers. Not looking at them made it easier to remember these were criminals, meeting a deserved justice. "Of course. It is for the best."

She kept her gaze from the group of victims, feeling the stretch of every slowly passing second until she could leave the hall.

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Heriolf looked over his subjects, feeling Naya's warmth so very close. She smelled of wooded paths, of autumn leaves, of wilderness. She'd been exploring the forest that surrounded the mansion again, and it worried him. She was vulnerable to the human slaves of his enemies, of which he was sure he had many. But keeping one of Naya's kind indoors all of the time was an impossibility if he wanted her to remain sane. And he did like her with her faculties intact, wanted to keep her that way for as long as possible. Perhaps one day it would be necessary to imprison her, visiting only to take the blood that made him invincible. Should that day come he would lock her away without a speck of conscience, though he might have a moment of remorse. Willing fonts were so much better than those that fought him.

Still, the thought his enemies might target Naya nagged at Heriolf. That he had enemies, he was positive. Randalf's disappearance was proof of that. His dedicated aide had been gone over a month now, and Heriolf felt sure he had been visited by his final death. But which of these who attended him now had been behind it? His ability to read minds had not uncovered the traitor in the vampires' midst. Even now, as he listened to their thoughts one at a time hoping for a clue, there was no indication of who had taken Randalf.

Instead there were only thoughts of blood and of sex, the inane wanderings of insignificant minds. So bendable, so easy to terrorize and cajole were the other vampires. As long as the animal hungers were met, his subjects were as much sheep as the humans they'd once been. Heriolf's takeover had been met with barely an outcry, even when he'd destroyed the council members that had once ruled southeast Georgia. Not when he'd bribed so many into complacency. And those who had fought against him? He'd easily overpowered them, Naya's blood giving him the strength and prior knowledge of those who would defy him. His rise to supremacy had been almost laughably easy.

But now Randalf was gone, an overt challenge to Heriolf's rule. Well, the greed of his subjects remained one of Heriolf's greatest tools, and he knew well how to use it.

He stood and the room fell silent at once. Without preamble he announced, "Many of you know my trusted aide Randalf. He has been missing for over a month now. I am eager to discover his whereabouts, so if any have heard anything, even just rumors, I am prepared to make it worth your while for sharing information with me."

He gestured to the whimpering feast, enough for his subjects to glut themselves on. And they would tonight, drinking and fucking themselves into a thrall. It wouldn't end until every last human on the buffet had been raped and sucked dry. "You will feed at my table for a year, if the information you share makes it so Randalf can be found."

Excited murmurs rose in the room at this announcement. Heriolf never lacked for blood, his hunting done by others. To not have to chance human discovery, to not have to prowl all night long for sustenance at the edges of civilization would indeed be a luxury for most.

Then Heriolf offered what he knew would ultimately out the traitor. He nodded to Naya. "And a taste of the sweetest blood of all if someone brings him to me, or those who may have been foolish enough to take him away."

Louder conversation, excitement lighting many a face. Despite his attempts to keep Naya's true importance quiet, rumors had spread. For the Font's part, she looked at Heriolf with shocked horror.

He gave her a slight shake of his head, assuring her of his lie. He would never let another taste even one drop of her blood. She belonged to him alone.

Mollified, Naya went back to looking aloof. Later she would chastise him for offering such a thing, and he would apologize and reaffirm how he would forever look after her, keeping her safe as he had for almost twenty years. His profuse exclamations of contrition would even make her feel a little guilty that she had doubted him for even an instant. Heriolf had been dancing with Naya for most of her life now, and he knew all the steps. Leading her was as easy as ruling the vampires.

As for anyone who did give him the information he sought, he would offer a few drops of another's blood in a cup, some young child snatched from its bed perhaps. Young ones did taste the best, and who would argue that perhaps it was not Naya's blood? No one that wanted to keep his second life going.

And if someone suggested he was due a draught straight from the Font herself? Let the fools only try to sip from her and they will know a final death too horrible to be contemplated.

Naya was his. Heriolf wasted no conscience on the ethics of double-crossing those who presumed too much.

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It was a battle to keep the grim smile off Elisha's face. Randalf had gone to his final death as soon as he'd given up all he knew of the Font. Considering how he'd helped Heriolf kill so many, including Elisha's sire, it was justice long overdue.

As Heriolf's ice-brittle gaze swept in his direction, Elisha concentrated on muddying his thoughts. He pushed forth false deliberations of how ironic it would be to eat at Heriolf's table since the king killed his sire, how lucky he was he didn't have to pay for his sire's treachery against the mighty ruler. Perhaps he could find a way to ingratiate himself with Heriolf? Take the missing Randalf's place?

