

Freckles

by iztopher

Vampires are compelled to count things. Galahad learns this the hard way when he absentmindedly notices Te'ijal's freckles.

Thanks to CJ for betaing!

...

Te'ijal was talking.

Or, at least, Galahad thought she might be. She *had* been. He'd stopped paying attention as soon as she stopped listing new ways he could die and started listing new ways he could kill people.

"Husband?"

She was, then. He turned his head back to face her, hating that he had already learned to answer to the name. "Were you saying something?"

Te'ijal huffed, crossing her arms over each other. "I have been 'saying something' the entire time we've been here, dumpling, and it would do you well to listen."

Galahad found himself wishing, yet again, that it had been at all feasible to go to the tavern with the living members of their party. But the decision not to surround himself with human food and beating hearts was obvious enough, and came with the bonus of drawing the demon away from finding her own dinner. Unfortunately, she had taken the opportunity to give him a lesson on his new vampirism.

"I will *never*," he growled, "listen to you detail your butchery."

Rolling her eyes, Te'ijal leaned back on the bench. "My inattentive partridge. If you had been focused, you would know I was trying to teach you much more than how to feed. Like it or not, you are like me now, and it is my responsibility to see the transition is smooth."

Galahad scoffed. "It would have been gentler for you to break my fingers one by one."

She clicked her tongue against her fangs, clearly amused by his dramatics. "However would you wear your ring then, husband?"

He was ready to tell her just how little he'd care to, but she continued before he got the chance.

"Consider your options, duckling. If you grant me the peace of mind that you are prepared for your undeath, I will have no reason to continue, as you say, 'detailing my butchery.' However, if I fear you are inadequately informed, I must make sure to fix that!"

He narrowed his eyes. "So if I hear what you have to say, you'll let me be?"

"To a degree." Her lips quirked up, fangs poking out from between them. She suppressed a giggle behind her smile. "*Much* more than I would otherwise, if I can trust you'll be safe. If you know how to navigate the world, what to safely avoid, then you scarcely need me to chaperone."

Galahad briefly thought it over. As little as he wanted to learn how to be a proper vampire, revolted enough by being one at all, the demon made it clear she wouldn't let him out of her sight until he had.

...Or until she thought he had, anyways. He could ignore her a little less blatantly, nod his head at what seemed to be appropriate intervals, look *at* her instead of past her. He'd always bristled somewhat under eye contact, and had learned ways to subtly avoid it while making it clear he was still focused. It couldn't possibly be more difficult to do and *not* pay attention.

He sighed. "Very well."

"Excellent!" Te'ijal brought her hands together in an excited clap. "I will start from the beginning, as that is my favorite part. It is very important to know the difference between feeding and turning, and to be deliberate in your bite..."

It took no small force of will for Galahad not to shut his eyes and visibly grit his teeth to block her out. Instead he fixed his mouth straight, his gaze on her face, and tried to focus on anything other than her voice. It was easy enough - his senses were unpleasantly heightened, and he found there was more to notice than there should be. By all means, it should have been overwhelming, but it *wasn't*, like he was equipped for it now, and that was troubling in its own right. The voices from the tavern down the street had no right to be so clear.

He looked straight ahead at Te'ijal, and scowled a little, because he was sure whatever she was saying warranted it. He found if he looked at any one feature for too long, the others would fade away. She said something about

invitations and he made a vaguely attentive "hm" sound as he stared just above her right eye at a swoop of wild red hair. He dipped his head in a slight nod while he focused on a shadow so dramatic it barely registered as a cheekbone.

Absentmindedly, he noticed a deep purple dot in its center, and then another, and then another. Te'ijal's skin was deathly desaturated, a pale, nearly purplish tone. But these spots were vivid and dark. There were more, almost hiding between the darker ones, that were closer in color to the rest of her skin. *Seven, eight, nine...* Freckles, he remembered, taking note of the larger pattern. He'd noticed before - it was hard not to be a *little* surprised by the sight of them on a vampire - but he'd never paid them enough attention to see just how many she had.

His eyes traveled easily from one to the next. There was always another just in his sight - *fifteen, sixteen, seventeen* - and he found he couldn't stop them from catching his eye.

Well, no. He could stop. And he really ought to.

And yet, even as he scolded himself and attempted to avert his gaze, the steady count continued on in the back of his head. *Twenty, twenty-one, twenty-two*. Galahad shook his head, as if he could somehow physically shake it from his addled mind.

Twenty-five, twenty-six, twenty-seven. Apparently not.

