



Vampire Morsels

A collection of short stories

By Joleene Naylor



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Ramblings from the Darkness at <http://www.joleenenaylor.com>
You never know what you'll find in the shadows...

Check out Zanatlja's awesome font Old Retro Labels

Other books by Joleene Naylor:

Amaranthine:

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- 1: Shades of Gray
- 2: Legacy of Ghosts
- 3: Ties of Blood
- 4: Ashes of Deceit
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Also:

Vampire Morsels Collection: 17 Short Stories

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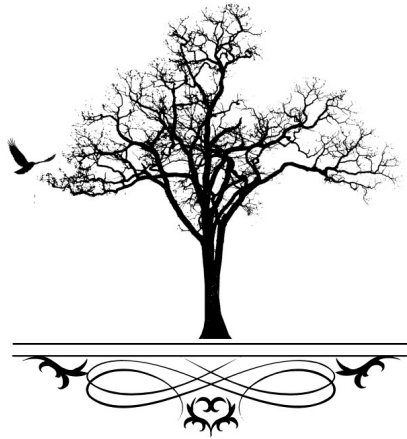
Thirteen Guests: A Masque of the Vampire companion

Road to Darkness: A short story companion to Brothers of Darkness

COMING SOON:

Tales of the Executioners





Vampire Morsels: Short stories from the Amaranthine Universe

Seventeen short stories from the world of Amaranthine; a universe of blood and darkness where vampires don't sparkle and night is eternal. Includes:

Kateesha - When Kateesha and her partner are sent to apprehend a rogue coven, things go awry and carry terrible consequences.

Michael - Michael isn't interested in finding a job, so his mother finds one for him. If only she'd known she was sending him to work for vampires.

Troy - Claudius is having a get together, and leaves Troy in charge of greeting the guests. But what happens when he finds himself stuck babysitting a pretty boy vampire?

Jesslynn - When Jesslynn's baby gets sick, she sees only way to save him; by discovering whatever dark ritual keeps their neighbor, Jorick, healthy and eternally young. She gets more than she bargained for.

Also includes: **Velnya, Sarah, Nirel, Kariss, Herrick, Elsa, Claudius, Bethina, Benjamin, Ashton, Arowenia, Alexander** and **Adam**.

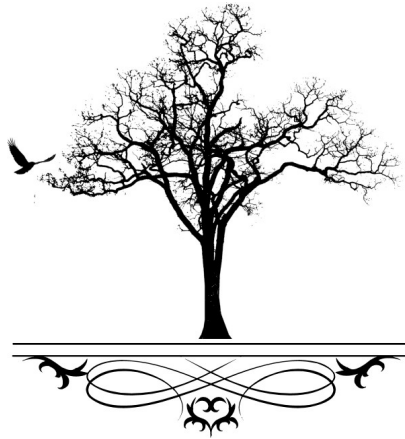


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INTRO

Most people skip introductions or only read the first couple of sentences. In that case, the important information is: the following stories are about random characters from the Amaranthine universe; a universe of night, blood, violence and vampires who don't sparkle. Oh, and **this is not suitable for children.**

You can now skip ahead and immerse yourself in vampire-y goodness, or you can hang out here and listen to me ramble.

The aforementioned Amaranthine universe takes place, primarily, in a series of novels that star Katelina, Jorick, and a cast of hundreds (or at least a hundred). Why so many characters? I could regurgitate some bull that a realistic universe must have layers of characters in order to feel truly fleshed-out, but the truth is I like to make characters. The trouble with so many characters is that few of them (excluding the heroes) get much time in the spotlight. So the Vampire Morsels were born; a chance to showcase the characters that got overlooked in the novels. Or seventeen of them, at least.

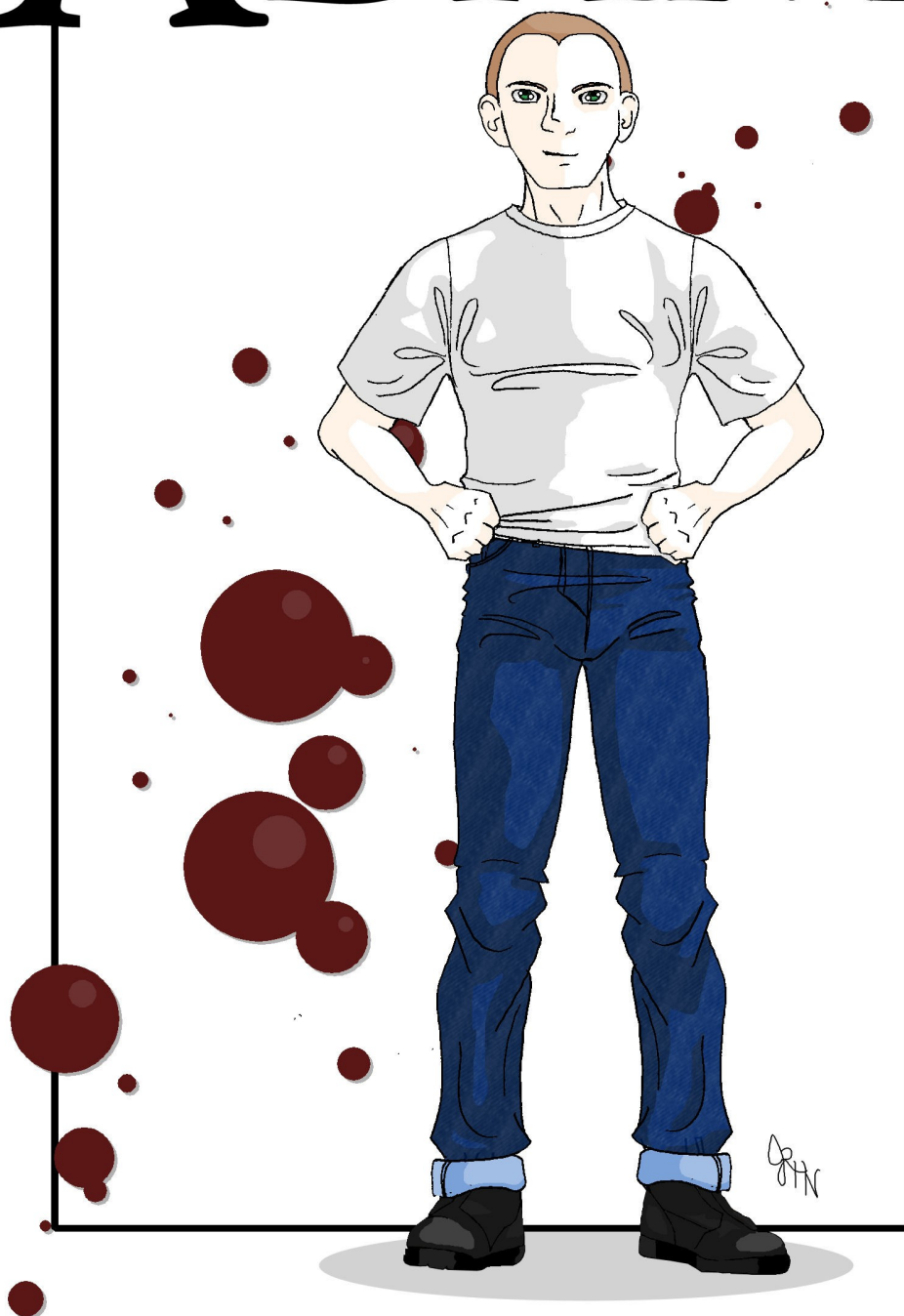
Peppered throughout their stories, you will find other characters lurking; Micah, Loren, Jorick, and even Verchiel make an appearance. Together, they create a tightly woven web that a true fanatic may need a timeline to keep track of. Or they make for some random reading fun. You can use these stories to peer deeper into the murky darkness of the Amaranthine world, or you can enjoy them as a quick one off. It's up to you. But, if you'd like more information on the universe, the novel series, and some of my other weirdness, you can check out my website at <http://JoleeneNaylor.com>,

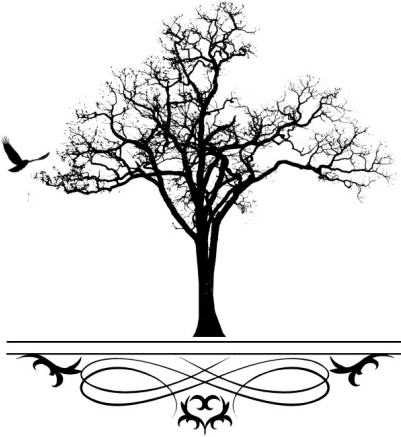
Thanks for reading!

P.S. Yes, I drew the pictures. With this touch up I thought about removing them, but they have a kitschy, retro vibe to them. Besides, people like them. Who knew?



ADAM





ADAM

(You can find Adam in the novel *Legacy of Ghosts*. Demetrius is in *Masque of the Vampire*. Adam's story takes place in 1952, one year before the Korean War ended.)



Adam leaned back in the barber's chair and closed his eyes. The buzzing clippers moved slowly over his scalp and sent a rain of brown curls falling around him.

"So you've joined up?" old man Winslow asked from what served as the waiting area. "You gonna go over there and kick some Commie ass?"

The barber coughed loudly. His eyes skipped to the girl who stood near the counter wearing a proud smile and a poodle skirt. "There's a lady present."

Mr. Winslow snorted, but amended the question. "So when you shippin' out, boy?"

Adam opened his eyes and tried not to sound too excited. "I have to go through Boot Camp, first."

"Ah, just don't mess around and get there too late, eh? Wars only last so long." The old man winked.

The buzzing stopped. The barber brushed away the loose hairs and spun the chair towards the mirror. The reflection was a shock, and Adam ran his hand over his nearly bald head. But, even in the wake of surprise, his chest puffed up with pride. He had a man's haircut; like his brother Randy's, and in a few months he'd get to join him over there in Korea. Yeah, a real man.

Adam stood and paid the bill while the pretty girl by the counter gushed and giggled. Susan Harley was his steady, and though he'd been afraid she'd get mad about him joining up, she'd taken the news well. He wondered if it was because it hadn't really sunk in. That was part of why he'd been in a hurry to lose the "civilian cut". Let her get a good look at the reality of it and see if it was still as appealing. To his surprise, the gleam in her eyes said it was.

He offered her his arm. With a warm smile, she took it and they strolled out of the barber shop and towards his dad's grocery store. He'd been working there as a clerk since his graduation three years ago, but he spent more time hauling boxes than running the register because he was "built for it". Tall and broad shouldered with thick arms, he stood out in a crowd and more often than not found himself carrying heavy objects, or reaching high places for other people. He didn't mind doing it, but he wanted to do something more significant.

"I think it's so romantic!" Susan prattled, and he realized he hadn't been listening to her. "And when you get back, we can get married!" She grabbed his arm and nearly swung around him like a kid on

the monkey bars. "We can get that little house on the edge of town, you know, the one with the big elm in the front yard?"

He made a non-committal noise and she went on as though he'd agreed. Susan had their lives all mapped out. It wasn't that he didn't want to marry her. If he had to marry someone, it might as well be her, but he just couldn't settle his mind to it, yet. Maybe he'd be able to when he got back.

They reached the grocery store, and Susan peeled herself loose, all batting eyelids and suggestive giggles. "I'll see you tonight. Meet me at the beach at eight and-" she broke off and drew closer. Her voice dropped low. "-If you're a good boy maybe we'll go for a swim in the ocean."

She hurried away, her hips swaying just because she knew he was watching. He briefly imagined her walking towards the water wearing nothing but the skin God gave her, then shook it off quickly. He had to get to work.



By late afternoon, storm clouds rolled in, and low, angry thunder rumbled across the sky. Adam tried to ignore the darkening disappointment in his gut but, by closing time, his dreams of a late night swim were pretty much gone. Still, they could huddle in the shelter and neck. That would be better than nothing.

It was seven o'clock when his dad closed out the register for the night. "You about done stacking those cans, Adam?"

There were only six left, but he needed a moment of quiet. "Yes, sir. Just a couple more rows."

As he'd hoped, his father called back, "All right. You go finish up, and I'll head home. You know how your mother gets if dinner has to wait too long." He chuckled and added, "Someday you'll have the pleasure of a nagging wife. That little Susan seems like the kind who'd expect you right on time." Adam didn't respond, so he gathered up his things and left with the final order, "Lock up on your way out."

Adam sighed in relief. It wasn't that he didn't like his old man, but sometimes he just bugged him. All the hinting and those half innocent remarks about Susan. They'd already had the "man to man" talk about whether or not he was going to marry her. Yeah, he was, but just when he got to it. He was only twenty-one. There were guys his age that were still in college. He bet no one hassled them about what they were going to do, or when.

He finished the cans and deposited the empty box in the storeroom. He had an hour until he had to meet Susan, so he popped out the back door for a smoke. Though it was just after seven, the sky overhead was black. Lightning sizzled across it, and thunder growled back, as if defending its territory from the dazzling intruder. Adam leaned against the building and watched the smoke curling up and away. There was too much to think about, so he let his mind drift to images of Susan waiting on the beach. Then he imagined her waiting with her sister. Oh yeah-

He jerked from his thoughts and stared at nothing. He'd heard something, but he didn't know what, only that it had been something; something that shouldn't be there. The tiny hairs on the back of his neck stood up, and a sudden, unexplained chill danced down his spine. He suddenly wanted to run back into the store and bolt the door.

A fat raindrop splashed past him to die on the pavement. "What the hell is this?" he whispered to himself. He stabbed his cigarette out and straightened his shoulders. He was the biggest guy in town, or damn near. What did he have to be afraid of? The rain and some shadows?

He walked towards the end of the alley where he instinctively felt the noise had come from. A row of weather stained garbage cans shone dully under a flickering light. The effect was eerie, but there was nothing there.

And then the light went out.

In the darkness, strong arms wrapped around Adam and pulled him down. He fought back but, blind and surprised, his reaction was too slow. He was slammed to the ground, and his head bounced off

the pavement. Dazed, he blinked against the fuzziness that filled his skull. The cold rain splashed on his face and pulled him back to the world. And then the light came on and he saw his attacker.

It was a man, if man it could be called. The features were once human, but were so inhumanly twisted as to appear beast-like. His face was streaked in dirt and his lips were pulled back to reveal a pair of gleaming fangs. Fury and burning need blazed in his eyes. He slammed Adam's head into the ground again, and set upon him, fangs slicing into his neck; shredding and rending.

Expletives rolled out of Adam's mouth as he tried uselessly to pry the monster loose. The rain picked up, and the sound drowned out the slurping noises as the creature drained him. Adam kicked and tried to roll away, but the thing only growled and bit deeper, so that blood ran around the edges of his mouth and over Adam's shoulder in a warm, wet trail.

Blood. The word "vampire" flitted through his mind, but was lost to the fight for self-preservation. Adam thrashed and bucked, but it did no good. He could feel his limbs weakening, feel his thoughts slowing. The light seemed to dim, and the sound of the rain roared louder and louder in his ears. Just as he was ready to give up, he saw a broken piece of wooden pallet. He could just reach it with his fingertips and slowly, he worked the slippery object closer until he could grip it.

Weapon in hand, he gave a final cry and slammed the board over the monster's head. The thing shrieked and let go, more from surprise than injury, and Adam used that second of imbalance to fling the attacker away from him. He tried to leap to his feet, but his legs were too weak, so he settled for a half lunge in the thing's direction. He crashed on top of him, knocking him to the ground.

"How do you like it, now?" he shouted, as he beat the monster in the face with the broken board. "How the hell do you like it?" The creature howled, and slammed a fist into Adam's chin. He and the board flew backwards and landed apart on the wet pavement.

The monster was suddenly straddling him, his dirty, blood streaked face pressed close to Adam's. In seeming slow motion, his lips pulled back, his mouth widened. His fangs seemed to grow larger...

Adam wanted to fight him, but he didn't have the means. The board was too far away and he was too weak to do the thing any harm. But he couldn't die. Not here, not now. He had to go to Korea. He had to show everyone he was a better man than his brother. He had to meet Susan at the ocean.

With a final, savage cry, he used the last weapon he had; his teeth. He bit into the creature's shoulder with all the force he could muster. Something warm splashed on his tongue. The flavor was strong and gritty, like a dirty penny. Adam's first instinct was to pull away, but there was something about it; something that made him want more. It was as if his weakened, dying body was screaming for it.

The thing shrieked and tried to recoil, but Adam hung on like a tiny dog to a mailman's leg. He gulped the hot, thick liquid in mouthfuls. As it filled him, his strength seemed to return, while the monster grew weaker and weaker and soon sank to the ground, his arms flailing uselessly.

Adam let the thing go and leaned back to stare at it. Conquering pride swelled through him and intensified his righteous fury. He grabbed the broken board that lay nearby and held it aloft, ready to strike. Unbidden, the word "vampire" returned to his mind, and he heard himself laugh maniacally as he slammed the sharp end of the board through the thing's chest again and again.

Suddenly, he fell back and half lay on the cold ground, soaked, bloody and exhausted. His heart pounded in his ears like an evil drum, louder and louder, and the world's focus grew too sharp. For an instant he could see every rain drop suspended in midair, as though someone had stopped the world. He blinked at the horror of it, and then everything rushed into a super fast tumult that made him sick. He couldn't focus; couldn't concentrate, and inside, low in his belly, a burning started. It spread through him, gaining momentum as it raced down his limbs, into his fingers and toes, and slammed into his brain.

Adam clutched his skull and writhed on the ground. It felt as though a thousand, red hot knives were slicing through every inch of him, and the wounds ripped into his neck and chest were on fire. He clawed at the mess, and then rolled onto his stomach and desperately tried to splash rain water on himself to quench the imaginary flames, but it didn't help. The pain was nearly unbearable. Then, it stopped.

Shaking and exhausted, Adam rolled over and slowly climbed to his feet. His head swam and all he could think about was getting away from the dirty alley and the dead guy with the big teeth. He needed to go... go... where? He thought of Susan and the beach. He thought of the coarse sand on her soft skin,

and the light in her eyes. He had to find her. Something was wrong with him, he was sick, and he had to find her.

His vision flickered off and on; sometimes bright and startling, sometimes black. He stumbled and weaved his way out of the alley, like a drunk. His feet dragged on the pavement, too heavy to lift. Even his arms seemed to be made of lead. And then, the pain returned and he fell to his knees.

He didn't know how long it took him. His rational mind deserted him and left him with only a strange, base instinct that pulled him towards the beach. More than once the searing pain overtook him, but then it would leave, and each time he felt a little stronger afterwards.

At last, he could hear the roar of the ocean waves. He stumbled through the thick sand, and found the shelter that he and Susan usually met in. Despite the rain, there she was sitting on the bench, her ankles crossed and her impatient hands in her lap. A folded umbrella leaned next to her, along with a soggy dime novel.

Lightning cut across the sky and she saw him. Her eyebrows shot up, but she hadn't had time to take him in before the blackness blotted him out, again. "There you are!" She stood and marched out of the shelter and towards him, hands on her hips. "Where have you been? I've been waiting and waiting. I thought maybe you'd changed your mind because of the storm," she broke off and stopped a few steps away from him, her posture suddenly alert. "Adam? Is that you?"

He tried to speak, but his voice didn't want to come, so he nodded mutely. She couldn't see him, so he forced the dry words out. "Yes, it's me."

She drew back and looked towards his silhouette warily. "Adam, what's wrong? You don't sound right."

"I- I don't feel right," he croaked, his voice gruff and somehow dark. "Susan." He moved towards her, his hand outstretched. "Susan, something's wrong."

Instinctively, she moved just out of reach of his fingers. "Adam, maybe you should go home?"

"I can't. Not like this?"

At his words, her body stiffened. "Like what?"

The lightning flashed again and revealed his disheveled state. He was soaked to the skin, and his clothes were torn and bloody. The wound in his neck gaped red and angry like something from a horror movie.

She screamed.

Adam grabbed her. He didn't want to hurt her, only make her stop before someone heard her. He pinned her to him with one arm, and muffled her mouth with his free hand. "Susan," he croaked. "Susan, listen, shhhh. Be quiet. Don't scream, honey, just--"

And then she bit him. He swore loudly and released her. She staggered backwards, her terrified eyes wide. "What's wrong with you?" she cried. "Just stay back, Adam. Go home. Go home- No!" He lunged towards her. "No! Adam! No!"

He tackled her to the ground, fury twisting his features. His brain slid and he didn't recognize her anymore. She wasn't a person, she was a thing. Something he needed to silence. Something he needed to bite. Something he needed to feed on. Bite. Drink. Feed. Bite. Drink. Feed. Bite-

He came to his senses. Cold rain pounded into his back as he lay over a prone female. The girl's neck was torn and bleeding. Something inside him rejected the picture and he pulled back and closed his eyes. But he couldn't hide from it. Slowly, he opened them again and peered at the girl's face. It was frozen in fear; a terrible, horrible kind of fear that made his guts twist. It was Susan's face.

With a cry, he flung himself off of her and shook her violently. "Susan! Susan, honey! Susan! Oh, God damn it! Susan!" But she didn't respond, only stared at nothing with those horrible, vacant eyes.

Adam fell back on his knees and held out his hands. The rain pounded the blood away, but it couldn't wash them clean. It couldn't fix this. It couldn't fix him. What had he done? What had he become?

The pain came again, only less terrible this time. He crawled to the shelter - their shelter - and curled up under the bench. Sobs racked his body as he fought to claw the image of Susan's face from his

mind. He couldn't have done that! He couldn't have! He wouldn't hurt her! He loved her! He was going to marry her! He loved her!

The storm raged. The night passed, and soon the sky over the ocean lightened. Slowly, the sun crept up. The light moved across the beach like syrup, reaching ever closer to Adam in his hiding place. He sensed the morning on some primeval level and moved towards the opening of the shelter, away from the protection of the bench above him.

The sunlight burned and he screamed and drew back into the cool shadows. He could smell something like cooked bacon, and gingerly touched his face. And then He was there. The man was dressed in a long, hooded black cloak. Only with his back to the daylight did he open the cloak to reveal a smooth, pale face and flashing, hypnotic eyes.

"Come, young one," the man whispered softly. "You must get away from the sun."

Adam stared openly. Despite all the questions burning through his brain he asked the most obvious, "Who are you?"

The man smiled, revealing a set of pointed fangs. "My name is Demetrius, child."

He rejected what he was seeing. None of it could be real. "Susan," he croaked. "Where is Susan?"

Demetrius sighed. "I can only assume you mean the young lady on the beach? She is of no consequence at the moment, young one. Nothing more can be done for her. Now come quickly, before it is too late and you join her."

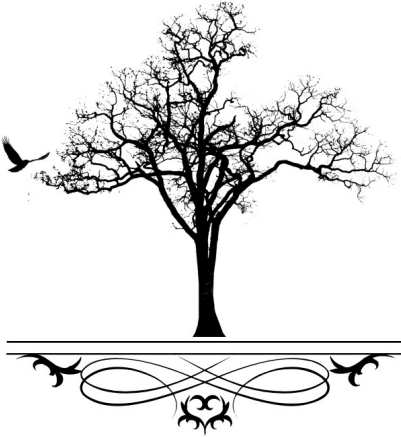
Adam wanted to argue, but something in the other man's voice made him obey. He shuffled quickly under the protection of the cloak, huddling against the stranger's body. "I don't understand," he whispered to the darkness inside the cloak.

"Don't worry," Demetrius answered as he snatched up the abandoned umbrella and opened it, using it as a sun shade. "You will soon." And then, slowly, he drew them both away; away from the beach where Susan's mangled, bloodless body laid spread eagle beneath a flock of hungry seagulls. Away from boot camp, and Korea, and marriage, and all the things that had made up Adam's life before. Away from the orb of the burning of the sun and into the shadows.



ALEXANDER





ALEXANDER

(You can find Alexander in the novel *Shades of Gray & Brothers of Darkness*. His story takes place in 1831 on the Cotterill plantation in Virginia. The rebellion mentioned is Nat Turner's rebellion.)



"Who goes there?" the potted fern demanded and shook its leaves threateningly. "Friend or foe?" The dark haired, pale woman stopped in her tracks and glared at the foliage. "Alexander! I have told you to stay out of the plants. They are not here for your amusement!"

The fern rustled again, and a smaller voice pleaded, "But, Mother, it's not me! It's one of the talking plants in the magical forest of Brisbinay! You can be the queen, if you want."

"Alexander." There was a note of warning in her tone. "I do not wish to repeat myself. Get out of the plants this moment and find some other diversion with which to amuse yourself."

Alexander watched her disappear through a large, carved doorway. Then, with a resigned sigh, he climbed out of the pot. Oblivious to the dirt he tracked, he marched down the hallway, past the family portraits, and up the shiny, curving staircase to the second floor. He stopped outside the door to his room, unwilling to go inside and face the dreaded monster: Boredom.

"I'll slay you, you foul creature!" he whispered and then brandished an imaginary sword. He pretended that he was in a grand castle in one of the fairytale stories Nanny Hannah told him. He would slay the monster and save the beautiful princess. She would reward him with jewels and a kiss. He'd have to put up with the latter, whether he liked it or not, because it was just the way fairytales went.

"Take that!" he cried. "And that! And-"

"Alexander!"

He spun around and knocked into his aunt Torina. They both stumbled, but she caught his arm and righted them. "What ever are you doing?"

"Fighting the monster, ma'am," he answered. "I was playing magical forest, but Mother said I mustn't."

Torina released him and brushed her skirts straight. "Before you go dashing about willy nilly you should make sure there are no innocent bystanders in your path. You could have knocked me off my feet!"

"I'm sorry, Aunt Torina," he murmured with a heavy sigh. "I'll go play somewhere else."

"Yes, you should." She looked thoughtful and then added, "Why don't you go find Martha's daughter to play with? She's too young to be of any use except keeping you occupied."

Alexander's shoulders sagged. "I'm not supposed to play with her. Mother said-"

“Oh, your mother.” Torina gestured away the importance of the order. “You may do as you wish, of course. Just mind where you’re fighting monsters in the future.”

She swished away in a swirl of green skirts, leaving Alexander alone. The large, gilded clock in the hallway said it was only ten, and he imagined the long hours of his day stretching out like one of the plantation house’s corridors; full of silent paintings, carved wood and echoey noises that sounded like “shush!”.

He turned over his aunt’s words and, with new resolve, he wandered down the back stairs and outside to the kitchen, housed in its own building. Inside, two women worked, sleeves rolled up over their dark arms, and sweat beading on their faces from the steamy heat. The smell of baked bread greeted Alexander’s nose, but did nothing for his appetite. However, he noted with delight that Eucey was sitting under the table with a bowl of buttons. Martha and Prudence were too busy to notice him, so he slid neatly under the table to join her.

“What are you doing, Eucey?”

She turned her large chocolate eyes on him and smiled brightly. “I’m countin’ buttons. You wanna count ‘em, too?”

Alexander turned a shiny red button over in his hand, then dropped it into the little bowl. “How would you like to play outside? It’s plenty warm out, so you don’t even need any shoes.”

“How come we never go play in the sunshine?” Eucey asked as she counted off five small buttons. “It’s lots prettier, then.”

“Because I can’t go outside in the sunshine,” he answered patiently. “You know that. None of us can. Not Mother, or Father, or Aunt Torina, or Uncle Fabian or me, or even baby Tristan.”

“Course I know.” She wrinkled her nose. “But why not? They’s other white folks what go in the sunshine. I seen ‘em in town afore, so it can’t be coz ‘a that.”

“It’s just the way it is,” he answered with growing impatience. “Look, do you want to come play or not?”

Eucey peeked out from under the table towards the women at their work. “Mama won’t like it.”

“I imagine not,” he agreed. “So we had best hurry.” Before Eucey had a chance to say anything further, he grabbed her hand and tugged her out from under the table. They dashed out of the kitchen and down the well-worn path. Alexander stopped and took in a lungful of air and held it. The night was cool and the silver moon hung in the sky like a thumbnail clipping. He could smell fresh cut alfalfa on the breeze and the bugs droned lazily in the trees. He could see the lights from the slave quarters and knew that most of them were going to bed. Unlike his family and the house slaves, they were up in the daylight and slept while it was dark. If he thought hard, he could remember a time when he was like that, too. He used to go out in the sunlight but that had changed. He just wasn’t sure when.

He shook off the thoughts as unimportant. “Come on,” he instructed, and pulled Eucey after him. They kicked through the wet grass towards the other outbuildings, but stopped when they saw that the stables were lit up. In the doorway, Alexander could make out his father and the shapes of two other men. His curiosity got the better of him, so he and Eucey crept closer, taking shelter behind a pile of neatly stacked wood.

“Who is it?” Eucey asked. “What are they sayin’? I can’t hear.”

Alexander motioned her to silence. If they were detected, he’d be sent back inside to find something else to amuse himself with. Slowly, their words filtered to him, and he paraphrased for his friend. “There’s father, his friend Mr. Smit, and another man. I don’t know him. They’re saying something about a massacre...” he trailed off and squinted into the night, as if that would improve his understanding.

Eucey waited patiently for more information, but Alexander made the mistake of leaning too far out from the wood pile. Someone pointed in his direction and, though he tried to hide, it was too late.

“Alexander?”

He looked up and found his father peering down at him. “Yes, sir?”

“What are you doing?”

“Sir, Eucey and I-”

His father's face stayed passive, but his tone was severe. "Alexander, have we not discussed your choice of playmates before?"

"Yes?" Alexander answered uncertainly. Perhaps he could say he'd forgotten?

His father cleared his throat loudly and looked at the little girl crouched down next to him. She hid her face with her skirt, as if that would make her invisible. "Go back to the kitchen, child," he ordered. "And Alexander, you will accompany me to the drawing room to see your mother."

The words filled the small boy with an unreasonable amount of dread, but there was nothing to be done except to follow orders. Eucey stood quickly. She curtsied and nodded all over herself before she turned and ran back towards the safety of her mother.

Alexander climbed to his feet and squared his small shoulders in an effort at bravery. "Father, I know Mother doesn't want me to be friends with any of the slaves, but there's no one else to play with. Aunt Torina said-"

His father scowled darkly. "I care not for what your aunt said. You've been warned about appropriate company, before. Now, come."

Alexander trailed behind the three men to the house. They wiped their feet and the two guests took off their hats and traveling coats and left them with Martha. Then, the four of them made their way to the drawing room where Alexander's mother and aunt Torina were already seated. His mother held his baby brother, Tristan, in her arms, but at the sight of guests she stood and quickly deposited him in the small rocking crib nearby.

Alexander's father moved to his wife and offered her his hand. "We have guests, Jesslynn," he said quietly.

She allowed him to help her stand, her face all politeness. Though, for just a moment, Alexander thought he saw a dark look pass between her and his father. "Yes, I see that we have guests. Good evening, gentlemen." She eyed the third man suspiciously. He offered her a polite smile that revealed a pair of fangs. The sign that he was one of them; appropriate company.

With that gesture the tension in the room dissipated. Torina stood and eyed the dark haired Mr. Smit. "Yes. A lovely evening to you, sirs." Though she spoke to all of them, Alexander had the distinct impression that her greeting was only meant for the one.

The men made the appropriate replies, and soon everyone was seated stiffly in the ornate furniture. His mother ordered refreshments brought, and welcomed Mr. Smit back from his trip. "What news do you bring?"

The dark haired man cleared his throat. "It is not news for a lady."

Torina pouted prettily behind her beribboned fan. "Oh, come now. I am sure our delicate sensibilities will be able to handle it."

From his perch in the chair, Alexander's feet didn't reach the floor, and it was with great effort that he refrained from swinging them. All of the adult niceties bored him. He wished his mother would scold him so he could go find something else to do.

"Perhaps," Mr. Smit agreed. "But there are children present." His eyes met Alexander's briefly, and then moved away again. Mr. Jorick Smit had never been unkind to him, but neither had he been particularly friendly. He was simply there, like the leaves in the autumn or the snow in the winter. There was no malice in him, but neither was there love, just the ever present "there-ness".

The third man, introduced as a Mr. Riley, also turned his attention to Alexander. His eyes registered surprise. "Upon my soul, is he?"

Before he could finish Jesslynn was on her feet. She snatched Alexander from the chair. "If you will excuse us, gentlemen? Perhaps this is not the place for children." She shot a commanding glance to her husband, and then dragged the small boy through the shadowy house and into the dining room.

"What have you been doing?" Jesslynn demanded, but before Alexander could answer, his father appeared, and she turned her unhappiness on him. "Who is that man, Riley, Oren? Can he be trusted?"

"He's a friend of Jorick's," Oren answered.

"A friend?" Jesslynn questioned sarcastically. "I didn't think he was capable of friends."

“An acquaintance then,” Oren said impatiently. “If he were not trust worthy, Jorick would not have brought him to our home.”

Jesslynn didn’t look convinced. “And what news do they bring that is unsuitable for our ears?”

Alexander tried to remain as quiet as possible. Inconspicuous children could find out all kinds of interesting things, including news they were too young to hear.

It worked.

“There was a slave uprising, in Southampton County. They killed 50 or more.”

“Mortals?” Jesslynn demanded.

“Yes, of course.”

“Then why would we care?” she asked haughtily.

Oren stared at her incredulously. “Southampton County is only seventy miles south of us, Jesslynn. If they can rebel there, what is to stop them from doing so here? What is to stop them from creeping into the cellar while we sleep?”

“Fear.”

Oren shook his head. “Fear will only go so far. Would it not be best to simply free them and send them on their way? We don’t need the plantation, anymore-”

She met his eyes challengingly. “Why do you say that? Do you think the neighbors will simply ignore it if our fields go wild? Do you think they won’t question?”

Oren ground his teeth together angrily. “Do you think they do not already question? They have neighbors that they never see, and when they do, we never change! For the love of God, we have children that never age!”

Alexander caught his breath, and the sound reminded them that he was there. Oren stepped back quickly, and his face fell to his usual cool, impassive expression. “We have guests waiting.” He started for the doorway, but stopped and looked back. “Alexander, go to your room and study your reading. Stay away from that slave child.”

He wanted to argue, but his mother’s sharp tone silenced him, “Slave child?” She grabbed Alexander’s arm, and bent to stare him in the face. “Have we not discussed this?”

“Yes, ma’am.” He could argue about Eucey another time. “What did Father mean children that never age?” She pressed her lips tightly together and he stared into her eyes, willing her to answer, but her dark gaze overwhelmed him and he was forced to look away, defeated.

“We will not discuss this further,” she snapped. “Do as your father says.” She straightened up and swept from the room, her long skirts rustling behind her.

Alexander sighed heavily and did as he was told, though the prospect was a bleak one. He’d read the primer from start to finish more times than he could count and had most of the stories memorized. It was the same with his other studies; the same books, the same lessons, over and over and over. His days were a long circle of the same rituals repeated again and again with seemingly no progress.



He was sitting at his desk, the worn books spread out before him with a flickering lamp for light, when the clock struck twelve. Moments later, he heard his father’s footsteps in the hall, and he paused from his daydream to wait for him. He appeared uncertainly in the doorframe and then plunged into the room, his hands held stiffly behind his back and his face unreadable. “Have you done your lessons?”

Alexander pointed to the opened book on the desk. “Yes, sir.”

Oren nodded crisply and turned back for the door. “Good. When you’ve finished, come down and have your meal. Your mother is planning for your birthday, tomorrow.”

“How old will I be?”

Oren stopped on the threshold and Alexander could feel him cringe. “You know very well.”

He nodded to himself because he did, or he suspected that he did. He’d noticed something wrong several birthdays ago. “I’m never going to grow up, am I, Father?”

Oren's shoulders tightened like a clenched fist and then he relented and turned back. He met his son's dark doe eyes and answered calmly, "No, no you won't."

"And Tristan?" Alexander pressed.

Oren sighed heavily and nervously smoothed his long, tawny hair. "No," he said at last. "Tristan will never grow up, either."

Alexander looked at his small hands folded in his lap and struggled to come to grips with his father's words. Suspecting the truth and knowing it were two very different things. He'd watched slave children grow up, but they were different than him; their skin was darker and their teeth weren't pointy. They ate the food that was cooked in the kitchen. He'd accepted that they grew up differently than he did because they were different. He just hadn't realized how different.

"Eucey," he began, but his father cut him off.

"Eucey will grow up. She will have children, she will grow old, and she will die. Her children will have children, and they too will grow old and the cycle will continue. But not for us. We are removed from their cycle, my son. We stand outside it."

Alexander swallowed hard. "How long do we stand outside it?"

Oren drew a tight breath and released it slowly. "Forever, Alexander. We will continue as we are, incorruptible and whole, forever. Do you understand?"

He nodded slowly, though the concept was one he only half understood. When he spoke his voice was barely audible. "How many birthdays have I had?"

"Fifteen," Oren answered without hesitation. "Tomorrow will be the sixteenth."

Alexander nodded again and turned to the stack of books on the desk. "I see."

Oren waited, but Alexander had nothing else to say. What else could he ask? "*Why are we different? What are we?*" He already knew the answer. They were vampires. That was why he must stay away from the sunlight, though Eucey didn't have to. That was why he drank from Nanny Hannah while Eucey ate bread and taters in the kitchen. That was why she would get older with every birthday, and he wouldn't. That was why he was supposed to stay away from them. That was why they weren't "appropriate".

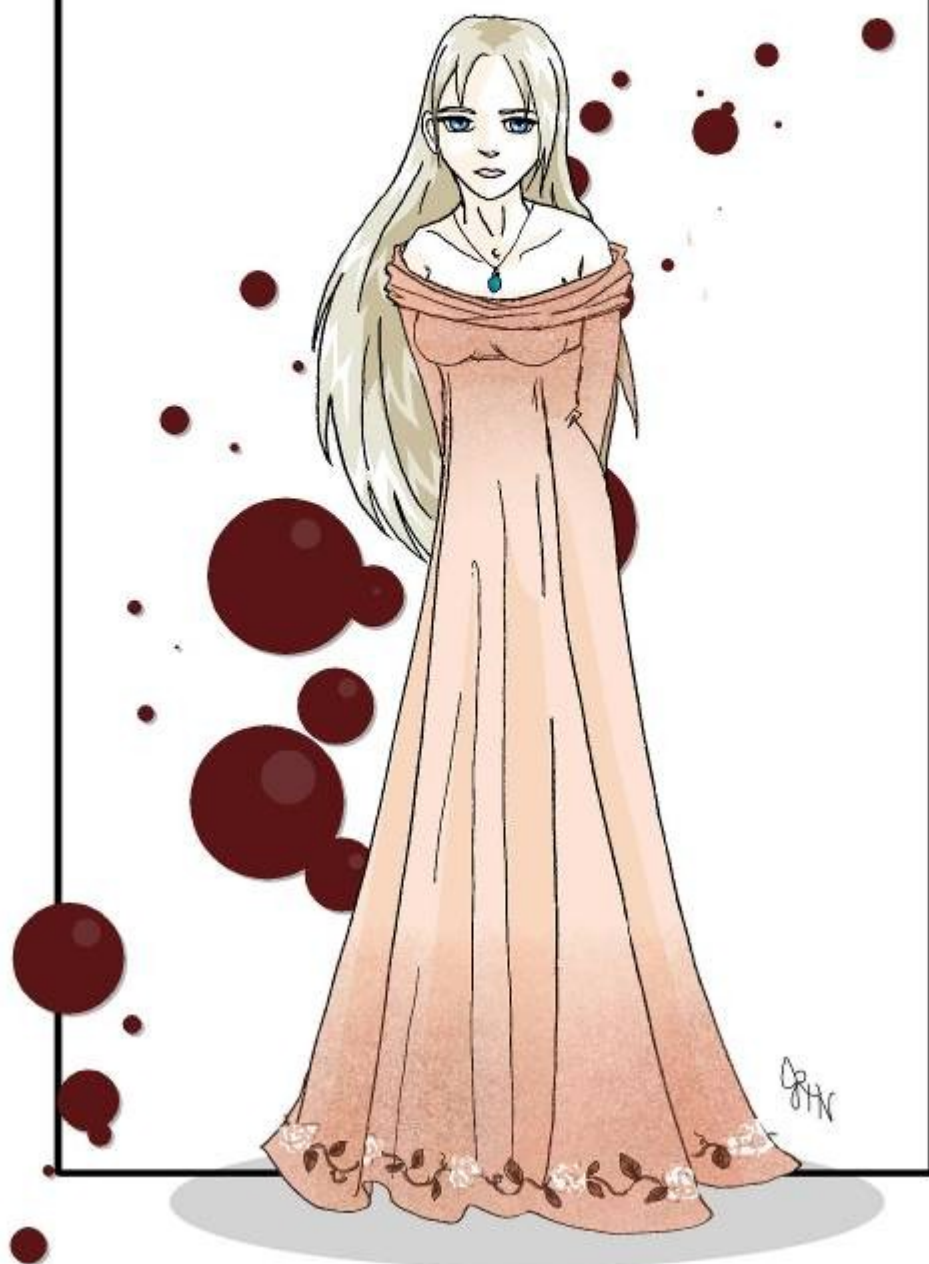
Oren cleared his throat loudly. "If you've finished your lessons, then come downstairs and feed." He turned back to the door, but Alexander called after him, "How old will I be tomorrow, father?"

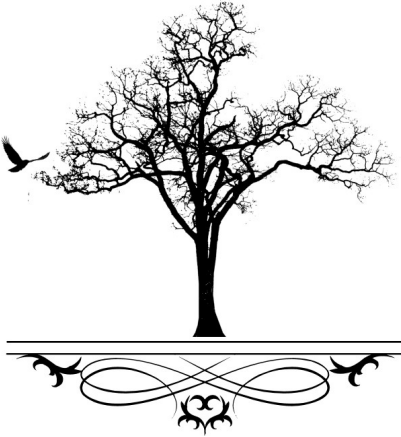
"Five," Oren answered softly. "You'll be five."

