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**A NOVEL OF VAMPIRES,
WEREWOLVES,
AND MUMMIES**

GAIL CARRIGER

TIMELESS

AN ALEXIA TARABOTTI NOVEL

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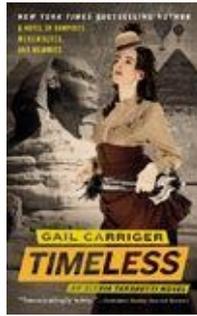
TIMELESS

The Parasol Protectorate: Book the Fifth

GAIL CARRIGER



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CHAPTER ONE



In Which There Is Almost a Bath and Definitely a Trip to the Theater

I said no such thing,” grumbled Lord Maccon, allowing himself, begrudgingly, to be trussed in a new evening jacket. He twisted his head around, annoyed by the height of the collar and the tightness of the cravat. Floote patiently waited for him to stop twitching before continuing with the jacket. Werewolf or not, Lord Maccon would look his best or Floote’s given name wasn’t Algernon—which it was.

“Yes, you did, my dear.” Lady Alexia Maccon was one of the few people in London who dared contradict Lord Maccon. Being his wife, it might be said that she rather specialized in doing so. Alexia was already dressed, her statuesque form resplendent in a maroon silk and black lace evening gown with mandarin collar and Asian sleeves, newly arrived from Paris. “I remember it quite distinctly.” She pretended distraction in transferring her necessities into a black beaded reticule. “I said we should show our patronage and support on opening night, and you *grunted* at me.”

“Well, there, that explains everything. That was a grunt of displeasure.” Lord Maccon wrinkled his nose like a petulant child while Floote skirted about him, puffing away nonexistent crumbs with the latest in steam-controlled air-puffing dewrinklers.

“No, dear, no. It was definitely one of your affirmative grunts.”

Conall Maccon paused at that and gave his wife a startled look. “God’s teeth, woman, how could you possibly tell?”

“Three years of marriage, dear. Regardless, I’ve replied in the affirmative that we will be in attendance at the Adelphi at nine sharp in time to take our box. We are *both* expected. There is no way out of it.”

Lord Maccon sighed, giving in. Which was a good thing, as his wife and Floote had managed to strap him into full evening dress and there was no way to escape that.

In a show of solidarity, he grabbed his wife, pulling her against him and snuffling her neck. Alexia suppressed a smile and, in deference to Floote’s austere presence, pretended not to enjoy herself immensely.

“Lovely dress, my love, very flattering.”

Alexia gave her husband a little ear nibble for this compliment. “Thank you, my heart. However, you ought to know that the most interesting thing about this dress is how remarkably easy it is to get into and out of.”

Floote cleared his throat to remind them of his presence.

“Wife, I intend to test the veracity of that statement when we return from this outing of yours.”

Alexia pulled away from Conall, patting at her hair self-consciously. “Thank you kindly, Floote. Very well done as always. I’m sorry to have drawn you away from your regular duties.”

The elderly butler merely nodded, expressionless. “Of course, madam.”

“Especially as there seem to be no drones about. Where are they all?”

The butler thought for a moment and then said, “I believe that it is bath night, madam.”

Lady Maccon paled in horror. “Oh, goodness. We had best escape quickly, then, Conall, or I’ll never be able to get away in time for—”

Clearly summoned by her fear of just such a delay, a knock sounded at Lord Akeldama’s third closet door.

How Lord and Lady Maccon had come to be residing in Lord Akeldama’s third closet in the first place was a matter of some debate among those privy to this information. A few speculated that there had been a negotiated exchange of spats and possibly promises of daily treacle tart. Nevertheless, the arrangement seemed to be working remarkably well for all parties, much to everyone’s bemusement, and so long as the vampire hives did not find out, it was likely to remain so. Lord Akeldama now had a preternatural in his closet and a werewolf pack next door, but he and his drones had certainly weathered much worse in the way of neighbors, and he had certainly housed far more shocking things in his closet, if the rumors were to be believed.

For nigh on two years, Lord and Lady Maccon had maintained the appearance of actually living next door, Lord Akeldama maintained the appearance of still utilizing all his closets, and his drones maintained the appearance of not having full creative control over everyone’s wardrobe. Most importantly, as it turned out, Alexia was still close enough to her child to come to everyone’s rescue. Unforeseen as it may have been when they originally concocted the arrangement, it had become increasingly clear that the home of a metanatural required the presence of a preternatural or no one was safe—particularly on bath night.

Lady Maccon opened the closet door wide and took in the sorry sight of the gentleman before her. Lord Akeldama’s drones were men of fashion and social standing. They set the mode for all of London with regards to collar points and spats. The handsome young man who stood before her represented the best London society had to offer—an exquisite plum tailcoat, a high-tied waterfall of white about his neck, his hair curled just so about the ears—except that he was dripping with soap suds, his neck cloth was coming untied, and one collar point drooped sadly.

“Oh, dear, what has she done now?”

