



Feast or Famine

A short story set in
The Ozymandias Saga

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Part I

"I would have words."

"No one is preventing you."

With a negligent wave, Darikosu Ozymandias Vechi languidly seated himself on one of the sumptuous divans that rested on the glossy and intricate parquet of the floor. His tall frame draped over the red velvet and gold gilt of the divan, long black hair spilling over the back of it, shadows and blood. His skin, paler than pale, glowed white against the ebony of his hair, the dark midnight blue of his flowing shirt.

They were at his home, buried deep within the granite depths of Stone Mountain in Georgia, United States. Building his home beneath the feet of oblivious tourists had amused him once upon a time, but it had proved convenient in more than one way.

The two were in his main reception room, which had not actually received anyone for some time. It was also far removed from the new bustle in further caverns, which suited him. He was in no mood for company, as the temper he now displayed openly showed his unwelcome guest. His guest blatantly ignored it.

Cassandra Shallot Marea moved forward with a rustle of skirts and sat down on a matching divan opposite him. Her sumptuous gown made of samite and silk, brocade bodice delicately spattered with pearls and tiny jewels that winked and danced in the light. She too had worn midnight blue, and it appeared that she contained the starry night sky itself within her. Her own long black hair was elaborately curled and braided, the bulk of it held in a glittering net set with winking gems of its own. She also had the startling whiteness of skin.

Of course, the skin was perfectly normal for them, as they were vampires.

"I am aware that you are not best pleased with my continued presence," Cassandra began, folding beringed hands in her lap but staring across at him with a frank and open expression. He examined the neatly trimmed fingernails on his left hand. "However, I believe I can be of use to you, and to her."

"You need not concern yourself with her," he said tightly.

"You cannot subsist on the blood of a single human female."

Now he lifted sapphire eyes to meet her own Mediterranean blue. "That was direct. Even for you, Shallot Marea."

"So formal, my pet? Have things become so strained between us?"

"They have. I adore you still, I always will, but you betrayed me. You stood by and did nothing while I..." He stopped abruptly, unable to finish the sentence.

"You know I was powerless in that. I did what I could to help the both of you. The heads of House Hubris would permit no further action from me. It was a delicate matter, and any interference on my part could have spelled disaster."

"How could it have been more disastrous?" he snarled, starting forward, but he caught himself before coming entirely to his feet. With a visible effort of will, he settled himself down.

"I am going to treat that as rhetorical, as you well know it could have been very, very much worse," she replied, showing no surprise or even unease at his sudden violence. "And it turned out well, did it not? The damage was repaired, and you cemented your bond with the Catalyst."

He crossed his arms and looked away from her. She laughed, a chiming sound.

"Do not pout, my dear. It has lost its charm." She wagged one long, elegant finger at him. "You are champion with Catalyst, the human woman Bonded to you, greatly increasing your power, so that you may save us all. Do not spoil it by acting like a petulant child refused a sweet. And do not think that your change of subject has gone by me. I will discuss the matter I came here (and dared face your fearsome tantrums) to discuss."

"And I told you it is not your concern," he replied sulkily, but did straighten and uncross his arms.

"I am your sire," she said, for the first time a hint of steel, and a brief flash of the power she possessed, showing. "It does concern me. You know I have a most unvampirelike affection for you. I would not have you suffer due to your own obstinacy."

"I feed well."

"Off of her."

"Of course."

"And no others."

"Of course."

"You will fail her."

"You have no right to speak of such things!"

"Right? You speak of rights? You are a vampire, Darikosu. What's more, you are a Vechi, well over five-hundred-years old and the oldest Vechi in existence at the moment. Putting your Bonded status aside for the moment, you must sustain yourself. You, out of all of us, must take

that extra care. We are dreadfully close to losing an entire generation, only the very old—the Marea Vechi, and the very young remaining. All due to the machinations of those whom we struggle against now. They moved against us, and continue to move against us, and now they move openly against the humans and other species as well. How many more will we, will all of us, lose?"

"We will lose no more."

"Can you assure me of this? Out of all the remaining Vechi in the world?" She raised a hand, palm to him. "No, do not force a lie. You know you cannot. Even such, there are not enough Vechi remaining to be raised to Seats, much less High Seats. It will take centuries to recover from this."

"But now we have assistance. The humans will help us."