And then he disappeared into the hallway, leaving Alexander alone.



AROWENIA





AROWENIA

(You can find Arowenia in the novel *Shades of Gray & Brothers of Darkness*. Her story takes place at Claudius' 'Summer Home' in June, four months before *Shades of Gray* opens.)



Arowenia stared at her reflection in the mirror. The child like face that stared back held large, liquid blue eyes devoid of feeling. Just over her shoulder, she could see the fluttering redheaded woman who tried to tame her long blonde hair into an elaborate updo that would suit Claudius. A second woman stood behind her, handing out strings of pearls and bobby pins as needed.

"You're going to look simply lovely when we're finished," the beautician-by-assignment cooed in her soft, honey southern accent.

"Like a doll," the other agreed with a wistful sigh that betrayed her jealousy. Yes, she was jealous. Truth be told, both of the women probably were. The grass is always greener on the other side, or so it appears to those looking in. But, sometimes playing the porcelain doll was a cold amusement, if amusement it could be called.

The last string of pearls was threaded, and the women stepped back to admire their handiwork. Arowenia glanced into the mirror, but felt neither pleasure nor dissatisfaction. She only noted whether or not it would satisfy Claudius, and she believed it would.

"If you're ready, my lady?" The redhead asked. A dimple at the corner of her mouth betrayed her opinion of the antiquated title, but there was a system to everything; rules, regulations and formalities. Without those things, the system would break down and there'd be only chaos and a group of power hungry vampires vying for control. Too many covens were already like that, or so Claudius said.

Claudius. Claudius. Claudius. It always came back to him, didn't it? The leader of the coven, the master of their futures, and her mate in immortality whether she wished it or not.

Arowenia followed the two women through the hallway and then down the ornate, curved staircase into the marble foyer. Guests and coven members alike mingled in small groups, chatting and laughing politely. Their tones were as tinkly as the crystal chandeliers above their heads.

Almost unwillingly, her eyes sought him out amongst the crowd. He stood in the center of the largest semi-circle, his blond hair pulled back into a tidy ponytail. His dress was as opulent as ever. A white shirt bore ruffles at the neck and wrists, and an ornately embroidered vest matched the cold green shade of his eyes. In one long fingered hand he held a crystal goblet whose contents were a rich crimson.

As if he felt her gaze, he turned and a smile snaked over his boyish lips. Though he looked no more than sixteen, untold years hid in his eyes and revealed themselves in the steady strum of his aura. He

mock toasted to her and held out his free hand, waiting for her to claim it. She understood the gesture, and moved to stand next to him.

“Arowenia,” he murmured, and brought her hand to his lips. “You look lovely.” He broke off and a tiny frown formed between his eyebrows. “Though I wonder that they chose peach instead of green. Hectia knows that I prefer we match.”

“Yes, of course,” she agreed tonelessly. “Shall I change?”

“No, no.” He brushed it aside carelessly. “I’ll speak to her later.” His eyes grew sharp and he barked suddenly, “You! Didn’t I give you instructions?”

They looked to see a pale, nearly terrified vampire who stood a few feet away, frozen as if in mid skulk. It was Michael, Claudius’ newest toy. He’d been the human hired to take care of the lawn until he’d gotten too nose-y. Now he was one of them, though not quite. Less than the least of them, he was on the same tier as the human servants Claudius kept, including Michael’s rather bizarre, but thankfully silent, brother.

“Um, yes,” Michael mumbled and then cleared his throat quickly. “I mean, um, yes. Sir. Erm, my Lord, um-”

“Get on with it!” Claudius snapped impatiently. He turned back to his companions and in an airy tone commented, “Fledglings. They’re so hard to train.”

The others nodded and, when Arowenia looked back, Michael had disappeared. Claudius noted the absence and straightened his vest, as if to get his composure back. “Come, I believe the music will shortly.”

Arowenia took the arm he offered, and allowed him to guide her through the French doors and into the lavish ball room. A small orchestra was gathered in one corner, their faces harried and pale as they arranged themselves. One long wall of mirrors reflected the dazzling chandeliers and the array of well-dressed guests. The colors smeared into a moving rainbow that made her eyes hurt.

She shifted her gaze to the square fountain in the center of the room. A cluster of four bat winged cherubs poured out pitchers of red tinted water into a wide pool. On their heads was balanced a large, carved basin filled with cubed ice and a pair of naked teenage girls. They were only semi-conscious and curled around one another like a yin yang symbol. Each had one bleeding arm extended over a trough that circled the basin. Blood dripped from their limbs and ran down thin, silver shoots into crystal bowls set at all four corners of the red tinted pool.

Claudius stopped next to the fountain and dipped his cup into one of the crystal bowls. He took a sip and sighed with appreciation. “You can’t even taste the drugs any more. Modern pharmacology has done wonders.”

His companions took cups from a nearby table and dipped a sample into their goblets. Heads bobbed as they swallowed, each agreeing that the flavor was unaffected. Arowenia let her gaze fall to the girls. Their pale skin was goose pimpled and their purple nipples stood cold and hard. Their heads were thrown back so that their long, pale throats were temptingly exposed. One of them moaned softly and her eyes fluttered open. For a moment, she held Arowenia’s gaze, and something flashed in her eyes; something pleading and desperate, but it disappeared under the influence of the drugs and her body fell limp again.

“Take a taste,” Claudius ordered and, without thought, Arowenia complied. She also nodded vaguely, though no one cared about her opinion. Then the group moved on.

The music started low and soft, then swelled to fill the room. Not too loud to drown out the discussions, but with enough volume to cover the sound of their shoes on the polished floor. Claudius discussed business, and Arowenia let her mind wander. Around them, couples danced, some like silk butterflies and some like bumbling raccoons. There would be no dancing for her, unless Claudius could separate himself from his business long enough, because no male was allowed to touch her. That was one of the endless rules and regulations that kept everyone in their proper places.

Claudius suddenly released her arm, and offered a polite, “You’ll excuse us, I’m sure?” Though he spoke it as a question, it was really a statement, and she only nodded wordlessly. He gallantly kissed

her hand again. Then, he and his associates disappeared, no doubt headed for the library where they could sign away some part of their souls to him.

Alone, she drifted towards the row of opened French doors that led to the veranda. Vampires flitted in and out, and each took their time to show their proper respect to her as they passed. Some simply nodded, while others went for a full blown bow. With no real conviction, she acknowledged each in turn. Neither an inconvenience nor a pleasure. Like so many other things it simply *was*.

Outside, the night was deep and dark. The stars above glittered like a thousand diamonds and Arowenia gazed at them and thought about what lay beyond the sky. They said it was outer space, a never ending black ocean with planets instead of islands, but she couldn't understand it. It was like China; something "they" said existed, but which she'd never seen with her own eyes. How was she to know that any of it was real?

She leaned delicately on the veranda railing and closed her eyes, savoring the early summer evening. The smell of fresh cut grass wafted on the breeze, and she could hear the bugs and the bullfrogs calling to one another. It reminded her of another time and another place; a world before Claudius and his "brothers" stormed her father's castle and butchered everything in their path. Sometimes, in her dreams, she could still hear the guards' screams, but she was numb to them now. It was so very long ago, and time healed all, or how else could they continue living year after year, century after century?

"Oh, uh, hey."

She looked up sharply to find Michael standing next to her. She didn't deign to answer him, only arched a cold eyebrow. He cleared his throat and shifted uncomfortably. She could smell his fear and hear his heart pounding. When he didn't speak, she finally demanded, "Yes?"

"Um, like, Claudius wants you." He jerked his thumb in the general direction of the house.

She turned back to the stars and sighed inwardly. What did he want now? Hadn't he just gone to speak privately with the other men? Why did he need her? Surely a porcelain doll on his arm wouldn't help seal the deal. But, regardless of what he wanted, it was best not to keep him waiting.

Without a word, she turned sharply for the house and strode through the doors and back into the brightness of the ball room. Guests bowed and scraped, and Michael scrambled to catch up, but she ignored everything except the doors at the far end of the room. One room at a time. One step at a time. Never contemplate the final destination, just the steps that take you there, or you might go mad.

Michael's all too human brother was waiting in the foyer, his blond hair disturbingly messy despite the formal engagement. He drew no more notice from her than a mosquito, and she passed him by and walked towards the library.

"Um, uh, hey," Michael said quickly. "He's, uh, in the sunroom."

She didn't bother to acknowledge him, only turned abruptly and headed in the opposite direction, towards the back of the house. The sunroom was a large glass enclosure filled with as many tropical plants as Claudius could get to grow. Gold bird cages peeped out from the foliage, and occasionally a bird would twitter or call, seeking comfort from its fellow prisoners. Many of the vampires found the sunroom a pointless addition, which was exactly why Claudius had added it. He wanted everyone to see that he had so much wealth that he could afford to spend it on trivial, outlandish things. Even after all these years, he was still desperately trying to prove that he was worthy; though, she didn't know who he was trying to prove it to.

The sunroom had a row of artificial lights just inside the door, but the rest of the room was thick with shadows. Her vampire eyes could see through the gloom, and she moved silently through the whispering plants, one hand holding her skirt above the floor, and the other gently folding back the larger leaves.

She reached the far side of the room, but Claudius wasn't there. She turned back, a frown on her face, and found Michael and his brother so close behind her that she nearly crashed into them. Surprised, she jumped back into a large potted palm. Her arms flailed as she fought for her balance. It was the human brother who caught her under the elbows. For a moment she hung suspended, like a water drop ready to fall, but he righted her. She saw something flash across his face; some kind of regret, and then she remembered the hands on her arms.

She pulled away, and he jerked back, as if he'd been burned. "I'm sorry," he said quickly. His panicked eyes skipped around the room as if they sought something, and his nervous hands dived into his pockets.

"Claudius would have you killed for that! Where is—" Before she could finish the question, someone grabbed her from behind. She struggled against constricting arms and opened her mouth to scream, but she was silenced with a wad of perfumed silk that burned her tongue.

"Be still and you won't get hurt," a low deep voice whispered close to her ear.

Michael and his brother drew away as she choked and gagged, both wide eyed and terrified. She tried to motion to them to do something, but realized the futility when she saw two more figures emerge from the shadowy plants. One was a dark skinned woman attired in a long, shimmery gown, and the other was a pale man with long golden hair and amber eyes. She'd never seen them before, but their expression told her that they weren't going to help her.

The dark woman smiled cruelly and lifted what looked like a sack. Arowenia struggled, but the woman slipped the sack over her head. The world was lost to darkness and the thick stench of old dirt. On the other side of the sack, someone bound her wrists tightly and the woman's voice purred, "There's no time to be squeamish now, boys. You've both done very well."

Arowenia was lifted and unceremoniously draped over someone's shoulder, no doubt the man who'd first grabbed her. The only sound was the faint whisper of the plants as they moved through the sunroom. A door opened, and she realized they were exiting through the sunroom's side entrance. She kicked her feet and made soft, muffled pleas, though no one seemed to hear her. Where were the guards? Why weren't they at the door? There were always guards – guards everywhere waiting, watching. Where were they now? Where were they?

She squealed and squirmed, but they were outside and there was no one in the back gardens at this end of the house. These were the autumn gardens, and they wouldn't bloom until September, so they were left shrouded in darkness.

Her captors stopped, and she could only conclude that they'd reached the back wall. The man who held her muttered, "You first, and I'll pass her over." Whoever he spoke to obeyed, and she was handed up, wriggling and kicking, to another pair of hands. Her new captor grunted and swore under his breath, but he pulled her to the top of the wall and held her there, face down, while he waited for his companions.

She wondered who these vampires were, and why they were taking her. How had they gotten past the guards? How had they gotten in the house and out again without being observed? Why weren't they being stopped now?

She was hauled down the other side of the wall to a waiting vehicle. They dumped her in the backseat between the woman and Michael's human brother. She could smell them both, something she should have done in the sunroom. But there was no reason to be on guard, then. Or at least, she hadn't thought there was.

Her captors were quiet. Moments ticked by with only the sound of the car moving down the road. Then, the human spoke. "What are you going to do with her?"

It was the woman who answered. "You know very well, Patrick. You were there when we made the plans." She trailed a finger over Arowenia's exposed arm, and the vampiress shivered and flinched away. The dark woman laughed. "She's going to be very happy in her new home, won't she, Oren?"

"For now," came the stiff reply. It wasn't the voice of the one who'd grabbed her, which meant it had to be the man with the amber eyes. Oren. The name was familiar, though she couldn't place it. Something someone had said to Claudius once, perhaps? Or something she'd overheard.

They fell into silence again. Trapped between them in the car, Arowenia couldn't do anything about the bag on her head or her bound hands, so she concentrated on spitting out the handkerchief. One step at a time.

When they reached their destination, she was free of the perfumed gag. There was no point in calling attention to it, so she stayed silent as she was heaved out of the car and carried inside another

building. The footsteps of her captors echoed, and she guessed it must be a large room, possibly like the foyer at the mansion they'd left behind.

Another door opened and she was carried down the stairs. She felt the cold damp of a basement wrap around her, and heard the sound of stone grinding against itself. She was dumped on the floor, and then the stone ground again and snapped shut; a concealed door.

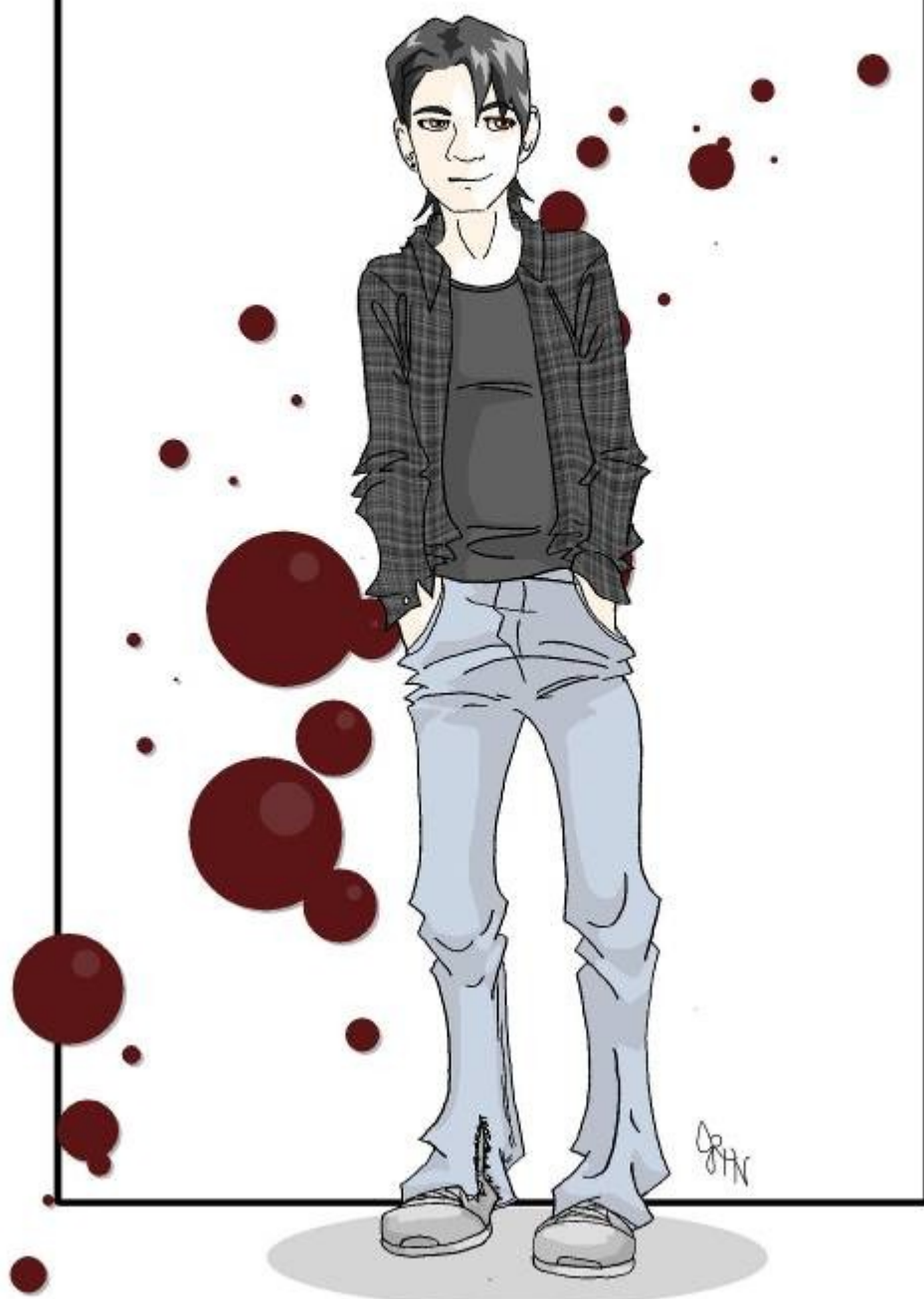
The chamber behind it was small and Arowenia shifted so that she lay on her side. The cold of the stone seeped through her light summer gown. The gown that was the wrong color. Why had they dressed her in pale peach?

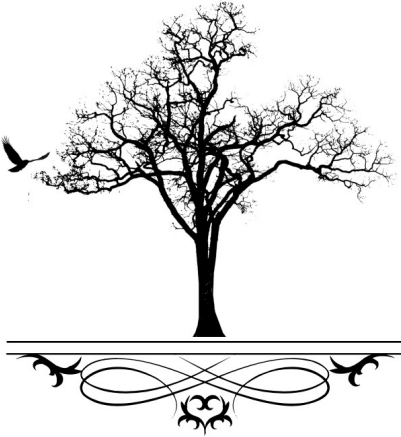
She listened to the darkness and felt it listening back. Upstairs someone moved, footsteps across a floor, and hushed voices whispered. Who were they? Why had they taken her? She didn't understand what she'd done, but she soon came to realize it had nothing to do with her. It was something to do with Claudius and one of his feuds. Though he didn't discuss them with her, she knew he had many. None of them had ever touched her before, and she still didn't understand how this one had.

But contemplating it was pointless. There was nothing she could do except wait for Claudius to come for her, leaving a bloody path of destruction in his wake, like he had before. For a moment, fear fluttered in her chest, a wild, forgotten emotion. A flash of the girls in the fountain came to her mind, and she could picture the one who stared at her, with terrified eyes. Like Arowenia's own fear, it hadn't lasted, and the girl's terror had dropped away into nothing. Yes, she was like them, only her drugs were the long, tired years that had drifted past, while she'd watched from a gilded window, never touching or being touched, until she no longer cared. And now, alone in the darkness of the secret chamber, with only her thoughts and her memories, she found they were all cold and numb, like the ice that had chilled the young girls in the blood fountain. Suddenly, she wasn't sure whether she wanted to be rescued or not.



ASHTON





ASHTON

(You can't actually find Ashton anywhere, except as a mention in the novel *Legacy of Ghosts* (Though you can meet his brother, Loren, in *Legacy of Ghosts*.) This takes place in Maine in 1995.)



"Hey, dickhead, get up!"

Ashton jerked awake. "Huh?" He blinked away the last shreds of sleep to see Loren, his younger brother. He stood in the bedroom doorway and glared impatiently, as if he'd expected more.

"I said get up, dude. It's after eight. You need to give the cat its pills and we need to get some shit from the store--"

Loren went on, but Ashton ignored him. He swung into a sitting position on the edge of the bed and dropped his head into his hands.

God, I'm tired. I'm so fuckin' tired! I thought I was supposed to feel like fucking superman now?

"Are you listening?"

He wanted to tell Loren to go to hell, but he only muttered, "Yeah, sure. Look, go to the store and get whatever we need, a'ight? I got some shit to do." With too much effort he climbed to his feet and rifled through the rubble of his bedroom for something to wear, his back carefully placed to his brother.

"You've always got shit to do!" Loren snapped. "How about look for a fucking job? We're almost out of money and--"

"And you're still in school, blah, blah, blah." Guilt washed over him the moment the words left his mouth. He forced his voice calm before he went on. "Look, I'm sorry, a'ight? I know this shit's hard on you, it's hard on me, too. If we run out of money before I get a job we'll just pawn some of Mom and Dad's stuff." He turned and met his brother's dark eyes for a moment, then turned away again. "A'ight?"

Loren physically shrank from the idea. "I don't wanna pawn their stuff."

"I know, but they don't need it anymore, and you need to eat." Ashton shrugged and went back to dressing. "I'm gonna go up and see Jessie and the guys for a while."

There was a moment of silence and then Loren said quietly, "You've been off with them every night for like a month. You're different since they showed up. I never see you anymore. It's like you're avoiding me."

"You're seein' me now." Ashton tried to sound casual. "Don't turn all girly on me."

"I'm not turning all girly! I was just saying, you know..." Loren trailed off. When Ashton didn't fill in the silence he sighed with resignation. "All right. I'll go get the stuff. But, I'm taking your bike."

Ashton cringed, but didn't argue. When Loren sensed his victory, he disappeared. Ashton didn't relax until he heard the door shut, and the motorcycle roar to life.

"Fuck," he muttered to thin air, as if he thought it might answer him. "What am I gonna do?"

It was a good question, and one he'd been working on for three weeks. Loren was right, he was avoiding him, but how could he face him - really face him - now? How was he supposed to explain that he really was different? How did he tell his kid brother that he was a vampire?

Vampire. Yeah, that's a word that makes a lot of sense.

"Fuck."



Ashton shoved the pill down the pissed off cat and got a scratch for his efforts. He rubbed the creature's throat until it swallowed. The dark look in its eyes seemed to say "I'm doing this against my will, jack ass, and I will make you pay, later". Let it try. Ashton was just dying for a reason to give it to the neighbors. The Willingers had a bunch of kids and a soft hearted mother. He bet he could talk them into taking the fuzzy white monster. If it wasn't for his new condition he'd have tried it already. That was something he'd have to get Loren to do. *Yeah. Let the Willingers take the fucking demon cat.*

A Band-Aid later and he was out the door and on his way. The moon hung heavy in the sky, and a chilly wind blew across the beach. The walk to the dilapidated house was a short one. Ashton tugged open the rusty screen door and slumped inside. The rooms were cluttered with broken furniture and old junk. The floors crunched under foot with a mixture of garbage, bits of plaster, mouse droppings and the occasional hardy roach.

This was headquarters, or that's what Jessie called it anyway. Jessie was tall, dark and infinitely cooler than the other chumps that lived around the small seaboard town, especially in off season. During the summer, they sometimes got tourists from the big places, but in the cold months there was just the steady, slow grind of small town people with small town ideas. Jessie had blown in a month ago with a handful of followers, including his right-hand-man Wesley. They'd set up shop in the abandoned house and for all the world looked like a group of partying beach-bum/gang members who lived to get fucked up and set fire to something. With the still too recent death of Ashton's parents and the sudden responsibility heaped on his shoulders, Jessie and his friends seemed like the perfect escape from reality. Get high, get drunk, forget about everything.

If only he'd known what an escape from reality it was.

Ashton paused in the doorway of what had once been the house's living room. A single hurricane lamp splashed wavery light over a handful of stained furniture and threw twisted shadows across the walls. Despite the gloom, Jessie sprawled in one of the chairs, as though he were the king of a grand castle, and warbled a terrible attempt at a song.

"Well if you feel the wanderlust, just grab a car or hop a bus. In every town there's excitement to be found, so much is happening--"

Ashton flopped into the other chair and snickered. "What the fuck are you singing?"

Jessie's head snapped around instantly. "Spring Fever." When Ashton only blinked, he nearly exploded, "Elvis Presley, man! The King! What's wrong wi' you, huh? You never heard a' it?"

Ashton's hands went up and he flinched involuntarily. "Sorry, dude. Sorry."

"Yeah, sorry. You always sorry. You come in here, interruptin' my vibe, man, wit' your dumb ass questions. Don't you know nothin'? And call me Master, fucktard. Remember your place, huh?"

Ashton rolled his eyes, but let it go. *Jessie is in one of his moods again. Great.*

The "Master" went back to his song. Soon, the other guys started to trickle in. They were all too smart to comment on the music, even as Spring Fever gave way to Teddy Bear. In fact, they didn't say a word. It wasn't until Wesley kicked Ashton's chair and snapped, "Hey, get outta my chair, loser," that there was any conversation at all.

Ashton snapped back with, "Fuck you." The words were brave, but one fanged snarl from Wesley and Ashton stood up. "It's fuckin' uncomfortable, anyway. And it smells like cat piss."

"That's you, man." Wesley laughed and smacked him in the back of the head, then he dropped into his newly claimed chair.

Ashton moved away to slouch in a shadowy corner and glare. That was the reason he didn't want to tell Loren about what he was. The first time Wesley smacked his little brother in the back of the head, he'd have to break his wrist, and then he'd be in the shit. Jessie and Wesley were tighter than a pair of Siamese twins. There was no way Jessie would let him get away with knocking Wesley down a peg – even if the fuck muncher deserved it.

Wesley kicked his feet up and propped them on the arm of Jessie's chair. "Yo, Jess, cut the concert and let's do something, huh?"

The singing stopped and Jessie slowly rolled his head face to the newcomer. "And what we gonna do, huh? You got any ideas?"

Wesley smirked as if he'd been waiting for this. "Yeah, I do." He raised his voice and shouted to unseen vampires, "Yo, bring her in!"

The screen door banged open and closed, and feet shuffled through the house. Someone whimpered; a soft, high sound that made Ashton's stomach clench. Two of the guys appeared through the doorway, lugging a fourteen year old girl between them. Her hair was strawberry red and hung around her face like it had just fallen out of a ponytail. Her clothes were rumpled and dirt stained, and she had only one shoe. Tears and dirt streaked her face, and traces of blood were smeared under her nose. It would have been bad enough if Ashton hadn't known her, but as it was, knowing made it worse.

The guys dumped her in a heap in front of Jessie. Their leader gave Wesley a look of surprised approval. Then he caught the girl's head under her chin and forced her to meet his gaze. "Well, looky here."

The girl's eyes darted fearfully around the room and Ashton hid in the shadows. *Don't see me, Jenny. Don't see me.*

It seemed to work.

"Please," she whispered, her voice tiny, even as she begged the whole room. "Please, just let me go home. I won't tell. I promise. I won't. Please."

"You won't tell, huh?" Jessie mused. "I tell you what, honey. You be a good girl and maybe you can go home in a little bit. How's that sound, huh?" His lips curved into a smile and his fangs glittered in the light. At the sight, Jenny's eyes grew wide and then, as the reality of her situation became clear, she screamed and tried to get away. Wesley grabbed her and hauled her up into the air. She kicked her legs furiously and shrieked.

Ashton shuddered and tried to disappear into the wall. If he just closed his eyes this would all go away. *Go away. Go away. Oh God, make it go away!*

But, when he opened his eyes he was still there. Wesley had Jenny pinned to the floor and Jessie and a couple of other guys hovered over her, their lips drawn back from their fangs as she flailed and pleaded. Goddammit. He had to do something.

"What the fuck?"

At his words the room went silent, and everyone turned in unison to look at him. He suddenly wished he'd stayed quiet, but it was too late, so he pressed on. "What the fuck are you guys doing?"

Jessie straightened up and eyed him with semi-amusement. "What's it look like to you?"

Ashton forced back the fear and took a step forward. "Christ, man, she's like fourteen. That's just sick."

"You think so?" Jessie asked in what seemed like a reasonable tone, though something in his eyes was off kilter. "Anyone else think that's sick? Huh?"

No one moved.

"Looks like it's just you, loser." Wesley snickered, but Jessie silenced him with a gesture.

"Maybe he's right."

No one knew what to say, Ashton included.

"Maybe he's right," Jessie repeated. "Let her go."

Wesley started to argue, but then he held up his hands and backed away. Jenny jerked to her feet quickly. She swayed in place as she stared uncertainly from one face to another. Her gaze brushed over Ashton and he saw recognition in her eyes; recognition and fear.

Jessie laid a hand on her head, ignoring her whimper. "I say you're right, man. She's just a kid. A fucking little kid!" He snapped her around and put her in a headlock. Her eyes went wide with terror as he shouted. "Just some fucking little kid you're soft on. You too soft to watch, huh? You too soft to join in and have some fun? You know what? You piss me off. You always comin' around here, ruinin' the vibe, man! The vibe! You're such a buzz kill, and I'm fuckin' sick of it. We're all fuckin' sick of it, man!"

He paused for them to agree, but everyone was speechless, so he bellowed, "You don't want us to have some fun wi' her, then we gonna have some fun wi' you, you get that, shit face? You get that?" There was a loud crack as he snapped the girl's neck, then he flung her aside like a discarded doll. "You got a five minute head start, then we comin' after you. We gonna hunt you down like a dog, and if we don't find you, then we gonna hunt down your brother instead. You read me, man? You better get runnin'. Run, bitch! Run!"

It took Ashton a moment to digest the words, but once the meaning slammed home, he did just what Jessie said: he ran. He pounded out of the house and across the beach as fast as his legs could carry him. No matter how fast he ran, he couldn't get the picture out of his head of Jenny standing there, her knees shaking and her eyes wide with accusing terror.

He got to the house just as Loren was pulling in. His brother climbed off the motorcycle and unstrapped the grocery bag from the back. "Hey, I thought you-" but Ashton grabbed him.

"We gotta go. We gotta go now."

Like the ever annoying movie sidekick, Loren blinked stupidly and asked, "What?" But, unlike the movies, Ashton didn't have time to explain.

"Just get on the fucking bike!" And before Loren could argue he was in the saddle and pulling his brother on behind him. He turned the key, flipped the kill switch, and kicked the bike into gear while Loren grabbed onto him.

They peeled out of the driveway. Loren clung to him and screamed, "What's going on?" but Ashton still didn't have time to answer - or was it that he didn't have the words?

The road sped away beneath them, and the dark trees were a blur in their peripheral vision. Loren soon traded questions for screaming at him to slow down. Ashton ignored it. As he drove, one thing became apparent to him: he was going to have to tell Loren. No, not only tell him, he was going to have to change him. It was his only chance. There was no way he could fight them like he was. The change would take a full twenty-four hours to finish, but after that he'd be better. He'd be stronger; faster. They just had to get through those twenty-four hours.

Ashton pulled off the gravel road into an abandoned lot. He parked the bike behind a weather worn shed. The skeleton of a burned house squatted nearby, but it offered no protection.

He swung off the bike and Loren did the same. His brother stared at him, eyes wild and his curly mop of hair a windblown mess. "Can you tell me now what the hell's going on?"

Ashton glanced over his shoulder, paranoid, but there was no one there. "Look, I gotta do this the fast way. Jessie and the others... they're not what you think."

"You mean they're not a bunch of asshole tweakers?" Loren asked sarcastically.

"Okay, they're a bunch of assholes, but they're not just tweakers. They're not... they're not even human." Loren started to interrupt, but Ashton went on quickly. "Look, Loren, I'm sorry about this, a'ight? I never meant to get you involved. You know I've done my best since Mom and Dad got killed, but I fucked up. I fucked up bad." He shifted from one foot to the other, and sought for words. "Jessie and the others, they're-

"Holy shit! What's with your teeth?"

Ashton froze, his eyes wide. His first reaction was to hide it, like he'd been doing for the last three weeks, but he knew he couldn't. Not this time. "It's part of what I'm trying to tell you. Jessie and

the others - and me - we're vampires." The word sounded much sillier than it felt. It failed to pack the punch of cold terror that was twisting in Ashton's gut when he thought about them.

"Vampires?" Loren echoed cautiously. "Dude, what are you on?"

"I'm not on anything!" Ashton insisted. "You have to listen. You know Jenny Willinger from down the road? They got her, dude. They got her tonight and they fucking killed her. I told them not to. Jessie was already pissed at me, and now he wants to kill me, and he wants to kill you, too."

Loren didn't believe him. "Seriously? Look, let's just go home and you can sleep this off." He reached for his brother, but Ashton didn't have time to convince him. *No time, No time. No time!*

With a roar that was half anger and half impatience, he grabbed Loren and spun him around, so his brother's back was against his chest. He forced Loren's head to one side, exposing his neck. His brother shouted something, but he didn't listen. He couldn't. He had to act.

Loren screamed when he bit him. He struggled, at first, but slowly he grew still and his body sagged back against Ashton. His blood was hot and coppery, and Ashton gulped it as though his life depended on it. He was doing it fast, maybe too fast, but he didn't know, and he didn't have the time to find out.

No time. No time. No time.

He lowered Loren's slack body to the ground and quickly searched his pocket for a knife. Fuck! He didn't have one! Then he thought of his teeth. It took him a moment to work up the courage, but then he tore into his own arm.

"Fuck!"

It hurt more than he thought it would, but there was nothing else to do. He tried to duplicate what Jessie had done to him; what he'd seen Jessie do to some of the other guys, but Loren was too out of it to take his arm willingly, so he crammed it in his mouth.

"Fuck," he muttered. "Come on Loren, drink. Fuck, drink! Drink!"

Like he'd done to the cat earlier, he pressed down on Loren's adam's apple and forced him to swallow. Forced the blood down his throat.

Loren's eyes popped open, like someone on the cusp of a seizure. He gasped around the arm in his mouth and choked on the mouthful of blood. Something shifted in his eyes, something that made Ashton think of Jessie. With a strange, gurgling growl he clutched his brother's arm and sealed his lips around the wound.

Like the bite, it hurt more than Ashton thought it would, but he endured until he started to feel light headed. He had to wrestle his arm away from his brother, but it had been the same with everyone else when they were turned. *After that first taste you never want to stop.*

Loren fell back to the grass and lay, gasping and groaning. His hands cupped his face and Ashton knew that his fangs would be coming in now. Or starting to. It wasn't instant. It took time to change your whole body over into something it shouldn't be.

Minutes passed and then the pain seemed to subside. Loren's eyes slowly cleared and his surroundings came into focus. He blinked too many times, as if trying to clear away the last several minutes.

Ashton dropped into a sitting position next to him. "You a'ight?"

Loren wiped his face, and stared at the blood on his hand. "I don't know. What - what just happened?" He swung his gaze to his brother. "What was that?"

"You're one of us now," Ashton said with a sick sort of finality. He pulled off his flannel shirt and used it as a makeshift bandage for his wounded arm. He wrapped it tight; *tight, tight, too tight*. Then he stood. "Just rest for a while. Jessie and the guys are a lot slower than the bike, so they're probably not even halfway here. We'll wait a bit, then we'll head back the long way, grab our stuff, and then we get the hell outta Dodge."

Loren nodded and rolled over onto his side, too tired to argue. Time was short, but they couldn't move now. They had to wait until the worst of it was over.

Fuck.

Two hours later they pulled into their driveway. The house was dark and the bag of groceries was still on the pavement, the contents scattered. Ashton shut off the bike and motioned for Loren to stay put. He approached the house cautiously, but didn't hear anything. *It's okay*, he told himself. They're not here.

The front door was locked and he'd left the keys in the bike, so he went for the attached garage. He threw up the door and took two steps inside.

He didn't see the vampire in the shadows, or the cracked flower pot that crashed down on his head a second later.



Ashton opened his eyes slowly. The light was bright and made his head hurt. He tried to raise a hand to block it, but he couldn't. His wrists were tied uncomfortably behind his back.

Tied?

"Hey, shit face is waking up."

The voice belonged to Wesley, and so did the face that leered over him. The rest of the room came into focus, and Ashton realized he was in his own garage. Jessie was there, as were some of the other guys and Loren, who was covered in blood. Ashton didn't know if it was fresh, or if it was left over from the turning. Regardless, his brother stood on shaky legs, held upright by two others.

Shit.

Jessie stood over him, something large and bulky in his hands. "Good evenin' sunshine. Nice job wit' your brother."

Ashton spit blood out of his mouth, and tried to sound brave. "Just leave him out of this."

"Maybe, maybe not." Jessie nodded to someone and the thing in his hands sprung to life, whirling and roaring. It was an electric drill. "Now it's your turn to entertain us."

Ashton tried to get away, but there was nowhere to go. Jessie pressed the drill into his leg and, with a sick smile, pulled the trigger. Ashton screamed and bucked as the drill chewed into his thigh. Shreds of his jeans wrapped around the bit and burned. He thought he heard Loren screaming, but he couldn't be sure. There was too much noise in his head. Too much noise. Too much pain.

Then it stopped.

Jessie stood back, a frown between his eyebrows. "Nah." He threw the drill aside and it landed on the floor with a clatter. "What else you got?"

Wesley answered him from further back in the garage, probably at the work bench. *Dad's work bench.* "We got a sander?"

Jessie snorted. "Nah. Fuck that. Fuck this pussy shit. We want something heavy duty, man."

"Chainsaw?" Before Jessie could answer Wesley added, "Lawn mower?"

Jessie's face lit up. "Oh yeah, man. That's the fucking ticket. That's just what we want. But not in here." He motioned to the others. "Bring 'em outside. We gots to do this right. Time to mow the yard!"

Someone grabbed Ashton under the shoulders and dragged him through the door, leaving behind a trail of blood from his damaged leg. He struggled, but he was too weak to really fight them. If he hadn't changed Loren he might have been strong enough - but if he hadn't changed him, Loren would be dead already. What was it they called that? A catch Twenty-two? A double edged sword? Whatever it was, it meant there was no way to win.

Fuck.

Ashton was thrown to the ground. The guys holding Loren tossed him in a heap a few feet away. Too weak to stand, he wasn't a threat to them, or they didn't think he was. Maybe he could get away and get help.

The others were busy trying to get the old lawn mower to start, so Ashton took the opportunity to catch his brother's attention. Loren started to crawl towards him, but he shook his head no. *Run*, he mouthed. *Run*. Loren shook his head, but Ashton just repeated it and added, *find help*. Though where he could find it was the million dollar question.

Reluctantly, Loren started to crawl backwards towards the beach. *Yes. Yes. Go. Get the fuck outta here! Go!* If he could just save his brother then it wouldn't all be a waste... would it? If only he'd been more like Loren after their parents died and put himself into something productive instead of running away and hiding out in drugs and alcohol. Jessie and his crowd seemed so extreme. They were the ultimate high: blood, danger, death. Like the death that was waiting for him. Fuck. If something didn't happen soon he was gonna get the biggest high ever. That one that ended in a bright light.

The mower choked out and he felt hopeful, but then it roared to life, amid cries of surprise and rough laughter. Wesley ran it over the grass a couple of times and then he and Jessie exchanged a meaningful look. It only took one of them to lift it up. Ashton squinted up at the undercarriage, but there was no high. He was just numb. Odd bits of grass stuck to the inside and the blades spun so fast that they were a blur. They whipped up a miniature hurricane that blew his hair and threw old clippings in his face. No high, just grass in his mouth and in his eyes. Just the taste of dirt and fear. Just the sight of Loren slowly backing away on his hands, his eyes wide and terrified.

And then they lowered the mower.

No! God, No!

Ashton screamed.

Help! God, help! Help!

And then everything went black.

There was no high.

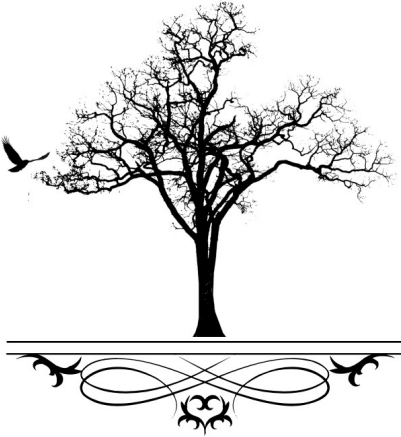
There was no light.

Only a never ending sea of black.



BENJAMIN





BENJAMIN

(You can find Benjamin in the novel *Shades of Gray*. This particular story takes place in a small New Hampshire town in 1972.)



The Rookwood Inn was a roadside motel. The town around it had once been vibrant, but now looked forward to its demise. Somehow, the occupants hadn't caught on yet, and still thought they had a corner on the tourist market. Even Benjamin seemed to think so.

The motel office was newly retiled, though no one had bothered to repaint. Behind the counter stood a doorway, closed off by a tatty blanket that served as a curtain. The smell of whisky and stale cigar smoke oozed out around the edges and left the office ceiling stained a permanent brown.

Through that door was a room as disheveled as its occupant. Though Benjamin called it his "living space", it was really a jumbled room with a dusty bathroom off to one side. The windows were hidden behind layers of cardboard, newspaper and masking tape, which left the room in perpetual darkness. Benjamin planned to renovate as soon as he got the money saved up, and when he did, the windows were going. Mei, the Chinese girl who looked after the place in the daytime and served as a part time housekeeper, couldn't understand why he wanted to be rid of them. She argued for them more than once, but he always shook his head and said the sun was bad for his complexion.

Benjamin sat in his usual spot. The ratty armchair smelled like it should have been left on the curb, and looked like maybe it had been. The TV was as close to his lap as he could get it without having to hold it, so that his feet were propped up on the table on either side of it. He watched the screen with an absorption born of years of television viewing and didn't even seem to hear the first knock.

"Goodnight, John Boy. Goodnight, Grandpa. Goodnight--"

Benjamin clicked the knob and the television went off with a hiss and fizz of static. He cocked his head to one side and listened. The knock repeated.

"Who the hell is that?" he demanded, but the stale air didn't answer him. There was only one way to find out. Using obscenities like booster fuel, he heaved his bulk from the chair and shuffled towards the side door. He had to stop and kick boxes of empty whisky bottles out of the way. No one used this door anymore, or at least no one was supposed to.

They knocked again and he grumbled a loud, "yeah, yeah," as he unbolted the locks and jerked the door open. The outside light was burnt out, but he could still see the two figures, their expressions carefully neutral. The one in the front had short, cropped hair and dark skin, while his companion was a

slender, willowy male with a reddish auburn mane. Benjamin surveyed them both and then demanded, "Eh? What do you want? Can't you read that sign?"

"What sign?" asked the dark one.

"The one that says 'use office door'! You want a room, you go around!"