“Far too much to explain, my lady. I think you had better come at once.”

Alexia looked down at her beautiful new dress. “But I do so like this gown.”

“Lord Akeldama accidentally touched her.”

“Oh, good gracious!” Lady Maccon seized her parasol and her beaded reticule—now containing a fan; her opera glassicals; and Ethel, her .28-caliber Colt Paterson revolver—and charged down the stairs after the drone. The poor boy actually squelched in his beautifully shined shoes.

Her husband, with a grumbled, “Didn’t we warn him against that?” came crashing unhelpfully after.

Downstairs, Lord Akeldama had converted a side parlor into a bathing chamber for his adopted daughter. It had become clear rather early on that bathing was going to be an event of epic proportions, requiring a room large enough to accommodate several of his best and most capable drones. Still, this being Lord Akeldama, even a room

dedicated to the cleanliness of an infant was not allowed to be sacrificed upon the unadorned altar of practicality.

A thick Georgian rug lay on the floor covered with cavorting shepherdesses, the walls were painted in pale blue and white, and he'd had the ceiling frescoed with sea life in deference to the troublesome child's evident unwillingness to associate with such. The cheerful otters, fish, and cephalopods above were meant as encouragement, but it was clear his daughter saw them as nothing more than squishy threats.

In the exact center of the room stood a gold, claw-footed bathtub. It was far too large for a toddler, but Lord Akeldama never did anything by halves, especially if he might double it at three times the expense. There was also a fireplace, before which stood multiple gold racks supporting fluffy and highly absorbent drying cloths and one very small Chinese silk robe.

There were no less than eight drones in attendance, as well as Lord Akeldama, a footman, and the nursemaid. Nevertheless, nothing could take on Prudence Alessandra Maccon Akeldama when bathing was at stake.

The tub was overturned, saturating the beautiful rug with soapy water. Several of the drones were drenched. One was nursing a bruised knee and another a split lip. Lord Akeldama had tiny soapy handprints all over him. One of the drying racks had fallen on its side, singeing a cloth in the fire. The footman was standing with his mouth open, holding a bar of soap in one hand and a wedge of cheese in the other. The nanny had collapsed on a settee in tears.

In fact, the only person who seemed neither injured nor wet in any way was Prudence herself. The toddler was perched precariously on top of the mantelpiece over the fire, completely naked, with a very militant expression on her tiny face, yelling, "Noth, Dama. Noth wet. Noth, Dama!" She was lisping around her fangs.

Alexia stood in the doorway, transfixed.

Lord Akeldama straightened where he stood. "My *darlings*," he said, "tactic number eight, I think—circle and enclose. Now brace yourselves, my pets. I'm going in."

All the drones straightened and took up wide boxer's stances, forming a loose circle about the contested mantelpiece. All attention was focused on the toddler, who held the high ground, unflinching.

The ancient vampire launched himself at his adopted daughter. He could move fast, possibly faster than any other creature Alexia had ever observed, and she had been the unfortunate victim of more than one vampire attack. However, in this particular instance, Lord Akeldama moved no quicker than any ordinary mortal man. Which was, of course, the current difficulty—he *was* an ordinary mortal. His face was no longer deathless perfection but slightly effete and perhaps a little sulky. His movements were still graceful, but they were mortally graceful and, unfortunately, mortally slow.

Prudence leaped away in the manner of some kind of high-speed frog, her tiny, stubbly legs supernaturally strong but still toddler unstable. She crashed to the floor, screamed in very brief pain, and then zipped about looking for a break in the circle of drones closing in upon her.

"Noth, Dama. Noth wet," she cried, charging one of the drones, her tiny fangs bared. Unaware of her own supernatural strength, the baby managed to bash her way

between the poor man's legs, making for the open doorway.

Except that the doorway was not, in fact, open. Therein stood the only creature who little Prudence had learned to fear and, of course, the one she loved best in all the world.

"Mama!" came her delighted cry, and then, "Dada!" as Conall's shaggy head loomed up from behind his wife.

Alexia held out her arms and Prudence barreled into them with all the supernatural speed that a toddler vampire could manage. Alexia let out a harrumph of impact and stumbled backward into Conall's broad, supportive embrace.

The moment the naked baby came into contact with Alexia's bare arms, Prudence became no more dangerous than any squirming child.

"Now, Prudence, what is this fuss?" remonstrated her mother.

"No, Dama. No wet!" explained the toddler very clearly, now that she did not have the fangs to speak around.

"It's bath night. You don't have a choice. Real ladies are clean ladies," explained her mother, rather sensibly, she thought.

Prudence was having none of it. "Nuh-uh."

Lord Akeldama came over. He was once more pale, his movements quick and sharp. "Apologies, my little dumpling. She got away from Boots there and hurled herself at me before I could dodge." He moved one fine white hand to stroke his adopted daughter's hair back from her face. It was safe to do so now that Alexia held her close.

Prudence narrowed her eyes suspiciously. "No wet, Dama," she insisted.