Heriolf's gaze went elsewhere, and Elisha relaxed. He felt dirty from the false ruminations he'd put forth, for the pretended ill thoughts of his maker, the wise council member Thaddeus. Had Elisha loved his birth father so much? He thought perhaps not. Thaddeus had rescued Elisha from a life of pain and torment, a life of neverending sorrow. He had owed his sire so much, and the elder vampire's final death had taken away all chances to repay the debt, save one.

You will be avenged, my maker, Elisha thought. Or I will go to my final death attempting it.

A long, spare vampire stepped to Heriolf's side for a brief word. Elisha decided Lyndon, who'd been turned barely fifty years prior, must be Randalf's replacement.

After a quick consultation, Lyndon called to the congregation. "We will begin the ceremony. Let the new subjects of our master Heriolf step forward to swear their fealty."

About thirty vampires moved forward towards the seated self-proclaimed king. Elisha wasn't interested in any of the supplicants hoping to join the Savannah vampires. He watched the stone-faced Naya, letting Lyndon's nasal tones wash over him.

"You who have joined King Heriolf's realm this last year have drawn numbers. Let the first step forward and beg the master's favor."

The first vampire, a very new member of the undead judging from the extravagance of his multicolored tattoos, took a step forward and knelt on one knee before Heriolf. "I come from the northeast region where vampires are bid to stay hidden and feed upon the blood of animals. The leaders there have forgotten our supremacy over the human cattle, upon which we should feed on exclusively. King Heriolf, you are known to keep to the old ways, where a vampire hunts his prey with pride and feeds well until it dies. I swear unto you my loyalty until final death turns my body to ash."

He looked ridiculous to Elisha with his black eye makeup and lipstick and all those garish tattoos, but his speech showed an educated mind. Too bad he wasted such pretty words on a lout like Heriolf. The old Norseman puffed up like a toad with self-importance, no doubt fed by the flattery.

His gravelly voice boomed. "You are welcome on my lands to live as a vampire was meant to. I welcome you and bid you to feast at my table."

With an exaggerated sweep of one huge hand, Heriolf indicated the bound humans. The vampire stood, bowed deeply to the master vampire, and stalked over to the row of naked bodies lying on the floor. He immediately yanked up a young, comely woman who screamed around her gag. She struggled uselessly, her wrists tied tightly behind her back, as the vampire took her to a nearby banquet table and laid her upon it.

As Heriolf's newest subject bit into her neck, he freed his penis from black leather pants. He raped her as he drank her life, drawing blood with fang and cock. The watching company cheered him on as he took what Heriolf claimed was the vampire's due.

The poor girl had probably been snatched from a college campus or during a night stroll on the beach. As far as Heriolf was concerned humans were cattle, creatures existing solely for the pleasure of vampires. He had little concern that the growing predations on the local population would be noticed, putting the vampires of southeast Georgia in danger of discovery.

Not to mention the destruction of innocent lives was just plain wrong.

As the girl's struggles weakened and her screams faded, Elisha stole a glance at Naya. Her pale blond head had turned from the disgusting display, and her tiny fists were clenched. Heriolf whispered to her, and she shook her head.

Another burst of cheers from the vampires brought Elisha's attention back to the feeding. The newly welcomed vampire rose from his now dead meal and joined the crowd as his victim fell from the table to the floor like a boneless rag doll. Human servants, thin, gray-skinned beings, scurried to remove her.

Lyndon grinned like a game show host. "Let us have the next candidate."

A female vampire moved forward, her bobbed brunette hair and flapper-styled dress suggesting she last drew breath during the Roaring '20's. Her white kid gloves were spotless. She took several steps forward, closing the distance to Heriolf. He smiled at her, but Elisha noticed how sharp his ice-chip eyes became.

She offered a curtsy. "Glorious King Heriolf, I come to you in all humility to—"

"To murder me and take my place." Heriolf laughed into the shocked silence. "I hear your thoughts, fool. Have you not been told of my powers? Of my absolute omnipotence?"

The female vampire didn't wait to hear more. She sprang at Heriolf, a silver blade in her gloved hand. She was fast. Heriolf was faster.

The Norseman seized the flapper in mid-air and ripped her in half at the waist as if tearing a sheet of paper. He flung the two parts to the marble floor. Blood sprayed, and Naya ducked the splatter by crouching behind Heriolf's chair.

His massive bare chest covered in the twitching vampire's blood, Heriolf roared at the assembled. "I am not only your master, I am your god! Who else will challenge me?"