"We're not here for a room." The visitor smiled, flashing a pair of silvery fangs. Benjamin drew back a step, and his dark visitor moved inside quickly, his companion on his heels. "You know what we came for."

Benjamin met the dark vampire's eyes. They stared at one another; a contest of wills, and then Benjamin declared, "Look here, poker night's Thursdays, Des."

There was a moment of silence and then Des rolled his eyes. "It is Thursday, old man. Check your calendar."

They stepped smoothly around their baffled host and headed for the couch. Des tossed a week's worth of mail out of the way and took its place. Benjamin trailed after them, ticking off the days of the week in his head. *Thursday? It's not Thursday - wait. The Waltons was on. Damn. The son of a bitch is right.*

The bell over the office door tinkled, and with a few healthy curses Benjamin diverted himself in that direction. Instead of customers it was Herrick and a bald guy that Benjamin didn't recognize. Two strangers in one night. *Ah well, their money spends the same.*

He led them through the blanketed door and pointed in the general direction of the couch and some folding chairs. They seated themselves while he set up the card table and gathered up the cards, an overflowing ashtray, half a bottle of whisky and a beat up metal bucket that smelled like alcohol. Finally, he tugged his tatty chair into place and dropped into it. "We ready to play, or is there anyone else comin' I should know about?"

"Nah, this is it." Des shuffled the cards with a little too much expertise. "By the way, this is Marcellus. I mentioned last week that he was coming."

Herrick nodded, but Benjamin just shrugged. "Eh. If you say so." His eyes landed on Herrick's companion; a bald vampire who had a tattoo down one side of his face. "And who's this?"

"Micah," Herrick explained, as if the name meant something. "He's what you'd call a new recruit."

Benjamin lit a cigar and blew out a cloud of thick smoke. "That's just what we need."

"You're not so far past new recruit yourself, old man," Des commented.

Benjamin snorted an answer and took a healthy swig of whisky. He swooshed the amber liquid around his mouth thoughtfully. He'd been one of them for damn near two years, now. That was enough time to lose the new recruit status as far as he was concerned.

Des dealt the cards and Benjamin spat the whisky noisily into the bucket. Marcellus cringed visibly, and Des shrugged. "I warned you he has some pretty bad habits."

"Just because I can't drink don't mean I can't still taste it," Benjamin grumbled. "You got a problem with it..." he left the sentence unfinished, but the meaning was clear and it went something like *"get the hell out, then."*

Micah fanned his cards casually. "I wondered how the fuck you planned on drinkin' that. I learned what happens the hard way."

"Got sick, did you?" That was a mistake they said most newbie vampires made. Hell, he'd made it himself. You could get the stuff down, but you couldn't keep it down. It was the same as when a kid swallowed something out of the cleaning cabinet. Your body knew it wasn't good for you and sent it back where it came from.

"Fuck, yeah." Micah offered a toothy grin. "That was one helluva night, though. A couple of ladies, a bottle of scotch and a jar of honey."

Herrick surveyed his cards, his brow wrinkled. "Honey? What was the honey for?"

Micah's grin widened. "If I gotta tell ya', then it takes the fun out of it."

"For the girls," Benjamin explained. "But sounds fulla shit to me. This loser couldn't get two chicks if he waved money in front of their faces."

Micah cocked an eyebrow. "How would you know? Bet the last time you even saw a chick was in 1965."

Benjamin ignored him and went on. "I get losers like him in here all the time. They show up on the make with a couple of stoned out girls and act all macho. Nine times outta ten, they pass out in a puddle of their own puke in the john."

Micah opened his mouth to argue, but Marcellus held up his hand. "Is an evening of negativity necessary? Let's just play cards."

"Negativity?" Micah snorted. "You sound like one of those dali-lama-guru Buddha heads. We here to play poker or talk about the meaning of the universe?"

"We could do both," Herrick suggested. "As long as someone else deals." He glared at Des who only snickered.

Benjamin was pretty sure Des had dealt the cards that way on purpose; he was too good with them for anything else. But, his own hand wasn't half bad, so he didn't care. He traded in two cards and quipped, "There's no meaning to the universe. It just is."

"I disagree," Marcellus fished a wad of money out of his pocket and counted out the opening bet. Benjamin tried to mentally calculate how much he had on him, but he wasn't fast enough before the money was stuffed back into his pocket. "There must be meaning, or else there wouldn't be organization."

"You see any organization around here?" Micah waved his arm to indicate the room. "It's just like us. There's no order, or reason, it's just chaos and you pretend there's a fuckin' plan behind it to keep yourself sane."

"Us?" Des asked, as he counted out his money under the edge of the table, carefully out of Benjamin's sight, despite his efforts.

"Yeah, us. You know, vampires," Micah rolled his eyes. "If nothing else, we're proof that it's all just random shit."

"I disagree," Marcellus said again. "Our very existence proves that there is order beyond the seeming insanity of the cosmos. You can't imagine that we, as a species, just appeared by accident? We were crafted for a particular purpose."

Micah folded his cards, the game momentarily forgotten. "What, like the next evolutionary step? You don't buy into all that monkey crap?"

Des glanced up from his cash. "How can you argue against both evolution and intelligent design?"

"Because I ain't from no ape. You can be if you want to--"

Marcellus cut him off. "No, we're not the next evolutionary step. Vampires have been in existence since the dawn of creation. As old as man, if not older. And that is the proof of the design, and the proof against the chaotic evolution theory. If it was all an accident that hurtled forth from chimpanzees to modern man, then why has the vampire not changed, too?"

"Maybe they have?" Herrick suggested. "It isn't like there's anyone from that time left."

"And how do we know that? Because you haven't seen one?" Marcellus' eyes shone with some kind of victory and he folded his cards as though settling in for a long discussion. "When was the last time you saw the sun? But you still know it exists."

Benjamin didn't bother to comment or interrupt. He just took an impatient swig of whisky, swished it around his mouth, and spit it loudly into the bucket. It failed to get their attention.

"That's different. I've seen the sun," Herrick argued.

"When? How do you know you really saw it and don't just think that you did?"

"And how do you know that any of us are real?" Des added, amused. "Maybe we're all just figments of a hamster's imagination. Enough existential stuff, huh? Whose bet is it?"

"I bet I can prove who's real," Micah said with a broad grin. "Gimme your arm and we'll see if you feel this." He snapped his teeth together in imitation of a savage bite.

Marcellus smiled tolerantly, but made no move to return to the game. "Pain is only an illusion and proves nothing."

“It can prove that your god damn foot’s been cut off!”

“No. First there is the pain and then you look and see that your foot is cut off, so the pain proves nothing, only draws your attention. However, there’s no evidence that what you see is real beyond your own experience, or that your reality and mine are the same experience at all.”

“Memories are like that,” Herrick agreed slowly, drawn in despite himself. “One person may remember that it rained, while another says ‘no, no, the sun was shining’.”

“Exactly.” Marcellus tapped his cards on the table. “Each has a separate reality that is just as true to them as the opposite is to the other. If reality is not to be trusted to the eyes or the senses, then that leaves us with only the emotion.”

“Ah, but emotion is nothing but an illusion, too,” Herrick argued, getting into the swing of things. “Though your words and actions may be forgotten, people will remember the emotions those actions created. However, your actions don’t necessarily correspond to their feelings. If I pick up this bucket.” He seized the bucket and Benjamin made a low, warning noise in his throat. “-and I toss it out the door, you may feel relieved to get a break from the alcohol regurgitation, however Benjamin will be angry enough to break my nose. To him, my actions are evil, but to you they were merciful. Meanwhile, the reality is that I neither planned to make him angry, or spare you, I simply acted.”

Benjamin jerked the bucket away and snarled. “Yeah, yeah. And there’s no ‘I’ in team. Can we get on with this, or should I kick the whole bunch of you out?”

“Your friend doesn’t like a thought provoking discussion?” Marcellus asked Des, half joking.

“No,” Benjamin answered for him. “I don’t. I like to watch TV, which is what I was doing before I got interrupted by a bunch of idiots who wanted to play poker. Only, we haven’t done much playing yet! So either get with it or I’m gonna go watch Ironside.”

The conversation died after that. The cards were dealt, the bets were placed and by two a.m. they were all sick of each other’s company. Micah and Herrick made their excuses first, followed shortly by Marcellus. Alone, Des and Benjamin counted their money. Then Benjamin moved the furniture back while Des lounged on the couch.

“I assume you didn’t like Marcellus?”

Benjamin kicked an argumentative folding chair and shrugged. “Eh. I don’t care either way. He loses pretty good. So long as he shuts up and plays his cards.”

Des nodded and they lapsed into a thoughtful silence. Finally, he broke it. “You don’t suppose there really is some intelligent design behind everything? That there’s some kind of fate that made us all what we are?”

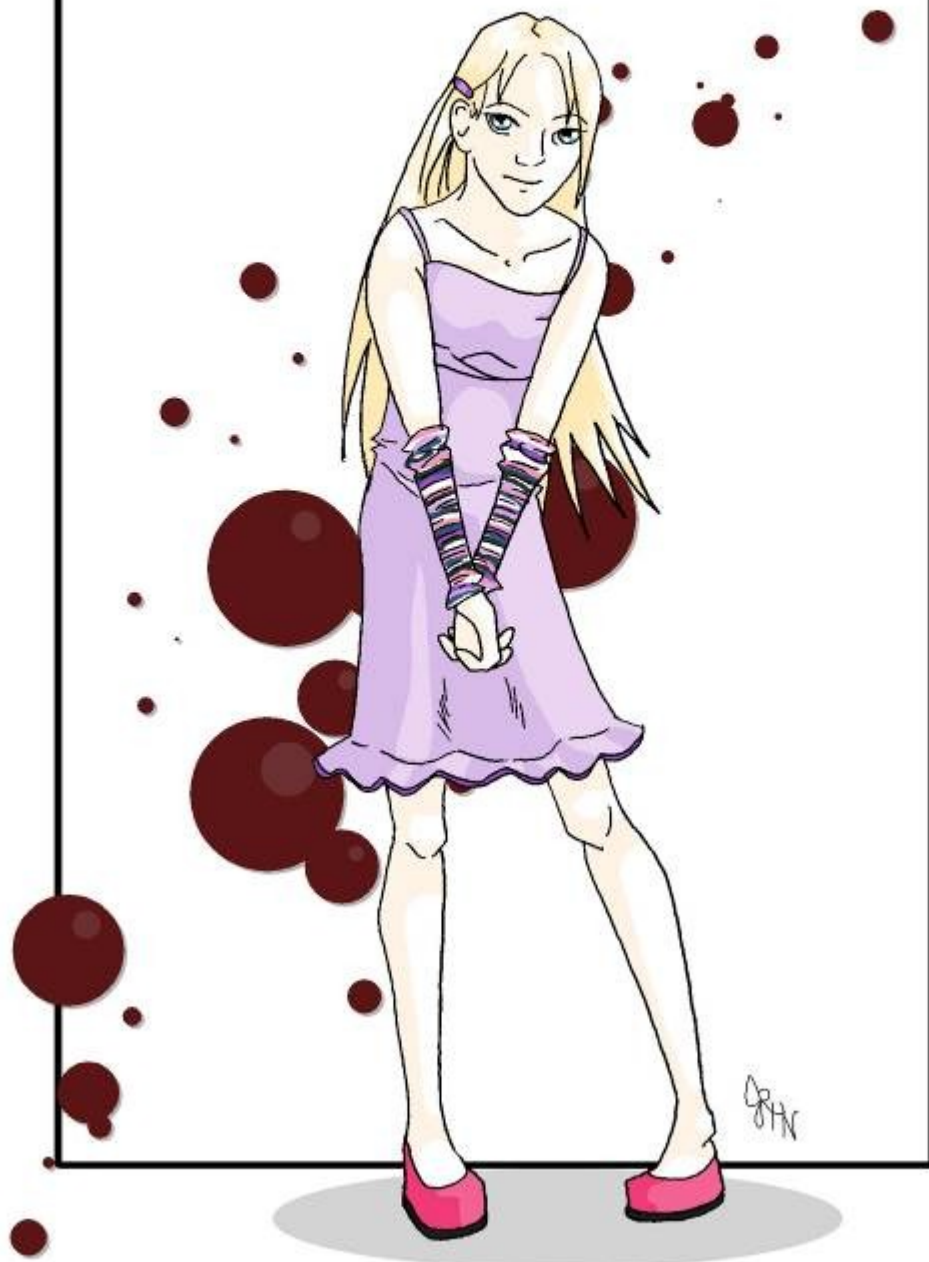
Benjamin rolled his eyes and plopped into his armchair, now restored to its rightful home in front of the television. “How should I know? It was a trucker woman with eyes like coal and nails as red as blood that made me what I am.” He glanced to the darker skinned vampire. “And I can’t say what made you the way you are now, but I doubt it was God.”

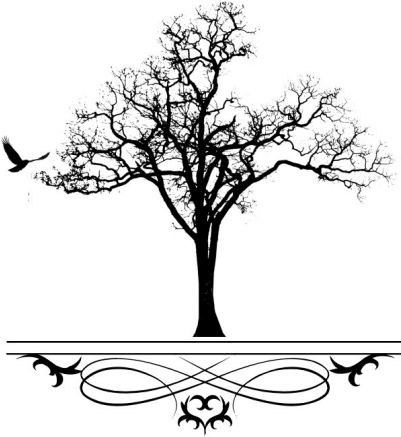
“No. It was my mother.” Des fell silent again, and Benjamin turned the television on. The stations were off for the night, so there was nothing but static. They sat there, lit eerily by the light from the television, both lost in their own worlds until Des snapped himself back to the present. “It’s been fun. See you next Thursday, old man.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Benjamin waved him off, and the dark vampire disappeared out the door. Benjamin stared at the television screen and watched the static bounce around, like ant races, some said. It never looked like ants to him. More like a blizzard. It was the same kinda blizzard that had brought that trucker gal into the motel. With her red nails and her black eyes. She’d been wearing skintight jeans and been so full of pent up energy that she looked like she’d burst right out of ‘em. That had been one helluva night.

“And I didn’t even need any honey,” Benjamin commented aloud. He took a swig of whisky and spat it into the bucket. “Amateur.”

BETHINA





BETHINA

(You can find Bethina in *Shades of Gray & Brothers of Darkness*. This story takes place at the Cotterill Plantation in Virginia in 1947.)



Bethina snapped the suitcase shut and gave the familiar bedroom a last look. She could feel her mother standing in the doorframe behind her and imagined the frown on her face and the unshed tears in her eyes.

“Are you sure about this?”

Bethina sighed and turned to face her. “Yes, Mom. I’m sure. What else am I going to do?” Her mother started to answer, but Bethina hurried on before she could. “It isn’t like I’m moving to the ends of the earth. It’s just a few miles out of town. I can come home and visit you.”

That wasn’t enough to silence her mother’s objections. “And what happens when you get too sick to be a nanny anymore?”

“Would you rather they send me to die in a TB San? Would that be better?” Her mother flinched as if she’d slapped her, and Bethina instantly regretted the words. Regardless, there was truth in them. How much longer could they pretend she wasn’t sick? Eventually, there’d be no choice and they’d have to send her away. Blue Ridge was one of the better sanatoriums, but it was over 100 miles away. That might as well be 1,000. This option was better - so very, very much better. If only she could tell her mother all of it, then maybe she’d understand. But, she couldn’t.

“I’m sorry, mother, but I’ve made up my mind. They know about my condition and they still want me to come stay full time. And Alexander is so sweet. You can’t look at him without melting. I don’t want to leave him behind. I want to do something with the time I have left.”

“If you feel that way, then don’t you have a responsibility to that little boy? You’re exposing him to the disease by being there.”

“And I’m exposing you by being here. And I expose everyone in church on Sundays! The Cotterill’s know about my condition,” she repeated. “And they have still asked me to stay full time.”

“But those people!” Her mother caught her hands and held them. “Bethy, they’re... they’re not right. They stay isolated in that old plantation and no one ever sees them. They’re-”

“Different,” Bethina finished for her. “There’s nothing wrong with them, mother.” *At least nothing I can tell you about.*

A horn sounded outside and Bethina thanked whatever saint was the patron of interruptions. “That’s Eddie. He’s taking me up there.” She extracted her hands and hurriedly grabbed her luggage. “I’ll

be back in a couple of weeks for a visit.” She brushed a quick kiss across her mom’s cheek and then slid neatly past her. “I love you! See you then!”

“Bethy!”

Bethina didn’t stop to let her mother finish, and she didn’t look back. Her mind was made up. There was no safer place in the world for her to go than the big brick plantation house with its shadowy corridors, silent rooms, and undead occupants. Occupants that couldn’t catch her disease.

Eddie was a few years older than her. Though they got along well enough, they had nothing to talk about, so the trip was silent. She could feel his disapproval, but they weren’t close enough for him to comment. However, when he parked the car just inside the large, iron gates, he met her eyes and cleared his throat noisily. The sign something unpleasant would follow.

She tried to circumvent it. “Thanks, Eddie. I’ll see you later.”

“Will you?” His question forced her to drop the door handle and meet his gaze. “I know it’s not my business, but are you sure you know what you’re doing? Everyone thought you were crazy enough working part time up here, but to move in? They’re creepy, and this place is about as cheerful as a funeral parlor. You sure you want to live here?”

Her eyes narrowed at his blunt assessment. “You’re right; it’s not your business.” She opened the door and climbed out with a crisp, “thank you for the ride.” She slammed the door with a satisfying sound, and then marched to the house.

The large front door opened before she knocked, and Sandra, one of the maids, moved aside to admit her. The entrance hall was a huge room paneled in wood and hung with old, heavy portraits. Light shone through windows around the front door, but it couldn’t chase away the shadows. Technically, Eddie was right. The house wasn’t very cheerful. The interior had been redecorated, but otherwise it was the same as it had been when it had been built over a hundred years ago. That meant no plumbing, and no electricity.

“You’re staying?” Sandra asked and took a step back. Like the rest of the staff, she could still get sick and, though she was never unfriendly, she was distant.

Bethina only nodded and Sandra motioned to the curving staircase. “You might as well go on up. They’re not awake yet.”

Bethina nodded again and climbed the stairs slowly. She made her way down the corridor to what was her new bedroom. Late September sunlight splashed through the windows and brought a cheer to the room that the somber hallways lacked.

She unpacked a little, rested briefly, then walked downstairs to the basement kitchen where the women were cleaning and preparing what would be their breakfast. Yes, things here were different, including what time their day started.

Both women glanced up at her, but only Sandra acknowledged her. “Have you eaten?”

“Yes, but thank you.” She pulled up a chair at the kitchen table and watched Jane add wood to the old cast iron stove. Finished, the woman straightened and mopped her forehead, then rolled up her sleeves. Her arms were wrapped at random intervals with white gauze bandages. A hazard of working at the plantation house.

As if she felt the scrutiny, Jane turned around and met Bethina’s blue eyes. “I hear you’re going to be here full time?” Bethina nodded and Jane looked mildly surprised. “I can’t imagine your family is happy about that.”

Bethina shifted uncomfortably in her chair. “No. My mother’s pretty upset about it.”

“I would be, too, if I were her.” Jane turned back to a bowl of batter, leaving Bethina wide eyed with surprise.

“But why? You work here.”

Jane stiffened, but didn’t turn back around. “Just because I’m here doesn’t mean I’d want my daughter to be here. I know what they are, after all. I wouldn’t want my child committed to this enslavement.”

“Enslavement?” Bethina echoed. The word seemed absurd and out of place. Something antiquated and distasteful. “How can you call it that?”

“And what would you call it?” Something dark hid under the edges of Jane’s tone. Something angry and challenging. It instantly irritated Bethina.

“How about employment?”

Jane laughed, but it wasn’t a happy sound. “You’re young still, and naïve. Employment is something you can leave if you choose. Do you think we have that luxury?” She turned around, her eyes dark fire and a wooden spoon gripped dangerously in her hand. “Do you think we can leave if we choose?”

“Well-”

“Of course not! We know what they are. They can’t just let us walk out. Do you know what happened to the last girl who wanted to leave? She disappeared!”

“Maybe that’s because she left?” Bethina suggested impatiently.

“Without packing?” Jane snorted contemptuously. “They got rid of her because that’s what they do. When you get too old, or you want to leave, they just dispose of you and hire another young girl who has no prospects for the future. And in the meantime, they work you to death scrubbing and dusting while they drink your blood!”

Sandra cleared her throat loudly; a warning that the conversation was headed for dangerous places, but Jane ignored her and went on.

“Maybe you don’t mind being food for those children because you’re staring down your own death, but the rest of us aren’t. I could have done something. I could have gotten married. I could have had children of my own. Normal children that eat and drink and grow up!”

“Jane,” Sandra said softly. “Enough.”

“No, it isn’t! How can you face it, day in and day out and still say it’s enough? How can you stand to stare into that baby’s eyes and say it’s enough?” She shivered. “It’s like they see right through you, to your very soul, but he never says a word. He never even cries! Just lays there like cold, dead weight and stares right through you!”

Bethina watched with wide eyed confusion as Jane’s shudders turned into tears, Sandra seemed to understand, though, and she quickly moved to embrace her. “Shhh. It’s all right, Jane. It’s all right.”

“How can it be all right? My sister’s dead! My own sister! And where was I? Here! I was here and would they let me go to her when she was sick? Would that bitch Jesslynn let me leave?”

Bethina stared uncomfortably at her hands while Jane wailed. She didn’t know how to feel about the woman’s words. Her misery was real, but Bethina couldn’t reconcile it to what she knew of them. Yes, Jesslynn was austere, haughty even, but surely she’d let Jane go to her sick sister? She’d told Bethina that she could go visit her mother when she wanted, so long as she didn’t say the wrong thing. She’d been working there after school for two years now and had never betrayed their secret, so they knew they could trust her. Maybe that was the difference. Maybe she was trustworthy and Jane wasn’t.

Still, she felt she should say something. “I’m sorry to hear about your sister.”

Jane pulled back and glared at her through puffy red eyes. “No, you’re not! You couldn’t care less, just like they couldn’t care less. You’re a pet to them, not a slave like we are. But, just wait until you’re dying and they look the other way and pretend they couldn’t share some of that immortality with you. Then you’ll see how much they think of you. You’re just livestock to them, like the rest of us. We’re good enough to clean their house and give our blood to their children, but we’re not good enough to join them! They let us die while they keep the secret to themselves!”

Bethina stood up too fast and grabbed the edge of the table to keep from falling. Jane had passed annoying and gone straight to making her angry. “It’s too bad your sister died, but you shouldn’t take it out on everyone else by being so nasty.”

Sandra cleared her throat again and glanced at Bethina. “I think maybe you’d better...” she trailed off, but they all knew what she meant.

Bethina nodded crisply and marched out the door. As she left, Sandra’s voice floated to her. “Jane, honey, you have to watch what you say. If she tells the mister and missus, who knows what will happen to you?”

“Who knows what will happen?” Bethina muttered darkly. “You’ll get fired, that’s for sure! See how you like it, then!”

She intended to go to her room and finish unpacking, but she was tired by the time she reached the entrance hall and had to stop and sit on a carved bench. She coughed into her ever present handkerchief and tried to fight the instinctual alarm when she saw the crimson dots on it. Jane was so worried about the meager amount that Alexander or the baby took from her. Maybe she should try watching her handkerchiefs fill with it for no reason! Then she could talk to her about death!

“Bethina!”

She looked up at the sound of a delighted voice and saw Alexander. He stood with his back pressed to the far wall, clinging to the shadows. “What are you doing up? It’s not dark yet.”

He squirmed. “I know, but I wanted to see if you were here yet. Father said he didn’t think your mother would really let you come, but Mother said of course you would. I knew she’d be right.” His face broke into a wide, pointy toothed grin.

She pulled herself to her feet and walked to him, stopping in front of him with her hands on her hips. “All right, now you’ve seen. You better get back to bed, mister, before you get caught.”

“Aw.” He turned his large, pleading eyes up at her, but she refused to back down. “Fine.” He relented. “But only if you promise to tell me a story later.”

“I’ll tell you a story, all right.” She tousled his dark hair. “One about little boys who don’t mind their parents and sneak around the house while they’re supposed to be sleeping. Can you guess the end?”

He gave a small, but exasperated sigh. “I’m going. I’m going.” He turned for the cellar, but stopped and looked back. “I’m glad Mother was right. I’d miss you too much if you never came back!” And then he skipped away to return to his coffin.

Alone, Bethina wandered to a side door and out onto the wide wraparound porch. The sky to the west flamed red and gold, and stray autumn leaves danced and swirled in the early evening breeze. She dropped to the porch and drew her knees up to her chest. Jane’s words flitted through her mind, “*Just wait until you’re dying and they look the other way and pretend they couldn’t share some of that immortality with you.*” Would they really do that? And even if they didn’t, would she really want them to share? Did she want to live forever, knowing that she’d never change?

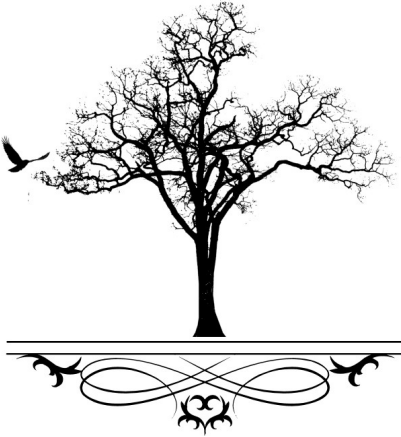
“*What’s that old adage? The journey is in the reward? No. The journey is the reward?*” She couldn’t find the exact words, but it didn’t matter. The essence was there. It was the road that mattered, not the destination because they were all headed to the same place, just some sooner than others.

Maybe Jane was right about one thing. Maybe she could look at things differently because she was staring down death. She knew she’d never get married and have children of her own, so what was the harm in letting her dote on Alexander while she could? Wasn’t it better to be here, near someone she cared about, than locked away in some sanatorium, sleeping in outdoor pavilions that were supposed to cure her? In the end, whether they looked away, or even killed her themselves rather than letting her last days linger, surely it was better here than being there? “*Yes*”, she told herself firmly. “*It has to be better. No matter what happens.*”



CLAUDIUS





CLAUDIUS

(You can find Claudius in *Shades of Gray* & *Brothers of Darkness*. This story takes place in France in the 1500's.)



The blood pounded through his head like white hot noise and he screamed. He fell to his knees, though he didn't feel it. He was numb to everything but the pain that seared through his veins. Cold hands grabbed him. They held him down to stop his thrashing. He kicked and fought, but the hands were too strong.

Then darkness came.

The black swirled around him. It gave no comfort. It was like the dark inside a furnace; too hot and too dry. There was no escape. He choked on the air, or was it his own throat? Something flashed behind his eyelids. It was an image and, though he recognized the face, the colors were too bright. He tried to call to her, but no sound came. There was only the dry, hot rasping of the damned.

How long it lasted, he couldn't tell. As the agony sliced through him, he forgot everything: his hopes, his dreams, his past, even his name. There was only one thing that he could remember and that was the too bright face with eyes that shied away from him.

Then, it was over.

He blinked and tried to focus on the face bent over him. It wasn't her, but it was a woman. Francoise had dark hair and creamy skin, full lips colored in blood and long, pointed teeth. He gurgled; an attempt at speech, and she smiled at his efforts.

"So you have survived, le petit Claude."

With that greeting, his memories slammed into his skull in a heated rush. He could see her; dark and coquettish. She batted her eyes like a virgin, but took him in the stables like a common whore.

He didn't love her, and she knew it, but she didn't care. He was a game for her, a new toy to play with. That suited him fine. Her offerings were sweet enough. Then, they got sweeter. She showed him her immortality and let him taste it. It was a prize like no other, one that would give him everything he deserved. He craved it like he craved the girl in his pain smeared visions. Now that he had the one, he would soon have the other.

Francoise watched him with keen interest. When she'd met him she had called him young. He told her he was sixteen and she laughed and said he was just a babe, but she could see the revenge that burned in his heart, and it intrigued her. She said that she could taste his hate; hate for the one who had sired him and turned him away. Other noblemen claimed their bastards, and without an heir, there was no

reason for *him* not to. He was so desperate for a child that he laid claim to his only niece, yet refused to foster the one who shared his blood. Or so he said. Claude suspected it was not a daughter, rather a future bride he raised in those stone halls. That was something he would not allow. The Écuyer would never touch her.

He sat up slowly and the world tilted. He caught himself on a rough hewn stall. The smell of horses filled his nose, suddenly too strong and too organic. His stomach lurched and his tongue burned. He needed a drink.

With great effort he climbed to his feet and propped himself up. "I thirst."

Her smile grew. "Yes, you must feed, but first you must be able to walk." She took his arm and helped him take an uncertain step. "Yes. Yes. Come, now."

They stopped at the opened door and he stared at the world beyond with new eyes. People bustled about their business in the late evening hours, some to bed, some to the taverns, and others to appointments of a more carnal nature. His legs felt stronger and he started forward. Francoise held him back and shook her head. "I shall find you one, mon enfant."

He scowled and pulled his arm free. "I am no child of yours. I will do it alone."

She laughed and let him go. He could feel her eyes on him as he stumbled into the street, and her scrutiny straightened his spine. The strength returned to his legs only to leech out again in an instant. He grabbed the wall of a nearby building to keep from falling in the mud. He heard her silvery laughter but he refused to succumb.

The alley was dark. A man stood at the end of it, no doubt a thief waiting for some unlucky prey. Claude stalked towards him his every sense alive as if for the first time, and the man offered a too friendly greeting. He didn't know it was his death that approached.

It was over quickly. The man's knife flashed and then his scream shook the night. The blade clattered to the ground, and Claude tore through his throat. Blood sprayed his face and shirt and filled his mouth. He gulped down mouthfuls of crimson. The burning agony in his throat eased, and the thirst was silenced. But there wasn't enough.

The blood stopped coming and he stared down at the limp body in his arms with a mixture of disappointment and confusion. Francoise was suddenly next to him. She took the corpse and cast it aside. "Come," she said softly. "We must quit this place before an alarm is given." She tugged the dark cloak from around her shoulders and used it to mop his face. He flinched away at first, but settled and let her clean him. "You are hardly in a fit state to be seen and not accused of murder."

Murder. The word rang through his mind and he looked at the corpse on the ground. He'd never killed a man before. If he wanted his due, he would have to kill many more. None would he enjoy so much as *him*.

Oblivious to his thoughts, Francoise threw her ruined garment aside and pulled his cloak closed over his shirt. "We are stronger than they are, but we are vulnerable to the sunlight. Never forget that. Besides, tonight you are weak, mon enfant. Your full strength will not find you until tomorrow's sun sets."

Though he sneered at the new endearment, he let it go. There would be time to deal with it later.



As dawn approached, Francoise finished the letter with a flourish. "I am coming," she read back. "I will take what is mine and neither you, nor all the demons in hell, can stop me." Claude nodded and she held the quill towards him. He pushed it aside roughly. There had been no time in his previous life for things such as writing. He could do no more than make his mark, and more was needed here. His cheeks flamed in anger and shame and he determined that he would learn. He had all the time in the world now, and he would learn everything. He would put *them* to shame.

Without comment she dipped the quill into the pot of blood and signed his name to the end. "Are you sure that you wish to give him warning? Would it not be better to sneak upon him on the 'morrow?"

“No,” he rasped. His throat was tight and hot again. “He will have the rest of this night and all the day to panic and then to posture and boast to himself. He will not run, but hide away like a rat in his hole. When we come upon him tomorrow I want to watch the confidence in his eyes melt into terror. I want to feel his fear.” He broke into a wide, sharp smile.

Francoise’s eyes gleamed as she surveyed him. “That is why I so enjoy you, mon enfant.” She glanced to the darkness and shouted, “Henri! Send a messenger to the castle!”



Claude woke the next night, the weakness and trembling gone from his limbs. Francoise was right. His full strength had only now come to him. He marveled at the things he could see in the shadows and at how the darkness, which he knew to be complete, seemed only to be early evening gloom to his new eyes.

He rose and found the others in the next room. He counted the pale faces. There were five, including himself and Francoise. The other three were her friends, if friends they could be called. They were more like a pack of dogs that hunted together for safety.

Francoise laid out the night’s plans. Claude listened in silence. After he’d discovered her secret, he had spoken to her of this more than once and he knew it by heart. They would storm the castle on the hill. They would kill the soldiers and he, he would murder the Écuyer with his own hands and then take the pale beauty for his bride.

Francoise finished and asked them, “Do you understand?”

Henri, the vampire nearest to her, snickered. “We bring the girl alive and kill everyone else. What could be simpler?”

His too casual attitude infuriated Claude. This was the epoch of his entire life, not some moment of amusement. “No!” he shouted and swiveled towards Henri with burning eyes. “You will kill only who you’re told - and you will not touch the Écuyer. He is mine.”

The others drew back at his fury. Rather than acknowledge their discomfort, they looked to Francoise as if to ask, “Why should we follow him?” A dark smile curved her lips and she nodded, leaving them to grumble their assent.

With that settled, she met Claude’s eyes and smiled. “Do not fear, you will have your wish tonight as I promised, mon enfant.”



The night wrapped around them like a cloak, and they moved through it swiftly. Claude smiled to himself as the air rushed past his face and through his long, blond hair. He could smell the men on the wind. Though to his inexperienced nose they were just blood, Francoise could read much more.

“There are at least six of them,” she whispered to her companions. “They will be no trouble.”

They weren’t.

The two at the gatehouse fell to Francoise’s companions, and another ran for the keep. Francoise, Claude and Henri chased him. It was the latter who snapped his neck and ripped into his veins. Claude pushed past, Francoise on his heels, and took the steps of the keep two at a time. It was a small château-fort, and the keep was little more than a tower with a winding stair. How could *he* think it would protect them?

Two more guards stood on the stairs. Claude grabbed one by his shoulder and ripped through his neck with his fangs. His blood was hot. For a moment he could have been lost to it. The memory of his quest pulled him back and he flung the gurgling man down the stairs. Francoise barely dodged out of the way. Though her eyes flamed, her voice was calm, “Remember, you are not alone. Do not be careless or your allies may turn on you.”

He dismissed the lesson and left the other guard for her. He heard the man scream, but he didn't look back to see what happened. He was too close.

Two final guards stood before the wooden door at the top of the stairs. They brandished swords and one of them shouted to the occupant of the locked room, "A demon is here, my lord! All blood and fangs! God save us!"

Claude laughed at the description and wordlessly grabbed the first of the guards. He fought back, and his sword cut into Claude's side. He roared at the surprise pain, and then grabbed the man by the arm and flung him down the stairs. His armor clanged and his bones crunched as he rolled out of sight to where Françoise waited.

The other dropped his weapon and cowered against the door, making the sign of the cross and jibbering. "Please, do not kill me. God, protect me! Please!"

"There is no God," Claude sneered. Then he grabbed the discarded sword and slammed the blade into the man's face. The guard screamed and raised his hands to his ruined head, as though trying to hold the blood in. It poured between his fingers and he gurgled on it.

Claude left him on the floor in his agony and stepped over him. The wooden door was bolted from within. He raised his foot to kick through it, then stopped. He wanted to savor the fear. Gently he rapped on it and purred, "I've come. Did you get my message?"

The Écuyer swore loudly and shouted to his guards, "How can he be here? Kill him!"

"I must apologize," Claude answered and carefully combed the stray hairs from his face with a bloody hand. "I'm afraid they cannot answer you."

The Écuyer cried something unintelligible, then dropped his voice. Though it was a whisper, Claude did not strain to hear. "Go. Hide in the back."

He was talking to *her*. He was telling *her* to hide. It would do no good.

Claude broke the door in with a single kick. He marveled at his new strength, but there was no time to be amazed. That would come later. After he had killed *him*.

And there *he* was. He stood in the center of the room, his sword raised. He was dressed in all his glory, as if his finery would make him more intimidating. His shaking hands and terrified eyes ruined the illusion.

"What do you want?" he demanded, though his voice trembled. "Be gone or—"

"Or what?" Claude strolled into the room, the dying guard's sword still in his hand. "You'll set the dogs on me, perhaps? Or have your men run me off in another shower of stones?" His smile grew. "Or perhaps you'll kill me this time, is that your plan? Be done with me once and for all?"

"I should have done so," he snapped back, his voice gruff even as he retreated a step. "The sisters at the abbey should have strangled the breath from you when you were born."

"You should have done it yourself," Claude answered. The amusement in his eyes flickered and died. "It would have been the only contribution you made, beyond bedding my mother."

The man opened his mouth to reply, but stopped. Claude willed him to speak; willed him to say something, anything. No words came. Where was his superiority now? It had fled with the lives of his soldiers, and that knowledge only swelled Claude's fury.

He lunged at him, slashing the sword wildly. In his untrained hands it was nothing more than a sharp club that was easily deflected. It bounced across the room, but the metallic clangs did not give the Écuyer any comfort. There was no light of victory in his eyes, only fear. Claude had wanted that fear. He'd wanted to taste it, savor it, to breathe it in. But he'd wanted to watch as the old man's eyes shifted from gloating certainty into terror. He wanted to break him – but he was already broken.

Claude roared a wordless oath and threw himself at the man. The noble man dodged, but his mortal reflexes were too slow and the pair crashed to the floor noisily. Over the clang and crash Claude could hear a sharp sob from the room beyond. His attention flew to the door that he knew *she* was listening at. The Écuyer saw the shift and took advantage of it to break loose and roll away. He jerked to his knees and summoned that last ounce of courage Claude had been waiting for.

"You won't have her!"

Claude snatched up the man's discarded sword and walked towards him. "Yes," he said with certainty. "I will. I will have this castle, I will have the land, and I will have her. I will have everything that should have been mine. Everything I was entitled to. Everything you denied me!" He pointed the sword like an accusing finger. "You left me to be raised an orphan. You claim her as a daughter and deny the one who shares your blood! A better man than I would hate her, but -" A strange smile flickered over his lips. "I do not hate her. I will take her, and your life will be her dowry!"

The Écuyer rose clumsily to his feet. His mouth worked with fury, though words seemed hard for him to locate. Claude didn't wait. He lunged at him with the sword, then cast it aside at the last moment to grab him by fistfuls of his hair; the fine blond locks so like his own. The nobleman cried out in surprise and tried to free himself, but Claude wrenched him to one side too quickly, and the Écuyer lost his footing. Claude caught him. He held the struggling man in his arms and stared down at the face, the pitiless face of the man he despised. His hatred and fury rose like black bile in his throat and, with a savage howl, he lost himself to his anger. Like a mad creature, he set upon the nobleman with flashing, rending fangs, ripping and tearing at his neck, his face, even the hands he tried to shield himself with. His blood was hot; hot and bitter and it burned, but Claude wanted more. He latched his mouth around the man's bleeding neck and drank the life from him, gulp after gulp.

And then, it was over.

Claude was seated on the floor and the torn, bloody Écuyer lay across his lap. Claude stared at the ruined face and the glassy, blue eyes and suddenly he didn't recognize him anymore. This wasn't his father, the lofty lord in his mighty castle, it was just a slab of dead meat that smelled of blood and piss and wine. The odors were overpowering. They choked him and, in disgust, he flung the body aside and backed away until he met the stone wall.

The reality of the universe slotted itself into place inside his mind. His eyes drifted to the motionless body. What was it now but a corpse, like so many others? And before that, what was it? A man? A weak creature who cowered in his crumbling castle, on his tiny hill, in his little county, counting his coins and jealously guarding his niece as though she were his wife. To what end were all those struggles? What had it gained him but a shabby, dreary little world veneered with the false delights of court and riddled with the worms of fear and weakness. Fear was all he'd known, the only thing any of them knew. They knew the deaths their futures held, and they feared it.

Their futures.

Claude was no longer one of them. Francoise's blood had lifted him above their petty existence and away from their mad scramble for one more breath. He would have all the breaths that he could desire, all the life he could ever crave, and it would be at their expense. And why shouldn't it? They were now the weak and he was the strong. He was the lord in the castle, only, unlike the feeble, fleshy thing that came before, he was a true lord. He was better in every way than *they* were.

Francoise was suddenly in the room. She looked approvingly at the body, and her dark eyes shifted to her pupil. "Does your revenge taste sweet, mon petit Claude?"

He jerked to his feet and straightened his clothing. "Don't ever call me that name again!" His cold, gray eyes landed on her. With his new clarity he saw her for what she was. An immortal, yes, but not deserving of it. She was a simple whore, like so many others, and she would feast on humanity until she grew too swollen and slow and then, in the shadows, her death would find her.

"From this moment on, I am Claudius." His eyes flamed and a smile flickered over his lips. Yes, a fitting name. The name of long ago emperors. As they were above the masses, so now was he. And like they, he would rule.

Francoise laughed softly. "If it pleases you, then so be it. But where is your prize?"

He didn't deign to answer her, only strode to that final, locked door. He kicked it in, no longer childishly amazed by his own strength, and stepped inside. Against the far wall, before the narrow window, stood a young girl of fourteen or fifteen. Her large blue eyes were wide with terror and her long blonde hair, pale like the moonlight that wrapped around her, fell loose past her shoulders. Her thin frame trembled in the night breeze, covered only by a thin white shift.

"Father?" she whispered, though she already knew the answer.

“He was no father of yours,” Claudius answered. Though his words were harsh his tone was soft, as though he spoke to a fairy that might flee if he was too loud. Something subtle shifted in his eyes and he stepped towards her and stopped, just out of reach. “Arowenia.” He held out his bloody hand to her. “Come with me. I can give you youth eternal, and life everlasting. You need never fade or wither, but always be beautiful. You will want for nothing. Come.”