"Well, accidents will happen and we all know how she gets." Alexia gave her daughter a stern look. Prudence, undaunted, glared back. Lady Maccon shook her head in exasperation. "Conall and I are off to the theater. Do you think you can handle bath night without me? Or should we cancel?"

Lord Akeldama was aghast at the mere suggestion. "Oh, dear me no, *buttercup*, never that! *Not* go to the theater? Heaven forfend. No, we shall shift perfectly well here without you, now that we've weathered this one teeny-tiny upset, won't we, Prudence?"

"No," replied Prudence.

Lord Akeldama backed away from her. "I'll stay well out of range from here on, I assure you," continued the vampire. "One brush with mortality a night is more than enough for me. It's quite the *discombobulating* sensation, your daughter's touch. Not at all like your own."

Lord Maccon, who had been placed in a similar position on more than one occasion with regard to his daughter's odd abilities, was uncharacteristically sympathetic to the vampire. He replied with a fervent, "I'll say." He also took the opportunity of Prudence being in her mother's arms to ruffle his daughter's hair affectionately.

"Dada! No wet?"

"Perhaps we could move bath night to tomorrow," suggested Lord Maccon, succumbing to the plea in his daughter's eyes.

Lord Akeldama brightened.

"Absolutely not," replied Lady Maccon to both of them. "Backbone, gentlemen.

We must stick to a routine. All the physicians say routine is vital to the well-being of the infant and her proper ethical indoctrination.”

The two immortals exchanged the looks of men who knew when they were beaten.

In order to forestall any further shilly-shallying, Alexia carried her struggling daughter over to the tub, which had been righted and refilled with warm water. Under ordinary circumstances, she would have plopped the child in herself, but worried over the dress, she passed Prudence off to Boots and stepped well out of harm’s way.

Under the watchful eye of her mother, the toddler acquiesced to full immersion, with only a nose wrinkle of disgust.

Alexia nodded. “Good girl. Now do behave for poor Dama. He puts up with an awful lot from you.”

“Dama!” replied the child, pointing at Lord Akeldama.

“Yes, very good.” Alexia turned back to her husband and the vampire in the doorway. “Do have a care, my lord.”

Lord Akeldama nodded. “Indeed. I must say I had not *anticipated* such a challenge when Professor Lyall first suggested the adoption.”

“Yes, it was foolish of all of us to think that Alexia here would produce a biddable child,” agreed the sire of said child, implying that any flaw was Alexia’s fault and that he would have produced nothing but the most mild-mannered and pliant of offspring.

“Or even one that a vampire could control.”

“Or a vampire and a pack of werewolves, for that matter.”

Alexia gave them both a *look*. “I hardly feel I can be entirely at fault. Are you claiming Sidheag is an aberration in the Maccon line?”

Lord Maccon tilted his head, thinking about his great-great-great-granddaughter, now Alpha werewolf of the Kingair Pack, a woman prone to wielding rifles and smoking small cigars. “Point taken.”

Their conversation was interrupted by a tremendous splash as Prudence managed to pull, even without supernatural strength, one of the drones partly into the bath with her. Several of the others rushed to his aid, cooing in equal distress over his predicament and the state of his cuffs.

Prudence Alessandra Maccon Akeldama would have been difficult enough without her metanatural abilities. But having a precocious child who could take on immortality was overwhelming, even for two supernatural households. Prudence actually seemed to steal supernatural abilities, turning her victim mortal for the space of a night. If Alexia had not interfered, Lord Akeldama would have remained mortal, and Prudence a fanged toddler, until sunrise. Her mother, or presumably some other preternatural, was the only apparent antidote.

Lord Maccon had accustomed himself, with much grumbling, to touching his daughter only when she was already in contact with her mother or when it was daylight. He was a man who appreciated a good cuddle, so this was disappointing. But poor Lord Akeldama found the whole situation distasteful. He had officially adopted the chit, and as a result had taken on the lion’s share of her care, but he was never actually able to show her physical affection. When she was a small child, he’d managed with leather gloves and thick swaddling blankets, but even then accidents occurred. Now that Prudence was more mobile, the risk was simply too great. Naked touch guaranteed activation of her powers, but sometimes she could steal through

clothing, too. When Prudence got older and more reasonable, Alexia intended to subject her daughter to some controlled analytical tests, but right now everyone in the household was simply trying to survive. The toddler couldn't be less interested in the importance of scientific discoveries, for all her mother tried to explain them. It was, Alexia felt, a troubling character flaw.

With one last glare to ensure Prudence remained at least mostly submerged, Alexia made good her escape, dragging her husband behind her. Conall held his amusement in check until they were inside the carriage and on their way toward the West End. Then he let out the most tremendous guffaw.

Alexia couldn't help it—she also started to chuckle. “Poor Lord Akeldama.”

Conall wiped his streaming eyes. “Oh, he loves it. Hasn't had this much excitement in a hundred years or more.”

“Are you certain they will manage without me?”