"Husband?" Te'ijal's voice broke through his frustration. "Is something the matter?"

He almost wanted to lie. Instead, he said, "Having to listen to your drivel."

"Ah, that would do it, wouldn't it? I thought you appeared even more bothered than usual." He couldn't see her expression, but he could hear the creeping humor in her tone. "It seemed unreasonable you would be so disappointed to still cast a shadow."

"Not in the slightest." He shook his head, but he found his gaze still rooted in the same spot, still taking stock. *Thirty-one, thirty-two, thirty-three...* There was a mess of freckles, clusters overlapping that only revealed more the longer he looked, the higher he counted. An entirely unwelcome realization overcame him. "Though I do have a question."

"Of course. It does me well to hear your interest."

He scowled, reluctantly tried to raise his gaze to meet her eyes. It wavered in his vision before he faltered, involuntarily redirecting his sights to his earlier place. *Thirty-nine, forty, forty-one...* "Is there any truth in that myth about counting? I have heard old wives' tales claiming you could distract a vampire by scattering rice."

"Oh!" Te'ijal laughed. "Just a little. Should you have the trouble to start, it's very difficult to stop." The twitch in her lower cheek suggested she was pursing her lips somewhere beyond the focus of his eyes. "We are apparently further inclined towards it than humans, and they do use it to sneak away on occasion. It's an impulsive, distracting behavior, but it is merely impulse. It certainly isn't magic."

"Obviously it isn't magic," he scoffed. "There's no such thing." That this was, in fact, vampiric in nature unsettled Galahad, but he found some solace in the full explanation. It was possible to reject, just as he would reject every other aspect of his new state, even if it was hard to shake. *Forty-four, forty-five, forty-six...*

She raised an eyebrow. "Why such curiosity in this in particular, my dumpling? Have you found yourself drawn to count something?"

He didn't answer.

His silence, and his expression, must have betrayed his concentration, because Te'ijal broke into a grin. "I think you are." She twisted her shoulders, turning her head behind her to look for just what. Her cheek turned with her.

On reflex, Galahad reached out, gripping her chin with his gloved hand and turning it back to face him. Te'ijal's eyes widened, then lit up, and then halfway closed as her smile turned even more devious. "Why, my succulent darling," she said, dropping her voice lower, "I didn't realize I was quite so *entrancing*."

Galahad growled, dropping his hand and furrowing his brow, even as his eyes involuntarily drifted back to the left side of her face. *Forty-nine, fifty, fifty-one...* "It's your freckles," he grumbled.

Te'ijal covered her mouth with her hand, snickering. "My freckles?"

"Which a creature of the night such as yourself should not even *have*-"

She shrugged. "They apparently appeared along the quest. I, of course, cannot see them, but Elini pointed them out to me. She speculated the

sunscreen could only protect me so much." Her wicked grin made itself comfortable across her face again. In the corner of his gaze still fixed across her cheek, Galahad could see the skin by her eye crinkle just slightly. He tried, again, to pull his eyes away from that spattering of freckles, using that creased skin as a guide.

He just barely managed, finding her eyes and fighting the urge to drop his all the while. She wasn't looking back at him now, and that made it easier. Those infuriating purple dots flashed in the back of his head, and he bit the inside of his lip in concentration. Knowing it was his new vampirism at play, however, made it easier to overcome. The impulse was no longer a minor embarrassment, it was something that it was imperative he control.

"Are you done?" she asked, taunting him, clearly expecting the answer to be *no*.

"I believe so." He was, as it turned out. Amidst the relief, his head hurt, just slightly. "This is *your* fault."

"For having freckles?"

"For *ruining my life*," he spat.

"By having freckles." She was laughing in earnest now, more schoolgirl's giggle than witch's cackle, which surprised him.

"By turning me into a monster apparently compelled to count them!"

Te'ijal merely shook her head. "Give it time," she assured him, "and the benefits will outweigh these little irritations. Now you have experience with the counting inclination, and we can continue on with our lesson."

Galahad sighed and folded his hands in his lap, closing his eyes. He felt like he had earned it. He despised admitting it, but perhaps it would do more good than harm for him to proceed with a fuller understanding of his new circumstances. Perhaps he could even use it to find his way out of them.

"You may proceed."

The taunt in Te'ijal's voice was palpable. "Before we do," she said, "I am very curious to know just how many freckles I have."

He clenched his jaw and held his face tight for a moment before sighing and settling on half an answer, unwilling to give her any more. "I stopped count at sixty."