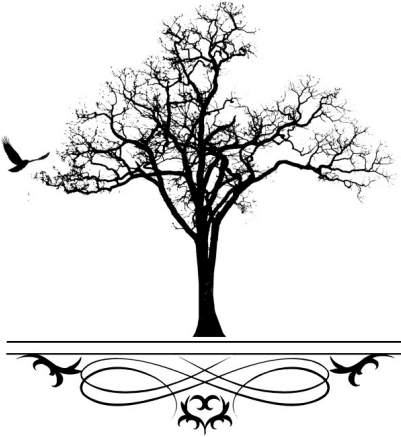
She swallowed hard and her luminescent eyes skipped from him to the window and the drop beyond. She looked back and forth more than once, as if to decide which death was the crueler. Tears dripped down her pale cheeks and, as her shoulders sagged in defeat, she looked back to him.

Without a word, she had surrendered. Claudius scooped her up in his arms and carried her through the bloody rooms and down the steep, spiraling stair into the darkness beyond. At last, he had laid claim to what was rightfully his, but it was only the beginning.



ELSA





ELSA

(You can find Elsa in *Shades of Gray & Brothers of Darkness*— she is the one who turned Michael. Lennon can be found in *Brothers of Darkness* & the *Road to Darkness* short story. This story takes place in a small New Hampshire town in the early 1980s.)



Elsa stared at him as he stared back. He gave what amounted to an apologetic shrug and strode away in the rain. She watched him go; watched him climb into his black car and disappear into the night. Then, she went inside and cried.

She hated him, but she hated herself even more.

When the tears stopped coming, she wiped her face and went to the kitchen. On TV, crying women splashed water on their face. What was the point? Though, that would be a good excuse if her parents saw her.

“Why is your face wet?”

“Because I just washed it.”

Yeah, right.

She opened the refrigerator and stared inside. Her eyes skipped from item to item, as if they might conjure something new and infinitely delicious. They didn’t. There were vegetables and fruit and cold tea. None of it would mend a broken heart.

What would?

She closed the door and dropped into a kitchen chair. The coffee pot light blinked in the darkness and the rain splattered noisily on the window. It was just the kind of night to be miserable. Even if it was her own fault. Which it was.

She knew he didn’t want anything serious. She knew he had a life that was as different from hers as night was from day, not to mention a girlfriend in another town. Still, she’d hoped, hadn’t she? Deep down she’d believed that he’d stay. That was why she was so shocked when he said goodbye.

“Bye, babes. It’s been fun.”

What fantastic parting words. Those were the kind of words you could frame and hang on a wall. As if. Couldn’t he come up with something better? He’d had enough practice that he should have had a little speech memorized just for the occasion. Did he say that to all the girls, or was she just the one lucky enough for such a poetic verse. Didn’t immortality require something better from him?

Damn him.

She ran her fingers through her brown hair and sifted through a tangle of memories. Just a few weeks, and yet she'd lost herself completely. She'd met him under the bridge, smoking a joint and looking like some kind of human God. When she'd looked into his eyes, the world jumped. They'd talked, though she didn't remember a word of it, then moved to the backseat of his car. He'd shown her what he was and she'd accepted it; welcomed it. The blood hadn't scared her, not really. Somehow, she trusted him to stop before it was too much, before she ended up dead. It was a risk, like any other.

And boy was it worth it.

Sex with Tristan was like being high – higher than she'd ever been. There were no words for it. Though he was more than sex. He was funny, and smart, and in unguarded moments something fragile shimmered in his eyes that made her want to wrap him up and take care of him. But her feelings for him went deeper than that. There was something about him; some kind of connection. When she touched him it was as if she'd known him before, perhaps in another life, and as if she knew him now. At a glance she could read his mood, at a word she could guess his sentence. She felt close to him as she had never felt with anyone before, as she never would again.

And now he was gone.

She abandoned the kitchen and her silent coffee pot companion. The front room was awash in whispery shadows. She stopped by the TV and turned it on to find static. It was too late for programming. It was as if the station managers were saying in unison, "Go to bed!"

She threw herself on the couch and picked up the phone from the stand. She stared at it. Nothing happened. With a sigh she snatched up the receiver and tapped in her best friend's number. This was the kind of situation best friends were supposed to be for.

Elsa counted off the rings. One. Two. Three. Four. They rang on and on, until she ticked off number eighteen. That was when the line clicked and a sleepy voice muttered, "Hello?"

Elsa gripped the phone in a strangulation hold and tried to find words. "Jen-" A thick sob cut through her voice and she broke down. "Tristan. He- he's gone!"

"What? Who's gone?" Jen yawned and slowly came to terms with the conversation. "Elsa, is that you?"

"He's gone! He just left! God dammit, he just left!"

"Oh, that dude who thought he was a vampire?" Jen was suddenly awake and her voice dripped sarcasm instead of sympathy. "Look, he was hot, I admit that. But, Elsa, he thought he was a vampire."

"He was!" she cried. "Goddamit! He was! And he left!"

"Yeah, I get that he left. But you're better off without the psycho. What would your parents say?"

Elsa stared numbly at the carpet. This was all wrong. Jennifer was supposed to tell her it was all right. She was supposed to understand. She wasn't supposed to lecture her. "I'm twenty. I can do what I want."

Jen imitated her father, "Not while you're under my roof." When Elsa didn't giggle, she sighed. "Okay, look. I'm sorry, all right? But there's plenty of other fish in the sea."

Elsa caught her breath and held it. *Plenty of other fish*. That was a line straight from the annals of cliché TV comfort, so she quit listening, though Jennifer kept talking. And talking.

When minutes had passed, Elsa cleared her throat, and cut in. "Yeah, you're right. Thanks. I'll talk to you later."

"Elsa, wait."

She didn't. She hung up the phone and then, for good measure, she unplugged it. Tears dripped down her cheeks like the rain on the window. She wished she'd done something besides stare at him. She wished she'd thrown herself at his feet! *Never, never give in. Never, never let something so important slip away. Don't just sit there and cry about your lost paradise. Get up and do something about it.*

That was what she needed to do.

Elsa stopped in the bathroom and splashed water on her face. As she thought, it did nothing to help, and soaked her shirt. She changed, threw on her raincoat and, without leaving so much as a note, she slipped out the door and into the storming night.

She climbed into her car and started it. The heavy engine roared to life and she wished for the millionth time that she could afford one of the cute cars. The radio crackled and Madonna bled through the static. Her tiny, high pitched voice was no comfort.

Under the streetlights, the road was a glare of slick reflections. Elsa navigated slowly, though she was only half focused on the task. Most of her attention was on the question “where to look for him?”

Twenty minutes later, she parked outside of the Roockwood Inn where Tristan had been staying. The vacancy light flickered eerily, and the raindrops echoed off the car; ping, ping, ping. The darkness seemed to watch her like a tangible, malevolent creature. She shivered at the thought and climbed out into the storm.

Room 622, around the back. That was where he’d been, but no one answered her knock. She pounded again and again, until someone in the next room shouted at her to be quiet. She couldn’t give up, so she hurried through the rain and into the shabby motel office. The walls were stained with tobacco and smoke hung thick in the air. The bell was broken, so she banged on the counter impatiently.

A voice came from behind the tatty blanket that served as a door between the office and the back rooms. “Yeah, yeah, hang on.”

She didn’t have time. Each second might be taking him farther away from her.

The blanket was thrown aside and a short fat man dressed in a horrible Hawaiian shirt waddled out. He took a puff from his cigar and eyed her critically. “Yeah, what can I help you with?”

“I’m looking for someone. Tristan Shelby. He was in room 622.”

The attendant shrugged. “Room 622 checked out earlier. Sorry, sister.” He looked her up and down. “Just as well. I’d let that one go, if I was you.”

“I can’t!” she cried passionately. “Do you know where he went?” Tears trembled at the edges of her eyes, ready to drop.

The attendant scratched his stomach thoughtfully. Indecision flickered over his face. Finally, her tears swayed him. “I don’t know where he went for sure, but he was runnin’ with a local crowd. They hang out at the old fair grounds most nights, so he might be down there. But-” he lowered his cigar and met her eyes. “I wouldn’t go lookin’ for any of them, if I was you. They’re not what you think they are.”

Hope blossomed inside her. The old fairgrounds were a popular hangout for teenagers and, having grown up there, she knew them well. “Thank you! Thank you so much!”

“Remember, I warned you!”

His words were lost as she dashed out the door into the rain. If she could only catch Tristan and say all those things she should have said earlier, then maybe she could stop this. Maybe she could convince him that they belonged together. Maybe she could hang onto him just a little longer.

The drive was short. The fairgrounds were on the edge of town, and had been abandoned since the late 70’s. She parked in the overgrown lot and got out. The tall, wet grass wrapped around her legs like grasping hands. She shook it off and forced her way towards the peeling gates. A wooden sunshine hung above them. Its toothy grin was faded and chipped. The colors were bleached almost gray. “Have a Happy Day” was just visible on the reverse side in faded rainbow letters.

The ticket booth was dark and silent. The windows were a spider web of cracks that told stories of bb guns and rocks. Scattered beer bottles glittered in the flashing lightning and weeds grew through the cracked pavement. The rusted Ferris wheel hulked to her left. Vines covered it and hung down in long, thick tendrils, like something from a nightmare scape.

She could feel eyes in the darkness again; feel the night watching her. She forced the silly superstition away and told herself to grow up. There was nothing to be afraid of. She’d been there before.

But never alone.

Am I alone now?

“Hello?”

No one answered her except the rain. She pulled up her courage and walked deeper into the fairgrounds. The carousel loomed ahead of her. The dirty mirrors still tried to glitter on the canopy, and the silent horses waited for riders that would never return.

She stopped next to the carousel and waited as a bolt of lightning sliced through the sky. In the instant of light, she looked around madly, but didn't see anyone. Her heart sank as she realized that she'd missed him. It was too late. Tristan was gone.

Her body sagged and she used the nearest carousel horse to hoist herself onto the large, disc-like base. She felt too morose to do more than sit on the edge and stare at her dangling feet. What was the point? Maybe she'd get lucky and the carousel would get struck by lightning.

She glanced up to her silent, painted companion. Dark streaks ran down the horse's face, like old tears. Oddly, that made her smile. "You know what it's like, don't you? With no reason to go on anymore?"

Thunder snapped and she sighed. She should go home and have a cup of coffee. She should change into her pajamas and go to bed. In the morning she should get up, and put on her make up, and go to work. Again and again, the same routine. Meanwhile, he would be doing what? Or who?

She heard something. Her head snapped up and she looked around. There was only rain and dark and rusted rides. It was probably just a rat, anyway. *Yeah. A rat.*

A rat with fangs.

A man stood in front of her. To her terrified mind, he was only a black shape with snarling lips and long, pointed teeth. A vampire, like Tristan. But, it wasn't Tristan. It was someone else. Someone she needed to get away from.

She gasped and tried to throw herself backwards. The vampire was too fast and she was suddenly pinned down on the old carousel. He held her by her wrists and growled into her face. His eyes were strange, not human but more like a wild dog; a wild starving dog.

He didn't ask who she was, or what she was doing. He only stared into her eyes for an agonizing moment and then tore into her neck. She screamed. The sound was drowned out by the rolling thunder. Lightning sliced across the sky and in the brightness she could see the rain drops, suspended in midair, and the sad weather stained face of the carousel horse, watching with chipped eyes. The darkness crashed back, but the image stayed in her head, like a still frame. Perhaps the last thing she'd ever see.

With her last breaths she screamed for Tristan.

There was a blur of motion and suddenly she was free of her attacker. Though she tried to move, she was too weak to do more than roll her head to one side. The carousel horse and its neighbors were broken and strewn in the mud. The vampire lay nearby, hanging half off the carousel, his face covered in blood. From the shadows a second man stepped forward. He had bright red hair, like a punk rocker. Though he was soaked, he brushed at the mud on his long coat as he approached.

"Sorry, Lennon. But I think I need her alive." The new vampire hopped lithely onto the carousel platform, stepped over the bloody and angry Lennon and came to a stop next to her. He peered down at her like a vulture, his brow puckered. "You are alive, aren't you?"

Her answer was a gurgle. Terror engulfed her. She tried to raise her hands to her gaping neck, but her arms wouldn't work. All she could do was plead with silent eyes.

Lennon stood and wiped the blood from his chin. "What do you need her for?"

The red head arched a single brow. "Unless I'm mistaken, she was shouting for our friend Tristan who, if you'll recall, I am trying to locate. If she knows him, she may know where he is." He narrowed his eyes at her. "Or maybe not." He shrugged as if it was suddenly of no consequence. "It appears she's useless to me, after all, so you can do what you want with her. Either kill her or turn her."

"Turn her?" Lennon stared at him as if he'd gone crazy. "Why would I do that?"

The world shifted into shades of gray and Elsa choked. She tried to concentrate, but the conversation slipped through her fingers like tears. *Tristan. Where is he? Why isn't he here?*

"Why not?" the red head asked cheerfully. "She already seems to know all about us. That's hard to come by in a fledgling, and it's not like you have any, yet--"

Tristan.

"- Besides, it might be fun--"

Where are you?

"-Of course, it's up to you. I don't care one way or the other--"

Tristan.

“-better decide before it’s too late-“

Goodbye babes, it’s been fun.

The thunder cracked, but the sound was muted behind a wall of black. There was something in her mouth. The taste was bitter and sharp, like sucking a knife blade. She swallowed. It burned like fire. She swallowed again. And again.



It was an hour or more before she could move. The first thing she did was sit up and touch her neck. The wound was gone. Even the blood had been washed away by the steady drum of rain.

Lennon sat nearby, his knees up and his eyes on her. “I’m Lennon,” he said pointlessly. Then he half-lifted a hand in greeting. “Hey.”

Her eyes skipped around. “Where’s-”

“That red haired guy?” She nodded and Lennon shrugged. “Went back to work, I guess. He’s hunting them. Tristan and his partner.”

“Hunting them? He’s not going to – I mean he won’t...”

“Kill him?”

The words were too horrible to contemplate, but there they were, just the same. Lennon didn’t explain further, so she forced the question out, “Will he?”

Lennon’s expression softened. “Were you guys, you know?” The answer was in her eyes, and he looked away. “I don’t know. It depends, I guess. If he just goes quietly, then probably not.”

Despite his attempt at reassurance, it was impossible to combat her panic. “Why is he after Tristan?”

“I don’t know. They’re wanted for something. Hard to tell.” Lennon fished a soggy pack of cigarettes out of his pocket. He tried to slide one out, but it crumbled in his hand. With a mournful sigh he tossed it away. “Maybe because the guy’s telling humans about us. You are - were - human, and he told you.”

Elsa couldn’t argue with that, though the word “were” disturbed her.

Lennon threw the ruined cigarettes away and stood. “We better go. I’ve got to find my brother, then we need to get back to the den before sunrise.”

“Where’s that?” she mumbled, still lost in the intricate twists of the night’s events.

“New York.”

Her attention snapped to him. “I can’t go to New York! I have to go to work tomorrow.” The sentence died on her lips as the full realization of her new status crashed down on her. She struggled to come to terms with everything that had happened in the last handful of hours. Hours. Was that all it had been? A few hours had taken Tristan away and changed her?

Changed her like she’d once asked Tristan to do.

“Have fun with that.” Lennon stood and offered her a hand. “I hope you don’t act this stupid when you meet Claudius.”

A mixture of panic and elation coursed through her and she fought to master it. “Is Claudius your brother?”

“Hardly!” He snickered. “He’s the coven master. We’re supposed to get permission before we make fledglings.” He frowned. “I don’t know what to tell him. I’m not really sure why I did it.” he squinted at her. “You’re not bad looking, I guess, but we need to work on a better story than this.” He waved his hand around the abandoned grounds as if to indicate the truth.

She had no answer for him, though he didn’t seem to expect one. He tugged her to her feet and led her through the rainy fairgrounds towards the exit.

Vampire.

Somewhere in the back of her mind she could hear Jennifer's voice echoing, "He thought he was a vampire."

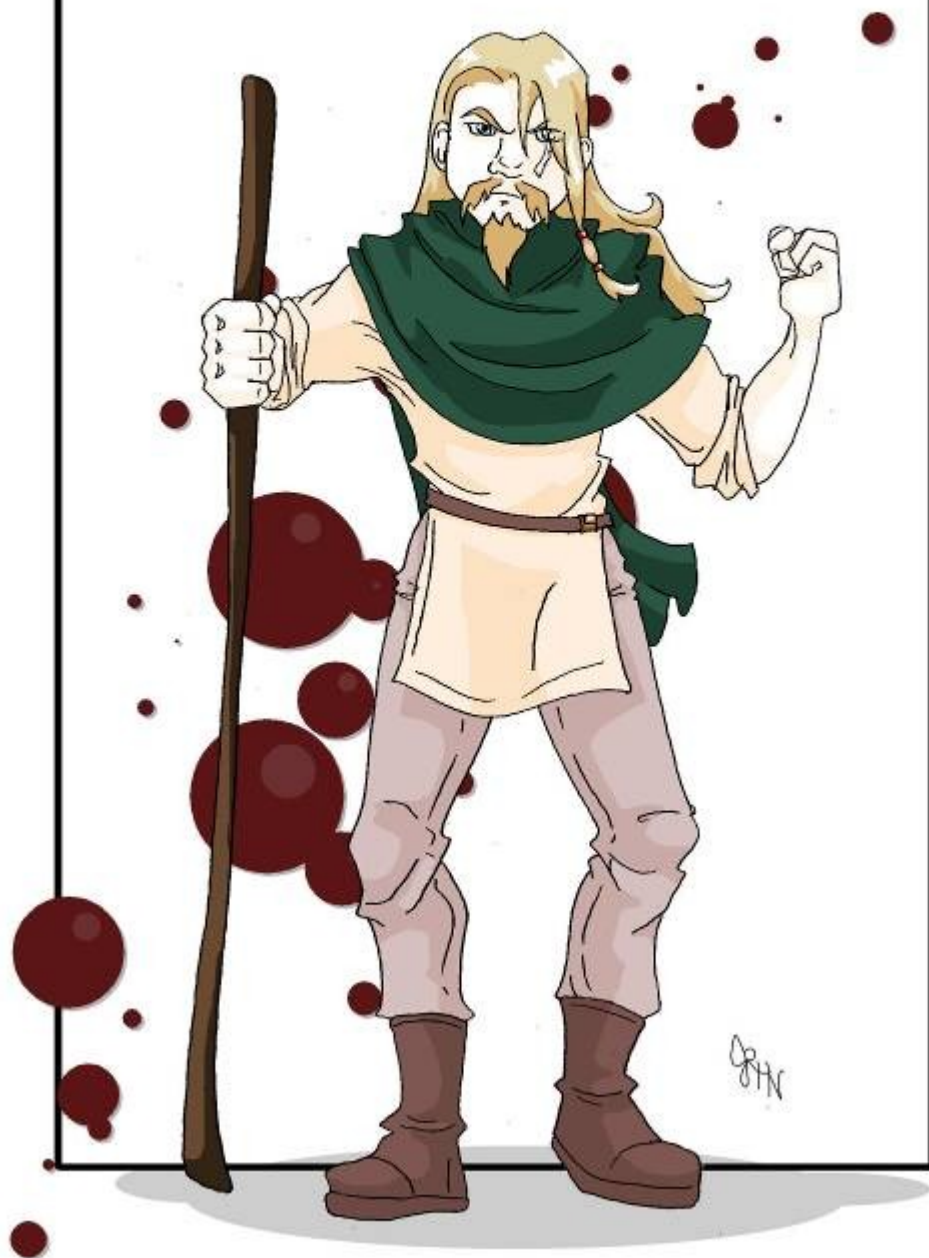
That's because he is, and now so am I.

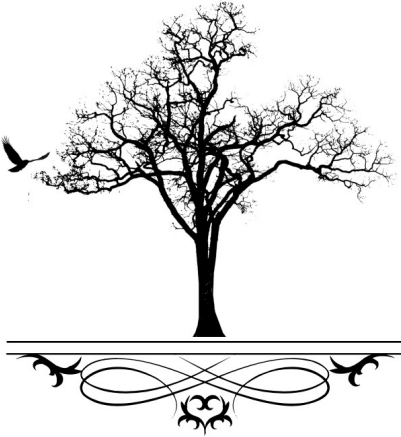
The sign over the exit made her giggle softly. "Have a Happy Day". Bizarrely, she would never have another day again. There would only be night after night from now on. But it was all right; or it would be once she found Tristan. Never, never give in. Never, never let something so important slip away. Don't just sit there and cry about your lost paradise. Get up and do something about it.

And now, she had an eternity to do it in.



HERRICK





HERRICK

(You can't really find Herrick anywhere. He existed as a character in an early draft of *Legacy of Ghosts* – originally he accompanied Kariss to Jorick's house – but he got cut in a revision and is no more than a name, which is a shame because he is an interesting guy. This story takes place in a small but familiar New Hampshire town during *Shades of Gray*. If you've read the book you may recognize the timing.)



Thunder rumbled in the distance. Herrick could smell the coming rain on the breeze, and so could Caroline. She held her hand out to check for stray drops before she pulled her front door shut. The dog strained at the leash, anxious for its nightly walk. It didn't care if there was rain or not.

"Okay, okay." Caroline took a few steps and the dog leapt ahead, his tail wagging and his tongue lolling to one side with enthusiasm.

Herrick stepped deeper into the shadows, not that Caroline could see him with her mortal eyes. She stopped at the quiet street corner and looked both ways, a habit she'd held onto from childhood, then she plunged forward again. He waited until she was halfway down the street before he followed. He didn't want to get too close.

Not yet.

He crept silently from shadow to shadow as she shuffled along at an uneven pace, her eyes on the dog in front of her. He wondered what she was thinking about. Her friends? Her family? Her ex-boyfriend? Was she happy? Sad? Worried? He wished he could crawl inside her head and make himself comfortable, if only for a few minutes. But vampirism hadn't given him those gifts.

Vampire.

It was a too familiar word, but it still held old terrors, ingrained from his childhood. He could hear his grandmother muttering prayers against the demons. He could see her terrified eyes, the way she made the sign of the cross with her withered hands. It was well that she hadn't lived to see her grandson join them, so long ago.

The clouds drifted over the moon and the world was suddenly shrouded in shadows. Herrick didn't mind. Sometimes, he thought he could see better without the light. Caroline couldn't. Her eyes darted around as if, in the dark, she was suddenly conscious of his presence. He wondered if she could feel him watching. Waiting. Wanting.

"Come on, boy." Her voice was too loud. The dog didn't notice, and turned back for the house with the same enthusiasm he'd left with. She picked up her pace, her shuffling, random steps suddenly a

steady rhythm on the pavement as she hurried towards her perceived safety. The closer she got, the faster she moved. Then, she passed him, only a few feet away. It was a distance he could have closed without effort, but he didn't.

Not yet.

A raindrop fell. And then another. And another. It pit-patted on the last of the tree leaves and the bugs in the branches sang to the beat. Thunder rolled across the sky, like tympani drums. The symphony of the storm only hurried her steps and by the time she reached the house she was running.

She fumbled with the door, her eyes on everything but it. Finally, it opened and she shoved the dog inside and followed quickly. The door slammed and the lock clicked. Herrick could hear it; the faint metallic sound that meant she was safe – or thought she was safe.

The thunder sounded, an echo of the door that shut him out. He walked silently until he stood under the tree across from her house. He leaned on it and watched. Light flickered in the window; the television. He could see her silhouette as she dropped onto the couch and pulled a blanket over her.

"Back here again?"

Herrick turned towards the voice. At first there was only the glowing cherry of a cigarette, and then a bald vampire came into view. He walked casually towards Herrick and stopped next to him. "You know it's fucking raining out here, right?"

"As a matter of fact, Micah, I had noticed." Herrick turned back towards the house and fought the desire to sigh deeply.

Micah followed his gaze. "This is stupid. You drive forty-five minutes for this every night. Why don't you just go knock on the door? What's the worst that could happen? She probably remembers you."

There was no mirth in Herrick's laughter. "And how do I explain that I haven't changed in the last twenty years? How do I explain my very presence here?"

Micah took a puff from his soggy cigarette, then dropped it to the ground and stomped it out. "You could just tell her the truth, man."

"What? That I'm her great-great-great-great-what's it and I've been keeping an eye on her all these years? That should go over well."

"How many greats are there? You sure it's distant enough for all this pining shit you do?"

Herrick ground his teeth together. "Yes. It's distant enough. Don't you have somewhere to be?"

"Yep." He clapped his hand on Herrick's back. "I'm here, savin' your ass from the miserable black hole you seem to wanna live in. Though, I guess I can kinda see it. You meddled when she was a kid, so it was like custom raising your future girlfriend. You shoulda got her some 'vampires are your friends' picture books or something. Woulda made things easier."

Herrick glared at him from under soggy blond bangs. "You make it sound cheap, sick even."

"Ah, I'm just kiddin' ya. I don't give a damn who ya wanna chase after. She's got a nice ass."

"Watch your mouth!"

"Sorry, man." He held up an appeasing hand, then grinned. "She does, though."

"Whether she does or not isn't for you to notice." Herrick gave the house a final look, then turned back to his friend. "Since you refuse to leave me in peace, might I suggest we go somewhere that's a bit dryer?"

Micah's grin grew. "Now you're talkin'! I got some laundry to do, then what do you say we hit a bar or somethin'?"

Laundry. How lovely.



It was nearly nine p.m. when they walked into the all night Laundromat. Despite the time, a woman and three children sat in the far corner. She talked on her cellphone, and waved her free hand to punctuate her words.

Herrick chose a plastic chair on the other side of the room and flipped absently through the stack of old magazines. Micah dumped his bundle of clothes into a nearby washer.

The washer started and he flopped into the chair next to Herrick, his eyes on the woman and her tiny denim shorts. "Take a look at that."

"I see her," Herrick answered stiffly. "Perhaps if she had more clothing on."

"More?" Micah chortled. "I think you mean less." He gave his friend a once over. "Never mind. I'm talking to a guy in a cape."

"It isn't a cape. It's a cloak. And it's comfortable. You should try one."

"No thanks. Not really into the whole medieval look." Micah snickered and then turned serious for a moment. "So you're really gonna go join what's his name's war?"

"Oren? Perhaps." Herrick stared into space and stroked his blond beard thoughtfully. "Benjamin and Des are already helping them."

Micah crossed his arms over his chest and slouched down in his seat, his legs kicked out in front of him. "You gotta ask yourself, is this really our problem? I mean, fuck, I don't even know who the guy is they're fuckin' fighting."

"His name is Claudius. I don't know if you've met him. He looks all of sixteen with a chip on his shoulder and a ruffled shirt."

"Not ringing a bell."

Herrick waved it away as unimportant and they fell into silence. Micah's attention stayed on the woman in the too-short shorts. Eventually, she looked up and caught his eyes. An unspoken communication seemed to pass between them, and she stood and stretched languidly. "Stay out of trouble. Mommy's gonna go have a cigarette around back." With another meaningful glance at Micah, she strolled out the door, her hips swaying.

Micah was on his feet. He dumped a handful of quarters on the nearest table. "Toss 'em in the dryer when they're done." Then he, too, disappeared.

"Of course, I don't mind."

No one was close enough to hear the comment, and no one cared, anyway. Herrick sighed and his thoughts turned to Caroline. She was probably still watching TV. It would be another hour before she crawled into bed, alone. Perhaps Micah was right. Perhaps he should knock on her door and confront her with the truth.

Then she can scream and reject me outright.

So much better.

He wasn't sure when it had happened. One day she was a little girl and he was her neighbor. He'd never thought anything impure, or even romantic about her. She was just another in the long line of descendants that he kept an eye on. Sentimentality held over from his mortal days, perhaps. Or guilt. He hadn't shared the gift of the vampire with his brother. Too late did he regret it, so now it was his duty to see that his brother's line didn't end. It was the closest he could give him to immortality.

Caroline left for college; a flush faced child with blond curls. He couldn't remain the unchanging neighbor forever, and so he'd disappeared, too, though returned now and again, unseen, to make sure they were all right. It was four years before he saw Caroline again. Instead of a shy child she was a woman with stormy eyes and a temperament to match. He hadn't even realized it was her at first, and by the time he did it was too late. Though she didn't know it, she owned him.

The washer stopped. He jerked from his thoughts, gathered Micah's wet clothes and stuffed them into the nearest dryer. The quarters clinked noisily, their echo giving more import to their existence than usual. Like the echo of Caroline's door.

"Are you a Jedi?"

Herrick looked down and found one of the children staring up at him. The boy's eyes were large and his hair was thick and curly. In another life he'd have been painted as a cherub. "What?"

"Are you a Jedi?" the child repeated. "You look like one."

Out of touch, Herrick had no idea what a Jedi was, or if he resembled one. The reverence in the child's eyes made it clear it was something splendid so he went along. "Yes. Well spotted."

"I knew it!" The child was suddenly animated. "Where's your light saber? Can I see it?"

Herrick was spared having to answer when a dark skinned vampire with short cropped hair skidded through the doorway. He lifted his sunglasses and his eyes snapped to Herrick. "We got trouble at Benjamin's!" Then he turned and ran out the door again.

The boy's excitement seemed to grow. "Is he a Jedi, too?"

"Yes, of course." Herrick dumped the extra quarters in the child's surprised hands. "When your mother returns, tell her crude, tattooed friend that I've gone to Benjamin's." He stopped himself from adding "if". Micah wasn't callous enough to drain the woman's life when she had children so close by.



Benjamin's motel was at the far end of town, not that it was much of a town. Herrick had come there following Caroline's family; she was barely a baby then. He'd been more than a little surprised to find a local concentration of his own kind. Perhaps they unconsciously drew together, even while their conscious mind cried for solitude.

The shabby little town was perfect for them, though. The main attraction was Benjamin's vampire-friendly motel, with its bank of windowless rooms in the back and Benjamin himself. Herrick didn't know how many vampires he'd helped over the years, many of them fledglings whose masters had left them to stand on their own. Not to mention the food was easy. The town was small enough that wildlife was available on the fringes, while the highway brought in just enough visitors to keep the locals safe from those who preferred more human food and, should something go amiss, the cops were slow.

Or they were normally.

All three cars were already parked at the Rookwood Inn, lights flashing red and blue against the night sky. Herrick found Des standing a block away under a dark tree. "What's going on?"

Des's face was hard and furious. "They killed Benjamin."

Herrick choked on his response. *Who? Why? How?*

Though the questions remained unasked, Des answered anyway. "It was that fucker Claudius' goons. It had to be! Jorick found Benjamin in the office mangled and drained. He barely got the body out of the way before the fucking cops showed up."

Herrick put a hand to his head. "Who called them?"

"Someone else in the motel? I don't know! Fuck!"

Herrick's eyes turned to the motel and then back to his friend. He tried to think rationally. "Why would it be Claudius?"

"Because Arowenia and Jorick's human are both missing. Who else would take them?"

"Jorick has a human?" That was almost as shocking as the other news.

"Apparently. I don't know! Ask Oren about it! They're trying and get ahold of Elsa and see if she knows where they've been taken."

It was too much information, too fast. "I thought Elsa refused to help them anymore?"

"I don't know!" Des shouted. "Fuck!"

Micah was suddenly there. He skidded to a stop, a cigarette in his hand. "What in the hell is going on?"

Herrick took the helm. "Benjamin's been killed. Arowenia and Jorick's human are missing."

Micah's eyes bulged. "What the fuck? Benjamin? No, not- but-" He took a step backwards. "Who killed him? Was it that bastard Jorick? I know who he is, he's that Executioner-"

"Was," Herrick interrupted. "Long before you were born. And no, they think it was Claudius' underlings."

"Claudius. The dude with the chip and the ruffles?"

Des's hands compressed to tight fists. "That's him."

"Then we fuckin' kill Claudius!" Micah grabbed Herrick's arm and started to pull him away. He stopped when the other vampire resisted. "What the fuck are you waiting for?"

Herrick cleared his throat loudly. "Claudius is much older than you and there are things to do here."

"Like what?"

Herrick turned to Des. "Where is the body?"

"My house. I didn't know what else to do with it."

Herrick gave a satisfied nod. "Good. Come, then. We'll see to this first, then we can worry about what steps to take."

Micah's eyes bulged. "Are you serious? They just fucking killed Benjamin and you're worried about – what? Burying him? That can wait until tomorrow! Tonight we get blood!"

"Claudius' blood will keep until tomorrow. Besides, no one knows where he is. He has several dens. Do you plan to visit them all? That would take days at best. If they've taken Jorick's human, then Jorick will no doubt be on the hunt already. Let him do the legwork."

Des nodded. "Yeah, though he's wasting his time. His human is dead. The whole place reeks of blood, but there isn't any to be seen. Obviously they drained her and took the body as a trophy for Claudius."

Herrick turned suddenly thoughtful. "Jorick and Claudius would be an interesting match. They're very close in age. I can only imagine Jorick's fury if he cares at all for the human."

Micah exploded, "I can't believe we're having this fucking conversation! Who gives a shit about the human? They killed Benjamin!"

"Yes, Micah, we know." Herrick glanced towards the police cars. "I suggest we go before they notice us loitering. I don't want to be questioned."



Herrick washed his hands. The water was red. It swirled around the sink and down the drain. He finished and stared in the mirror. His face looked young, frozen forever in his early twenties, but his eyes were old. Too old.

Des and Micah waited in the backyard, their hands in their pockets and their eyes on the frosty ground. It hadn't rained here and the autumn leaves had been raked in crisp piles to create a bare patch of grass. They'd dug a trench, like a miniature moat. It was only a few inches deep but nearly eight inches wide. Instead of surrounding a castle, the miniature trench circled Benjamin, who looked as presentable as Herrick could manage. His face was torn and the side of his neck was ripped out, but the clotted gore had been neatly cleaned away and a scarf had gone a long way towards hiding his hurts.

"He looks... Nice." Des suggested without really looking.

"Yeah, whatever." Micah scuffed his feet in the leaves. "So now what?"

"Now would be a good time to remember him." Herrick looked to the east. *The sun will rise soon.* "Who would like to start?"

"I will." Micah took a step forward. "Benjamin was an okay guy, though he was kinda gross with his whisky and shit, and those sons of bitches who killed him are gonna fucking pay."

Herrick rolled his eyes impatiently. "That isn't exactly what I had in mind. Des, do you have something more appropriate?"

"Um, yeah. Benjamin was a good guy. Been awhile since we had one of the old poker nights. I've been thinking we needed to do it again soon, but I guess we won't get to now. I've been too busy with all this shit with Oren. I thought we had forever, you know?"

Before he could continue his cellphone rang; the dance rhythm seemed out of place at the solemn occasion. Des answered it quickly, nodded and then hung up. "That was Oren. Elsa won't help them, so we're trying alternate routes for information. I need to run if I'm going to meet up with them before sunrise. You guys can sleep here if you want after... you know." He motioned to Benjamin's prone form.

Micah looked suddenly hopeful. "You going to kill that bastard Claudius?"

“Not tonight, it’s just a meeting. Oren loves that crap.” Des checked his watch. “I have to go. Sorry.”

Herrick threw his hands up. “Of course, go. Micah and I will finish this.”

“Sorry,” Des repeated and then hurried towards the street and his car.

Herrick took a deep calming breath and looked towards the horizon again. Des was right, they had very little time. The sun would rise soon and cleanse the world.

“You gonna say something?”

Herrick looked at Micah in surprise. “Yes, I suppose I should.” He let his eyes settle on the dead body and tried to remember the old funeral rites, but they were lost to time. He barely remembered his birth language anymore.

He cleared his throat, as though it would make a speech easier. “Benjamin was an interesting man, to say the least. And though I didn’t expect to be here, I would not say it was because he lacked bravery. He was brave, but he was the kind of brave that stays behind and guards the house while the warriors go to battle. He was dependable and reliable and, though his words were gruff, I believe his heart was soft. He will be greatly missed, not only for the help he has provided to many over the last twenty or thirty years, offering them shelter, help and acceptance, but also as a recognizable figure around town.” A strange smile made Herrick’s eyes crinkle. “Even the mortals were beginning to notice he hadn’t changed. He had become a fixture, and there will be a Benjamin shaped hole in the world now that he is gone.”

Micah lit a cigarette and puffed on it. It was several minutes before he spoke. When he did, his voice was thick, “That was beautiful, man.”

“Thank you.” Herrick’s eyes skipped to the horizon again. A gold line appeared, like a crack between heaven and earth opening to take Benjamin home. “We had best go indoors, now.”

Micah nodded and grabbed the nearby shovel. He held it up, then dropped it again. “Fuck it, Des can get it.”



They watched through the window of the back bedroom as the sun crested the hill and the first rays spread across the cold grass. They backed away quickly, but not before Herrick saw the smallest of flames licking at Benjamin’s ugly Hawaiian shirt. He said a quick prayer, though he wasn’t sure to who, and asked that someone, somewhere take Benjamin into their everlasting care. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust, reclaimed by the sun they had long ago abandoned.

They hurried through the house and clunked down the stairs to the finished basement and Des’s bedroom. Without feeling, Herrick pointed to the bed. “You can have it. The floor is fine for me.”

“I’m not gonna argue.” Micah flashed him a fanged grin and peeled off his motorcycle boots.

Herrick found some extra pillows and made himself comfortable. When he closed his eyes he saw Benjamin’s lifeless body, the first rays of the sun gleaming golden on his pale skin. The image disappeared and suddenly he saw Caroline again. Tonight showed how fragile life was – even immortal life. He thought of Micah’s advice, “*Why don’t you just go knock on the door? What’s the worst that could happen?*”

Maybe he should. What was the worst that could happen?

In his mind he suddenly heard Des, his voice offhanded and matter of fact, “*His human is dead.*”

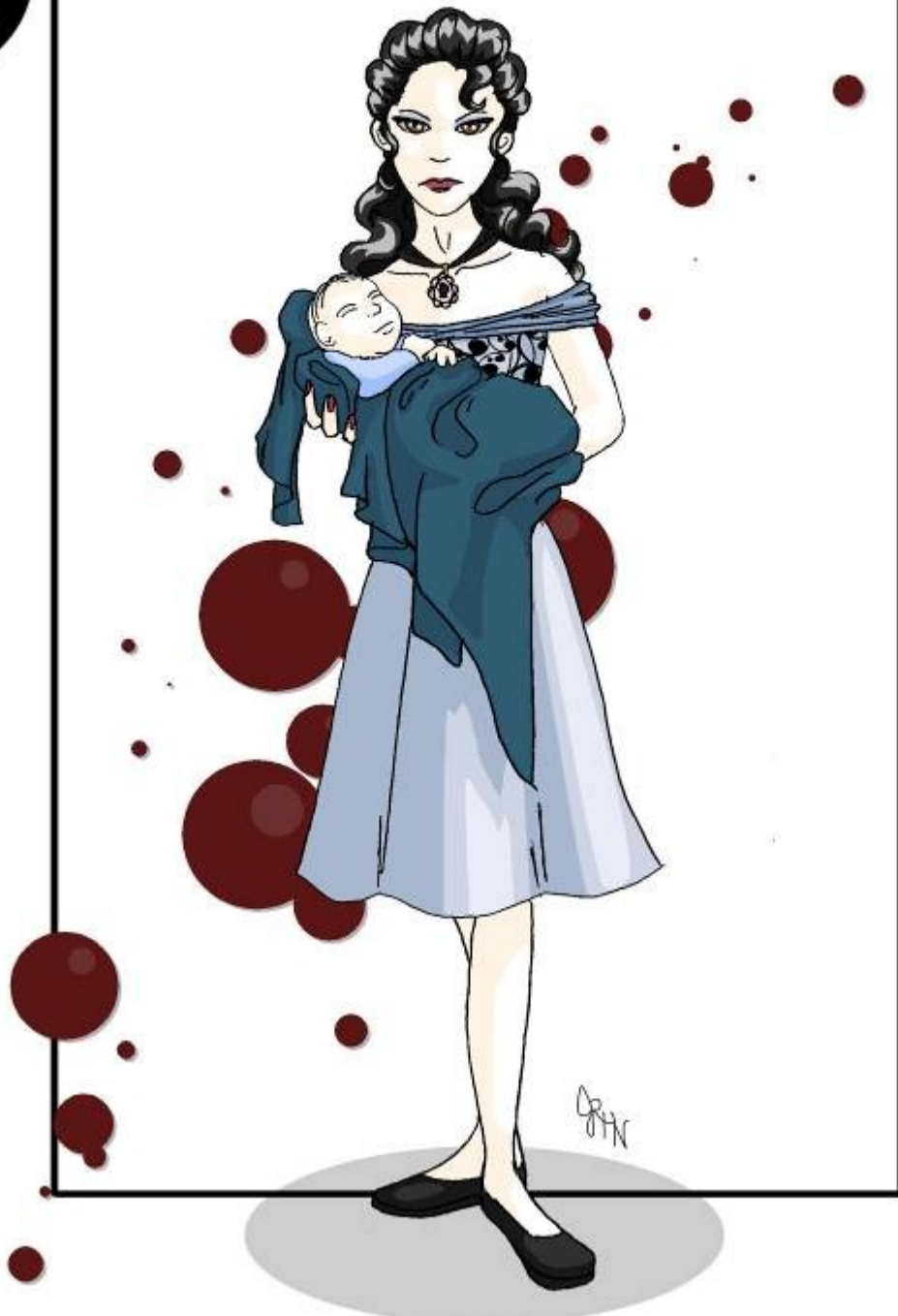
“*What’s the worst that could happen?*”

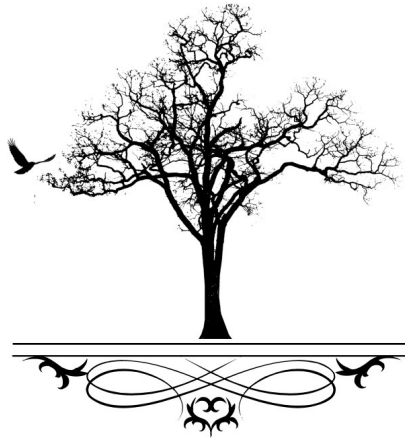
“*His human is dead.*”

No, now was not the time to talk to Caroline. Maybe when the fight was behind him, but not now. *Not yet.*



JESSLYNN





JESSLYNN

(You can find Jesslynn in *Shades of Gray & Brothers of Darkness*. Her story takes place on the Cotterill plantation in Virginia in January, 1820.)