“We will be back in only a few hours. How bad can it get?”

“Don't tempt fate, my love.”

“Better worry about our own survival.”

“Why, what could you possibly mean?” Alexia straightened and looked out the carriage window suspiciously. True, it had been several years since someone tried to kill her in a conveyance, but it had happened with startling regularity for a period of time, and she had never gotten over her suspicion of carriages as a result.

“No, no, my dear. I meant to imply the play to which I am being dragged.”

“Oh, I like that. As if I could drag you anywhere. You're twice my size.”

Conall gave her the look of a man who knows when to hold his tongue.

“Ivy has assured me that this is a brilliant rendition of a truly moving story and that the troupe is in top form after their continental tour. *The Death Rains of Swansea*, I believe it is called. It's one of Tunstell's own pieces, very artistic and performed in the new sentimental interpretive style.”

“Wife, you are taking me unto certain doom.” He put his hand to his head and fell back against the cushioned wall of the cab in a fair imitation of theatricality.

“Oh, hush your nonsense. It will be perfectly fine.”

Her husband's expression hinted strongly at a preference for, perhaps, death or at least battle, rather than endure the next few hours.

The Maccons arrived, displaying the type of elegance expected from members of the ton. Lady Alexia Maccon was resplendent, some might even have said handsome, in her new French gown. Lord Maccon looked like an earl for once, his hair *almost* under control and his evening dress *almost* impeccable. It was generally thought that the move to London had resulted in quite an improvement in the appearance and manners of the former Woolsey Pack. Some blamed living so close to Lord Akeldama, others the taming effect of an urban environment, and several stalwart holdouts thought it might be Lady Maccon's fault. In truth, it was probably all three, but it was the iron fist of Lord Akeldama's drones that truly enacted the change—or should one say, iron curling tongs? One of Lord Maccon's pack merely had to enter their purview with hair askew and handfuls of clucking pinks descended upon him like so many mallard ducks upon a hapless piece of untidy bread.

Alexia led her husband firmly to their private box. The whites of his eyes were showing in fear.

The Death Rains of Swansea featured a lovelorn werewolf enamored of a vampire queen and a dastardly villain with evil intent trying to tear them apart. The stage vampires were depicted with particularly striking fake fangs and a messy sort of red paint smeared about their chins. The werewolves sported proper dress except for large shaggy ears tied about their heads with pink tulle bows—Ivy’s influence, no doubt.

Ivy Tunstell, Alexia’s dear friend, played the vampire queen. She did so with much sweeping about the stage and fainting, her own fangs larger than anyone else’s, which made it so difficult for her to articulate that many of her speeches were reduced to mere spitting hisses. She wore a hat that was part bonnet, part crown, driving home the queen theme, in colors of yellow, red, and gold. Her husband, playing the enamored werewolf, pranced about in a comic interpretation of lupine leaps, barked a lot, and got into several splendid stage fights.

The oddest moment, Alexia felt, was a dreamlike sequence just prior to the break, wherein Tunstell wore bumblebee-striped drawers with attached vest and performed a small ballet before his vampire queen. The queen was dressed in a voluminous black chiffon gown with a high Shakespearian collar and an exterior corset of green with matching fan. Her hair was done up on either side of her head in round puffs, looking like bear ears, and her arms were bare. *Bare!*

Conall, at this juncture, began to shake uncontrollably.

“I believe this is meant to symbolize the absurdity of their improbable affection,” explained Alexia to her husband in severe tones. “Deeply philosophical. The bee represents the circularity of life and the unending buzz of immortality. Ivy’s dress, so like that of an opera girl, suggests at the frivolousness of dancing through existence without love.”

Conall continued to vibrate silently, as though trembling in pain.

“I’m not certain about the fan or the ears.” Alexia tapped her cheek thoughtfully with her own fan.

The curtain dropped on the first act with the bumblebee-clad hero left prostrate at the feet of his vampire love. The audience erupted into wild cheers. Lord Conall Maccon began to guffaw in loud rumbling tones that carried beautifully throughout the theater. Many people turned to look up at him in disapproval.

Well, thought his wife, *at least he managed to hold it in until the break.*

Eventually, her husband controlled his mirth. “Brilliant! I apologize, wife, for objecting to this jaunt. It is immeasurably entertaining.”

“Well, do be certain to say nothing of the kind to poor Tunstell. You are meant to be profoundly moved, not amused.”

A timid knock came at their box.

“Enter,” yodeled his lordship, still chuckling.

The curtain was pushed aside, and in came one of the people Alexia would have said was least likely to visit the theater, Madame Genevieve Lefoux.

“Good evening, Lord Maccon, Alexia.”

“Genevieve, how unexpected.”

Madame Lefoux was dressed impeccably. Fraternization with the Woolsey Hive had neither a deleterious nor improving effect on her attire. If Countess Nadasdy had

tried to get her newest drone to dress appropriately, she had failed. Madame Lefoux dressed to the height of style, for a man. Her taste was still subtle and elegant with no vampiric flamboyances in the manner of cravat ties or cuff links. True she sported cravat pins and pocket watches, but Alexia would lay good money that not a one solely functioned as a cravat pin or a pocket watch.

