

## Feverish

My face scrunched up in disgust as I stepped inside the great hall. A cold darkness swallowed me whole; I could not see an inch beyond my face, but I knew that I had run into a large room from the way my bare feet echoed against the walls as I ran. The adrenaline running through my veins made it difficult for me to remember where I was, who I was, and why I was here. The carpet was drenched in some kind of thick liquid, the substance seeping through my toes and splashing onto my legs as I ran. The thin scrap of fabric I wore as a dress began to cling to my skin, my hair a tangled mess down my back. And that *smell*. That awful, foul smell that made my eyes sting and water; that smell that reminded me of rotten eggs and rotten milk and garlic and cheese and feces, with a touch of berries and chlorine.

Despite all this, I kept running and running, adrenaline laced with fear pulsating through my body. I had awoken earlier on cold cement with a splitting headache and pins and needles down my body. My throat was unusually dry. I was enclosed in some kind of cage, a dim light flickering overhead. My cage had been left open, and I dragged myself through the bars and into a grim hallway. Its walls were lined with more cages much like mine, and without much thought, I took off.

I can't seem to remember if those cages were filled with other children like me. I don't know why my cage was left open, all I know is that I am running through this terrible place with a throbbing headache. I run for a long time. So long that my nose had grown used to the smell of cheese and the thick liquid on my body began to dry.

My feet are suddenly met with a cold floor, maybe hardwood, and I stop in my tracks. Focusing into the distance, I could see a faint outline of two large doors, light peeking through its cracks. A breath of relief washed over me, but somehow I still felt uneasy. Tentatively, I

hesitantly step towards the doors. If I listened hard enough, I could hear faint noises coming from the other side of the doors. It sounded like... laughter. As I got closer it became more obvious; laughter and conversation, two, maybe three people. I pick up the pace but light on my feet, careful not to alert them of my presence. I still didn't know where I was, I couldn't risk getting into any trouble I couldn't get out of. I still felt this edge, this queasy feeling in my stomach, and the way my throat was incredibly parched warned me to be careful. I envisioned those rusty cages again and I wonder if these are the people who have captured me.

I reach the doors and it's easy for me to eavesdrop. The nauseous feeling in my stomach has grown bigger, and I place my ear against the wood.

"That was really quite the show! Wasn't it, Delia?" a man's voice booms through the room, followed by the shrill laughter of a woman.

"Yes, yes!" says the woman. "I must say, you've really outdone yourself this time, Celeste! Where did you find such a fierce young lady?"

"Oh, do let us know," the man spoke again, "Delia and I have been struggling to find our Incomings."

Another woman's voice chuckled softly. "Please, please."

Chills ran down my spine the moment she spoke. A new edge of fear has wedged itself into my stomach, and I am suddenly very afraid. Her voice was sultry and sweet, like swallowing syrup and honey. As if I was compelled to do anything this woman would tell me.

"You both flatter me too much," she says, "Of course, you know a good countess does not reveal her secrets."

In the next moment, I had not realized how much I was leaning on the door until it burst open and I fell into the room. I yelped as I tripped face first onto gold lined carpet, frantically

scrambling to run back out the room. But the doors behind shut with a heavy thud and I was trapped. I fearfully looked up from my place on the ground at three wide-eyed faces staring right back at me.

The room was achingly bright, and I hissed as my eyes stung trying to adjust. Everywhere I looked, the room was designed with intricate black marble and red-gold lining. A giant chandelier hung overhead, shining off the crystals that adorned every inch of the room. It reeked of pennies and old people perfume.

Frozen like a deer in the headlights, I stared back at the voices, the three of them seated at a large, round table in the center of the room. I awaited my demise.

The shrilly woman—Delia?—spoke first. “Oh, how wonderful! There’s our little star!” A wide smile spread across her face, like she was happy to see me.

The man began to cackle, his booming laughter echoing through the room and hurting my ears.

The pair sat on one end of the table. The woman, Celeste, whose voice sounded like honey sat on the other side, and as my eyes adjusted, I saw just how terrifyingly beautiful she was. Tall and slim, with skin as white as milk. Silky, long hair red as blood, draped delicately behind her ears, over her shoulders and down her back. She wore a sleek, long black dress that fell deep below her collarbones, a single gold necklace decorating her neck. The hairs on the back of my neck stood up as she stared at me with a piercing gaze, dark eyes seeming to grab at the ends of my soul. That parched feeling came back once more.