Jesslynn peered through the window. Outside, the world was still and silent like an empty room. Snowflakes dropped from the sky and the dawn's feeble beams tried to slice through the mantle of clouds.

By contrast, morning was well under way inside. Warm smells drifted from the winter kitchen in the cellar. The slaves had already been at work for two hours. Breakfast would be ready soon and Jesslynn turned her thoughts to her family; or what was left of it.

A baby's wail broke through the house, shrill and unhealthy. The sound tore at her heart and she closed her eyes against despair. She could hear Nan's quick steps as she hurried to fetch the child and bring him down. Jesslynn straightened her spine and readied her face. The fruit of her womb might be weak, but she was strong.

A dark, wrinkled woman appeared with a squirming bundle in her arms. Without a word, Jesslynn took the baby and dismissed the slave. She turned dark eyes on her son and cooed to him softly. His small face was screwed up in misery but instead of bright red, his skin was pale like linen. Her chest tightened. She had seen that color before. It was the color of death.

Her eyes stole to the window and the family cemetery beyond. There were eight markers. The newest belonged to her mother-in-law, dead six months and good riddance. Next to her was Oren's father, Jesslynn's father-in-law. He'd been dead before she ever married into the family. It was the other stones that caused her heart to skip. They belonged to her children. Though she'd born eight, only two survived infancy; Alexander, who would be five in June, and Tristan, the baby in her arms. At six months, it was uncertain whether he would live to see his first birthday.

She looked from the stones to the naked vine that wound around the cemetery's fence; roses that her husband and their neighbor, Jorick Smit, had planted. When she thought of Jorick, she shivered. They'd planted those flowers in the dark. At first she'd thought it some old world superstition, but then she'd taken stock of him and paid attention. Her conclusion was drawn quickly; he was touched by demons. Demons that kept him from aging, growing weak, getting sick.

She looked down at the child in her arms and made up her mind.



Her husband stood in the snow, bundled up against the January wind. Strands of tawny blond hair escaped his ponytail to blow in his face. He stared at her. A mixture of horror and disbelief shown in his amber eyes.

“What you say is...” he broke off and shook his head.

“Is what? A sin? I am tired of righteousness if the bones of our children is all it rewards us with.”

“No. Impossible. I’ve told you before that it is your overwrought imagination. Jorick is not an agent of demons, nor a warlock, nor a wizard. He is as human as you or I.”

“Have you ever seen him in the sunlight?”

“Perhaps. I don’t remember.”

She narrowed her eyes shrewdly. “No, you haven’t, and neither have I. Neither have his slaves, or anyone else you could name. I’ve asked them, Oren. You must go now, before the sun can set, and catch him up. Reveal the truth of his secret deeds. The mark of the devil is on him. I feel in my heart that he is not human. You see that he does not age nor grow weak, nor sicken? He remains unchanged - not his hair, not his face, though it has been six years since he took the plantation from his uncle – if uncle the man was to him!”

“There are others who don’t sicken. Perhaps Jorick is blessed with a strong constitution?”

“No! You know as well as I! You have remarked on it before. You try always to pass it off as some casual observation, made in jest, though we know that is a falsehood, for you can sense the truth of the matter. It’s in his eyes, in the way his skin seems to gleam, in the way he moves and the way he talks; how he never opens his mouth all the way, as if he is afraid some secret will leak out. Don’t deny these proofs, my husband! You know them to be true!”

Oren’s shoulders sagged. “Yes,” he said softly. “You are right. There has always been something about him. But to suggest that he has a pact with the devil?” Oren closed his eyes against the idea. “If you are right and I catch him in some secret rite, then what?”

“You must demand he share the secret!” She broke off from adding “before it’s too late”, though it was on her face.

“What if he refuses?”

She caught Oren’s hands and gazed hard into his eyes. “Then you must make him!”

“How?”

“Must I think of everything?” She threw his hands away and turned her back on him to stare at the small, snowy cemetery. When she spoke again, her voice was calm, but not warm. “You owe this to your children and their future, Oren. You will find a way. You will make Jorick share this gift and you will bring it to us.”

“Yes, Jesslynn.”

Though his words were what she wanted to hear, his uncomfortable tone was not. “You’d better.” When he made no reply, she turned back to him. After glancing both ways to be sure they were unobserved, she brushed a quick kiss across his cheek. “Go now. The overseer can handle the slaves. Safe journey, my husband.”



It was early afternoon when Oren left. By dinner he had not returned. Jesslynn hid her fears behind a mask of stern indifference, though she couldn’t feign an appetite. Oren’s sister Torina sat at the far end of the table. As she ate, she chattered about the plans for her new dress. When no one answered her, she eventually fell into a pouty silence.

Alexander finished his meal and folded his hands primly in his lap. “Mother, where has Father gone?”

She fought to keep the apprehension from her voice. “To call on Mr. Smit.”

Torina cooed delightedly. “Will Mr. Smit be joining us this evening?”

Jesslynn cringed inside. Torina was as vapid and useless as her mother had been. “I can’t say.”

"I do hope so!" Torina patted her hair and bent to examine her reflection in a silver server. "I'm quite taken with him."

"I'm sure." The words were out before Jesslynn could stop them, but they made little difference. Torina had been in and out of six engagements. Perhaps Jorick Smit would be next. If they were lucky, Torina would actually make it to the altar this time.

Alexander looked at his empty plate. "May I be excused, Mother?"

"Yes. Go to your room and study your French lesson. You have yet to give me a sentence for the day."

The small boy looked on the point of arguing, but wisely snapped his mouth shut. With an exaggerated sigh, he climbed off the chair and scampered out of the room.

Torina blotted her lips with a napkin and dropped it on the table. "You're too strict with him sometimes, and others too lenient." Her nose wrinkled. "Children are such a bothersome trial. I can not understand why you and my brother insist on having them, one after another."

Jesslynn's face went hard. "I imagine you would feel that way as you have no prospects for a husband or a home of your own with which to birth a child in."

Torina's eyes flamed, but her voice was honey, "You have misheard, dear sister. The trouble is that the prospects are too numerous. But that is bound to happen to a woman who has been blessed with the beauty and temperament to attract men." She looked suddenly sorrowful. "Oh! I must apologize. Of course you would know nothing about the trials and tribulations of beauty and warmth. I imagine that's why you accepted the first hand that was offered to you."

Jesslynn ground her teeth. "Better to take the first than to grow old a spinster."

Torina batted her eyes. "Perhaps that was a concern for you. However, it's something I doubt I need to fear." She swept up from the table in a swish of long skirts. "When Oren returns, tell him I'd like to speak with him about some *important* matters." Then she disappeared from the room.

Jesslynn glared after her. When Oren returned, Torina would be the last person he'd see!

Only he didn't return. Not that night, or the next morning. The day dragged past, cold and grey, and still there was no sign of him. As the sun set, Jesslynn's uneasiness turned to fear, and she sent a rider to fetch her brother.

She met him at the door. Fabian shook the snow from his boots and studied her. "What is so urgent that I must be called away from my dinner?"

"It's Oren." She laid a hand to his elbow and steered him towards the parlor. "Come, I'll tell you everything."

They stood in front of the fireplace and the story tumbled out in hushed tones. When it was over, Fabian sulked. "You believe that Jorick Smit is an agent of the devil, and yet you expect me to go to his house, alone, and seek out your husband? If he caught Jorick in some unholy ritual then no doubt he is dead."

Dead.

The word was one she'd imagined before; heavy and dark it dropped like lead through her thoughts. She tried to ignore it. "Do you expect me to go? A woman, traveling alone in the dark?"

"You could send a slave?"

"And have them learn the secret?" She grabbed his hands. "Do this for me, Fabian, and if he has been successful I will share with you! Think of it, to never grow sick or frail!"

Fabian whined, "What if Jorick has killed him? Would you lose a husband and a brother both?"

She narrowed her eyes at him. "Then be smarter than Oren. Be quicker and quieter! Go and look, only. If you do not see him, return to me and we will discover some plan together."

Fabian argued for half an hour more, then gave in. Jesslynn watched him go, and paced the floor while he was gone. When he returned, she ran to the door, to find him alone.

"Well?"

Fabian pulled off his winter gear, scowling. "The slaves said that Oren and Mr. Smit left just after dark and have not yet returned. They say that your husband was alive and well when last they saw him, though Jorick was unusually grim and severe."

Jesslynn clutched his arm. "Perhaps he has taken him to see the source of his secret?"

"Perhaps." Fabian shook her off. "And now that I have run your errand I'm hungry. You took me from my meal, so I expect you to provide me with another one."

"Yes, yes," she gestured him towards the kitchen, her thoughts elsewhere.



Despite the word of the slaves, Oren did not return. Fabian ate and drank. At midnight he helped himself to the guest bedroom. It was three days later when he finally went home, and Oren was still missing. Jesslynn sent messengers with questions. The slaves said the same thing: Jorick and Oren had gone but not returned.

She feared the worst.

After one week she forced her brother to accompany her. After sunset, they ventured to the Smit plantation. The dark young woman who answered the door tried to keep them out. Jesslynn barged past her. With Fabian at her heels, she swept from room to room, but found only shadows. The beds were untouched, and the drawing room was cold.

The slave woman followed their inspection, wringing her hands and begging them to hurry and go. "If the master comes back he won't be pleased!"

They were in the master bedroom when Jesslynn spun on her heel to face her, "When will he be back? Tonight?"

The fear in the young woman's eyes doubled and she looked away. "I don't rightly know, Ma'am. Maybe tonight, maybe a month. The Master is often away on errands."

"What errands?"

The slave woman took a step back, her hands twisting in her apron. Different fears warred on her face, and her voice dropped low, "He ain't right, Mistress. He ain't... he ain't right. You best to go 'for he comes back. He has an awful mean temper. He don't like no one to peer into his business, Ma'am."

"I do not fear him." She swept her eyes around the room; from the heavy wardrobe to the four poster bed hung in garish, red curtains. "What errands does he leave on?"

"I don't know, Ma'am. He gets a letter, then most times he orders the horse to be made ready and he and the messenger go. No warnin'."

"What do these letters say?"

The woman's eyes got bigger. "I don't rightly know, Ma'am. I can't read, and even if I could he burns them."

Jesslynn grunted in dissatisfaction. "And did he receive such a letter this time?"

"No, ma'am. Not this time. Like I told the Master there," she nodded to Fabian. "Master Cotterill came and they spent the night locked away. The next night they left as soon as it was dark and they ain't been back since." Her voice turned pleading. "Please, Ma'am. Please go home quick. Go home and forget what I told you."

"I told you," Fabian said peevishly. "This was a wasted trip."

Jesslynn stepped close to the slave, her eyes narrowed and her voice hard to cover her own fear. "The moment they return you are to send a messenger to me, do you understand? No matter the time of day or night. Otherwise, I will mention that you've gossiped about your master's business behind his back. As he values his privacy, I'm sure he will be most grieved to hear of it!"

The woman squealed. Jesslynn grabbed up her skirts and swirled from the room with the command, "Come, Fabian."

Fabian helped her into the carriage and then climbed in next to her. At a word, the driver took up the reins with a "Yawh."

Fabian seemed amused. "Will you really betray her to Mr. Smit and his temper, I wonder?"

"Perhaps." Jesslynn stared at nothing, her expression cold. *I am strong. I am fierce. I am resolute. I am strong.*

"Really? How unlike you. You're too soft with your own and I can't imagine you jeopardizing another's."

She dismissed his concern. "Mr. Smit is softer. A fearful slave would never have spoken to us unless spoken to, and certainly would not have betrayed such confidences."

Fabian leaned back in the seat. "Or perhaps he's crueller and she's more afraid of him and what he might do if he knows you've been there. She may have told you so that you'd leave before he arrived and found you in his chambers." A wry smile twisted his lips. "I can't imagine that your husband would appreciate such a visit, either."

"Then he should have come home!" The veneer slipped away and her terrors shown on her face. "What if he never returns? What will I do?"

Fabian shrugged. "Remarry. You'd be a wealthy widow. Mr. Smit is unwed."

The slap was loud. Fabian put a hand to his stinging cheek and scowled.

"Don't ever suggest such a filthy thing, again. If Oren is gone, it is his doing. I would no more marry the instrument of my husband's destruction than I would throw my child to wolves! I am not Torina! I do not hand my affection to the highest bidder!"

Fabian smirked and relaxed back into the seat. "She only does so for a short while, usually an hour at a time."

She should have slapped him again for his crude remark. Instead, she grunted her agreement.



"Is Father coming home?"

Jesslynn caught her breath and tucked the blanket under Alexander's chin. "Of course. I told you, he and Mr. Smit have gone to Charleston on business. They'll be home soon." She pressed a kiss to her son's cheek and inhaled his sweet, innocent scent. *How much longer can I continue this charade?*

She closed the door and found Torina in the hallway, frivolously dressed in her new skirt and matching shirt waist. "You expect us to believe that story?"

"Yes." Jesslynn answered coldly and made to move past her. Torina caught her arm and held her back.

"He always tells me when he's going somewhere and asks if I want him to bring anything back. He wouldn't go without speaking to me first and telling me goodbye. Why would this time be any different?"

Jesslynn jerked away and glared, her lip curled in fury. "How should I know! Perhaps because you're his sister and not his wife! Now get out of my way!"

Shocked, Torina stepped back, and Jesslynn stormed by her, anger pulsing in her veins. She'd had enough of her, of Fabian, of all of them!

She changed into her night dress and shut herself in her room, Tristan in the bed next to her. She picked up her embroidery and worked without really seeing it. Inside, her mind clicked away, making plans. If Jorick returned without Oren she would confront him. She would take Fabian and five of the most able bodied field slaves. She'd demand answers, and she would get them!

Tristan cried; a soft, mewling whimper. She scooped him up and cradled him close to her. He was so pale and so weak. She tried to nurse him, but he refused to drink, only made those soft, sickening noises. She clutched him tightly. "Damn it! Where are you Oren? Why haven't you come home? Why haven't you brought the secret? Where are you?"

The dog barked. She stood and crossed to the window. Torina stood before the porch in the arms of a man. Jesslynn couldn't see his face and she didn't want to. She made a noise of disgust and moved back to the bed. *We will never be free of the harlot!*

She heard a raised voice; the man. She glanced towards the window, but from her vantage point she could only see darkness. *It's no matter. Let them fight.*

And then Torina screamed.

Jesslynn laid Tristan aside and hurried back to the window. She drew aside the curtain to see Torina struggling with-

No.

She dropped the curtain and stepped back. She didn't want to know who he was. Let him do as he pleased with her. It was something she gave away for free to other men. Let this man take his share, too. Let her scream. Let her lay in the cold, bruising grass and know misery for once in her selfish, pampered, spoiled life. Let her suffer.

Jesslynn climbed back into bed and pulled her baby to her. Torina screamed again and again and Jesslynn closed her eyes tightly against the sound. Tristan cried for her, though Jesslynn shooshed and soothed him.

A door banged. Feet ran across the floor. The house slaves were awake. She heard the front door open and she heard Nan cry, "Lordy! What have you done? What-" her words were choked off in a terrified cry.

Jesslynn squeezed her eyelids tighter. Where was Oren? He was the Master of the house! He should handle this! He should – but he was gone. Gone and useless! And what use was he when he was there? He was a body, at least. A body who could stand at the door with a rifle. Now someone else must hold the rifle and she must stand behind them.

She tucked the blankets into a hurried nest, lest Tristan roll away, and dressed quickly. There were more footsteps, scurrying, hurrying, running to the scene in the front of the house. She could see light flare; a torch. One of the slaves shouted, and then the gun went off.

Tristan wailed and Alexander was suddenly there, his eyes wide in his terrified face. "What is it?"

She pulled him into a hug and squeezed him tight. Her son. Her only son that would survive. Reluctantly, she released him. "I don't know yet. Stay here with your brother and stay quiet."

He nodded, and she took a last look at them before she hurried out the door.

The house was dark, and she had no candle. She stubbed her toe on a heavy sideboard and banged her knee into a low stool. There was no time to stop. She could hear someone shouting outside. She could hear Torina screaming again.

Two of the kitchen girls stood on the porch in their nightdresses, their eyes wide and their terrified fingers pointing away into the shadows near the carriage house. One of them held a torch. The flickering flame threw harsh, stark shadows. Henry, one of the slaves, stood on the bottom step, the rifle to his shoulder. The barrel shook in time with his hands. At his feet, red against the snow, was a splash of blood. It trailed away into the darkness, mingled with drag marks, disappearing towards the carriage house.

Jesslynn made the sign of the cross. The devil had come for Torina at last. For one wild moment she thought again to leave her, but where was Nan? The slave woman had been good to her and to her children. She didn't deserve to suffer for Torina's sins.

"What are you waiting for?" Jesslynn demanded. She grabbed the torch from the trembling slave and marched forward. The women wailed, and Henry hurried after her, the gun up.

The night was cold. The stars were tiny and brittle, like bits of broken glass. The snow was frosted over and crunched under her feet. The heavy silence was broken by soft, guttural noises and something that sounded wet and sloppy. The doors of the carriage house were open and the closer Jesslynn drew, the louder it grew.

And then she saw it.

A man lay near the doors, his body broken and crumpled. It was Torina's lover. Blood stained the snow around him. Just inside the carriage house crouched Torina. Her hair had fallen around her face like a shower of flames. Her dress was torn and bloody. A gaping wound on her neck bled freely. More horrifying, she held an unconscious Nan in her arms. Her mouth was fastened around the old woman's

neck. The torchlight shone in her green eyes and Jesslynn bit back a scream at what she saw there; lust, hunger and madness.

“Do not enter!”

It was Oren.

She pulled to a stop, the torch held high. Slowly, Oren stepped from inside the shadowy building. He was dressed as she’d last seen him, only without his coat or hat. His long blond hair flapped free in the wind. Blood ran down his chin and stained his shirt and hands.

“God save us!” Jesslynn made the sign of the cross and moved back. Oren stared at her, the expression on his face a mixture of sorrow and fear. He took a step towards her and she backed away. The torch shook in her hands and slipped from her fingers. The flame burned for a minute, throwing long, black shadows, and then it sputtered and died.

She ran.

She heard the gun go off behind her, but she didn’t stop. The two girls were still on the porch. She’d nearly reached them when he called to her, “Jesslynn.”

The girl’s shocked expressions made her stop. She looked over her shoulder and then looked away quickly. His face was clean and his shirt was gone. He stood half naked in the snow, his tawny hair whipping around his face.

“Go inside,” she ordered the girls. “Alexander and Tristan are in the master bedroom. Go to them and stay until I come for you.”

They babbled incoherently and fled into the safety of the house. She could hear Oren’s footsteps crunching through the snow, moving towards her. She couldn’t bring herself to face him.

At last he stood behind her. She could feel him there, so close that his hot breath warmed the back of her neck. The proximity tightened her spine and her shoulders like a fist. She couldn’t move.

“Jesslynn.” Her name was more a breath than a word. Softly, he touched her cheek. His warm fingers trailed down her neck to her shoulder and she shivered. “You wanted the gift, Jesslynn, and I’ve brought it.” His voice turned brittle. “Look at me, wife. This is what you wanted. Look at it.”

Almost against her will she turned and stared into his face. It was different. He was different. His golden eyes seemed to glitter with an intensity they’d never held before and when he opened his mouth she saw the fangs.

“God preserve us!” She fell back. “What have you done? What have you become? What have you done?”

He closed the gap between them and cradled her face in his hand, forcing her to look at him. “I did as you asked. You wanted his secret and here it is. Do you still want it?”

A twig snapped. She looked over his shoulder to see Torina hovering in the shadows. She wiped the blood from her face with a gory hand and swayed on her feet. A maniacal smile spread over her face and long, shiny fangs glittered in her mouth.

Whether gift or curse, he had given it to his sister first.

In that moment she hated Torina more than she had ever hated anyone.

“You shared it with her?”

There was regret in his voice. “I had no choice. I – I couldn’t stop. The man – his blood. I hurried to come home to you. I did not drink first. She did not know me. She screamed. I – I did not mean to bite her. But then... I couldn’t let her die. She is my sister. There was no choice.”

No choice. No choice but to save his sister. She buried her fears behind her fury. “Will it save our son?”

Oren hesitated. “Yes. But Jorick said we must not use it on the children, not until they’re grown. Once they drink they will never age, never grow.”

“Never die?”

He nodded uncertainly and she focused again on Torina. The redhead stumbled backwards and fell to the ground on her knees. Her eyes squeezed shut and she held herself as if trying to stop her insides from spilling out into the snow. A high, horrible sound issued from her lips.

“It is the change,” he said softly. “There is pain. It comes and goes, then disappears in a day.”

Torina threw her head back and howled. She fell onto her back and writhed, her arms around her mid section. Her bloody hands left red, wet spots on her new dress. Blood. Pain. The mark of the devil.

And then Jesslynn pictured Tristan.

“Yes,” she whispered, her voice almost inaudible. “Yes. Give it to me.”

Oren crushed her to him. She could feel his heart pounding against her, the warmth of his hard body, the texture of his hands as he pulled her head to one side, exposing her throat. He brought his lips to her neck. His breath was hot. He hovered, lips brushing her skin, and then, he bit.

Jesslynn held back a scream. She would not howl like Torina. She would not draw attention.

I am strong. I am fierce. I am resolute.

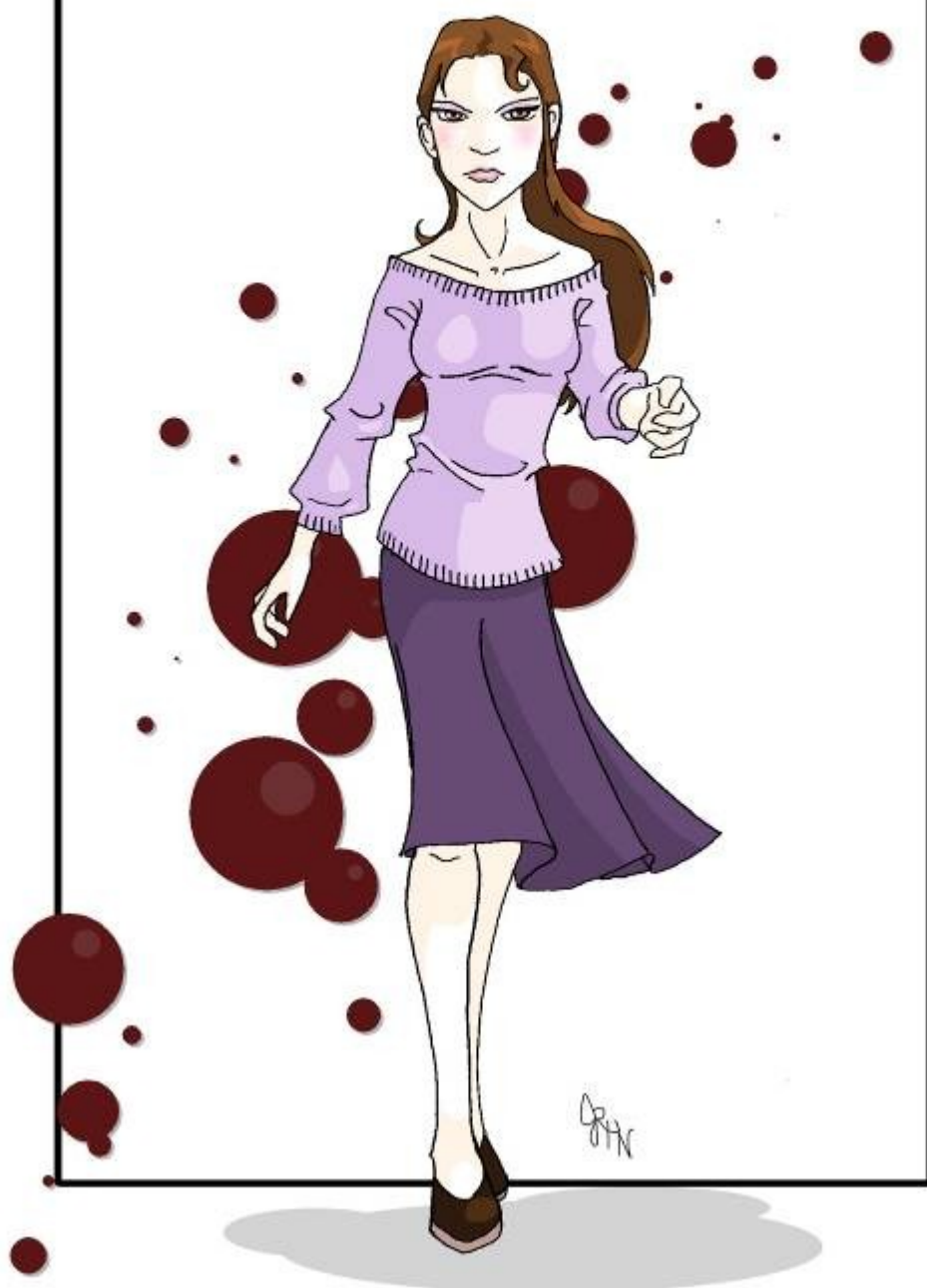
I will save my children.

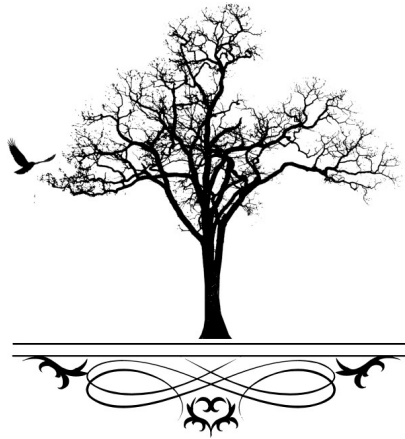
Like me, they will be strong.

Forever.



KARISS





KARISS

(You can find Kariss in *Legacy of Ghosts* and Kolli in *Masque of the Vampire*. Her story takes place in Iceland and bounces back and forth between the early 1820's [when she is with her mother] and 1784 during the Mist Hardships [the flashbacks])



“Who are you?”

Kariss ground her teeth. “I’m your granddaughter, Pala, remember?”

The old woman nodded and Kariss relaxed a little. She masqueraded as her own fictional child, a young woman who had never been born and never would be, because how could she explain things to her dying mother otherwise? What story could excuse her own youthful appearance except the truth.

The truth.

Truth was a word that meant dark shadows and screams in the night. It wasn’t the thing her mother needed right now.

Her mother coughed, the signal she had something to say. Slowly, she worked her voice up and croaked out, “Kariss was a good girl. Did you know that? She was always a good girl. Until she disappeared.” The old woman squinted and peered through the gloom. “Where were you when she disappeared.”

“I wasn’t born yet.” Another lie; keep up the façade, pretend to be Kariss’s daughter so that the old woman would know that someone cared, that someone thought of her. But the lie still tasted bitter. “That’s when she met my father. I’ve told you that, Grandmother.”

“Hum. Maybe you have. I don’t think so well these days.” The old woman coughed again, long and ragged. “Where is your grandfather? Where is Vagn?”

“He’s dead.”

The cold wind rattled the house and Kariss shivered, more from habit than from cold. The cold didn’t bother her anymore, not since the darkness had taken her. The darkness stole many things from her, including the sun. If only it had taken her heart with it. Then, she wouldn’t have to hide in the shadows and watch her mother die.

“It was during the Móðuharðindin, that’s when she left. Have I told you about that? The livestock died. Everything died. Kolli died, and Kariss disappeared. Her brothers looked for her, but they’re gone now. Where did they go?”

“Manitoba,” Kariss answered. That was what the weathered letter next to the bed said. It seemed that everyone had gone to Manitoba.

“Yes, yes. That’s right. My sons have made lives in another place, except for Styrr and Athan. The famine took them. Athan was Kariss’s twin, did you know?”

His name brought with it a pair of laughing blue eyes and a head of curly brown hair. A crooked smile beamed at Kariss from the memories and her chest tightened painfully. “Yes.”

“He was killed by a man who wanted his food, but he didn’t have any. I can’t remember the man’s name now. It was so long ago. But that man’s wife died and I always thought that drove him insane. Athan was a good boy and he knew it. There was no bad blood between them. It was the loss and the hunger. It makes people do things.”

Kariss nodded wordlessly. She’d imagined his death a hundred times, and each scenario was worse than the one before.

“I named Athan and Kariss after the Kappas. You don’t know them, they left, went home or somewhere better. They stayed with Fjola that summer. They had such lovely names.” She broke off into a cough. “They’re gone now. Everyone is gone now. So many have left. There will be nothing left. Even Kariss has left.”

“I’m here, Grandmother.” She took her mother’s withered hand in hers and squeezed it softly. The return pressure was light and fluttery, like a butterfly. So weak.

“Your hand’s cold, child! Cold like the wind.” She closed her tired eyes and murmured softly, “Cold.”

Kariss touched her mother’s withered cheek, so different from her memories. In her memories her mother was stern and firm with bright, flashing eyes and a temper to match. It was only when Kariss’s father kissed her that she softened. And then she would smack him and tell him to behave. “We have enough children!” she’d say and point to whichever was nearby. “Do you want another one like that one?”

Forty years ago, watching her parents had been like peering into her own future, only instead of Vagn it would be Kolli. Kolli would come home and she would point to one of the children and say, “Do you want another one like that one?”

No. She didn’t want that. Or she thought she didn’t.



No one knew where Andrei came from. He breezed into town just as the Mist Hardships were at their worst. He was exotic and intoxicating, and he stole much of Kolli’s attention. Then came the news that Kolli and six others were killed in an accident.

When Athan told Kariss, her knees gave out. He picked her up and cradled her while she cried. Her words were thick with misery. “Not Kolli. No, not Kolli.”

“He wasn’t the only one,” her brother reminded her gently.

The others didn’t matter. Why didn’t Athan understand that? “Not Kolli.”

Athan carried her to the house. Her mother met them at the door. Her face said she’d already heard. She laid a rough hand on Kariss’s shoulder. “I’m sorry.”

Kariss cried harder. What did sorry do? It didn’t bring her future back to life!

The moon was full when he came to her. She heard his whisper in the winter mist and rose, half fearful and half hopeful. Though she bundled up, the night was cold. She glanced up, hoping for stars, but there were only clouds. The lava and the gas still belched from Laki and she covered her nose to hide from the thick air.

And there he was, a lone figure in the snow.

“Kolli!”

She ran to him, but stopped short. It was him, but it wasn’t. He was wrong. His eyes were too bright, his hair too shiny, his skin too smooth. She took a step back, suddenly afraid. He smiled.

His teeth were too white; too sharp.

Like fangs.

She screamed. He caught her in his arms and hauled her away from the house. He whispered soothing words and they seeped into her brain. Andrei was in the hollow just beyond the hill. He held out his arms in welcome.

"Welcome."

The word whispered through her brain and she trembled. She felt him run through her mind like white lightning. He withdrew and her trembling legs folded on themselves. She landed on her knees in the dirty snow.

"She is worthy."

Kolli hurried to her and she flinched away. Terror shook her lips as she whispered, "You're dead. They said you were dead."

"No, Kariss. Andrei saved me, and he can save you, too." He took her hands in his. "If you accept it and swear yourself to him, he can give you ever lasting life. You will never grow sick, or old, or hungry. It's true freedom."

Freedom.

It was a beautiful word, but it was a lie. There was no freedom. It was only enslavement of another kind; forty years of enslavement to the darkness, to Andrei's whims, to blood.

A tear slipped from her eye and she caught it on her finger tips. The old riddle came to mind, one her brother had asked her: I was born in your eyes, live on your cheeks, and die on your lips. What am I?

You are a tear, but what am I?

What am I?

The answer was a single word; one horrible word that she refused to think about. If she could only shut it out, perhaps it would go away. Maybe it would all go away.

Only, it wouldn't.

There was a sound; a footfall. Soft and muted in the snow. She stiffened and sniffed the air. The familiar smells of home were there. Under them was something else equally familiar. Musky, heady.

He is here.

She stood quickly. Her mother stirred in her sleep, as if she sensed the intrusion, but she didn't wake. Kariss fixed her blankets with trembling hands, then hurried to the door. She flung her cloak over her shoulders as she plunged out into the night.

The sky spread above, strewn in crystal clear diamonds. The salty tang of the ocean filled her nose. In days gone by the cold would have stung her cheeks. Now it only caressed them like the cool hands of a lover.

"Kariss."

He was suddenly in front of her. His pale face gleamed in the moonlight and his angry eyes glittered with the light of a thousand stars. The same eyes she'd seen on that long ago night under the full moon.

Her breath caught and his name came to her lips like a worried sigh, "Kolli. You found me."

"Of course I found you. I knew where you'd be." He reached for her. At the last second the caress turned into a slap that made her ears ring. "What did Andrei tell you? It's one of the rules, you can never go back! Someone might recognize you!"

She stumbled back, hand to her face. "She's my mother, and she is dying all alone!"

"As did my mother, and my sisters and your brothers and countless others. We gave them up when we accepted his blood. That was the price we paid for this freedom."

"What freedom?" she asked bitterly. "To wander the nights eternal while all we once knew withers? What freedom is that?"

"The freedom of life." He caught her and pulled her to him. She resisted, her spine straight, but the familiar warmth of his arms softened her. "We are alive, Kariss. Alive and together." He nuzzled her neck and his voice dropped to a whisper. "Unless you anger him. I'm - I'm sorry for being harsh, but what would I do if he punished you? What if he..." he choked off, but she knew the rest.

What if he took back the life he'd given?

She found no words, only stood wrapped in his arms and the cold wind.

He let her go and took her hand. His eyes searched the landscape around them and a faint smile played on his lips. "Do you remember when we were young?" He prodded the snow with his boot. "Do you remember how we used to wait for the first snowfall? And when it came, like a blanket to cover the world, how we used to run through it? Do you remember how we used to make angels? And then the spring would bring the sun back and melt it all away."

"Yes, I remember."

He breathed deeply, as though inhaling the memory. "What will you do now? Will you share immortality with her?"

Both the question and answer made her stomach clench. "No. She's too old and frail. Her mind is gone. I doubt even the blood would bring it back."

"I am sorry."

And she knew he was. If she closed her eyes and concentrated on the tiny pulse of him in her mind, she could feel his sorrow, like an aching tooth. He was sorry for her and for himself, and so was she.

He let go of her hand and stepped back. "Take tonight but no more. You've been here a week already and we can't risk any more. Tomorrow when the sun sets we must leave. Andrei is waiting."

"Did he send you after me?"

"He didn't need to, but yes. Our blood debt is unpaid. Until it is, he owns us. You know that as well as I."

He turned away and started up the hill. After a handful of steps he stopped and turned back. "Only tonight, Kariss. Tomorrow we have to go back."

Though she nodded, it wasn't in agreement.



The house should have seemed warm, but it didn't. Andrei's blood had taken that, too. She sat next to her mother's bed and watched her sleep.

She remembered the rest of that long ago night. Intoxicated with his blood, she'd run back to the house. Her feet failed her and she dropped. Fire sliced through her. The pain would pass and she would run again, as if hell's demons followed her.

And maybe they had.

She banged into the house. The door left open as she stumbled to her mother's bed. Mother could make it all right. She could take away the burning pain, the terrors screaming in her brain. She could save her.

Kariss fell on her knees next to the bed. Under her heavy gaze, her mother stirred in her sleep and muttered, "Vagn, tend the fire."

Nonsense from her dreams.

Kolli's footsteps were soft. He stopped behind Kariss and laid a hand on her shoulder. "Come. Pack your things so we can go. Andrei is impatient. Everything will be better now. You'll see. We'll be happy."

Happy. Kolli had been wrong. It had been so long since she'd felt happy that she'd forgotten how.



She stared through the darkness and listened to the winter wind howl. It was a lullaby for the damned and she knew the words by heart. She knew the empty, aching darkness it screamed about.

Her mother coughed and she turned her eyes to her. She watched her chest rise and fall and listened to the heavy, labored breaths. How many more would there be? A hundred? Half a dozen?

The rasping breaths were torture. The sluggish heart beats were agony. It could go for days, for nights, for weeks. She could linger, slowly decaying, while Kariss sat at her side, forever young, forever whole, forever safe.

How much more could she stand?

She brushed her mother's gray hair from her face and she woke. She fixed Kariss with a pair of watery blue eyes and asked weakly, "Who are you?"

No more.

A single tear slipped down her cheek. She met the blurry eyes and focused on them; focused on the feeble mind behind them. "Sleep. Sleep and dream of better days. Dream of your husband and your children when life was sunny."

Her mother's eyelids sagged, and then dropped. Kariss bit her lip until she tasted her own blood. This was not the mother of her memories. Gone was the stern face, the flashing eyes, the quick temper. This was a feeble woman waiting for the angel of death to take her away. If he refused, then so be it. She would play his role.

She leaned over the sleeping woman and breathed in her leathery, sick bed scent. Gently, she turned her mother's head to one side, exposing her wrinkled neck. Her lips hovered over the pulsing vein.

"Goodnight, Mamma. Sleep and be free."

She struck.

Her mother's eyes went wide. Her whole body jerked, suddenly animated. Kariss pressed her down into the bed and drank. The hot blood filled her mouth. She swallowed it, mouthful after mouthful. Her mother's feeble limbs waved once, twice, then fell still, too weak to fight, and still Kariss drank. She reached for her mother's memories, buried under layers of too much hardship. She sorted through them, sifting, seeking. And there it was.

The weak sun shone, giving its final farewell before it left for its winter exile. The snow sparkled. A bird called, loud and harsh. Kariss stared through eyes that weren't her own; they were her mother's eyes. She looked at the assorted children that peppered the wintry landscape. They ran and laughed. They fell and rolled and made angels in the snow. They were all good children, or as good as they could be. All too thin and too loud, as children were wont to be. She didn't have much in the world but she had them and Vagn and so she was happy.

Happy. That feeling Kariss had forgotten.

The scene faded. Kariss fought to hold it, but it ebbed away with her mother's life. The old woman fell still on the bed and there was only blackness inside her head. Black and cold like the winter night.

Kariss pulled away and wiped tears and blood from her face. The old woman stared back at her with wide, glassy eyes. The wound on her neck bled and scarlet blossomed on the pillow.

Kariss swept from the house and into the night. As if he'd known what she'd do, Kolli stood nearby, waiting. She stopped next to him and he took her hand. His eyes moved to the stars and he said softly, "Aren't they beautiful? I remember when we used to lay in the snow and try to count them. It seems so long ago, yet nothing has changed."

Her voice was wet with tears. "You're wrong Kolli. Everything has changed."

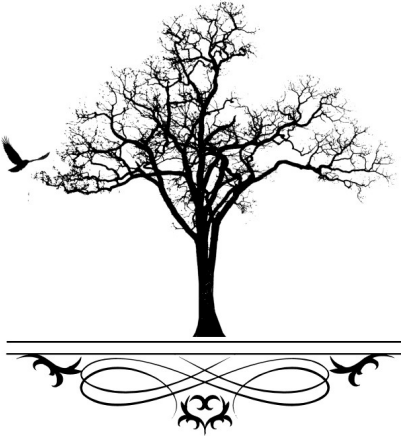
"No, Kariss. it's only we who have changed."

In that moment she understood the truth. *You can never go back.* It wasn't a rule meant to protect yourself from discovery, but to protect your heart. You could travel to the places of your childhood and drink in the faces of those you'd once loved, but it could never be the same. It wasn't that they had changed, but that *you* had changed. So long as you stayed away, you could tell yourself that you were the same, but when you stood face to face with the past, you'd find only the dark, ugly truth and all the illusions would melt away, like Kariss's forgotten happiness and the lost angels in the snow.



KATEESHA





KATEESHA

(You can find Kateesha in *Brothers of Darkness*, *Shades of Gray* & *Legacy of Ghosts*. Her story begins in May, 1868, roughly three years after the American Civil War, and takes place in Missouri, Iowa and Arkansas.)



Kateesha and Daniel steered their horses through the trees. The night clung to their shoulders like the black cloaks they wore, and they moved through it wordlessly. Ahead, shafts of moonlight danced into a clearing. Kateesha stopped and threw back her hood. Her dark skin gleamed and her mahogany eyes skimmed the surroundings.

“I can smell them.”

Her partner reined his horse to a stop and looked left to right, his eyes invisible beneath his hood. Though she couldn’t see them, she knew them. She’d gazed into them more than once, watched as his pupils flared and shrank with blood lust. They made her think of another set of eyes; eyes so dark they seemed black, fringed in heavy lashes and shimmering with a thousand demons.

Jorick.

He’d been her partner so many times, in more ways than one. They’d come from the old world together, just her, him and their master. She’d sworn an oath of blood to them both, though she knew she would break it a thousand times over if Jorick told her to. On his word, she’d betray Malick and damn the consequences.

She thought suddenly of her master. Though the ancient vampire was shorter than she was, he seemed a giant. His long beard and flowing hair were the color of fresh snow, and his eyes were like staring into the heart of a lightning storm. When she’d last seen him, he’d sat at a long table and glanced absently at a piece of parchment. “It appears we have a coven in Arkansas that has overstepped their bounds. My daughter, you and Daniel will bring these wayward children back to us so that I may chastise them myself.” A dark look came from one of the council members and Malick added, “Gently, of course.”

“Of course, Father.” Though they used those titles, the relationship was not of human birth. Rather, he was her father in blood; her father in darkness. The mysterious man who’d swept through the brothel and brought her an immortal kiss, promising her a new life and a mate for eternity.