“Are you enjoying the show?” inquired the Frenchwoman.

“I am finding it diverting. Conall is not taking it seriously.”

Lord Maccon puffed out his cheeks.

“And you?” Alexia directed the question back at her erstwhile friend. Since Genevieve’s wildly spectacular charge through London and resulting transition to vampire drone, no small measure of awkwardness had existed between them. Two years on and still they had not regained the closeness they had both so enjoyed at the beginning of their association. Madame Lefoux had polluted it through the application of a rampaging octomaton, and Alexia had finished it off by sentencing Genevieve to a decade of indentured servitude.

“It is interesting,” replied the Frenchwoman cautiously. “And how is little Prudence?”

“Difficult, as ever. And Quesnel?”

“The same.”

The two women exchanged careful smiles. Lady Maccon, despite herself, liked Madame Lefoux. There was just something about her that appealed. And she did owe the Frenchwoman a debt, for it was the inventor who had acted the part of midwife to Prudence’s grossly mistimed entrance into the world. Nevertheless, Alexia did not trust her. Madame Lefoux always promoted her own agenda first, even as a drone, with the Order of the Brass Octopus second. What little loyalty and affection for Alexia she still had must, perforce, be a low priority now.

Lady Maccon moved them on from the platitudes with a direct reminder. “And how is the countess?”

Madame Lefoux gave one of her little French shrugs. “She is herself, unchanging, as ever. It is on her behest that I am here. I have been directed to bring you a message.”

“Oh, yes, how did you know where to find me?”

“The Tunstells have a new play, and you are their patroness. I admit I had not anticipated *your* presence, my lord.”

Lord Maccon grinned wolfishly. “I was persuaded.”

“The message?” Alexia put out her hand.

“Ah, no, we have all learned never to do *that* again. The message is a verbal one. Countess Nadasdy has received instructions and would like to see you, Lady Maccon.”

“Instructions? Instructions from who?”

“I am not privy to that information,” replied the inventor.

Alexia turned to her husband. “Who on earth would dare order around the Woolsey Hive queen?”

“Oh, no, Alexia, you misunderstand me. The instructions came *to* her, but they are *for* you.”

“Me? Me! Why...,” Alexia sputtered in outrage.

“I’m afraid I know nothing more. Are you available to call upon her this evening,

after the performance?”

Alexia, whose curiosity was quite piqued, nodded her acquiescence. “It is bath night, but Lord Akeldama and his boys must really learn to muddle through.”

“Bath night?” The Frenchwoman was intrigued.

“Prudence is particularly difficult on bath nights.”

“Ah, yes. Some of them don’t want to get clean. Quesnel was like that. As you may have noticed, circumstances never did improve.” Genevieve’s son was known for being grubby.

“And how is he muddling along, living with vampires?”

“Thriving, the little monster.”

“Much like Prudence, then.”

“As you say.” The Frenchwoman tilted her head. “And my hat shop?”

“Biffy has it marvelously well in hand. You should drop by and visit. He’s there tonight. I’m certain he would love to see you.”

“Perhaps I shall. It’s not often I get into London these days.” Madame Lefoux began edging toward the curtain, donning her gray top hat and making her good-byes.

She left Lord and Lady Maccon in puzzled silence, with a mystery that, it must be said, somewhat mitigated their enjoyment of the second act, as did the lack of any additional bumblebee courtship rituals.

CHAPTER TWO



Wherein Mrs. Colindrikal-Bumbcruncher Does Not Buy a Hat

Don't you believe this would suit the young miss better?" Biffy was a man of principle. He refused, on principle, to sell a huge tricolored pifferaro bonnet decorated with a cascade of clove pinks, black currants, and cut jet beads to Mrs. Colindrikal-Bumbcruncher for her daughter. Miss Colindrikal-Bumbcruncher was plain, dreadfully plain, and the bonnet was rather more of an insult than a decoration by contrast. The hat was the height of fashion, but Biffy was convinced a little gold straw bonnet was the superior choice. Biffy was *never wrong about hats*. The difficulty lay in convincing Mrs. Colindrikal-Bumbcruncher of this fact.

"You see, madam, the refined elegance complements the delicacy of Miss Colindrikal-Bumbcruncher's complexion."

Mrs. Colindrikal-Bumbcruncher did not see and would have none of it. "No, young man. The pifferaro, if you please."

"I'm afraid that is not possible, madam. That hat is promised elsewhere."

"Then why is it out on the floor?"

"A mistake, Mrs. Colindrikal-Bumbcruncher. My apologies."

"I see. Well, clearly we have made a *mistake* in patronizing your establishment! I shall take my custom *elsewhere*. Come, Arabella." With which the matron marched out, dragging her daughter in her wake. The young lady mouthed an apology behind her mother's back and gave the little gold straw bonnet a wistful look. *Poor creature*, thought Biffy, before returning both hats to their displays.