No one spoke. No one moved. Elisha caught Sebastian's gaze with his own. Moving carefully, he knelt and bowed his head. Everyone around him immediately followed suit, and less than a second later, every vampire, except the ones standing guard near Heriolf and Naya, had gone to their knees.

There were a few moments of utter silence as the congregation awaited the tyrant's next reaction. Heriolf had been known to go into murderous rages, killing off a dozen vampires at one go just because they were unlucky enough to be at hand when he lost his temper.

Nothing can be as still as a vampire. Even their hair was motionless, refusing to acknowledge the occasional errant breeze.

Heriolf's voice rolled through the room like distant thunder. "Clean this up and continue the ceremony."

Human servants scurried out from the next room once more, collecting the two halves of the vampire. She twitched, too stunned to mount a defense before they tossed her into the mammoth fireplace. While other human servants quickly wiped blood from the floor, all were silent to listen to the would-be killer scream as the flames ate into her. Fortunately, she went up quickly and died within a minute or two.

His 100-watt smile dimmed to about 40, Lyndon still managed to speak smoothly. "Let us have the next candidate."

The ceremony resumed. Now on edge because of the failed attack, everyone's nervous attention focused like lasers on the candidates presenting themselves. Heriolf and his guards were as wary as everyone else, and Elisha took the opportunity to ease himself to the very back of the crowd. He gained the dark hall of the manor with no one the wiser.

His vampire-enhanced eyesight pierced the gloom with ease. He passed closed doorways on his way to the foyer, where the stairway led up to the second floor.

No one challenged him. His co-conspirators had cleared the way for him, and he silently mounted the marble stairs with the hand-carved polished wooden rails. Even his clothes did not rustle with movement. Vampires learned quickly how to mask all sound from their passage. All Elisha heard was the continuing drone of voices from the hall, and the very, very distant traffic that one never seemed to escape in this day and age. The twisted trail that led to Heriolf's abode was hidden from the roads by an overgrowth of palmettos and the rampant kudzu that blanketed old pines and oaks. Most had forgotten the once popular Seward mansion even existed, and death waited for those intrepid historians who sought it out.

Once in the second floor's hallway, Elisha headed to the door at the end where flickering light seeped around its borders, keeping an eye on the closed doors he passed. He barely noted the archaic but still deadly weapons that served as decorations on the walls: a mace, swords, shields, a brutal double-bladed axe. Heriolf may have well carried all these arms in his Viking career before being reborn as a vampire.

The lit room beckoned: Naya's chamber. Elisha opened the door cautiously, ready for an attack. But no, his fellow rebels had indeed sought out and removed the vampires who guarded Naya more closely than Heriolf himself. The only thing that rushed out at him was the soft, sweet scent of young human woman. Elisha inhaled appreciatively. The living always smelled of warm vitality, and the remnants of Naya's aroma was richer than most. It made him wonder, as they all had these past weeks, what made her so special among humans.

It would not do to be caught hanging about outside her room, the light from it casting him in silhouette for all to see and report to Heriolf. He stepped into the room and closed the door behind him.

Alone in Naya's bedchamber, Elisha looked around to get a feel for his enemy's secret weapon.

There was a four poster canopied bed, the wood ornately carved, the curtains sheer. A bedside table held a water pitcher and glass as well as the flickering hurricane lamp that cast dancing shadows on the light blue flowered wallpaper. There was a vanity with a mirror, the reddish-brown wood polished to a high gloss. Her hairbrush was made of ivory. A few of her blond strands wound in the bristles. There was little in the way of makeup; only two tubes of lipstick and one of mascara. Elisha found himself nodding with approval at the Font's apparent disdain for heavy makeup.

He went to the black walnut armoire and opened it. It was full of dresses, all long and made of light, almost gossamer fabric. It was a rainbow of pastels, all suited to flatter her fair skin and pale hair.

Elisha went to the bed and drew back the thin veil of the curtain. A mountain of soft pillows awaited the head that rested there. Before he thought about what he was doing, he bent over and inhaled her scent.

So fresh and electric, yet somehow subtle too. She smelled of the woods, of nature, of life. It aroused him, and for the first time Elisha wondered if Heriolf had visited the pleasure of

Naya's bed. He thought of the lovely creature lying here, her long slender body naked, her thighs parting to admit a man...

Elisha made himself stop. He was to steal her from this place, to take her away so that Heriolf could no longer add her power to his. The woman was a means to an end, no more. Elisha vowed he would only taste her blood to verify she provided Heriolf's strength. He had no interest in her otherwise.