Jorick.

“Where are they?”

Daniel's question brought her back to the task at hand. "Near." She motioned towards the source of the scent. "It appears they've chosen to gather in the woods. However, their den is not far from here, if our information is correct." She spurred on her horse, "Giddyup, Aethenoth."

The animal whinnied and followed her directions at an easy pace. Kateesha breathed in deeply, as if seeking assurance. Yes, she could smell them still. Five men, or the remnants of them, now made immortal. They gathered around a campfire, no doubt more for comfort than for warmth or light. Beneath their scent was the smell of human blood from more than one source. They'd made their meal and either kept the corpses or neglected to clean themselves.

The camp fire was suddenly visible between the trees and she slowed her horse to a walk. Old leaves crunched beneath his hooves and small animals scurried away. Though vampires could move silently, the horses couldn't.

She signaled to Daniel and they stopped and dismounted. She tugged a sword from her saddle and motioned him to do the same. She hid the weapon under her heavy black cloak and crept forward. As they drew closer, she could see five figures huddled around the fire. They wore tatty, stained gray uniforms, relics of the newly ended war. Beards sprouted from their chins and faces, clotted with gore and blood. Seven bodies lay crumpled on the ground around them. Five wore the Union blue. The other two had dark skin and were dressed as civilians, or more likely ex slaves. All of their throats were identically torn out. The youngest, a boy of perhaps fourteen, still twitched. His eyes rolled in his head and his blood dyed his shirt crimson.

Daniel laid a hand to Kateesha's arm. She stopped, an annoyed question in her eyes.

"Perhaps I should speak with them?" he suggested.

"Why?"

The word was cold, and he shivered under its power. "Because you're a woman. Few men take orders from ladies."

His reason was a lie and they both knew it. It wasn't her sex they might take exception to, but her color. Though the humans' president had freed the slaves, and been shot for his efforts, the citizens of the south still held the same opinions they had before. "I'm no lady, but fine." Her tone was a soft purr. "You play the mighty man, and I'll stand in the shadows this time."

Daniel drew to the fore and she followed a few steps behind. They were nearly within the circle of light before the vampires noticed them. Their heads snapped up in unison and they squinted uncertainly at their visitors.

Kateesha reached out and touched their minds. As she moved from man to man, she saw scenes of blood and death; battlefields, dead comrades, a bleeding wife, a burned house, the twisted bodies of children. Yes, war was cruel and it had fostered this coven. They'd been nursed on the teat of destruction and nurtured by prejudice and ignorance. It was a coven destined to cause trouble.

The blond nearest to the dying boy spoke first, "And who might ya'll be?"

Daniel opened his cloak and flashed the silver medallion he wore around his neck; three pieces of intertwined metal that formed a twisted knot. "We're here on official Guild business."

A vague understanding washed over them. "If I rightly understand, that there Guild is the vampire gov'ment, ain't it?"

Kateesha snickered behind her hood and Daniel answered impatiently, "Yes. Your presence is requested immediately."

They laughed. Daniel's body tensed. "This is no laughing matter."

"Maybe it is and maybe it ain't," the blond replied. He stepped forward and adjusted his bloody coat. "Why don't yer try invitin' us nicely?"

Daniel ground his teeth. Kateesha moved next to him and silenced him with a thought. *"I'll handle this."*

"Is that a woman?" a redhead demanded. "This gov'ment's sendin' women ter do men's work? Pshaw, we ain't got nuthin' ta worry 'bout."

"Don't you?" she asked, her voice silk. "You are cordially invited to the Guild's fortifications where you will have an audience with our Master. Will you ever so kindly accompany us?"

They laughed again and the blond slapped his knee. "Now that's more like it. Good to see a woman what knows her place." He turned back to Daniel. "Despite your right hospitable invitation, I'm afraid that me 'n the boys will have ta decline on account a the fact we got too much work ta do here. The war may be officially over, but we reckon that with these new abilities we ought ta be able to start 'er up again real soon. I reckon we could take a whole regiment by ourselves. Give them Yank bastards sumin' ta think about."

Kateesha's laughter was light and silvery. The men glared at her, arms crossed over their chests. "And just what do yer find so funny, Miss?"

She dropped her hood and fixed them with her dark eyes. "I doubt you could successfully route a company composed of orphaned children, let alone a regiment." She saw his reaction in his mind; saw what he thought her punishment should be for daring to speak out to a white man. It had been the punishment of another girl; a slave girl. Bound, ravaged and left to die. Kateesha's hand went to her sword before he even spoke.

"Hey there! You watch what you say, you nig--"

The word fell unfinished. With a single stroke of the blade, Kateesha severed his head.

The men jumped back, eyes as large as saucers. The redhead cried, "Holy Jesus! Who are you?"

Kateesha smiled a broad, fanged smile. "I'm the devil, and I've come to collect."

Of the remaining four, two ran. The other pair attacked, or tried to. Too young and inexperienced, Kateesha cut them down in seconds. The scent of blood filled her nostrils and stirred her in a way that nothing else could. She wanted it. She wanted the feel of it, the taste of it. She wanted to bathe in it while Jorick watched, but since he wasn't there, Daniel would do, just as he had before.

Her eyes flamed with lust and she grabbed his hand. "Come, we'll catch the others."

They raced headlong through the woods. Terror and youth made their prey clumsy and their lead was quickly lost. The men squealed. The leader, a brunette, tripped over a tree root and crashed to the ground. The redhead fell over him and landed in a horrified tangle of limbs.

Kateesha threw aside her sword and grabbed the redhead with her bare hands. She knelt, one knee in the middle of his back, and pulled his head back to expose his throat. Daniel stood over the brunette, his sword pressed to his chest.

"Oh sweet Jesus," the redhead whimpered. "Please, in the name a the holy mother, have mercy. We didn' do nuthin'. I swear. I swear we didn't do nuthin'."

She leaned down, her breath hot against his ear. "Isn't that a pity, then? To die as a punishment when you haven't had the fun of the offense?" She flicked his earlobe with her tongue and he whimpered. Her fangs scraped over the delicate curve of his ear and then, she bit. She clamped down savagely and tore. His ear came away in her mouth with a spray of blood.

His screams echoed through the trees. She spit out the ear and licked her lips, her dark eyes shining. The brunette vampire screamed and writhed under the point of Daniel's sword. "Oh, God. No! Please, no!"

"Don't worry," Kateesha purred. "You're next." She turned back to her bucking, shrieking prey and buried her fangs in the side of his neck, under the bleeding hole where his ear had been. She ripped the flesh, peeling it away. His blood was hot and thick, and she gulped mouthfuls of it. His screams grew louder, higher pitched, more horrible as she bit into his shoulder, rending skin and shirt together in a mangled mess.

She met Daniel's eyes. His nostrils flared and she could feel his desire; his need. The hot blood pulsed in her hands. She lifted a palm full and licked it, wiping the last of it over her face and her neck, to the collar of her cloak. She arched her back, and licked her lips, promising him anything he wanted.

He was weaker than Jorick had ever been. That small display was too much temptation and he broke under it. With a savage snarl, he threw aside his sword and set upon his terrified captive. The younger vampire screamed as Daniel's fangs tore through his flesh. Hot blood sprayed out, coloring Daniel's face and sandy hair.

Kateesha laughed and attacked her victim again. This time it was his wildly waving hand; his wrist. The bones snapped and popped and he shrieked. She could hear his terrified thoughts. He begged

God to let him die, to let him pass out. Anything to end this torment. Thanks to his immortal blood, no such grace would be granted him.

The rest of his limbs cracked easily and she left him lay, broken and bleeding in a heap. Her heart raced and the smell of his death intoxicated her senses. But not just his death. The blood of his victims was still fresh in his system and not yet fully mixed. She could smell them; smell the negro and his life of labor, and the soldier and his prayers to see his new baby one more time. She could taste them and the cocktail inflamed her.

She peeled back her robe and gathered handfuls of the blood. She brought it to her mouth, and let the excess run through her fingers. It streamed over her heaving cleavage and down the bodice of her gown. She looked up to see Daniel watching her, his face and clothing covered in blood. The brunette vampire lay dead beneath him. His back was torn open. His broken ribs and spine were shiny in the moonlight. Next to him lay the squashed remnant of a heart.

A Quick kill.

Without words, Daniel moved to her. She pulled him to her roughly. The broken vampire next to her moaned softly, not so lucky to share the fate of his comrade. She wiped blood from his shoulder and smeared it over Daniel's face and his eager lips. His tongue darted out and cleaned her fingers. Without breaking eye contact, he smeared blood over her cheek, down her neck. She leaned back and tore at her dress and the corset beneath. Cloth ripped beneath her impatient fists and she discarded the scraps.

With fresh handfuls, he painted her dark breasts in crimson. She moaned and ground her hips against his. He pressed back, his need a hard knot of urgency.

She tackled him to the ground. He writhed beneath her and she straddled him, rubbing her body against his. She stared into his eyes, not black but green. They weren't the eyes she wanted to gaze into, but they would do for now. They would be a vehicle to her memories, to the night in the eastern territory so many years ago when she and Jorick had bathed in the blood of the rogues. She'd drawn scarlet symbols on his skin and licked him clean again. She could still remember his scent and the soft growl when he surrendered to her and the blood.

She closed her eyes and mentally conjured Jorick. Sightless, she ripped at the clothes of the man beneath her, no longer Daniel, but another. She tore away his cloak, his shirts, and ran her hands over his naked chest. He groaned her name; a plea to end the agony of his need.

A plea she would gladly grant.

With an inhuman howl, she sank her teeth into his shoulder and bit. His hot blood filled her mouth and the world shifted; pulsed. He bit back, his teeth sharp. The pain was delicious and then it melted into something more. Her every nerve burned, quivered, screamed. Torn between ecstasy and agony in a world of shimmering shadows and screaming desire. It no longer mattered if he was Jorick or Daniel or someone else. Only the blood and the need mattered.

Something pulled her from her trance-like absorption and she released Daniel, though he held on, his teeth buried in her arm, his expression glazed ecstasy. She turned her face to the broken redhead. He lay next to them, his gurgling mouth opened and his dying eyes wide. Kateesha laughed and wiped the blood from her face.

"Do you want some?" she asked huskily. "Do you want to die like you've never lived?"

Before he could answer, she sank her fangs into his good shoulder and his world exploded in a flash of nightmare pleasure.



Traveling by night, it took them a week to get to the Guild's fortifications in Iowa. Half brick, half wood, what would soon be a monstrosity was only partially finished. Kateesha could imagine the coming grandeur, but she didn't care. This was the third location since she'd come to the new country. It would move again.

Malick waited in the audience chamber, a long, low room paneled in wood. Five chairs sat at one end, under an antique tapestry. He sat in the center chair, a pale woman on his left and a dark skinned male on his right; two of the other four council members.

Malick's thundercloud eyes swept over the newly returned pair. His question came like a gentle slap, "Where are those you were sent to bring back?"

Kateesha dropped to her knees before him. "Father, they were troublesome and we were forced-"

"Forced?" The room seemed to shake with his displeasure. "Would you lie to me? I can see the events in your mind! I see the orgy! Is that what you make of your missions? Do my orders mean so little to you?"

Kateesha could feel his fury. "No, of course not, Father!" She dared to look up and offered him her most winning smile. "They were of little use. Ignorant, uneducated, filthy-"

"As were you when I found you!"

The smile disappeared from Kateesha's face. "They deserved their deaths!"

The dark council member leaned forward. "It is not your judgment to make! Your job is to carry out your orders as they are given to you!"

"Yes," the council woman agreed. "You have disobeyed too many times, Kateesha. You are a dangerous element that has proved uncontrollable, and your partner in this is no better. Leave us while we decide what your fate will be."

Kateesha felt the blood drain from her face and her stomach twisted. There was only one fate for breaking the laws: death. Panic consumed her and she threw herself prostrate on the floor, her hands on Malick's feet. "Please Father!" she cried. "We're sorry! We did not mean to disobey you! It will never happen again!"

"So you've said before," the council woman answered sharply. "Yet here we are. Your words are lies that you shine with your charm. I will not fall prey to such traps. Now leave us!"

Kateesha snarled at her and turned her eyes to Malick. "Father, please! Forgive us! I beg you! Have mercy!"

Malick withdrew his feet and pointed silently to the door. His face was as unreadable as marble, and the blood in Kateesha's veins turned to ice.

"Go," the dark council member ordered. "We will call for you when a decision is reached."



And so they went. Not just out of the audience chamber, but out of the building, to the stables. Their horses were too tired to be taken again. Kateesha threw a single, regretful glance back at Aethenoth as they rode away on someone else's steeds.

The horses ran full tilt and only when they could take no more did Kateesha call a halt. Daniel slid from his saddle, his eyes on the lonely road behind them. "They'll hunt us."

"Perhaps. Would you rather have stayed there and waited for your death to be handed to you?"

His silence hung heavy. At last he answered, "No."

"Good. Once the horses have rested we'll need to find shelter. It will be morning soon."

Daniel nodded and then, in a tone so low she could hardly hear, he asked, "Do you love me?"

The question caught her by surprise and she laughed. "Should I?"

He looked away. His mouth twisted unhappily. "We've been partnered on several occasions. We work well together. We-" he broke off but she could see the bloody memories in his mind.

"We fuck well?" she asked unabashedly.

He balked at her language, but didn't deny it. "I'll do anything you want me to, you know that."

She patted down the horse absently. "I've heard that a hundred times, or a thousand. That's the second line every man uses, right after 'you're beautiful'."

"You are," Daniel said quietly. "I've never met a woman like you."

“And that’s the third. Next you’ll promise me your undying devotion, and maybe your soul.” She made a dismissive gesture with her hand. “It’s the same. You’re all the same.”

Except for Jorick.

Daniel had no reply.



They rode for days. When they grew tired of running they took a farm house and kept the occupants for their dinner. They dragged their deaths out to a week, but then they drained the final child.

“We will have to hunt tomorrow,” Kateesha said as she mopped herself up.

Daniel nodded absently, his eyes still clouded with the after moments of their feast. His clothing lay in a heap beside him and the last of the child’s blood was smeared across his chest. He gazed at Kateesha as she cleaned herself and pulled on layers of white linen undergarments. A chemise, a corset, petticoats-

A knock sounded on the door. While Daniel went stiff, shocked back to the present. Kateesha sniffed the air and smiled. She could smell their visitor. She knew who he was and she knew what he wanted, but she was sure she could persuade him otherwise.

She wrenched the corset opened so that her ample breasts nearly spilled out the top, and carefully smoothed her hair. After a quick glance in the mirror, she dropped one strap of her chemise, leaving her shoulder naked and whispering to be touched.

That should be enough.

She opened the door and let her eyes drink in the man before her. Tall and lean with broad shoulders and silky hair as black as midnight. She knew how that hair smelled and smiled at the memory of it wrapped around her fingers.

His voice was neither hostile nor friendly, only impatient. “You know why I’m here.”

“No, Jorick,” she said innocently. “I have no idea.”

“Malick sent me.”

“Did he?” She gazed at him from under heavy lids, and let her eyes slide lower, past his belt. Her tongue flicked out involuntarily and traced her full, lower lip. “I thought perhaps you’d come to see me.”

Jorick drew back a step, his face hard. “I’m married now.”

Kateesha leaned against the door frame and pouted. “Yes, I know, and to such a plain, timid little thing. Can you truly be happy with her? Oren’s sister would suit you better. Even that little girl in Texas would have been a more suitable choice. Sarita, wasn’t it?”

His nose curled with disdain. “You know I have no love for Spaniards.”

“She wasn’t a Spaniard, but a Mexican and she filled your bed easily enough.”

“There is a difference between sharing love and a bed.”

“And do you love this new woman, this Velnya? Can you really?” Kateesha was suddenly on him, her hands on his shoulders, her breasts pressed against his hard chest and her lips brushing his neck. “Can she really give you all the things I can?”

“Enough.”

Jorick knocked her away. Surprised, she stumbled and landed on the floor in a heap of petticoat. She jerked to her feet, her forehead puckered in anger. “Don’t do that again!”

“I’ll do it as many times as necessary. Malick ordered me to spare you, so get out of my way!”

She reached for his mind and plucked the scene from it. The council was angry. They shouted. They demanded her blood. Jorick must be sent. Only he was strong enough to do what must be done without falling victim to Kateesha’s charms. But Jorick was tired. Newly arrived from a dispute in Indian territory, he wanted to go home. His little wife needed him. She sent terrified letters, afraid of the local population. Cattle had died. First only a handful and then by the herd. They blamed her. They called her a witch. But Malick owned Jorick the same as he owned Kateesha. He’d given them his blood and gotten their unwavering loyalty in exchange. Jorick was nothing more than his dog, and Jorick’s request was

denied. Only... No. Privately, Malick made a deal. He would free Jorick from his debt if he spared Kateesha and took only Daniel's life. Jorick agreed quickly. He had other things to attend to.

Jorick shoved past Kateesha and stormed through the house. She leaned against the doorframe and closed her eyes. She heard Daniel shout, and then she heard the scuffle. Wood smashed. Something ceramic broke to bits. Then, Daniel screamed. At the sound she had a sudden vision of his lust filled eyes locked with hers and something fluttered in her chest. She dismissed it cruelly. Daniel was nothing. He was a diversion. A replacement.

Jorick reappeared, a splash of blood across one cheek. Kateesha moved quickly and used her petticoat to wipe it away. He jerked back and glared at her. "I don't have time for this."

"Don't you?" she asked, packing every innuendo she could into the syllables. "Velnya will keep for a night." She caught his hand and tugged him towards her. "I've missed you, and I know you've missed me. Come, for one night it will be like it was. Do you remember that night under the stars, after we'd defeated the rogues?" She pressed against him again and looped an arm around his waist. "Do you remember the way they tasted? The way I tasted?" Her lips hovered over his throat. "I remember your flavor--"

As if he'd suddenly broken free from a spell, he jerked away. "No!" He stepped back and ran a hand through his hair. "No."

"But, Jorick, I love you." She reached for him. He caught her hands and held them away from him.

"No, Kateesha, you don't. You love a shadow. I'm not that man anymore and now that Malick has released me, I am free, and I won't be that man ever again. I don't want to be." He dropped her hands and turned for the door. "If you value your life, I suggest you give the council at least a year to forgive you before you stage a return."

He didn't wait for her reply, but ducked out into the night. She glared at his disappearing figure with narrowed, burning eyes. How dare he reject her? How dare he turn his back on her? On a whim she could make any man crawl through the mud for her, begging for a word, a touch, a taste. How dare he resist!

He's leaving!

She threw her pride aside and plunged out into the darkness. He stood next to his horse, one foot in the stirrup. She rushed towards him. "Dammit Jorick! You are who you are! You can't run from your nature simply because you wish it to be something different! You can not take shelter in a falsehood!"

He paused to look at her. "That was never my nature, Kateesha, only yours and Malick's. It is the falsehood I'm running away from."

He swung into the saddle in a smooth motion and nudged the horse forward. Kateesha's hands turned to fists at her side. "You can't hide, Jorick!" she screamed. "You love me, and you know it! I was made to be with you! You belong to me!" Her words turned shrill and hysterical. "I will have you! One day you will beg me for mercy on your knees! Do you hear me?"

He didn't look back. His only acknowledgement was a flippant half wave. Then, he spurred his horse forward and rider and animal raced away into the darkness.

Kateesha stood alone, her petticoats gleaming white under the moon and one fist raised as she shouted, "Do you hear me, Jorick? You're mine and you'll always be mine! Do you hear me? I own you! I own you!"

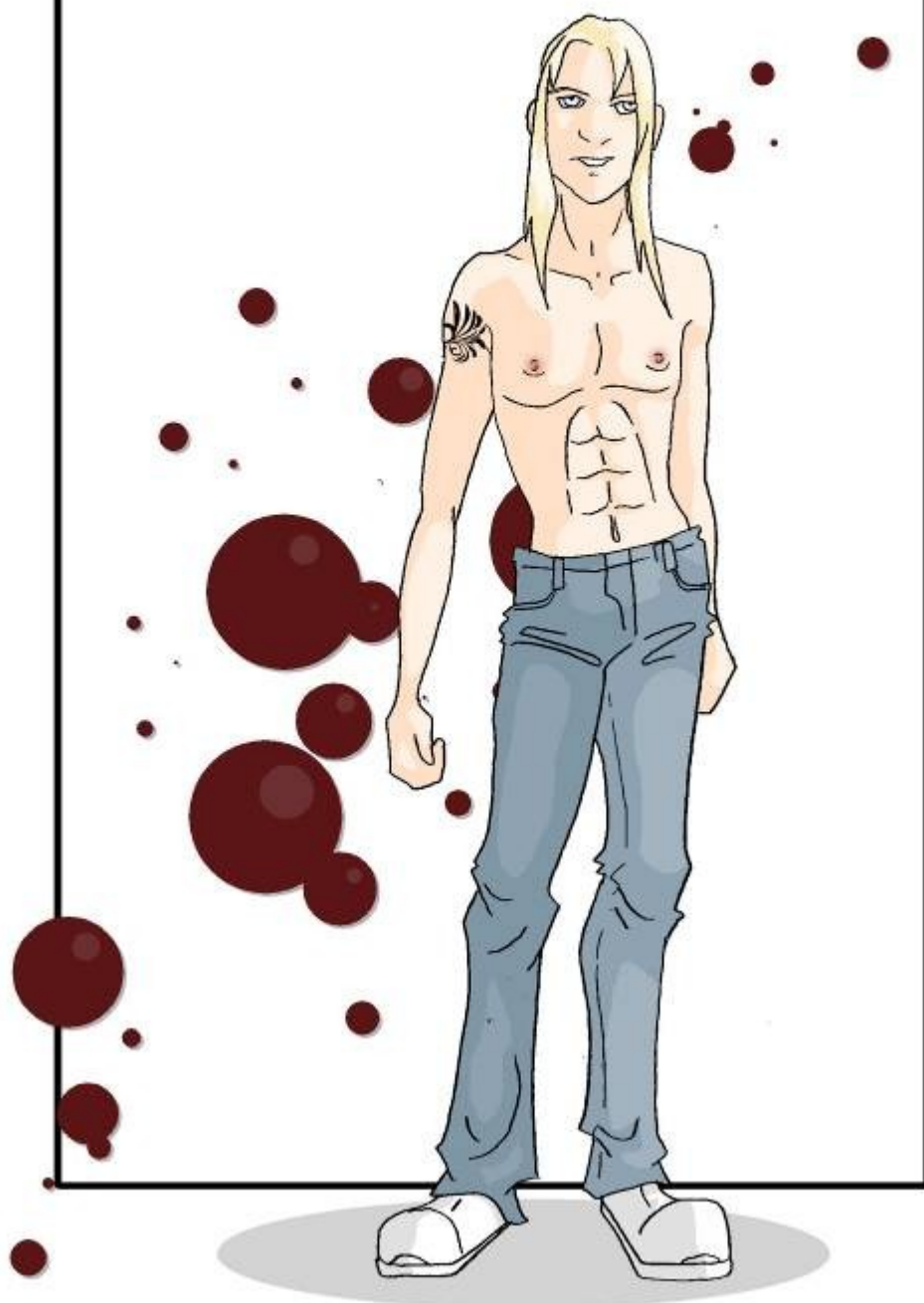
There was no answer. She dropped her fist and glanced back to the opened door. Inside Daniel lay in a pool of his own blood, shattered and dead. She shoved away the burgeoning emotions. She couldn't afford to care. Daniel was of no consequence. Jorick was her goal. They were bound together for eternity, whether he understood that or not. He was hers, and ultimately she was his.

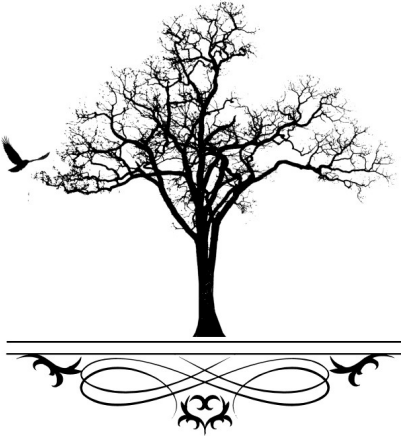
Regardless, he'd chosen Velnya over her.

Only for now, she told herself. Only for now. One day he will repent his choice.

She'd make sure of it.

MICHAEL





MICHAEL

(You can find Michael in *Shades of Gray* & *Brothers of Darkness*. This story takes place roughly two years before *Shades of Gray* starts.)



Michael sat on the couch in his mother's trailer, watching TV. He wished she'd hurry up and get home from work. He needed another beer, but he was finally comfortable and he didn't want to move.

As if heaven sent, she banged through the door, dropping shoes and her purse. Before he could even ask her about the beverage, she shoved a piece of paper into his hand. "Call them."

He muted the TV and glanced disinterestedly at the phone number. "Who is it?"

"It's about a job, Mikey. You've been out for two months and all you do is lie on the couch and watch TV. Pat's more productive than you, and that's saying something. I told you the only way you're staying here is if you work."

"What kinda work is it?"

"Yard work."

Yard work? What did his mom think he was? "I don't know shit about yard work and I'm too smart for that crap, anyway. I'm not some manual laborer."

"No, you're so clever, aren't you? So clever that you landed yourself in jail! For God's sake, where else are you going to get a job with two drug convictions?" She tossed a cell phone onto his chest. "Call."

There was no point in arguing when she was in one of her moods —not for him anyway. His brother Patrick could have sweet talked her, but hell, he could sweet talk a harpy if he put his mind to it. "Fine, whatever. I'm callin', I'm callin'."

He dialed the number and waited. The rings peeled off, one, two, three, four, five —

"Hello?" The man's accent made Michael think of Mr. Belvedere from the old TV show. "The Durand residence. How may I help you?"

"Um, yeah. My mom told me to call about the lawn job or whatever."

There was a pause, then, "Are you enquiring for the sake of employment?"

"Yeah, sure."

Mr. Belvedere drew an audible breath through his nose. "Name please?"

"Michael Mullens."

“Mr. Mullens, please come to the manor tonight after dark. The master will wish to speak with you.” He gave a handful of directions, then bid Michael a crisp goodbye.

“Well?”

At his mother’s question, Michael snapped the phone closed and tossed it back to her. “I have to see ‘the master’ tonight.” He tried to add the right snooty inflection, but failed. “Sounds like a pain in the ass.”



Michael found the ‘manor’ easy enough—it was the only set of iron gates in the county. He drove through them, his eyes wide. The house was huge. Made of stone, it was decorated at seemingly random intervals with angels and gargoyles, like something from a horror flick. Bright light shone from its many windows in yellow patches.

Michael wasn’t sure where to park, so he pulled the Geo off to the side. On his way to the front porch, he paused at a large carved fountain ringed with cherubs. On closer inspection, what looked like innocent angels actually had bat wings and fangs.

“Man this place is whack!”

The huge front door was made of polished wood and frosted glass. Music and laughter leaked through it and he wondered if they were having a party.

When he knocked, the door was opened by a tall thin man in a suit. “Yes?”

The accent and attitude were the same as the man on the phone. “Um, I was supposed to come about the yard job?”

“Of course.” The butler—Michael was sure that’s what he was—looked down his nose. “This way please.”

He led Michael into a grand entrance hall. A set of sweeping staircases filled one wall and glittering chandeliers hung from the ceiling. At the far end, between the staircases, a set of French doors opened onto a room full of people. Michael caught a glimpse of glittering jewelry and swishing skirts before the butler led him away.

He followed the man down a long hallway to a small white office.

“Wait here,” the butler ordered, then shut the door and disappeared.

Michael moved uncertainly to a green velvet chair and sat down in front of the desk. His eyes roamed the room; a suit of armor stood in one corner. Jeweled medieval weapons hung on the walls and glinted from glass fronted display cabinets. Above the desk hung an old portrait of a mustached man, and a well-polished silver sword.

The butler came back, followed by a young sneering guy who might have been seventeen. His blond hair was pulled back and he was dressed in a ruffled shirt and vest, like someone from the PBS shows Michael’s mom watched.

They must be having some kind of costume party.

The young man moved behind the desk and glared at Michael, as if he expected him to do something.

Though Michael couldn’t explain why, the hair stood up on the back of his neck, and the heavy silence felt oppressive. He broke it with a murmured, “Hello?”

The young man scowled, but instead of commenting he gestured to the butler.

The servant quickly took his place next to the desk. “The master would like to welcome you.”

The master? Fuck, he’s just a kid! Must be fucking nice to get born into all of this!

The butler explained the job. It was basic grounds keeping; mowing, hedge trimming, cleaning out the creepy fountain. Basically, he only needed to worry about the front and side lawns. The extensive gardens in the back of the property were under the domain of the gardener.

When the explanation was finished, Michael asked, “How much does it pay?”

“Two hundred dollars a week.”

For two hundred dollars, Michael wanted to say no, but he thought of his mom. She was right. Where the hell else was he gonna get a job with no references and no questions asked?

There were no contracts to sign, only the instructions to be back the next morning. The master gave him a cold glare that sent a chill down his spine. At the first chance, Michael stood and gave a quick, “Okay, thanks. I’ll be here tomorrow.”

He made it to the door before an icy voice drawled, “There is one more thing.”

Michael turned around to find the blond kid staring at him. “Uh, what?”

“We value our privacy. At no time are you to be in the house, unless you are invited in. Do you understand?”

A thousand terrible threats glittered in his eyes. Michael managed to nod and, with a gesture, he was dismissed.

He couldn’t get out of there fast enough.



The next morning, Michael’s mom kicked him off the couch and out the door. The manor was only slightly friendlier in the sunlight. The fanged cherubs on the fountain leered at him as he parked the Geo and made his way to the door.

The butler showed him to a shed where the tools were, including a brand new lawn mower. He gave him a set of basic instructions and waved toward the collection as if their actual functions were beneath him. Then he left.

What the fuck did I get myself into?



Michael was sweaty and out of sorts by the time he got home. His brother was on the porch, a beer in his hand. “Have fun at work?”

“Fuck you, Pat.” Michael dropped next to him and groaned. “My back is killing me.”

Patrick snickered. “How’d the first day go?”

“Like shit. The fucking butler is a prick. After I got done he walked around the yard pointing out everything I missed and said next time I should do a more ‘thorough job’. I’ll give him a thorough job, asshole.”

Patrick laughed. “You gonna quit?”

Before he could answer, his mom leaned out the door and quipped, “No, he’s not!” She leveled her gaze with Michael. “If you quit this job, then you can find somewhere else to live. And you—” she jabbed Patrick in the back “—if you encourage him you’ll be out on your ass, too. It’s time you both grow up and take responsibility for your lives.”

She went on and Patrick mimed a chattering mouth with his hand. Michael snorted and snagged his beer. They’d heard it all before.

It’s like some kind of periodic ritual.



The job didn’t improve; it got weirder and worse. Michael didn’t see the master—or anyone for that matter – after his interview. The whole place was deserted, except for the butler. *The asshole of a butler.* The man was too picky. Every time he inspected Michael’s work, he’d add something new for him to do. By the third week, he was working into twilight.

Michael slammed the shed door and wiped the sweat from his forehead. The night bugs were already screaming in the trees and lights popped on in the manor’s many windows. *This might only be three days a week, but it ain’t worth this shit for two hundred bucks.*

He clomped toward the house and banged on the side door— they couldn't have the lowly help using the front entrance, could they? —and waited for the butler. *If that jackass finds something to criticize tonight, I swear to God I'll fucking quit. He can do his own fucking weed whacking!*

The door opened, but instead of the sneering suited man, there was a bald guy with cold gray eyes. "What d'ya want?"

"A million dollars, what do you think? I finished the yard and I'm going home."

"Oh, you're the yard guy. You better come in and tell Geoffrey. This isn't my deal."

Michael wanted to argue, but there was something about the man's eyes that made him shiver. *Like that master dude.* "Yeah, okay."

He followed the bald guy into the house, through a pair of paneled rooms and into a large sparkling kitchen. The butler stood next to a table, supervising a pair of women who frantically packed ice into a punch bowl big enough to hold a small person. He looked up and narrowed his eyes at Michael. "What do you want?"

The bald guy answered for him. "He's done with the yard and he looks pretty worn out." He clamped a hand on Michael's back. Though the gesture was supposed to seem friendly, it made Michael cringe. "I thought we might invite him to the party."

The butler winced. "As you wish, Master Troy, though perhaps you should ask the master's permission?"

"Claudius won't mind. He was moaning last night about how bored he was."

Though Troy stood behind him, Michael could almost feel his smile. It made his skin crawl. "That's okay. I should probably get home, anyway."

"Nonsense. It'll be great. The best party you'll ever go to." With a little more force than was necessary, he steered Michael toward the door and through the house to the entrance way. Michael was surprised to see several people, all dressed to the teeth, loitering near the stairs. In the center of the group was the blond kid—Claudius—wearing clothes from a historical flick.

The master turned to the new arrivals and his face darkened. "What are you doing in the house?"

Troy answered, "It's okay, I invited him inside. We need some new blood at these things." He broke into a boisterous laugh that was taken up by a few of the others.

The hilarity melted away as a group of young women came down the stairs. Michael had to forcibly hold his mouth closed. *Holy shit! They're fucking hot!* Though hot didn't do them justice; they were beautiful, like something from TV or a glossy magazine, and he couldn't look away.

Though they were all attractive, it was the girl in the middle that knocked the breath from his chest. Her hair was long and pale blond, and she wore a blue dress that fell to her feet. She came to a stop before them and Michael choked. Her eyes matched her dress and they were like staring into an endless ocean. For a wild moment he wanted to drown in them and forget everything else, but the reality of her age pulled him back. She couldn't be a day over fifteen.

Too fuckin' young for you. That's jail bait right there.

Claudius caught her hand and brushed his lips across it. As he dropped it, he looked at Troy. "Should your joke go amiss, you'll take his place mowing the lawn."

Joke?

Troy's demeanor changed, like slipping from one shirt to the next. "As you command." He gave a stiff formal bow, then tugged Michael away. "Come on boy, those aren't the ones you're looking for."

Michael followed, still wrapped in the spell of her ocean colored eyes. It was only the giggles of a threesome of women that pulled him out of it. He blinked at them stupidly. *Man, more hotties? What is this place? Like the playboy mansion?*

The darker of the three grabbed him by the front of his tank top and pulled him toward her. "It could be," she murmured, her breath cool on his face. "Why don't you come with us and find out?"

Warning bells went off in the back of his mind, but they were muffled by another thought: *When am I ever gonna get a chance like this again?* The answer was "never" and he wasn't about to let this one slip by.

Troy seemed to evaporate. Michael looked around what was obviously a ballroom. One wall was made of shining mirrors and, as he watched, one of the panels opened in the shape of a door—a secret door—and a well-dressed couple slid out. The woman dripped with jewels and the man—

“Are you coming?”

Michael looked to the girls, and managed to nod. With a chorus of giggles, they led him through a maze of glittering rooms. His eyes strayed from their breasts to the opulent surroundings long enough to think, *Holy shit, this guy's got more money than I thought*, but then his attention was pulled back to the ladies, almost against his will.

The room they led him to had the air of a bedroom, but there was no bed. Only a chaise longue and a scattering of other furniture. The girls pulled him to the seat and knocked him onto it. He laid back, a stupid grin on his face as the darker girl hitched up her skirt and climbed on top of him, straddling him with a pair of long tanned legs. She leaned close to him. Her lips moved down his jaw and to his throat, where they stopped. She flicked out her tongue and licked him, as if testing the flavor. He moaned and shifted, arching his back and grinding his hips into her. Over her shoulder he could see the other two girls, holding hands and licking their lips.

“Are you ready for the night of your life?” she asked, her voice a whisper against his skin.



Patrick let out a lungful of smoke. “And then what?”

Michael shook his head and snagged the joint back. “I dunno man, it’s all a blur after that.” He took a hit and held the smoke, though it leaked out with his words. “I’m tellin’ ya though, whatever it was, it was fuckin’ wild.”

“Yeah, no shit. I can see the hickies.” Patrick took the joint back and balanced it in his fingers. “It looks like they chewed on your neck.”

Michael exhaled the smoke and ignored his comment. “I been thinkin’ about something. I mean, shit they got a lot of stuff in that house. I mean a *lot* of stuff that has to be worth a fortune.”

“They’re rich man, that tends to happen.”

“No, you’re not getting me. Think about it. They got all this really rich stuff, right? But there’s no one there all day. I mean *no one*.”

“So?”

“Are you listening to me? Man, you’re like ignoring me. You’re always ignoring me.”

Patrick giggled. “Okay, say it again. I’m listening.”

“They got all this stuff, and there’s no one there but that fucking butler, Geoffrey, hanging around. I hate that prick. I hate that fucking smarmy master kid; he thinks he’s so clever. I know he does. He sat there all smarmy mouthed and shit like he was better than me, but he ain’t, and he ain’t smarter. I’m smarter. I’m smarter and I’m gonna use my brains. I hate that job but I need money. We go in, we take the shit, and we sell it. And if that prick of a butler catches us, we fucking kill him.”

Patrick exploded into laughter. “Are you fucking serious?”

Michael frowned. “Yeah, I’m serious. We could be rich. Rich enough to get outta this place and buy a real life.”

Patrick exhaled a thick cloud of smoke and eyed his brother. “Man, money don’t buy a life. You want a life, you gotta do something with it.”

“And you gotta have money to do that.” Despite his buzz, Michael felt sour. “You in or what?”

“Come on Mikey—”

“Don’t Mikey me. Are you fucking in or out?”

Patrick’s good mood flickered. “You’re just fucked up. When you sober up—”

“In or out?”

All signs of amusement disappeared. “I’m out, Mikey. It’s a stupid plan that’s gonna get your ass back in jail.”

“Fine. Who needs you anyway? You know what? Fuck you.” He jerked to his feet. “I’ll do it on my own.”

Patrick snorted. “Only a moron would do it.”

Angry words stuck in Michael’s throat as he slammed out the door.



The sun was high in the sky when Michael stopped his work. He dropped the weed whacker to the ground and leaned against the house. *I don’t give a fuck what Pat says. I’m sick of this shit.*

He reached into his pocket and wrapped his fingers around the cool metal of the gun. It was only a Colt Junior, snagged from his mother’s purse, but it was enough to take care of Geoffrey if he needed to. Part of him hoped the fucking butler got nosey. He could picture the self-righteous prick with a hole between his eyes.

Michael kicked the weed whacker for good measure, then marched toward the house. Instead of knocking on the side door, he threw it open and charged inside. He paused in the doorway to the next room, waiting, the gun drawn and ready in his nervous hand.

When Geoffrey didn’t appear, Michael lowered the weapon and tried to come up with a plan. He didn’t have a bag, and since he was alone he couldn’t carry much. It would be better to find a couple of small things that were worth a lot.

He thought of the bejeweled weapons in the office, and hurried through the unfamiliar house, opening doors. When he finally discovered his destination, he also found the butler.

Geoffrey was hunched over the desk, a drawer opened, his eyes bulging with guilt and surprise. He was going through ‘the master’s’ stuff, but Michael didn’t care. He raised the gun and, before the startled butler could react, he pulled the trigger.

The sound was loud; louder than Michael expected. He stared, dumbfounded, and the butler stared back. Then Geoffrey looked down to where a red spot blossomed against his white shirt. With a strangled gasp, he clutched his bleeding chest and exclaimed, “Oh my God!” before he tumbled backwards and fell over the chair.

Michael held the gun out and noticed the barrel shook. *Holy fuck. I shot him. I fucking shot him. Oh my God.*

He staggered back and dropped the gun. He could hear the butler moaning. *Why is he making so much noise? Shut up! Shut up!*

He hurried around the desk. Geoffrey lay half on his side, clutching his chest. Blood leaked between his fingers. Michael’s hands clenched and unclenched and he looked around wildly. What should he do? Should he hit him in the head with something? His eyes landed on the silver sword on the wall and he thoughtlessly pulled it down.

He turned back to Geoffrey and raised the sword like a baseball bat. The butler choked and grabbed Michael’s leg, smearing blood on his jeans. He stared at it; at the bright red against the pale blue denim. Geoffrey gasped out, “Help me.”

Michael slammed him in the head with the flat of the blade. Geoffrey cried out as Michael hit him again and again and again. The room blurred and he lost track of it; lost track of himself. When he came back to reality he was shocked to see Geoffrey’s face and head, beaten and sliced into a bloody pulp.

He backed away and dropped the sword to the floor. His arms were speckled with blood. Geoffrey’s blood. This didn’t feel like he thought. It had all gone wrong.

He ran from the room. His feet pounded down the corridor until he saw a bathroom. He ducked inside, his stomach heaving, but there was no toilet; only a sink and a bathtub. He turned in helpless circles. Bile gagged into his throat and mouth, and he lurched for the tub. The vomit hit with enough force to splash back. Just like Geoffrey’s blood. The thought made him wretch harder.

When his stomach was empty he fell back on the floor, exhausted. He had to fix this. It was all fucked up and he had to fix it.

Wash away the blood, he told himself. He stood on shaking legs and turned on the sink. Fancy hand towels hung nearby. He wet them and savagely swiped at crimson that spotted his naked chest, arms, and face. *Just get rid of the blood. It's okay. It's okay.*

He dropped the ruined towel in the sink and stared into the mirror. Wild blue eyes stared back; eyes that didn't have a plan. He needed a plan. He'd killed someone. If he got caught it wouldn't be jail this time, but prison. He'd have to get out of the country. Maybe Mexico? But to do that he needed money.

Fuck!

He took a deep breath. *Come on man, you're smart. You can do this.* And he could. He was in a fucking mansion surrounded by money. He needed to grab something and get out. But what? He couldn't stand the thought of going back to the office. *Fuck, there's stuff everywhere.*

When his legs were steady, he followed the corridor back to the entrance hall. His eyes fell on the double French doors and the ballroom beyond. He thought of the mirrored wall and the secret door. If the stuff upstairs was worth a fortune, then what would be down there?