The silver bells attached to the front of the shop tinkled as a new customer entered. Some evenings those bells never seemed to stop. The store was increasingly popular, despite Biffy's occasional refusal to actually sell hats. He was getting a reputation for being an eccentric. Perhaps not quite so much as the previous owner, but there were ladies who would travel miles in order to have a handsome young werewolf refuse to sell them a hat.

He looked up to see Madame Lefoux. She carried in with her the slightly putrid scent of London and her own special blend of vanilla and machine oil. She was looking exceptionally well, Biffy thought. Life in the country clearly agreed with her. She was not, perhaps, so dandified in dress and manner as Biffy and his set, but she certainly knew how to make the most of somber blues and grays. He wondered, not for the first time, what she might look like in a proper gown. Biffy couldn't help it, he was excessively fond of female fashions and could not quite understand why a woman, with so many delicious options, might choose to dress and live as a man.

"Another satisfied customer, Mr. Biffy?"

"Mrs. Colindrikal-Bumbcruncher has the taste level of an ill-educated parboiled potato."

"Revolted female," agreed the Frenchwoman amiably, "and her gowns are always

so well made. Makes her that much more vexing. Did you know her daughter is engaged to Captain Featherstonehaugh?”

Biffy raised one eyebrow. “And he’s not the first, I hear.”

“Why, Mr. Biffy, you talk such scandal.”

“You wrong me, Madame Lefoux. I never gossip. I observe. And then relay my observations to practically everyone.”

The inventor smiled, showing her dimples.

“How may I help you this evening?” Biffy put on his shopboy persona. “A new chapeau, or were you thinking about some other fripperies?”

“Oh, well, perhaps.” Madame Lefoux’s reply was vague as she looked about her old establishment.

Biffy tried to imagine it through her eyes. It was much the same. The hats still dangled from long chains so that patrons had to push their way through swaying tendrils, but the secret door was now even more well hidden behind a curtained-off back area, and he had expanded recently, opening up a men’s hats and accessories section.

The Frenchwoman was drawn into examination of a lovely top hat in midnight blue velvet.

“That would suit your complexion very well,” commented Biffy when she fingered the turn of the brim.

“I am sure you are right, but not tonight. I simply came to visit the old place. You have tended it well.”

Biffy gave a little bow. “I am but a steward to your vision.”

Madame Lefoux huffed in amusement. “Flatterer.”

Biffy never knew where he stood with Madame Lefoux. She was so very much outside his experience: an inventor, a scientist, and middle class, with a marked preference for the company of young ladies and an eccentricity of dress that was too restrained to be unstudied. Biffy didn’t like enigmas—they were out of fashion.

“I have recently come from seeing Lord and Lady Maccon at the theater.”

Biffy was willing to play along. “Oh, indeed? I thought it was bath night.”

“Apparently, Lord Akeldama was left to muddle through alone.”

“Oh, dear.”

“It occurred to me that we have switched places, you and I.”

The French, thought Biffy, *could be very philosophical*. “Come again?”

“I have become a reluctant drone to vampires and you nest in the bosom of the Maccon home and hearth.”

“Ah, were you once in that bosom? I had thought you never quite got all the way inside. Not for lack of trying, of course.”

The Frenchwoman laughed. “Touché.”

The front door tinkled again. *Busy night for new moon*. Biffy looked up, smile in place, knowing he made a fetching picture. He wore his very best brown suit. True, his cravat was tied more simply than he liked—his new claviger needed training—and his hair was slightly mussed. His hair was *always* slightly mussed these days despite liberal application of Bond Street’s best pomade. One, apparently, had to bear up under such tribulations when one was a werewolf.

Felicity Loontwill entered the shop and wafted over to him in a flutter of raspberry

taffeta and a great show of cordiality. She smelled of too much rose water and too little sleep. Her dress was very French, her hair was very German, and her shoes were quite definitely Italian. He could detect the odor of fish oil.

“Mr. Rabiffano, I was so hoping you would be here. And Madame Lefoux, how unexpectedly delightful!”

“Why, Miss Loontwill, back from your European tour already?” Biffy didn’t like Lady Maccon’s sister. She was the type of girl who would show her neck to a vampire one moment and her ankle to a chimney sweep the next.

“Yes. And what a bother it was. Two years abroad with absolutely nothing to show for it.”

“No delusional Italian count or French marquis fell in love with you? Shocking.” Madame Lefoux’s green eyes twinkled.

The door jingled again and Mrs. Loontwill and Lady Evelyn Mongtwee entered the shop. Lady Evelyn headed immediately toward a spectacular hat of chartreuse and crimson, while Mrs. Loontwill followed her other daughter up to the counter.

“Oh, Mama, do you remember Mr. Rabiffano? He belongs to our dear Alexia’s household.”

Mrs. Loontwill looked at the dandy suspiciously. “Oh, does he, indeed? A pleasure to meet you, I’m sure. Come away, Felicity.”