She gave a delicate snort. "I understand you have grown inordinately fond of humanity, and I will continue to respect that, but they *are* humans. They have no concept of our ways, they cannot although they should wish it. Their mortality prevents it. They will form their committees and their parties and will endlessly discuss it while we wait for them to come up with nothing. We maintain our present status with them due to their combined ability to destroy us, nothing more. As of now, they are strong, we are weak. We must adhere to their rules. However, they can never be of any real use to us aside from their intended purpose; food."

He did not respond, merely scowling at his fingernails.

"Ever since the veil between the natural and supernatural was ripped away, we have all been forced to integrate. It has not been easy, particularly for the humans, and I do admire their attempts to normalize society while still respecting those whose ways are so different from their own. We must repair ourselves, they cannot do it for us. More, as we are all part of this world, we must help *them* recover. Noblesse oblige. But the order still remains; we are the apex predator, they are our prey. "

"You tread on dangerous ground, Cassandra."

"And now you drop the formalities to become so threatening. I will take what I can get on that score. I know you speak of your beloved Catalyst. I agree with most of the rest of our kind. She is no longer human. She is something else. She has to be in order to keep pace with you and what you are becoming."

"And because she is something else, she can sustain me. I need no other."

"Are you so willing to take that chance? Your requirement to feed has increased, rather than decreased. You can now withstand sunlight, you require less sleep, the day no longer strikes you with somnolence, you are stronger, you have more power...but you need more blood to sustain that, don't you?"

He merely looked away from her.

"How long since you last fed?"

"A week," he mumbled, running one finger along the golden gilt running along the arm of the divan.

"And you already feel the hunger upon you, do you not?"

The glare he directed at her was an odd blend of anger and helplessness.

"And you require much more than previous, do you not?"

"Stop this!" he growled, jerking to his feet and pacing.

"No. I have already told you why I cannot leave this be. You are paramount for so very many reasons. If you will not care for yourself, I will force you to do so."

"Really," he sneered. "And how would you accomplish that?"

"I will tell Sasha you are neglecting yourself," she said simply, with all the smugness of having played the ultimate card.

That stopped his pacing dead in its tracks.

"I see you realize the import," she said, leaning back in satisfaction. "And it is no idle threat. I will tell her, and she will confront you, and you will continue to be stubborn, and she will take some sort of extreme measure to ensure you properly care for yourself. It is her nature to accomplish her goals by any means necessary, regardless of risk to herself. Reckless, but effective."

"I cannot believe you are using 'I'll tell on you' as a threat," he finally said, shaking his head ruefully.

"You have reduced me to this, my pet," she replied cheerfully. "I will use any weapon in my arsenal, and she is the most effective one."

"She is indeed."

"I nearly went to her first. Her reaction would have been most amusing entertainment. Alas, I do not think I would be allowed to watch her confrontation with you, so I came to you first, hoping you'd see reason."

"I will address it," he told her.

"You will feed on others? It's perfectly acceptable, the humans have set up quite a nice legal system regarding our needs, I will give them praise for that. So long as their bureaucratic needs are met they will allow nearly anything. Politics are so useful. And so are misplaced sympathies and indignation. 'Oh, the poor vampires'. Human nature to our advantage, as always."

"I will address it," he repeated.

"I do not like this, but I will accept it for now. For now. I am watching you, dearest."

"Yes, yes," he sighed, flipping a hand at her.

With a nod, she swept out of the room.

Darikosu turned and moved towards a baroque oil painting by Rubens. Daniel, surrounded by lions, praying to God. The expression on the painted face was fatalistic, ready to accept whatever fate was intended, yet desperately hoping for life. Stretching out a finger, he lightly touched the surface, where invisible repairs had been made after the painting had been damaged.

Since becoming the Bonded to a Catalyst, he felt he understood Daniel in a way he had never understood it before. He had been incapable. Unlife was what it was, no more, no less. There was no reason to hope, as he'd had no real wishes or goals. There had been no desire other than the next diversion, the next entertainment, to stave off the long grind of immortality.

She had changed all of that. Changed the unchanging. She was Catalyst, the being created at need by whatever one chose to call the implacable force; God, Allah, the universe, Gaia, spirits... A human formed to bond to a vampire and change them both. The reason for the event was simple; a higher power foresaw a danger to everything existent.