He felt along the smooth glass. "How the fuck do you open this? Come on!"

As if by command, something clicked and the door sprang open. He gave a soft cry of delight and ran down the dark narrow stairs. The light gave out before he reached the bottom and he stumbled when he hit the floor. He flicked his cigarette, and saw candles in massive golden holders flanking the door. After he lit one, he examined the room by the flickering light. It was plain, except for ten large wooden boxes, neatly arranged in rows. Excitement coursed through him as he thought about the contents. He envisioned gold, like treasure from a long forgotten children's cartoon.

He hurried to the first and pried open the lid. There was no gold inside, but a man with a pale face and closed eyes.

Holy shit! He's dead!

Michael jumped back into the candleholder. It fell with a clatter and the room plunged into darkness. He fumbled his lighter to life in time to see a figure leering over him, mouth opened, fangs gleaming.

He grabbed the fallen candlestick and swung it at the guy's head. His attacker fell backwards, and Michael scrambled to his feet and up the stairs. He skidded through the ballroom and out the double back doors, to the sun drenched veranda. Only then did he look back to see the guy burst through the secret door, half of his head bashed in and bleeding.

Oh my God! How is he still walking? He should be dead!

The man saw him. With a fanged inhuman snarl, he lunged toward him, but stopped just before he reached the pool of sunlight. He gave a wordless cry of fury, then turned and shouted, "Geoffrey! Where the hell are you, you worthless piece of shit? Geoffrey!"

Several more men appeared, storming through the secret door, fangs bared. Just like the first, they skidded to a halt at the edge of the sunlight.

Michael was frozen in place by terror, but when no attack came his muscles uncoiled. *What the fuck? Why aren't they coming out here to get me?*

He decided he didn't care why. With a final horrified look at the snarling crowd, he ran.



At home, he took a shower and changed his clothes. His mother got home from work and made dinner. He ate. Patrick came shuffling in the door, smelling like alcohol and cracking jokes. Despite the fact there was a dead butler at the manor, the police didn't come. The world moved on like always, and Michael floated above it in a surreal bubble of confusion.

Maybe I dreamed it? He ducked into the bathroom and fished through the hamper for his jeans. Speckled and smeared with blood, they matched his memories. Something had happened at that house.

There was a word for what those people were; what he thought they were, but it felt ridiculous on his tongue. Vampires weren't real. They couldn't be. And yet, there they'd been, or something very like them. He'd seen their fangs. He'd seen them stop at the patch of sunlight. There was no other explanation and, despite the absurdity, so many things made sense now. Why the house was deserted in the daytime, why there was a secret door and coffin-like boxes in the basement. Why they hadn't gone to the police yet. It was because they couldn't risk an investigation!

With that realization, Michael relaxed. He was safe. They couldn't do anything to him because he knew; he knew what they were and, if they so much as breathed wrong, he'd tell everyone. He'd take the police to the manor in the daytime, show them the secret door and lead them down to the basement. He'd tell the whole God damned world. Then what would they do?

The more he thought about it, the more he realized his silence was worth something. They had plenty of money. They could afford to give him some. No, they *should* give him some. He deserved it.

He jammed the jeans back in the hamper and strode through the house. His mom and Patrick were on the couch and he tossed, "I'll be back," at them before he headed out the door. As it shut behind him, he heard Patrick laughingly call, "Bring some more beer."



Lights blazed in the manor when Michael parked the Geo. He climbed out, straightened his shoulders, and marched to the front porch where he pounded on the door. *Fuck having to slink in the side entrance.*

The door opened and Troy stared at him. "Well, well, you came back."

Michael flinched back. His cowardice embarrassed him, and he snapped out, "Damn straight I came back. I want to talk to Claudius. Now."

Troy stepped aside so he could enter. "Then come on in."

Michael walked into the entrance hall. People —*no, vampires*—stood around in tiny clusters, holding glasses of red wine. *No, not wine. I bet that's blood.*

With that thought, Michael wasn't so sure of himself, but he'd be damned if he'd let them know it!

He followed Troy past the curious stares, down the hallway, toward the office. As they walked, they passed the three women from the other night. The ladies giggled and waved at him. Their full lips curved into fanged smiles and they laughed when he shied away.

Troy stopped and held the office door open. "Wait here. I'll fetch Claudius."

Michael hesitated. He pictured Geoffrey lying on the floor in a pool of blood, his face and head mutilated. He couldn't face that room, but he didn't have a choice. Without waiting for a response, Troy walked away and there was nothing for him to do but go inside.

Come on, you can do it. Go in there and get this shit over with.

He forced his feet to move over the threshold, then into the room. The silver sword he'd used on Geoffrey was clean and hanging on the wall above the old portrait. *What did you expect? Did you think they left the mess?*

He sat in the green velvet chair and waited. When Claudius swept through the door, Michael's heart froze in his chest. The master took his place behind the desk. Troy followed and stopped to loom over Michael like an amused vulture.

The air in the room grew thicker until Michael found it hard to breathe, let alone form words. He could feel something radiating from the kid, something that left goosebumps trailing over his arms.

When Michael didn't speak, Claudius snapped, "What do you want?"

This guy is just a kid, Michael reminded himself. I'm older than he is. He's a stupid kid and I'm smarter. I'll show him. He cleared his throat and announced with as much bravado as he could muster, "I know what you are."

Claudius arched a single brow and tapped his fingers on the desk. "Do you?"

"I do," Michael insisted. "You're—" the word stuck, as if it was too silly to say. "You're vampires."

"It seems you're more intelligent than I gave you credit for." Claudius leaned back in his chair. "So, we're vampires. What of it?"

Shit. Michael had expected him to deny it. Some rational part of himself even *hoped* Claudius would laugh and churn out an explanation that made more sense. His voice turned hard to hide his discomfort. "If you want me to keep quiet, you're gonna have to make it worth my while. I want one million dollars, in cash, or I tell everyone I can find."

Claudius made a strange noise in his throat and stood, his back to Michael and his eyes on the portrait that hung over his desk. "Do you know who this is?"

Michael blinked at the topic change. "What?"

"The portrait." Claudius turned to face him, his eyes cold fire. "He was my father." Claudius fetched the silver sword down from the wall and Michael shifted uncomfortably. The young man held it at arm's length, as if checking the edge. "Do you know what happened to him?"

The atmosphere in the room changed perceptibly. Michael looked to the door for escape, only to see Troy in front of it, that fanged smile on his face.

"No."

Claudius' tone was emotionless. "I fought him, with this sword. And do you know what I learned?"

Beads of sweat popped out on Michael's forehead. "Uh, no?"

"I learned it's all rather pointless. Even a worthy foe is not so worthy once they've fallen at your feet in a pool of their own blood. And an unworthy foe... Well..." He looked to Troy. "Deal with him."

Michael yelped and tried to get out of the chair, but Troy was too fast. He pinned him back, fangs flashing as he bit through his throat. Michael screamed and fought, hands and arms flailing. He managed to pitch himself, chair and all, backwards, and scrambled away, his neck torn and screaming in pain. He pressed a hand to it and came away with a palm full of blood. His own blood.

Oh fuck.

Troy lunged at him again, Michael dodged, but only barely. The bald vampire grabbed him and threw him across the room. He smashed into one of the display cases in a flurry of glass and bits of wood.

"Watch the furniture!" Claudius shouted.

Michael tried to scramble to his feet, but his leg wouldn't work right. He looked down and saw it bent at an odd angle. *Oh fuck, it's broken. Oh fuck. Oh—*

Troy grabbed him by the front of his shirt and pulled him up. He shrieked as his weight landed on his leg. He had a momentary glimpse of Troy's flashing fangs before the vampire ripped into his throat again.

The pain was more than Michael could stand. It radiated out from the bite, like fire under his skin. He twitched and tried to scream, though the sound was more a gurgle than a cry. The edges of his vision turned black and the room smeared— shiny glass cabinets, shiny metal weapons.

"Stop!"

Troy obeyed Claudius' command and dropped his prey back to the floor in a bloody heap. Michael choked on his own blood and tried to stem the flow with his hand. *Oh God.*

Claudius stood over him, a self-satisfied smirk on his cold face. "You thought you could get the best of me? You, a petty mortal. Where is your cleverness now? You're out of your depth and your fear flows out behind you in crimson rivers. Death stands in the shadows, ready to drag you to hell. Was it worth it?"

Troy leaned casually on the desk. "Death is too good for someone like this. I got a better idea."

Claudius snapped his attention to his subordinate, no doubt angry his poetic scene was interrupted. "And what would that be?"

"We should keep him. Since he killed Geoffrey, we're shorthanded."

Claudius clucked his tongue and looked over Michael's bleeding, broken form. "We have plenty of humans, I don't want more. Especially one we can't trust."

Troy's cruel eyes turned crueler. "Then don't leave him human. Have someone turn him." His gaze shifted to the group of vampires who stood in the hall, no doubt drawn by the noise. Among them was a young woman in a red dress, her eyes on the floor. "Elsa's a fairly new vampire and, since Lennon turned her, she doesn't have any powers to pass on. Of course, you could kill him, if you think that would be a better punishment. I just thought dragging it out might make him think twice."

The room tilted. Claudius' answer turned into an ocean of unintelligible words in Michael's ears. He tried to concentrate on what was happening, but it slipped through his grasp. *Not like this. I can't die like this.*

"—turn him."

Though Michael missed the beginning of the sentence he knew those words were a command. He looked up. The woman in the red dress, who must be Elsa, stood near him. Like all the other women there she was beautiful. Hell, even the men were beautiful. He was dying, surrounded by the beautiful people.

Elsa looked down at him, pity in her eyes. The command was repeated and her shoulders slouched with defeat. She knelt down, her knees in his blood. It was red, like her dress, like her lips, like the ring slowly expanding around Michael's vision; a red circle slowly expanding to blot out the world.

Elsa wrinkled her nose at the mess on his neck and lifted his arm to her mouth. He felt her breath on his skin as she hesitated. Then, with a last look to Claudius, she bit.

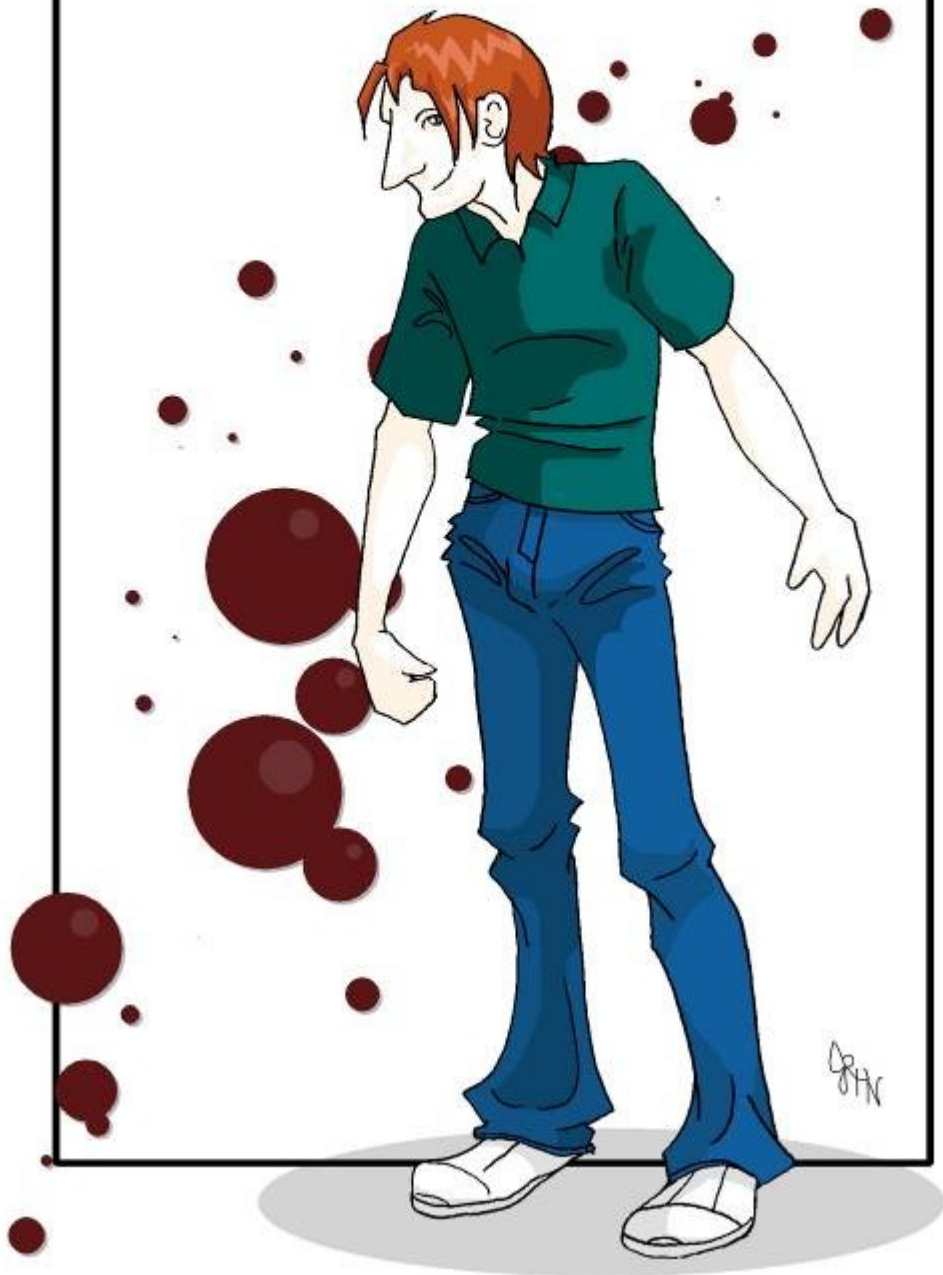
Michael gave a gurgle; a gurgle of blood, death, fear. Pain radiated from the bite, hot and burning, then morphed to something else; cool soothing ocean waves that lapped over him. He looked at her, looked at her red lips wrapped around his arm, the curl of hair that fell in her face, and those deep brown eyes; eyes filled with pity. Pity for him. Pity for her, and pity for the new life he would lead.

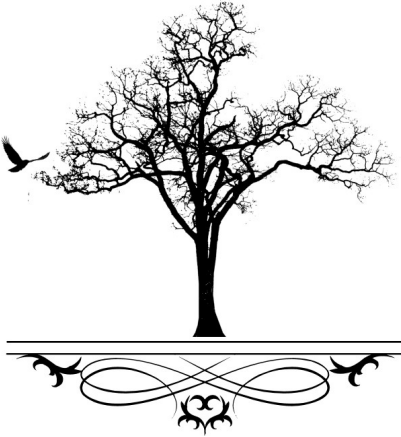
A life of punishment.

Who's the clever one now?



NIREL





NIREL

(You can find Nirel in *Legacy of Ghosts*. The sisters can be found in *Ashes of Deceit*, *Heart of the Raven*, & *Clash of Legends*. This story takes place in 1967.)



“Whereat with blade,
some demon shudders,
hiding under smoky glass
the colors run like virgin teardrops...”

Though Nirel tuned it out, the rest of the poem was in the same vein. Maybe it was because he wasn't as high as the others, or maybe it really was utter tosh, but he just didn't care. When the girl finished, everyone else clapped and reeled off compliments. The best one came from a guy in a pair of dark bell-bottoms. “That was beautiful. It is so in tune with modernism and the core of socio-transcendental-patterns of a new age.”

Nirel scoffed and lit another fag. Either that guy saw something he didn't, or else he just wanted in her knickers. It was probably the second one.

He felt the eyes and turned his head to see Agnes staring steadily at him. He gave her a nod and then looked away, as if that would discourage her. Times like this made him wonder what he'd been thinking when he'd made the sisters what he was; immortal and unchanging: vampires.

Her dark eyes bored into him; expecting something more. He shifted uncomfortably and finally swept to his feet. He muttered about needing air, not that anyone listened, and strode out the door.

The porch sagged. He leaned against a peeling railing and listened to the sound of the rain as it pinged the shabby roof and the late summer vegetation. Drip. Drop. Plop.

Splat.

He wiped the raindrop from his forehead and, with a filthy glare at the leaking roof, he hunkered down in a shadowy corner, away from the moisture.

The front door opened and closed. Agnes took a few faltering steps and squinted into the dark. He watched her eyes widen and a small smile curve over her cherry lips when she spotted him.

“Why are you hiding in the corner?” she asked and giggled. “Don't you like the rain? I'd think it would remind you of home.”

Home.

"Eh, I don't care either way, love." He drew the last puff from his fag and threw it out into the rainy yard. "Alright, so I'm here."

She frowned. "You make it sound like some kind of duty."

Isn't it? He kept the thought to himself and gave a non-committal shrug. Her frown deepened and, with a roll of his eyes, he caught her and pulled her to him. She resisted for just a minute; the feminine proof that she was the one in charge, and then she surrendered and snuggled into him with a soft sigh. He wrapped his arms around her and tangled his fingers in her chestnut hair. He leaned close and his lips brushed her neck where a knot of old scars was still visible. He inhaled deeply, breathing in the scent of her hair, her skin, her blood.

And then he bit.

She moaned softly and melted over him, like warm butter. Her blood filled his mouth, warm, spicy, sweet. He closed his eyes and tasted her; her thoughts, her dreams, her desires. They were all there, scattered at his feet like jewels and he chose which to look at and which to ignore. She tasted good, she felt good. Suddenly, he wasn't sure why he objected so much.

A wave of pleasure swept over him, and engulfed them both. With a shuddering groan, she tugged his shirt open and bit his chest. Her fangs sunk deep and he felt the initial pull as she drew his blood into her mouth. Then it was gone and there was nothing but the two of them, crashing together to the beat of the rain.

She cried out as the orgasm ripped through her, and he followed a moment later. His lips released her, and he traced his tongue over the still bleeding wound. She lay against his chest, murmuring soft sounds, like a kitten. Time and reality came back into focus as the blood pleasure faded. He closed his eyes against it. The soft landscape of her mind had been better and yet-

And yet he didn't love her.

"It doesn't matter," she whispered, as if she had plucked the thought from his mind, though it was an ability she didn't have.

She just knows. She always bloody knows.

"I love you enough for both of us."

He sighed and brushed her hair back from her flushed face. "I doubt that, love."

Music drifted out to them; heavy on the guitar and lean on meaning. The rain sped up and low thunder rumbled in the distance. Marijuana smoke wafted through the open window and he breathed it in. It was weak and diluted, just as they were.

He changed the topic. "You got one picked out yet?"

She giggled like a mischievous child. "I thought the one in the paisley, with the dreamy eyes."

"Dreamy?" He snorted. "'E didn't look dreamy to me, but call 'im what you want."

"I didn't say he was dreamy, just his eyes." She sighed. "I want to look into those eyes while I drink from him."

The door banged open and Iris stepped out. She adjusted her glasses and peered into the shadows. Despite the gift of vampirism, neither of them could see well. "*It's an improvement!*" Iris had cried with delight as she looked on the world with her new eyes. "*Oh look, Agnes! Look! I can see the stars.*"

As mortals, they'd obviously been very blind.

Iris hurried to them, a faint look of disapproval on her face. "Are you about ready to go? I'm bored."

"Not yet," Agnes turned to face her sister, though she still held a wad of his shirt in one hand. "I haven't eaten yet."

Iris crossed her arms. "Then hurry up. These parties are so boring. I don't know why we come to them."

It was a tune he'd heard before. "If it's not your scene, love, you don't have to come."

"Yes she does!" Agnes cried and grabbed her sister's arm with her free hand. "I want her to come."

Iris adjusted her glasses, as if to make herself look sterner. "Then feed so we can go!"

“All right!” Agnes giggled and stepped away from Nirel. “I’ll be right back,” she trilled and nearly danced to the door and back into the house.

Agnes turned her stern gaze to Nirel. “What about you?”

“I’ll catch something later. None of ‘em caught my fancy.”

“Not a lot does.” He could see the wheels turning behind her eyes, as though she were trying to formulate an especially witty and pointed remark.

He didn’t give her time. “You’re the one who was bored, not me.”

“Well, yes, but these parties are boring. The drugs don’t do anything for me.”

“Nothing at all?” he asked with mild surprise. They might be vampires but he still got a buzz.

“That’s what I just said. The music is terrible and the company even worse. Can’t we do something exciting?”

He tugged a fag from the pack and lit it. “And what would you find exciting? Cutting my ‘ead off, maybe?”

“That might be a good start,” she admitted with a huff. He glared back and she softened. “Oh, you’re all right, I suppose. But can’t we do something ‘vampire-ish?’ It’s been five years and nothing has changed! We might as well still be human! Surely there has to be something more than this.”

“Ya got any ideas? I’m all ears.” He took a deep puff and breathed out a cloud of vaporous smoke. “What do ya expect to ‘appen? Vampires are just people who live forever, so of course it’s all the same.”

“But we don’t have to hang out with... them!” She made a sweeping gesture towards the house and its mortal occupants. “Shouldn’t we be with our own kind?”

He snickered. “Vampires ain’t big on packs. Why d’ya think I’m by myself. How long do ya want to spend with someone before you’re tired of them?”

“Well I’m tired of this.” Iris stomped her foot for emphasis and the porch shuddered just a little. “I want some adventure!”

The door opened and Agnes appeared, licking her lips and smiling serenely. “He was delicious!” she declared as she came to a stop before them and grabbed Nirel’s hand. “Are we ready?”

Iris narrowed her eyes. “Yes, more ready than you can guess.”



It was still drizzling the next evening. Iris donned a rain poncho and bulldozed her way out the door. Agnes didn’t bother with a coat, only grabbed Nirel’s arm and dragged him into the rain.

“Oh!” she cried with delight. “The drops are cold! Do you feel them?”

“Eh, not really.” His gaze swept from her rapt face to the fringe of dark trees that bordered the property. Over the sound of the storm, he could hear Iris clomping through the underbrush, pointedly searching for soggy prey.

“Try!”

“What?” His attention swung back to her. “Sorry.”

She batted his apology aside. “I said try! Here!” She grabbed his arm and extended it, forcing his palm up. “Now concentrate. Feel the drops as they land on your fingers.”

He sighed inwardly. If it would shut her up he’d play along. “Yeah, yeah. I feel it. Cold.”

“See?” She giggled and released him so she could step away and look up at the dark sky. “Iris is angry.”

“Yeah, I know. She’s bored.”

Agnes’s face clouded and she met his eyes. “Are you?”

He looked back to the trees and bit off another sigh. “Love, I’ve been bored since I was born.”

“Even when you’re with me?”

He cringed at the clingy question. “Agnes-”

"It's all right. You don't need to answer." She followed his gaze and stared at the trees as if she could see through them. "She wants to leave."

The non sequitur jarred him. "What?"

"Iris. She wants to leave you. She wants to go that guild place where the other vampires are."

Nirel shoved his hands in his pockets. "It isn't what she thinks it is, like some kind of bloody summer camp. It's just a place where some of them go, mainly the prats who rule the rest of us. What she wants is a proper coven, but even that won't be what she's 'oping for. They just turn on you when it suits 'em and leave you behind to take the fall."

Agnes caught his arm and said softly, "You could come with us."

"Not if you're goin' to the bloody Guild. I'm sorry, love, but that's not a place I want to visit."

She sagged against him, her voice a whisper nearly lost among the rain drops. "What am I supposed to do? I can't leave her but..." she turned to him with liquid eyes. "Please, Nirel? I know you don't love me, but--"

The answer was on his face and she looked away. "It isn't fair! Why must I always choose? Why is it always what she wants or what I want? Why can't we both be happy?"

Her misery was too much for him. "Look, maybe you should let 'er go by 'erself? You could stay 'ere and we could... I don't know. We could do sumthin'."

She shook her head emphatically. "I can't leave her, you have to understand. We've always been together. I just -- I can't!" She exploded in a shower of tears and ran for the house.

Nirel took an absent step to follow her, then stopped. He could hear the squishy-squashy sound of Iris stomping her way across the lawn towards him.

"She told you?"

He didn't bother to face her. "Yeah. So when ya leavin'?"

He could imagine the way her face scrunched up. "You don't have to sound so delighted about it! You might pretend you care about her!"

"Why bother?" He turned for the trees. "I'm gonna go feed. I'll be back."

Iris shrieked after him, "You're a jerk!"

Maybe I am, but you're a petulant cow.



He half expected them to be gone when he returned. They weren't. Agnes sat in a chair in the kitchen, her skinny knees up to her chin. Iris banged around deeper in the house; in the bedroom, it sounded like. *Ah, I bet she's packing. Well good riddance.*

Nirel shook his shaggy red hair out and wiped the rain from his face. He peeled off his sodden shirt and jacket and tossed them in the sink, then he dropped into one of the kitchen chairs. "She's in an 'urry?"

Agnes answered with no enthusiasm, "Yeah. Once she makes up her mind she likes to jump right into it." They fell silent and Agnes dropped her legs and leaned on the table. Absently, she traced a circle on the table top, the mark from an old moisture ring. "She spent so long sick. We couldn't do anything; we couldn't even go outside when we were little." She sought his eyes, pleading. "You have to understand."

He leaned back in the chair and noted the soft creak of the wood. "I never said that I didn't."

Iris's voice floated from the bedroom, "I can hear you, you know!"

Agnes dropped her head to the table. "Yeah, I know," she murmured. "So what are you going to do- once we leave, I mean?"

He realized suddenly that it was their house. They'd grown up there, in the middle of nowhere Indiana, two sickly girls, their aging mother and her religion. From what he understood it had been powerful enough to count as a fourth inhabitant. "I dunno. Go find sumthin' to do, I reckon."

"You could stay here. We'll probably come back."

“Yeah, maybe.” The tension was heavy; like the shadows that hung in the corners. He stood and stretched. “I’m gonna go to town. I’ll be back.”

He grabbed his wet shirt from the sink and hurried out the door. Agnes’s surprised face hung in his memory even as the door slammed behind him. Hurt and surprised.

What did she expect?



He took another hit and handed it to the girl across from him. She had hair the color of a summer sunset and eyes like green grass, and she was so blitzed out of her mind, she didn’t even know where she was.

“What did you say?”

He hadn’t said anything, but that didn’t matter. “I said she’s leaving.”

Her red tinted eyebrows drew together. “Who’s leaving?”

“Agnes. She and her sister are packin’ their shit and ‘eading out.”

“Bummer. Is she your girl?”

“No.” He leaned back on his elbows. “She’s just a girl.”

The redhead held the smoke in her lungs, then let it out in a sweet scented cloud. “Did you date her a long time?”

He rolled his eyes. “Eh, five years.”

Her green eyes popped. “Wow, that is a long time. No wonder you’re so cut up.”

“I’m not cut up.” She offered the joint to him and he waved it away. “I don’t care.”

She was suddenly distracted by her hand. Obviously she’d been doing more than just pot. When she came back, she blinked at him and asked again, “What?”

A guy in a dark blue pullover lounged behind her. “He was telling you about his girlfriend.”

“Oh were you?” She fixed him with a vacant stare. “What about her?”

Nirel ground his teeth to keep from snapping, “*No, I wasn’t.*” He was suddenly sick of the whole vapid, stupid crowd. They didn’t know their arse from a hole in the ground. They probably didn’t even know their own bleedin’ names. Iris was right, there had to be something more.

The thought filled him with fury and he bit off his words savagely, “I was tellin’ you ‘ow we met. It was snowing and I was ‘ungry and there was their house, out in the middle of nowhere. So, I go right up and I knock on the door.”

He could still see it in his head. The door was locked and he pounded on it. He could smell their blood and he wanted it; he needed it. It had been days since he’d fed. After the massacre, his coven had abandoned him and left him to take the punishment. He was the newest, after all, the least important. The redheaded executioner had spared him, but the lackeys had left him bound and gagged in the abandoned house. He’d had to wait for the rats to chew through the rope. He’d caught one of them, but the rest of them ran and he’d stumbled out into the snow, looking for something better.

He’d knocked, over and over and over. Finally the door opened and the woman had stared at him. Short and gray, with cold, hard, unrelenting eyes; eyes that promised to suffocate those they loved and destroy any who endangered their carefully arranged kingdom. The kind of eyes that haunted a person’s dreams.

No, nightmares.

He’d killed her on the doorstep. Her blood splashed up the door and when he’d drained her he’d almost licked it off the woodwork, except he could smell the others; two others. It wasn’t just their blood, but the odor of a sick room. They’d be weak...

The guy in the pullover cut into his memories, “So what happened?”

An evil smile stretched across Nirel’s face. “I killed their mother and then I went through the ‘ouse ‘til I found the sisters cowering in the bedroom, dressed in their nightclothes and beggin’ me to spare ‘em. But I was too ‘ungry, so I drained ‘em both and now I’m gonna do the same to you.”

The red haired girl blinked vacantly. "What?"
Her question was followed by a scream.



Nirel wiped the blood off of his face and left. The screen door slammed with echoing finality. Someone was bound to find the two bodies soon. Maybe later tonight. Maybe tomorrow. The rest had run from what they'd later think was a drug induced hallucination.

He hadn't needed to kill them. They normally didn't; they just took some and left them alive. But tonight was the kind of night to revel in death and blood. It felt good. It felt like some kind of power.

The rain had slowed, but it still dripped in fat, splatting drops. Nirel walked randomly and listened to the noise in his head. It was nonsense and it didn't make him feel any better.

The sky was rosy to the east when he ducked into an abandoned root cellar. It smelled of earth and wet and mold. He flopped across a bin of rotten potatoes and closed his eyes. He could see Agnes; see her huddled in a ball on the floor in the bedroom, crammed back as if to hide from him. Iris was on the bed, her hair cropped short and her arms waifishly thin. She squinted at him, no doubt trying to make sense of the smeared vision of a withered monster. He grabbed her first, only because she was closer. Her skin tasted like sweat and medicine, and her blood had the bitter tang of chemicals, but he didn't care. It tasted like life to him.

Agnes screamed and lunged at his legs. She sobbed and begged him to stop. "Not my sister. No! Not her! Me! Take me!" and he hadn't cared. One was as good as another. He dropped Iris back to the bed where she curled into a trembling ball, her hand to her neck.

He remembered how Agnes's tears had tasted, and how hot her blood was as it filled his mouth. Iris cried; a constant flow of inaudible whimpers meant to be pleas. And there, in Agnes's mind, he saw it all. He saw the two girls, born weak and sickly. Saw the day their father left them. Saw their mother and her despair. Saw as Iris got better, then worse, as Agnes, the youngest but strongest battled for a life and ran away, only to find that the world outside was cruel. He watched her crawl home, her dead dreams packed away in her suitcase with her toothbrush.

And he'd turned her rather than watch her die. Not because he cared but...
Because I was bored.



His rest was patchy at best, and he was grateful when twilight came.

The rain had stopped and stars peeped between tattered clouds in the deepening sky above him. He trudged the familiar path back to the lonely clapboard house. No lights shone in the windows, and he hesitated on the lawn for a moment before he plunged through the door into the silent kitchen.

"ello?" He didn't know why he bothered. He already knew they were gone.

He didn't turn the light on. He didn't need it. He could see in the dark, like he was supposed to.
Not like them.

An envelope lay on the table and he picked it up. He recognized Agnes's slanting handwriting. "To Nirel" it said, and underneath in smaller letters she'd added a hasty, "Please read this. XXO."

He stuffed it in his pocket and dropped into the kitchen chair he'd been in the night before. "*You have to understand,*" she'd said, and he did. He understood.

"No skin off my nose, eh?" The darkness creaked around him, as if the house and its ghosts were answering, so he added, louder this time, "You 'ere me? It's no skin off my nose. I don't care what they do. I don't care where they go. You 'ere me? I don't care."

He broke off and laughed softly to himself. "Goin' crackers already, ain't I?"

The wind whispered through the corners, and he shivered. He imagined he could feel their mother's eyes on him, like they'd been that first night. They were angry eyes. Vengeful eyes. Eyes that wanted to punish him for what he'd taken away.

"Fuck this."

He stood and made show of gathering his things, as if to prove to the phantoms that he was leaving. With his bag over his shoulder he thumped out of the house and locked the door behind him. The key seemed to burn his fingers, but he didn't know what to do with it. Stick it in a plant somewhere? Toss it in the creek?

He settled for jamming it into his pocket with the letter. *Her letter*. What could she have to say to him? Probably more clingy, whiny bullshit.

"I love you enough for the both of us."

Bullshit.

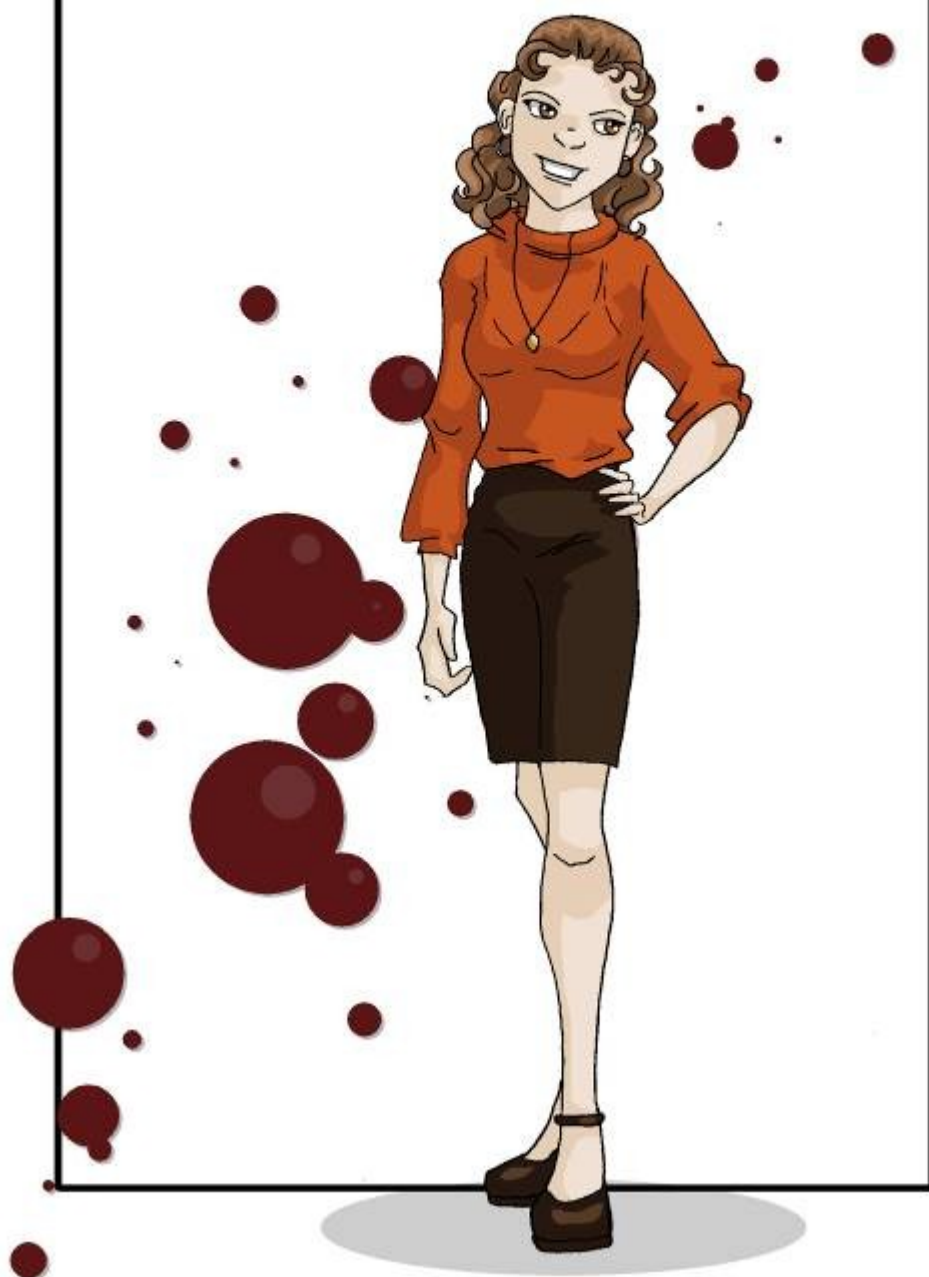
But it didn't matter because he didn't love her. He'd never loved her.

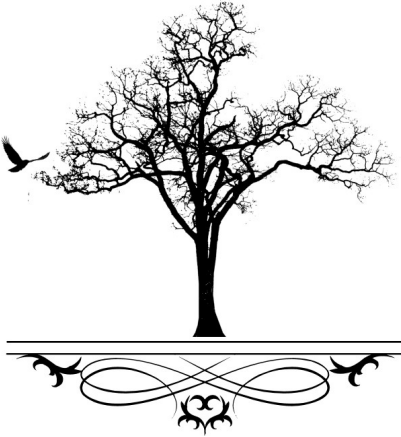
And he'd keep telling himself that.

Forever.



SARAH





SARAH

(You can find Sarah in *Shades of Gray* and *Brothers of Darkness*. This story takes place during *Shades of Gray* - if you've read the book, it's on the same day that Katelina runs into Jesslynn and the baby in the nursery.)



Sarah sat on the couch, a bright orange pillow clutched in her lap. "I know it's been hard on Katelina. I really think she needs to talk to someone. I suggested she call you and set up an appointment, but she's so stubborn."

The therapist nodded. Her blond hair moved with her head, like a solid piece of hairsprayed perfection. "Her boyfriend was murdered, wasn't he?"

"Yes. They still don't know who did it." Sarah frowned. "Though the police have been harassing her about it for a month. And now there's some joker calling her at work." She sighed. "I'm sorry. I know this isn't what we're supposed to talk about."

"We can talk about anything you want," the therapist assured her. "Why do you think this is bothering you so much?"

"Because she's my best friend," Sarah answered without thought. "We've been friends since we were kids. She was there for me through a lot of crap." The therapist nodded, and Sarah went on. "I can't stand seeing her like this. She says she's fine, but I know better. And then some jack ass thinks it's funny to call and say they know who killed him..." she trailed off and shook her head. "I'd like to wring their neck!"

"Did their joke upset her?"

Sarah absently bunched the pillow with her hands. "Of course it did!" Her voice dropped. "She went home early and I haven't seen her since. I thought I should give her a little time, but I don't know. It's been a couple of days. Maybe I should call her?"

"What do you think?"

Before Sarah could answer, the timer buzzed.

"And that's our session for today." The therapist stood up and offered a lipstick colored smile. "I'll see you next Friday?"

Sarah dropped the pillow to the couch and swept to her feet. She shook the doctor's hand, murmured the usual goodbyes, and headed out into the corridor. The colorful fish photographs and cheerfully painted woodwork didn't make her feel any better.

Her cellphone went off and she tugged it from her purse. Brad's familiar, smiling picture flashed on the screen and a silly grin stretched over her face as she answered it. "Hey, honey. What's up?"

"Hey, sweetie. Just calling to see how you're doing."

Sarah juggled her purse and let herself out through the glass front door. It was only five, but the October sky was already growing dark and the air was crisp. She wished for her jacket and hurried to her car. "I'm okay. Just leaving the therapist now."

"Feel better?"

It was a joke, but it made her frown. "No, not really. I'm worried about Katelina."

"I'm sure she's fine, honey. She just needs some time."

"I know." Sarah unlocked the door and slid in behind the steering wheel. "I just wish to God she'd never gotten tangled up with Patrick! He was bad news from the get go!" It was a familiar speech, but she launched into it, anyway. "He was a drop out – we went to school with him, though he was older than us – you'd think that would have clued her in, you know? A guy who can't even graduate isn't going to get anywhere. And he wore eyeliner – eyeliner! What kind of responsible man wears eyeliner? I'll tell you – none!"

The tirade continued as she started her car and pulled onto the road. Brad made little noises of agreement until she paused for a breath and then he threw in, "I'm sure it will be fine. Are you coming in tonight?"

His question momentarily confused her. "What?"

"To the bar? Hello! Earth to Sarah! I work tonight, honey, and I thought you were going to come in and keep me company. Unless you're too busy?"

Her cheeks flushed. "No, of course I'm not too busy."

"I wasn't sure. Your Patrick tirade can go for hours, after all."

She could hear the smile in his voice and she responded with a sheepish laugh. "Okay, okay, I get the hint. I just never liked the guy."

"Me either, but he's dead now. It's so long and good riddance, and time for everyone to move on, huh?"

"I know, I know. My therapist says I have trouble letting things go."

"I think she's right." His voice turned to innuendo. "Maybe later tonight we can see if you have trouble letting me go?"

Sarah giggled. "Oh, you! All right, let me just change and call Katelina real quick, and I'll be right there."

"Okay. I'll be missing you until then."

They exchanged their kissy-sounds and goodbyes, and then Sarah dialed Katelina's phone. It went straight to voicemail. Undeterred, she tried twice more, as though it would magically ring through if she only called enough. She pulled into the driveway of her little rental house and surrendered to the insistent voice mail request.

"Hey, it's Sarah. Just wanted to make sure you're okay. They said you didn't call in today, or yesterday. I know you sort of flake sometimes, but I just wanted to make sure everything is all right. Call me."

Now she had to wait.



Sarah took a shower and changed into the little red dress she saved for special occasions. Tonight wasn't really special, but she knew Brad felt neglected. On their last date she'd spent the whole night fretting about Katelina. He'd joked about it, but it was obvious it upset him.

"I'm going to show him just how important he is," she thought as she spritzed on his favorite perfume.

She checked her phone as she headed out the door, but there were no missed calls. Damn. Where the hell was she?

She called Katelina – got voice mail again – and made up her mind. She dialed Brad’s phone and he answered on the second ring. “Hey, whatcha need?”