Mrs. Loontwill didn’t even glance in Madame Lefoux’s direction.

The three ladies then gave their undivided attention to the hats while Biffy tried to comprehend what they were about.

Madame Lefoux voiced his thoughts. “Do you think they are actually here to shop?”

“I believe Lady Maccon is not receiving them at present, so they may be after information.” He looked suspiciously at the Frenchwoman. “Now that Felicity has returned, will she be rejoining the Woolsey Hive?”

Madame Lefoux shrugged. “I don’t know, but I shouldn’t think so. I can’t imagine it holds much appeal, now that the hive is located outside London. You know these society chits—only interested in the glamorous side of immortality. She may find herself another hive. Or a husband, of course.”

At which juncture Felicity returned to them, in clear defiance of her mother’s wishes. “Mr. Rabiffano, how is my *dear* sister? I can hardly believe how long it has been since I saw her last.”

“She is well,” replied Biffy, utterly passive.

“And that child of hers? My darling little niece?”

Her face sharpened when she was being nosy, noted Biffy, rather like that of an inquisitive trout. “She, too, is well.”

“And how is Lord Maccon? Still doting upon them both?”

“Still, as you say, doting.”

“Why, Mr. Rabiffano, you have grown so dreary and terse since your accident.”

With a twinkle to his eye, the dandy gestured at the little gold straw bonnet. “What do you think of this one, Miss Loontwill? It is very subtle and sophisticated.”

Felicity backed away hurriedly. “Oh, no, mine is too bold a beauty for anything so insipid.” She turned away. “Mama, Evy, have you seen anything to your taste?”

“Not tonight, my dear.”

“No, sister, although that green and red toque makes quite the statement.”

Felicity looked back at Madame Lefoux, on point. “How unfortunate that you are no longer in charge here, madame. I do believe that the quality may have fallen.”

Madame Lefoux said nothing and Biffy took the hit without flinching.

“Do, please, give my sister and her husband my best regards. I do hope they remain blissfully enamored of one another, although it is terribly embarrassing.” Felicity whirled to the French inventor. “And give the countess my compliments as well, of course.”

With that, the rose-scented blonde led her mother and her sister out into the night with nary a backward glance.

Biffy and Madame Lefoux exchanged looks.

“What was *that* about?” wondered the inventor.

“A warning of some kind.”

“Or an offer? I think I should return to Woolsey.”

“You are turning into a very good drone, aren’t you, Madame Lefoux?”

As she made her way out, the Frenchwoman gave him a look that suggested she preferred it if everyone thought that. Biffy hoarded away that bit of information. He had much to tell Lady Maccon when he saw her next.

Alexia and Conall arrived home from the theater prepared to go out immediately to call on the Woolsey Hive. One did not ignore an invitation from Countess Nadasdy, even if one was a peer of the realm. Alexia alighted from her gilded carriage in a flutter of taffeta and intrigue, marching into her town residence with strides of such vigor as to make the bustle of her dress sway alarmingly back and forth. Lord Maccon eyed this appreciatively. The tuck-in at his wife’s waist was particularly appealing, emphasizing an area ideally suited to a man’s hand, particularly if one had hands as large as his. Alexia turned in the doorway and gave him a look.

“Oh, do hurry.” They were still making a show of living in their own house and so had to move swiftly up the stairs and across the secret gangplank into Lord Akeldama’s residence in order to effect a change of attire.

Floote’s dapper head emerged from the back parlor as they did so. “Madam?”

“Not stopping, Floote. We have been *summoned*.”

“Queen Victoria?”

“No, worse—a queen.”

“Will you go by rail or shall I have the groom switch to fresh horses?”

Alexia paused halfway up the grand staircase.

“Train, I think, please.”

“At once, madam.”

Prudence, much to everyone’s delight, was down for her nap, nested with her head atop Lord Akeldama’s cat and her feet tucked under the Viscount Trizdale’s lemon-satin-covered leg. The viscount was looking strained, obviously under orders not to move for fear of waking the child. Prudence was wearing an excessively frilly dress of cream and lavender plaid. Lord Akeldama had changed into an outfit of royal purple and champagne to complement it and was sitting nearby, a fond eye to his drone and adopted daughter. He appeared to be reading a suspiciously embossed novel, but

Alexia could not quite countenance such an activity in Lord Akeldama. To her certain knowledge, he never read anything, except perhaps the society gossip columns. She was unsurprised when, upon catching sight of them lurking in the hallway, the vampire put his book down with alacrity and sprang to meet them.

Together they looked at the lemony drone, calico feline, and plaid pile of infant.

“Isn’t that just a *picture*?” Lord Akeldama was adrift on a sea of candy-colored domestic bliss.

“All is well?” Alexia spoke in hushed tones.

The vampire tucked a lock of silvery blond hair behind his ear in an oddly soft gesture. “*Excessively*. The puggle behaved herself after you departed, and as you can see, we had no further incidents of note.”