An imminent collapse of the world was forthcoming, and the Catalyst was created to stop it. It had occurred several times before in history, and the Catalyst and their vampire champion had not always been successful. The failure of previous Catalysts and their Bonded had plunged the entire world into darkness and despair that took decades, or even centuries, to recover from. And before the Age of Information, the victories of the Catalyst pair had gone largely unnoticed except by bards and storytellers. Oral traditions, quickly lost.

Sasha Worthington, government agent, was Darikosu's Catalyst. Both had been changed, although the changes in Sasha were much more subtle and had not been detected for some time. Their enemy had also become more than apparent. The destruction had been vast. They now knew who they fought, but were still uncertain how. Betrayal, divine anger, demonic influence;

all had converged to create this new threat. It had revealed itself by destroying epicenters of human involvement, and the world still reeled.

As the bulk of humanity argued and politicized, other forces moved in an attempt to combat the threat. However, they were few, and without the structure humanity had set in place, it was difficult to communicate. Progress was slow. And painful.

His thoughts wandered to the activity in the further caverns of his lair. BANI, the Bureau for Anormal Normalization and Integration, the agency his beloved was a part of, had leaped upon his offer after their Vampire Specialization headquarters had been devastated. Most of BANI was involved in fighting to make sure that the various supernatural entities that had been proven very, very real after the MetaCollision managed to live with everyone else with a lack of mass murder on any side. Humans had proven just as vicious as any werewolf during its moon trial. The United States had formed BANI in order to protect everyone, not just humans. It was an admirable goal.

Sasha had been part of New Contacts, the department within the department that helped register and incorporate the "anormals" without anyone suffering for it. Her specialization had been vampires. When an anormal registered, they became bound by a variety of magical spells and laws, known as the Covenant, that had extremely nasty consequences should a registered anormal decide to make the convenience store clerk a Slurpee.

It gave as much as it restrained, protecting the anormal from such things as human lynch mobs and unprovoked violence. This kind of precarious balance had been forged on a bloody anvil, but it seemed to be working.

Shaking his head, he forced his thoughts back to the issue at hand. Cassandra had been right, blast the woman, and he was needing to feed more often. And needing more blood when he did feed. Before, due to his age, he had only needed to feed perhaps once a month unless he was very active in using his powers. Sasha had been more than ample to sustain him.

Now, however, the thirst started after only a few days. He'd begun avoiding his beloved, and shielding the part of her that lived inside him, that awareness both had gained when their Bonding had been completed. She was aware something was wrong, but she did not know what it was. He could feel her frustration and anger, but felt powerless to address it.

At that moment he knew she was concentrating on something, and located in the makeshift headquarters that had been set up after their previous one had been destroyed. It made no difference. He could not approach. Every time he got near her...

With a grunt he turned away from the painting and started pacing again.

Why didn't he just feed on a willing partner? Cassandra had been correct. Humanity had set up multiple ways for him to find a safe donor. But everytime he thought about it, his heart would twist inside him in a way he had never experienced before. It made him feel soiled.

It wasn't the first time he'd wrestled with this. His stubbornness had directly led to the catastrophic tribulation of his House, where he had...Shuddering, he forced his thoughts from the memory. He had promised Sasha it wouldn't happen again, but that promise had been made before his need had grown exponentially.

He could not just feed off of her anymore. Catalyst or no, she was still inherently human, her body just could not create blood fast enough. Simple equation.

Yes, Cassandra had been right, damn her eyes. He had to feed, and feed well. Despite his newfound powers, despite Sasha's, it was still unknown if it would be enough to fight the forces that had gathered to destroy them. Just as Sasha was still quite human, he was still "just" a vampire. The only one who knew if the Catalyst and her champion had a chance was the omniscient being who had created them in the first place, and divinity was notorious for not answering questions.

He had tried to quietly research House records on how other Bonded vampires had dealt with this situation, but there had been nothing. It seemed that none of the other Bonded had problems feeding off of other people. He was the first. And those were in ages where the curtain had still been drawn, vampires were the stuff of myth and legend, and feeding had to be circumspect and secret.

Why was he so different?

His eyes snapped out of their reverie as he felt Sasha approaching through one of the tunnels he'd prepared for her to have easy access to their shared quarters from the

BANI setup. A quick flutter of shadows surrounded him, and he travelled elsewhere.
Away from her.