

It had been years since Erik climbed free of the opera's smoking ruin and witnessed the true tragedy of that night: not the hundreds dead but his face, which had melted into something monstrous. And though he had grown a thick skin since then, tonight's meeting had him on edge.

"So, you're the one," says a woman sitting at the bar. "Oh, don't look so startled. Only someone with a face like yours needs my services."

"At least try to be discreet," growls Erik, sitting next to her. "It's what I'm paying for."

"You paid me to deliver a message, and I did. My discretion costs extra."

"Fine," sighs Erik, and waves down the barman, ordering a drink. "Just tell me — did you do it? Did you speak to her?"

"Your long-lost love? Of course. And I can see why she's gotten you so worked up."

Erik glares at her, taking his drink and draining it. "Stop playing with me and tell me—what did she say? Did she... did she do it? Did she marry him?"

"About that," she says, pressing her lips into a thin line. "I told her you missed her, that you loved her. That you would always love her. But—"

"But what?"

The woman shakes her head before fixing Erik with a hard stare. "She didn't care, Erik. She married him anyway."

Erik's face drops, his heart plummeting into the pit of his stomach. "She had nothing to say to me? Are you sure you told her how I really felt?"

"I've no doubt."

He shakes his head, fists clenching into balls. "Am I really so wretched?"

The woman takes a moment to drink her wine, studying him thoughtfully. "My opinion? She only ever loved you out of pity. She never accepted you for who you are."

Erik slams his fist on the bar top. "She's *the only one* who accepted me," he growls, face more twisted than usual.

"That simply isn't true. I accept you. I don't like you, but I accept you."

"What are you talking about? *I don't even know you.*"

The woman stands up and extends a hand. "I am Carmilla, and I come from Macabria—a place that will accept you for who you are. A place where people won't stare. A place, if you so choose, to call home..."

"Leave? I can't abandon her."

Carmilla sighs and shakes her head. "Abandon who? You're all alone, Erik. And you have been for a long time."