“It seems our child has woken up,” said Celeste. She stands up, moving like oil. “How are you feeling, my dear?”

I scrambled back until my back hit the doors as the couple and Celeste approached me quickly. I breathed heavily in fear and hissed loudly as a warning.

Celeste scrunches her eyebrows and pouts her lips as she notices my fear. “Now, now, dear. There is no need to be afraid.” Then why do I have this aching feeling my chest? “I am sure you are terribly confused, you’ve just woken up from the Fever,” she says soothingly.

Delia and the man have stopped midway, watching and smiling at me from afar while Celeste slowly approaches me with her hands held out like a mother. I am still breathing hard with a throbbing headache and itchy throat, nothing is making any sense. But the more this woman speaks, the more I thirst for something. Anything.

“Don’t worry, child. We are here to help guide you through your new life!” the man booms behind her.

At this point, I’ve decided to see what these people have been saying to me. Fever? New life? Celeste crouches in front of me and looks me in the eye. I stare back with searching eyes, praying that their kindness is meaningful.

“May I touch you?” Celeste asks patiently.

I hesitate.

“I just want to make sure you aren’t hurt.”

After pausing, I nod my head.

Celeste reaches towards my head, long slender fingers caressing my dirty hair and stained skin. Her touch is cold and somehow electrifying, and that hunger burns in my throat as I smell that sweet scent of perfume on her skin.

She feels my face and traces my features. Checks my neck, my arms, my legs, but I am not injured. I am about to pass out.

She reaches my mouth. “Open wide,” she asks.

She checks the inside of my mouth for a while before beaming at me with a wide smile.

“Are you hungry?”

I nod fervently.

“Come with me, I’ll take you to the feeding room.”

She takes my hand into her cold ones and pulls me gently to my feet. The fear that I had for this woman moments ago was still present, I could feel it in my stomach clenching. But the mention of finally quenching my thirst overpowered, and I let her take me to wherever she pleased.

Celeste opens the two large doors back into the darkness I had just escaped, and that smell of cheese wafted inside once more. I scrunched my nose and tears formed in my eyes as it was so strong when I felt Celeste tap my shoulder.

“Here, it will help with the smell.” She hands me a handkerchief and I drape it over my nose. “Come take a look. You should be proud!”

We walk into the great hall of darkness. She steps to the side and flips a large lever, and soon enough, the lights to the room flicker on.

My eyes widen as the source of that awful smell is revealed before my eyes.

Bodies. Just piles and piles of bodies on bodies. Arms, legs, heads, torsos, intestines, all strewn about chaotically, as if a giant animal tore through them and mangled them to death.

Dried, old blood was splattered all accross the walls, carpet covered in it.

I let out a scream. This is what I had run through? I shut my eyes as I felt myself about to keel over.

Celeste picks me up by the shoulders and shields my head away from the view.

“Hush, I know, I know,” she whispers. I whimper in fear. Who killed all those people? Who would do such a thing?

“It’s always hard remembering a Fever,” she breathes. “Don’t look, I’ll take you there quickly.”

I bury my head into her neck, skin still cold as ice. I feel her rushing through the hall to reach the other side, smell wafting over my face as I desperately try to block it out. We run for only a few seconds before she stops and places me down.

“Here we are,” she says. I open my eyes and see as we are now in a small hallway connected to the great hall, Celeste closing the door behind her. “One day, you’ll be able to face your audience. It was quite a show!”

I realize she had crossed the hall in a matter of seconds. I remembered running through it felt like an eternity. More questions flooded my mind, but that hungry feeling came back again as I was just relieved to be out of that smell.

“There’s food in the room behind you. Go ahead! I’ll wait out here,” she beams brightly. I look up at her, and I think I am no longer afraid of her. She has promised me food and made sure I was safe and out of sight of that room.

I hold her hand and smile meekly at her. “Thank you,” I whisper.

I turn around and see a simple door. I run hungrily towards it and open it wide.

As soon as I stepped into the room, the sweetest smell I have ever smelled wafted up my nostrils and filled my lungs. It enveloped me whole, and my thoughts clouded as all I could think about was getting some of that sweetness.

I glanced around. It was just a room of people. Sleeping in beds.

Still, sweet scents clouded my mind. I yanked my hand out of Celeste's grip. I take a step forward, multiple steps, and I am running towards the first bed.

A small girl, just like me, sleeping peacefully. I grab her shoulders and sink my teeth into that sweet flesh.