“I do hope she grows out of this dislike for soap suds.”

Lord Akeldama gave Lord Maccon a significant sort of once-over where he lurked behind his wife in the hallway. “My *darling* chamomile bud, we can but hope.”

Lord Maccon took mild offense and sniffed at himself subtly.

“Conall and I have been summoned to visit Woolsey. You will manage without us for the remainder of the night?”

“I believe we may, *just possibly*, survive, my little periwinkle.”

Lady Maccon smiled and was about to head upstairs to change her gown when someone pulled the bell rope. Being already in the hallway and hoping to keep Prudence from waking, Lord Maccon dashed to answer the door despite the fact that this was most unbecoming for a werewolf of his station, and it was someone else’s house.

“Oh, really, Conall. Do try *not* to behave like a footman,” remonstrated his wife.

Ignoring her, Lord Maccon opened the door with a flourish and a tiny bow—as behooved a footman.

Lady Maccon cast her hands up in exasperation.

Fortunately it was only Professor Lyall on the stoop. If any man was used to Lord Maccon’s disregard for all laws of propriety and precedence, it was his Beta. “Oh, good, my lord. I was hoping to catch you here.”

“Randolph.”

“Dolly *darling*!” said Lord Akeldama.

Professor Lyall didn’t even twitch an eyelid at the appalling moniker.

“You had a visitor, my lord,” said the Beta to his Alpha, looking refined.

Alexia was confident enough in her assessment of Lyall’s character to spot a certain tension. He displayed quick efficiency under most circumstances. Such forced calm as this indicated a need for caution.

Her husband knew this, too. Or perhaps he smelled something. He loosened his stance, prepared to fight. “BUR or pack business?”

“Pack.”

“Oh, must I? Is it terribly important? We are required out of town.”

Alexia interrupted. “I alone am required. You, as I understand it, my love, were simply coming along out of curiosity.”

Conall frowned. His wife knew perfectly well that the real reason he wished to accompany her was for security. He hated sending her into a hive alone. Alexia waggled her reticule at him. As yet, there was no new parasol in her life, but she still

carried Ethel, and the sundowner gun was good enough when pointed at a vampire queen.

“I’m afraid this is important,” said a new voice from behind Professor Lyall, in the street.

Professor Lyall’s lip curled slightly. “I thought I told you to wait.”

“Dinna forget, I’m Alpha. You canna order me around like you do everyone else.”

Alexia thought that a tad unfair. Professor Lyall was many things, but he was not at all tyrannical. That was more Conall’s style. It might be better said that Professor Lyall *arranged* everyone and everything around him just so. Alexia didn’t mind in the least; she was rather fond of a nice arrangement.

A woman moved out of the gloom of the front garden and into the light cast by the bright gas chandeliers of Lord Akeldama’s hallway. Professor Lyall, polite man that he was, shifted to one side to allow their unexpected visitor to take center stage.

Sidheag Maccon, the Lady of Kingair, looked much the same as she had almost three years earlier, when Alexia had seen her last. Immortality had given her skin a certain pallor, but her face was still grim and lined about the eyes and mouth, and she still wore her graying hair back in one heavy plait, like a schoolgirl. She wore a threadbare velvet cloak that would do nothing to ward off the evening’s chill. Alexia noted the woman’s bare feet. Clearly, the cloak was not for cold but for modesty.

“Evening, Gramps,” said Lady Kingair to Lord Maccon, and then, “Grams,” to Alexia. Considering she looked older than both, it was an odd kind of greeting to anyone unfamiliar with the Maccon’s familial relationships.

“Great-Great-Great-Granddaughter,” responded Lord Maccon tersely. “To what do we owe this honor?”

“We have a problem.”

“Oh, do *we*?”

“Yes. May I come in?”

Lord Maccon shifted, making an open-hand gesture back at Lord Akeldama, this being the vampire’s house. Vampires were odd about inviting people in. Lord Akeldama had once muttered something about imbalance in the tether ratio after Lady Maccon entertained Mrs. Ivy Tunstell overly long in his drawing room. He seemed to have adjusted tolerably well to Prudence and her parents living under his roof, but after the Ivy tea incident, Alexia always made certain to entertain her guests next door, in her own parlor.

Lord Akeldama peeked over Lady Maccon’s shoulder, standing on tiptoe. “I don’t believe we have been introduced, young lady.” His tone of voice said much on the subject of any woman darkening his doorstep with plaited hair, a Scottish accent, and an old velvet cloak.

Alexia pivoted slightly and, after a quick consideration, decided Lady Kingair was just lady enough to warrant the precedence, and said, “Lady Kingair, may I introduce our host, Lord Akeldama? Lord Akeldama, this is Sidheag Maccon, Alpha of the Kingair Pack.”

Everyone waited a breath.

“I thought as much.” Lord Akeldama gave a little bow. “Enchanted.”

The female werewolf nodded.

The two immortals evaluated each other. Alexia wondered if either saw beyond the