“I called Katelina but she didn’t answer.” He sighed, and she rushed on quickly. “I’m just going to stop by her place for a little bit, to make sure she’s okay, and then I’ll be yours for the whole evening.”

“Sarah-”

“I promise! I just can’t enjoy myself while I’m worried about her, you know? I swear, it won’t be five minutes and then I’m all yours. No more distractions. Just you, me, and a few dozen drunks hanging around the bar.”

He laughed lightly. “As long as they’re a few dozen drunks who are tipping. All right, though I think you’re worried over nothing. Every time that girl breathes wrong, you’re fussing and fretting. Sometimes I just feel like you love her more than me.”

“Of course I don’t! You know I love you and Mr. Winky-boo.”

She could feel him cringe. “I wish you wouldn’t call it that.”

“Why not? Oh, come on, lots of guys have names for it.”

“Cool names. Not something like that. It sounds like a puppet from a kids’ show or something! For Christ’s sake, we’re not in junior high.”

She couldn’t stop the giggles anymore. “All right, all right. I’ll stop calling it that if you stop dogging me about being a worry wart.”

He gave an exaggerated sigh. “Deal. Now go check on your air headed friend and I’ll see you later.”

They repeated their kissy-ritual and hung up. Sarah started the car and backed into the street. “*Just a few minutes,*” she promised herself.



Sarah had to park her car two blocks away. Most of the shops on Main Street were closed, but the ballet studio was letting out and the street was thronged with parents picking up their little princesses in time to whisk them home for a late dinner.

“*Must be nice,*” Sarah thought bitterly then, just as quickly, she chided herself. Her therapist had told her that when she started to feel like that, she should count her blessings. It didn’t matter where she’d come from, only where she was going.

Easier said than done.

The street lights tinted the evening orangy-pink. Sarah hurried down the sidewalk to the book store. Katelina’s apartment sat above it and her living room windows looked out on the street. Light blazed from them and a person shaped shadow flitted across the blinds.

Good. At least she’s home.

A cheery red door led to a steep set of stairs. Sarah hurried up them and froze at the top, one hand on her purse and the other on the stair railing.

Katelina’s door sat at the end of the hall, wide open. A slice of the front room was visible; the coffee table was overturned and the floor was heaped with books and other items, including what looked like the couch cushions.

Eyes narrowed in determination, Sarah marched through the door, her cell phone in one hand as though it was a weapon. The disarray was even worse inside. The two large bookcases had been emptied and the armchair was overturned. From where she stood, she could see part of the kitchen where the cupboard doors were open and broken dishes littered the floor.

Fury swept through her. After everything that had happened, how could someone do this?

Glass shattered and she stormed towards the sound. Inside the bedroom she found two men. One had long black hair and a chestnut complexion. He’d have looked at home wearing feathers and buckskin.

A scar across one cheek only made him look wilder. The other had short red hair and dark eyes. His skin was pale white, and something about the way he stood, perfectly still and staring, seemed wrong.

She refused to let them intimidate her. “What in the hell do you think you’re doing?” She brandished her phone. “I’m calling the cops!”

The Native American took a step towards her, his eyes narrowed and his hands loose fingered fists at his side. “I wouldn’t do that if I were you.”

She jabbed the icon for the phone app. “Just watch me!”

With a snarl he leapt at her, and she ran. She pounded down the short hallway, the intruder behind her. Her purse fell from her shoulder and she let it go. Maybe he’d trip on it.

She made it to the front room before he tackled her to the floor. She kicked and flailed, but he was too strong. A thousand panicked thoughts raced through her head, each one culminating in the certainty that she had to escape.

A voice floated from behind them, “Did you get her, Joseff?”

The reply came through clenched teeth, “Obviously.”

“Good, then let’s get out of here.”

Her captor stood and pulled her to her feet. She tried to swallow down her terror and remember what she’d learned in self defense class. She knew the first step was to remain calm.

Easier said than done!

Joseff jerked the cell phone from her hand. Impossibly, he crushed it in his palm and dropped the pieces to the floor.

“My phone!” Sarah shrieked. *That’s it!* She slammed her fist into his surprised stomach and followed it with a sweeping kick to the back of his knee. He didn’t fall, but the moment of surprise gave her an opening and she took it.

She was just to the front door, one foot in the hallway, when he grabbed her arm and swung her around. Her face smashed into the door frame and pain exploded from her nose. She stumbled backwards and Joseff knocked her to the floor.

Something warm and wet ran down her face; blood. The familiar sensation flung her back in time. Suddenly she was a little girl again, crouched in the closet, hiding from her father’s beer scented fury. She trembled and terror crashed through her. *Help me!* She begged silently. *Save me. Someone, please.*

No!

She wasn’t a little girl, she was a grown woman, and the only person who was going to save her was herself.

She took stock of her surroundings, looking for a weapon. A broken-spined book lay next to her. *Useless.* A pair of dice was near her left hand. *Useless.* There was a bottle of nail polish – *useless* – and half of a broken glass ashtray.

Useful.

She slowly wrapped her hand around it, the jagged edge out, and readied herself.

“She’s going to be trouble,” the red head quipped.

“Brilliant observation, Lennon!” Joseff jerked her to her feet. He shoved his face in hers. His dark eyes snapped like fire that left her breathless. “Listen here Kate, or whatever your name is. You can cooperate or you can die. The choice is—”

His words shook her out of her momentary trance and she struck. The broken glass tore at his cheek, but did a fraction of the damage she’d hoped for. He roared in surprise and fury and then punched her in the face. She fell backwards over the armchair and lay stunned.

Joseff loomed above her, his face twisted and lips pulled back from his teeth – No, fangs! *Jesus! He has fangs!* He grabbed a handful of her curly hair and lifted her by it. “Enough games, you stupid human!”

She had a nanosecond view of his fist crashing towards her.

The world went black.



When she opened her eyes she was greeted by the same suffocating blackness. Her face throbbed and, though she tried to move, she couldn't. It was as if she was tied up.

Oh, God!

She took a deep, exhaust scented breath and choked. She could feel the hum of a motor, the vibrations of movement.

I'm in the trunk of a car.

Which could only mean one thing: she was being kidnapped.

But why? If they wanted money they'd have just taken her discarded purse. If they wanted to rape her, they'd have done it at the apartment. If they wanted to kill her, she'd already be dead. She didn't know them, so why-

And then she remembered his words, *"Listen here Kate, or whatever your name is..."*

"Oh my God, they're after Katelina!"

The realization jolted her. Why would a pair of thugs be after her best friend? What in the hell was Katelina mixed up in?

Patrick. It had to be something to do with him. Probably drugs. No doubt, that was what he'd been killed over and now – and now what? And now they were after Katelina, only they'd grabbed her by mistake?

In her mind, she ran through scenes from movies, lectures from her self-defense class, random reality TV shows. None of them had any advice for this scenario. Not even Cosmo had a "What to do if you're locked in a trunk" article. Like usual, she was on her own.

"You can do this," she told herself. *"Just hang on until we get wherever we're going. Then they'll open the trunk."* But how long would that be?



Minutes ticked past, or maybe they were hours. Trapped in the dark without her phone, Sarah had no idea how much time had passed. The car thrummed along at a steady pace. She was jostled over bumps, but for the most part the ride was smooth. *"Probably an interstate,"* she told herself.

Her mind wandered. She thought of Brad. She could picture him leaning on the bar, his sandy blond hair glinting in the row of colored lights, and his blue eyes twinkling with mischief. Only they wouldn't be. They'd be ringed in worry and impatience, while he checked the clock and wondered what was taking her so long.

Hopefully he'd go to Katelina's when he got off work, and when he found it in shambles... what? He'd call the police? And just how would that help her, when she was God knows where?

The car slowed and then the road suddenly got bumpy – very bumpy. She could hear something pinging the bottom of the car: rocks. They were on a gravel road.

Gravel?

It felt like an eternity, but at last the car pulled to a stop and the engine fell silent. Sarah heard the car doors open and footsteps crunch across rocks. They stopped nearby and someone banged loudly on the trunk.

Lennon's voice sounded tiny and distant through the metal. "You sure she's not dead?"

"I'm sure."

Someone slotted a key into the lock and then the trunk sprang open. Sarah squinted against the onslaught of artificial light; so bright after the blackness.

Joseff grabbed her by her shoulders and pulled her out of the trunk. With her ankles bound, she couldn't stand on her own, so he flung her over his shoulder and carried her towards a small brick building that sat seemingly in the middle of nowhere. Several cars were parked in the gravel parking lot, and a security light threw harsh, strange shadows.

The metal door of the building scraped open and a man appeared. His blond hair was longish and tucked behind his ears. His eyes held neither hatred nor pity; the expression of someone who was simply doing what they were supposed to.

"You got her?"

"Yes," Joseff answered smugly. "She walked right in and practically asked us to take her."

The blond moved aside so they could enter. As they passed through the door, Sarah missed banging her head by mere inches.

They walked down a brick hallway and the blond asked, "Was Jorick there?"

Jorick? Who's Jorick?

"Nope," Lennon answered from behind. "She was all alone."

"Hmmm. The way that Michael and the others talked, she left with him."

Michael? Didn't Patrick have a brother named Michael?

Joseff made a noise of agreement. "I know, but he wasn't there and it's not our problem. Let Michael explain it."

"He can't. He's dead."

Sarah felt a stab of icy terror at the blond's words. She didn't know if was the same Michael she imagined, but that they could be so nonchalant that someone – anyone – was dead...

"Claudius kill him?" Joseff asked as they came to a door in the far wall. The blond opened it and they started down a set of stairs.

"Yes. He had him burned, shortly after the two of you left."

Lennon made a noise in his throat and Joseff grumbled, "I always miss the entertainment."

Burned? *Oh my God, it's the mafia, isn't it?* There was no other explanation. But the mafia doesn't have fangs. Sarah still remembered her captor's flashing teeth. *Maybe it was my imagination. It had to be.*

The trio of men fell silent as they reached the bottom of the stairs and Sarah concentrated on her surroundings. The room was large and open, like a big basement, with gray walls and floor. A chandelier, strangely out of place, hung from the center of the ceiling, and beneath it sat a large, wicker chair.

A door to the right opened up and several people trailed out. Among them was a bald guy, two scantily clad women, and a sulky blond teenager. Sarah didn't recognize any of them, but there was something about them, something that seemed... wrong.

If this is the mafia, then they don't look like they do on TV!

The group moved to the center of the room and the teenager sat in the chair. His cold eyes surveyed them and Sarah shivered.

Joseff dropped her to the cement floor. With no hands to catch herself, she landed painfully on her shoulder. She bit back a cry and told herself to stay calm. *"Work on the rope on your wrists. Try to get your hands loose. You can still escape."*

The Native American propped his foot on her hip and declared, "We've brought her, Master."

"Have you?" The teenager stood and moved to her, absently rubbing his hands together. She froze as his gaze moved from her feet to her head and back again, so intense that she could almost feel it, like fingers gliding over her. "She is interesting. I could see why they might fight over her."

The bald man made a noise in his throat and walked towards them. He stopped a few feet away and broke into rough laughter.

The teenager's head snapped up and his cold eyes narrowed. "And what do you find so amusing, Troy?"

"It's not her," he answered, his smile wide and fanged.

Fanged? No, that had been her imagination. People didn't have fangs. The mafia did not have fangs!

The teen frowned. "Are you certain?"

Joseff growled low in his throat and stepped harder on her hip. "Who else would it be?"

Troy shrugged. "Damned if I know, but Patrick's girl is a bit of blond fluff who looks like she might crawl under the bed at the slightest provocation." He broke into harsh laughter again. "This one's kinda cute, though. I bet we could find something to do with her."

His leering tone made Sarah's stomach twist. And his fangs continued to taunt her; shiny, sharp, real. How could he have fangs?

The teenager's face clouded and he glared at Sarah, as if it was her fault. "If you're not Katelina, then who are you? Speak!"

Joseff ground his heel into her and she yelped, then choked out, "Sarah. Sarah Townsend." She could tell from their expressions that more was expected, but she refused to play their game.

"And just what do you have to do with anything?" the teenager demanded.

She summoned up all of her courage and stared back. "Untie me and I'll tell you."

The teen motioned with his hand. "Joseff."

The Native American leaned down and grabbed her by her throat. She choked as he lifted her off the floor, crushing her windpipe in his hand. The same hand that had broken her phone to bits. *Oh God.*

"I'm- I'm Katelina's friend," she gasped out.

"What? I didn't hear you." The teen motioned to Joseff again and he released her. She landed on her face and rolled over, still coughing. "I'm Katelina's friend," she repeated, her voice raspy.

"Her friend, hmmm?" The young man's eyes glittered like daggers. "Then tell me, where is she?"

"I-I don't know."

He leaned down, though not close enough to actually touch her. "You don't know, or you refuse to tell?"

Her voice rose, though she didn't know if it was from anger or terror. "I said I don't know!"

"Hmmm." The teen straightened, turned on his heel, and stalked back to the chair. He draped himself over it and stared at her with bored disdain. "I imagine you don't know where Jorick is, either?"

Jorick. They'd mentioned him earlier. "I don't know who he is."

The teen snorted. "Of course, play innocent. But, we'll see how long you can keep it up for." He snapped his fingers. "Troy! Have you heard from Peter and Jason?"

"No, Claudius – Master," he corrected quickly.

Claudius drummed his fingers on the arm of the chair. "They should have reported by now, unless they're dead." He narrowed his eyes at Sarah. "Are they dead? Did Jorick kill them, perhaps?"

When she didn't answer, Joseff kicked her in the back. "He asked you a question."

Though she knew they weren't playing, she shouted, "I don't know who they are, or who Jorick is, and I don't know what happened to any of them! Let me go now and I won't call the police!"

Troy's grin seemed to grow even wider, if that were possible. "Let me have her, Master. I'll make her talk."

Claudius nodded disinterestedly. "Very well, Troy. Do as you please." He glanced back to her and added absently, "If she knows anything, I would appreciate the information while she's still able to speak."

A terrified scream strangled itself in Sarah's throat and she struggled against her bonds. This had to be a joke. Wasn't there a TV show where they tried to scare people? Maybe she was on it. Or maybe it was a nightmare. Or maybe-

Troy bowed low, and then pounced, like a cat with a mouse. He snatched Sarah up by the front of her dress and smiled into her face; that wide, toothy, fanged smile. She could see herself reflected in his eyes, feel the heat of his breath.

Oh God, maybe it's real.

Troy snickered and glanced to her captors. "Stand back, boys, and watch how it's done."

Joseff snorted contemptuously and the other two remained silent. Sarah tried to catch their eyes and send a silent plea to them, but they didn't look at her. Her gaze swung wildly to the group clustered around Claudius' chair. Surely one of them would help her. One of the women, maybe?

Help me. Save me. Someone, please.

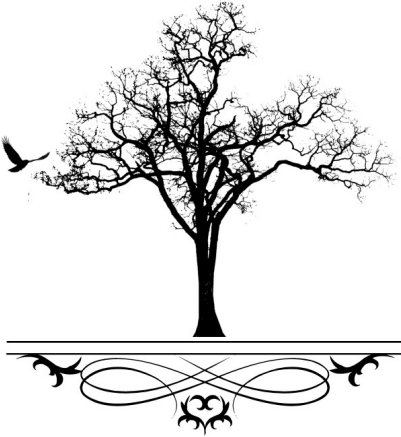
Troy laughed again, and she told herself she wouldn't scream, no matter what.

Easier said than done.



TROY





TROY

(You can find Troy in *Shades of Gray* & *Brothers of Darkness*. This story takes place in New York, sometime before *Shades of Gray*.)



Troy leaned back against the metal building and stared at the sky. Shreds of clouds drifted past the full moon, like tattered silk, and a lone bird called in the distance. The sound was harsh and eerie.

It was lost on Troy.

God, I am so fucking bored. I don't know why Claudius put me on greeting duty.

But there was only one guest left to arrive and then he was done.

The noise of a motor reached his ears and his shoulders tensed. The sound grew louder and a black car appeared, a cloud of gravel dust trailing behind it. Troy stood and stuffed his hands in his pockets as the vehicle pulled to a stop.

The back passenger door opened and a tall, thin woman climbed out. Her hair was as black as the sky and her expression cold as ice. She sniffed disdainfully and lifted the hem of her scarlet dress, as though the slowly settling dust had contaminated her.

Troy muttered to himself and then moved to meet her. He gave her a once over that left a leering smirk on his lips. Her ass wasn't bad, but she didn't have much in the top department. Ah well, not like he was gonna get her, anyway. She was there for the big boys. Claudius didn't have a chance either, though no one had better tell him that or he'd have one of his fits.

The woman's cold face got colder. "And you are?"

Troy cleared his throat loudly and made a show of a low, sweeping bow. "My master Claudius bids you welcome, madam. Allow me to escort you, and if there is anything else I can do to make your stay a... pleasurable one..." he trailed off and let the smirk demonstrate his meaning.

"That won't be necessary," she snapped. Her words danced with a foreign accent, Italian maybe? He didn't know, and he didn't care. Like the rest, she was a self-absorbed, bossy bitch.

"However, you can keep Costus entertained."

Her random statement pulled him back to the conversation. "Costus?"

She motioned to the car, as if that was an answer, and then walked purposefully past him, towards the tin building and a pair of guarded double doors. "I do hope it's better inside than outside!"

Troy didn't bother to explain the subterranean den concealed by the small metal structure. Why bother? The bitch would see for herself. Maybe he'd get lucky and she'd get lost in the labyrinth of tunnels before she reached the throne room and the conference.

The guards opened the door and leapt out of the way quickly. Troy watched her disappear inside, then turned back to the car and scratched his bald head. "Who the fuck is Costus?"

The back driver's side door opened and a sulky teenage boy climbed out. Dark messy hair obscured his eyes and the set of his shoulders said he'd rather be anywhere else. His thoughts were the same.

Just the kind I like.

The boy slouched around the car and threw his bangs from his face with a jerk of his head. Cold, dark eyes gave Troy a once over. "Who are you supposed to be?"

Troy returned the long look; from the kid's leather footwear, past his pressed pants, sharp blazer, and the open neck of his crisp white shirt. "First tell me who the fuck you are."

He sniffed disdainfully. "I'm Costus, obviously."

"And obviously I'm the asshole who's stuck babysitting you while your momma plays with Claudius."

The change was instant; the kid went from sulking boredom to raw fury. "She is not my mother, you insolent-"

Troy snorted. "I don't care who she is. I'm not stuck with her, I'm stuck with you. Let's go."

Costus' anger flickered. "Go where?"

"I've been greeting the envoys all night and haven't had time for more than a snack, so I'm hungry."

Costus looked ready to argue – and he was. Troy could hear the thoughts bubbling through his brain. He didn't want to take his car, didn't want the driver to know where he was going or what he was doing. His sister – *That's who she is, not his mother. I knew they looked alike* – wouldn't like it. She'd told him not to go anywhere and charged the driver with keeping him out of trouble. Then she'd lectured Costus. He was tired of being lectured. He wasn't a child, and hadn't been for two hundred years.

Bingo.

Troy's shrug was fake casualness. "Unless you think your mom would get mad?"

As he expected, that did it. Costus's face twisted and he snapped, "She is not my mother, and I don't care if she's angry!" He turned and jerked the back door open. "Are you coming or not?"



The interior was black leather; the smooth, sensual kind. Troy briefly imagined the kid's naked skin on it, white against the black. *Kid*. Though he called him that, he wasn't. Costus' thoughts had betrayed his age. Hell, he was older than Troy was by nearly a century. That was the beauty of vampirism. Age was relative; it just depended on how you looked at it, so everyone was only as old as you wanted them to be.

The town was nearby and there wasn't much to it. It was larger than some of the others, but it was nothing like home. Not that Manhattan had been a great place to live, especially not the part he'd been in. Hell's Kitchen, they'd called it. The name fit in a way that people who'd never been there couldn't know. Or at least it used to fit. Last time he'd been there it was full of high rise bullshit and nothing he recognized. Sure, some of the old buildings were there, but they were occupied by suits and yuppies. Oh well, all the old gang was gone too, so it seemed fitting. Not like he needed any of them now, anyway. Truth be told, he didn't need anyone.

Except for some fun.

The driver glanced back to them. "Where would you like to go, sir?"

Costus looked at Troy from the corner of his eyes, as if seeking the answer.

Oh yeah, this kid's like putty.

"We're hungry," Troy barked. "Take us to a restaurant – a nice restaurant."

"Erm. A restaurant... sir?"

“Do you always talk back to your superiors?” Troy demanded with authority. “I don’t know what kind of a coven they’re running, but where I’m from, the low men on the totem pole show the proper respect and do what they’re told!” As if to seal it, he met Costus’ eyes. “Is this how you let them treat you?”

“No!” the kid cried with moral outrage. He pounded his fist into the seat. “Do as you’re told, Piotr!”

“Yes, sir!”

Troy could hear the driver’s worried thoughts; worried about being demoted, worried about being killed. Worried about being kicked out of the coven and left to fend for himself. He was a vampire like them, but he was new – really new. Troy saw a flash of thought, a half formed image of a pretty girl with a bloody face whispering, “*Do you want to be like me, pretty Piotr?*” And then she was gone and Piotr was alone in the rain and he didn’t understand.

Good. He knows what it is to be alone. He fears it. Where there’s fear, there’s control.

Troy smiled, but not kindly. “You better listen up, there, Piotr, or they might have to replace you with someone competent.”

He could feel Piotr’s fear double.



The restaurant was attached to a hotel. It was nice, but it wasn’t the million dollar kind. There weren’t any of those around. Piotr parked the car and nervously hopped out and opened the back door for them. Troy climbed out and straightened his leather jacket. Costus got out behind him, a frown on his face.

He doesn’t understand, but he will.

Troy motioned to the kid and headed for the door. Like an uncertain puppy, Costus followed into the lobby and to the desk where a lady asked for their reservations. He saw it in her mind; there’d been a cancellation. The Whites- *whatever the hell they are* – weren’t coming. That sounded like the perfect table to him.

He fished around in her head for their full names but could only get one: Ron. That was enough.

“Ron White said he had to cancel his table and he thought maybe we could have it instead.”

She looked doubtful. “You’re friends of Mr. White?”

“Either that or he’s just calling strangers about his reservations.” He gave her a tight, friendly smile. “Ah, come on honey, I bet you don’t get paid enough to do detective work on everyone who comes in here. The bosses probably don’t appreciate everything you already do. No need to make more work for yourself on our account.”

He heard her agree silently. They didn’t pay her enough, and the manager forgot her birthday. It wouldn’t have been so bad if she wasn’t sleeping with him. But he still forgot it. The bastard!

“I could speak to the manager and see if he thinks it’s okay?” Troy suggested.

“Oh, that won’t be necessary.” She motioned to a passing girl. “Show them to table twenty-six.”

They wound their way through restaurant, past clinking glasses and chattering diners. The table was in the center of the room, under a heavy chandelier. *The old fashioned version of wealth.*

The young lady hurried away and left them with a pair of menus. Costus blinked at his, and then at Troy. “You know these White people?”

“Sure, kid. I know everyone.”

Costus’ forehead seemed to fold in on itself. “I’m not a kid,” he hissed between his teeth.

Troy’s return grin was wolfish. “My mistake.”

When a waiter appeared, Troy ordered for both of them. Once they were alone again, Troy leaned back in his chair and surveyed the room. “What do you prefer? Boys or girls?”

“Girls!” Costus snapped a little too quickly, his cheeks slightly pink.

Bullshit. You'll settle for anything that comes your way. Boy, girl, what's it matter to you? Once the fangs are in, they all feel the same.

Only they don't.

Troy ignored Costus' vehemence. "Take a look around and find one you like."

The kid gave the room a casual glance; the kind of casual glance where the owner was secretly cataloging everything and everyone. Troy listened to his inner comments; this one was too fat, another too old, another too young. One was too skinny and a fifth was unattractive.

"That one," he said finally, and nodded towards a girl with black hair and eyes the color of shadows. She reminded Troy of Costus' sister, only without the attitude.

He didn't mention the resemblance. "All right. Keep an eye on her."



Their food came. They pushed it around the plates and Troy even tasted some of it, then spit it back in his napkin. Costus wasn't as good at the charade. His back was rigid, his shoulder's stiff, and he looked toward their prey far too often.

He's gonna spook her.

He needn't have worried. She was dining with an older lady – an aunt – and when Troy reached for her mind he found it all giggles. She noticed Costus' attention, and she liked it. She was already planning on how to get rid of her aunt for the evening.

And then, she did.

She and her aunt disappeared towards the lobby and Troy climbed casually to his feet. He snapped his fingers impatiently, "Waiter! Check, please!", motioned to Costus and then stalked out after them. He made it outside in time to see the pair separate; the older lady hobbled off towards her car and the girl made a show of stopping to dig through her purse for an imaginary "something", her eyes on the building and her secret heart hoping that the "hot guy with the dark hair" would come out any second.

It evidently took Costus a couple of minutes to deal with the bill, and when he stormed through the door he looked as angry as anyone who's ever been left with the check. Troy caught his furious eyes, winked and subtly nodded towards the girl, as if to say, "There she is, tiger."

He got the hint.

Troy leaned against a planter and smoked a cigarette, while Costus stumbled through his opening lines. Her name was Andrea. He was just passing through. She was just recovering from a messy breakup. He was single. It went on through one cigarette and half of another, then Costus invited her to go with them. She giggled and said she shouldn't.

Then, of course, she agreed.

Troy had already spotted the car in the parking lot and led the way. Andrea asked who he was and Costus explained him away as an uncle. She seemed to find that appealing.

A family girl.

She squealed when she saw Piotr. "Oh my God! You have your own driver!" Troy could hear her thoughts clicking away; visions of dollar signs, luxurious mansions and private jets. She thanked her lucky stars for finding a rich boy. It was every nineteen year old girl's fantasy.

Nineteen? Huh. She looks twenty.

They climbed in the backseat together, Andrea in the middle. She blushed and giggled and talked. And talked. And talked. "Oh wow, look at the seats! Oh! They're so smooth. I've never been in a car like this. Wow, you must be rich. What do your parents do? My father works for the railroad and my mother's a teacher. So this is your uncle? What does he do? He looks like a rock star in that leather jacket. Oh my God, is that it? Are you guys rock stars or something?"

Troy tipped her a wink. "Shhhh. Don't tell anyone, honey. We're traveling incognito."

She put her hands to her face and suppressed a squeal. Questions followed; what band were they in? What kind of music did they sing? Had she ever heard of them?

Troy put his finger to his lips, and she fell silent. He leaned close to her ear, as if to whisper a secret. He could smell her hair; honey and peaches. *What an interesting combination.* Her skin smelled like citrus with a hint of flowery perfume. Under it was the scent of her blood. Warm, salty, thick.

His words were more breath than sound, "If we tell you, we'll have to kill you." He laughed softly at his own joke, and she smiled nervously and leaned away. He could hear the alarm bells ringing in her head. Something wasn't right. She could feel his malintent.

As does most prey, just before the predator strikes.

With lightning precision, he struck. His fangs sliced through the pale skin of her neck, just below her jaw. She shrieked and tried to climb into Costus' lap, her arms and legs flailing in the confined space. Troy roughly pulled her back and grabbed a fistful of her hair. He jerked her head to one side, to give him better access. More blood.

With the blood came the visions.

She was six. Candles burned on a birthday cake. She cried because another girl was mean to her. She told her she was ugly. Poor little ugly girl in her birthday dress. Mother soothed her. Told her she had guests waiting.

The scene changed.

Snow fell and cocoa steamed. Her best friend lay on the couch with a bowl of popcorn. They watched horror movies. The TV flickered. A Hollywood vampire snarled, blood on his face. Artificial, yet somehow more believable than the real ones.

Believable because they weren't in the middle of nowhere New York. Real vampires wouldn't be there. Not really.

Or so she thought.

The visions pounded over him, and he sought the worst ones; the tears, the pain, the agony. Breakups, broken hearts, loneliness, grief. He felt them all, just as she had, one after another, breaking over him like waves on the shore. She felt them too, as raw and fresh as if they were new, and she screamed.

He could still hear Costus, like a small beating light at the edge of his peripheral vision. Troy broke away from Andrea's streaming consciousness to concentrate on him. Costus had fed earlier but the smell, the sight, the screams – his desire was growing, building. His lips pulled back from his teeth. He wanted the heat, the taste, just a drink. Only a drink.

"Come on," Troy whispered around a mouthful of her throat. "You picked her."

Troy edged away from her mind and let her come back to the present in time for Costus' bite. He bit into her naked shoulder, teeth rending flesh in the quest for her blood. She jerked and fought, hitting him with one arm, kicking her legs uselessly against the seats. And her screams – her screams were terrible, terror-filled. The kind of screams a horror movie producer would pay extra for.

The kind of screams Troy loved.

He let her go and leaned back into his corner of the car. He watched as Costus took hold of her writhing, flailing body. He pulled her to him and bit harder, deeper. Her back arched and her breasts strained against her dress. Her blood smeared around Costus' mouth. He tightened his hold for better access and wrapped his hand around the bite Troy had made. Blood oozed between his fingers; scarlet against the pale of his skin.

She went limp in his arms, but still he drank, oblivious to Troy, or to Piotr who was still driving, mild concern on his face as he glanced into the rearview again and again. Troy could hear his thoughts. His mistress wouldn't like this. She was going to be mad when she found out. There would be hell to pay.

He has no idea.

"She's empty," Troy whispered, his voice husky. Costus' eyes met his briefly, a flash of incomprehension. He wanted more. It wasn't about the blood anymore. It was about...

Yes, that's it. That's exactly it.

Troy pulled the girl from Costus' arms and stuffed her into the floorboards. The kid stared at him with wild, half crazed eyes. Troy didn't wait for them to clear.

He pounced on Costus and knocked him back against the window. Troy grabbed his shirt in both hands and pulled it open. Buttons popped and pinged on the chrome and leather. The skin underneath was smooth and pale. Under the passing streetlights, it gleamed like polished marble.

Troy caught Piotr's horrified eyes in the rearview and his smile grew into something smug. It was the driver's job to look after Costus and keep him out of trouble, but there wasn't a damned thing he could do now.

Troy bit. Costus gave a strangled cry and batted at Troy, aware for only a moment of what was going on. His awareness disappeared as his blood filled Troy's mouth and their minds touched. Oh yeah, the kid was older than he was. He could see it; see the funny clothes, hear his sister's urgent voice. Costus was born into darkness first, turned by a friend of his mother's he called 'Uncle'. The bloodlust tore through him. In his rage he attacked his sister. She screamed but he was strong now – so strong-

"No!"

Costus' scream tore through the car and Piotr slammed the brakes. Troy let the scene go; let it slide away, back into the depths of the kid's memories, and reached for something else, something better. Costus moaned and his body relaxed. The pleasure built, coursing through both of them. They shifted until they were nearly laying down, Troy on top of him, pressing him down into those smooth leather seats. Costus unconsciously wrapped his arms around him, pulling his attacker closer, tighter. His back arched and his body shuddered.

Yeah. Oh fuck, yeah.

The orgasm ripped through Troy and he let go. The connection snapped and cold air slapped him in the face. The door was open and Piotr leaned in it, screaming. Without a thought, Troy slammed him in the face with his fist. The driver stumbled backwards and Troy slid out of the car. He grabbed Piotr by the lapels and lifted him, his teeth snapping in the driver's face. He could take him now – right now – gorge himself like some big, fat spider and leave him lay. He could-

"Stop!"

The cry was shaky, but demanding. Troy looked up to see Costus stumble out of the car and lean against it. One hand held his shirt together and the other was out, almost comically, like a traffic cop giving directions. "Leave him!"

Troy dropped Piotr to the ground and stepped over him. "Whatever you say, kid." He ducked past Costus and slid into the backseat. "We better head back, your sister will want to know where you are."

He could hear the argument in Costus' head. Hear him mentally shout, "She's not the boss of me!", but he didn't say it. Instead, he fumbled himself into the car and settled into the corner.

Piotr stood and wiped himself off. He opened his mouth, the beginning of a tirade. Troy knew what he was going to say and cut him off. "You're just a lowly nothing peon. Go ahead, run back to your mistress and tell her what happened. See if Costus goes along with you, because he won't. He'll say you're full of shit and she'll punish you like a dog for lying. That should be fun to watch."

Piotr looked to his master, but Costus didn't meet his eyes. Troy knew he was right, and now Piotr did too.

Without a word, the driver got in and started the car. They pulled back onto the highway and sped through the night towards Claudius' war den. Troy watched Costus from the corner of his eye. There were wet wipes in a door compartment and he used them to clean himself; his hands, his face, his chest. His fingers trembled as he buttoned his blazer. It wasn't enough to hide his gaping shirt and the missing buttons. Troy could hear his panicked thoughts as he tried to come up with a lie to explain it. All his attempts were stupid, but Troy didn't care.

Not my problem.

The car pulled to a stop and Troy hopped out and stretched. He glanced back to the pale faced kid inside. "You coming, prince charming?"

"No. I-I'm going back to our hotel."

"Suit yourself." Troy slammed the door and stepped back. He watched as it pulled away, spitting gravel behind it, then faded into the embrace of the night. Costus' sister would have to find another ride, or else sleep there during the day.

Troy turned for the metal building and thought of Costus and his downcast eyes. It was an expression he'd seen before; half guilt, half bewilderment. Uncertain about what had just happened, and if they'd wanted it or not.

Of course he did. And if he didn't, then he at least deserved it. They all deserved it with their mansions and their money. Hell's Kitchen might be a swanky address now, but in his memory it wasn't. The lessons he'd learned on those streets would stick with him for an eternity. You took what you wanted because no one was ever gonna give it to you. Only the strongest survived, and to be the strongest, he'd given up his soul, long before he'd become what he was now.

And in order to live with myself, I don't try to get it back.

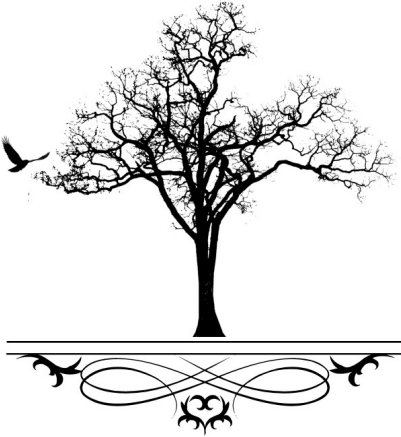
After all, what did a vampire need with a soul anyway?

It would just get in the way of the fun.



VELNYA





VELNYA

(You can read about Velnya in *Legacy of Ghosts*. Traven and Jeda are in *Ties of Blood & Ashes of Deceit*. This story takes place in 1855 near Springfield, Massachusetts.)



Moonlight splashed on the leaves and the last of the summer grass. Velnya peered through the window and let the evening breeze kiss her skin.

“Turn your head, ma biche!”

She is slipping back to French. Oh dear.

Velnya did as ordered. Her sister’s brush strokes were more violent than necessary, and Velnya bit her lip to stop a complaint.

“Place your hand just here.” Jeda pressed her fingers against her skull, and Velnya obeyed. This was not the way she had imagined the preparations for her wedding day. In her mind, there was a number of cheerful bridesmaids snipping flowers and giggling, discussing the mysteries that young ladies could only speak of behind closed doors; the dreams, the possibilities, the endless years stretching out before them that would promise them happiness.

Instead she had her sister and her cold, angry eyes staring down at her in the mirror.

It was more than she could bear.

She turned in her seat and caught Jeda’s pale hands in her own. “Let’s not fight. This should be a happy occasion!”

“And it would be, if you were not going so far away! Why must he take you to the Nebraska territory? He has a fine house here!”

Velnya sighed and drew her hands back. “I’ve told you already. He’s worried that the hostility between the states will turn into something more serious, and he wishes to be as far from it as possible, and of course he wants to move farther away from his master.”

Jeda’s voice was controlled, but her eyes narrowed dangerously. “The same master he moved here not two years ago to be near? Why the sudden need to get away? And so *far* away?”

Velnya fidgeted with the lace on her sleeve. “I know, it *is* far. But not so far as it could be. It’s not as if we were going back to the continent.”

“For now,” Jeda bit back. “Who knows what he plans to do in another year, or five!”

Velnya smiled softly. “Of course we won’t. What purpose would such a move serve? Oh, Jeda! It really isn’t so very far as it could be, at least there will not be an ocean between us, and we are not going immediately.”

“No, you will go to Virginia first, to honeymoon on his plantation – another home he will leave behind – and then you will go to the wilds. There is nothing there, only dirt and shacks made of sod! There won’t be any of our kind!”

A soft rap sounded on the door and Traven’s voice floated through, “May I come in?”

Velnya glanced down at herself. She was properly dressed, it was only her hair that wanted finished.

“Yes,” Jeda called, and forced Velnya to turn back. She forcefully jabbed a pin into a coil of hair and added, “Hold still.”

Velnya sat motionless and watched in the mirror as the door opened and Traven walked in. His chestnut hair gleamed in the candlelight and his clothing was more ornate than was the fashion, a remnant of their earlier lives, before they became what they were now.

Vampires.

Velnya had been one for so long, a century at least. Each night the moon had risen to shine on Jeda and her husband and Jeda’s lonely younger sister. Though Velnya was with them, she was always alone; the one who allowances must be made for, the extra, the third wheel.

Traven stopped next to Jeda and spoke to her in soft tones; the furniture had been moved, the guests were ready, the flowers were set, the minister had arrived from Springfield. The words were unimportant. What did men and women have to talk about but the mundane? What mattered wasn’t the conversation, but the way they stood near one another without shyness. The way Jeda’s eyes would stray to Traven and something would soften in their depths. The way they said goodnight to one another every morning.

Velnya was tired of watching it and not having it for her own.

But Jeda wasn’t happy. “It’s not too late,” she murmured. “The wedding could still be postponed until we can convince him to stay. If he truly cares for her he will understand.”

“And what if he doesn’t?” Traven hissed back. “She will not find a better match. He’s an Executioner, Jeda! No, the head of the Executioners! Think of it! You know who his master is! Imagine having such an ally!”

“I am not interested in an ally, but in a husband for my sister! One who will not drag her away to the wilds!”

Traven took her hands and his voice turned into a soothing lullaby, “And would your mother not have said the same of me, bringing you here?”

“That is different! We don’t have to live in a shack and bury ourselves in the dirt!

“And neither will they. They will have a house and all the things of comfort, ma mie. Can you imagine one of his rank and privilege going without? No, he will have only the best and so will your sister. Being gloomy is easier than being cheerful. Instead of seeing the clouds, the separation, you should see the silver lining, such as your sister’s happiness.” He looked past his wife and met Velnya’s steady gaze. Something in his eyes said it wasn’t her happiness he cared for, but the advantages the match might bring him. “Have you asked Velnya what she thinks?”

Jeda pulled away from him and back to her sister. “Yes.”

“And?”

“She says she is happy in this match.”

Traven gave a satisfied nod. “As such, there is nothing more to discuss. Velnya wishes to be married, I have given my blessing, and even now the guests and groom are gathered.” He bowed to the ladies and added meaningfully, “Let us not leave them waiting.” Then he slipped out the door.

Jeda finished her work in silence. Velnya watched her progress in the mirror and noted that she wiped her eyes more than once. Each tear filled Velnya with trepidation.

Despite the assurances Traven had given, they knew nothing of this Nebraska. From what Velnya understood, it had only become a territory a year before. She had never seen a frontier and had no idea what to expect. Would there be wooden houses with pianos and chandeliers and carpeting or would it be shacks of sod - whatever that was - as Jeda insisted? Velnya had heard of vampires that, with no shelter from the sun, were forced to dig holes to protect themselves in the daytime. Would she really have to

stoop so low? Would they not have proper coffins in a dark room or cellar? She thought of lying under the earth with the worms and the bugs, like one who was dead, and shivered. Surely Traven was right; he had to be.

Jeda helped Velnya to her feet. She placed the veil, then stepped back to eye the effect. When she didn't speak, Velnya prompted, "Is something amiss?"

"No. It is perfect. You are perfect." Jeda turned suddenly stern. "Promise me that this is what you want."

Velnya swallowed hard and a thousand doubts suddenly screamed through her brain. *Is it what I want? Do I want to go to the Nebraska territory? Do I want to be married? Or do I want to watch my sister and always be on the outside?*

She knew the answer to the final question, and it made the rest superfluous.

"Yes. I want to marry him, Jeda."

Her sister picked up the bouquet from the washstand and weighed it in her hands, as if it was a physical manifestation of her options. "You know he will be gone much of the time with his work. You will be alone."

"Only at first," Velnya assured her. "He's going to speak to his master and ask to be set free. He's more than paid his blood debt. Once he does, he will come home to stay."

"And will his master let him go?"

It wasn't something Velnya had considered. "Why wouldn't he? What could a master gain by holding on to their fledgling? After all, Henri let Traven go."

Jeda made a soft noise in her throat and looked away. A secret glittered in her eyes, but it was one Velnya didn't care to know, so she let it pass without comment.

A soft knock sounded on the door. Instead of Traven, it was a woman with hair almost as black as the sisters'. Velnya recognized her as friends of her fiancé. She and her husband were his neighbors in Virginia, and they were vampires, too. That they had made the journey to Massachusetts said much about their relationship with him.

"Yes?" Jeda asked politely.

The woman – Mrs. Jesslynn Cotterill, if Velnya remembered correctly – replied, "Mr. Laurent asked me to see if you were ready."

"Yes. Tell him to start, please."

There was a long moment as the two dark haired women surveyed one another; an invisible clash of wills that washed past Velnya. At last Jesslynn broke away. "Of course." Then she turned and floated out the door.

As soon as they were alone, Jeda moved to a bureau and removed a small box. She handed it to her sister. "I believe Mère would want you to have this."

Velnya opened the box to reveal – "Momma's cross." She lifted it out gently and held it in her palm, turning it this way and that so that the candlelight reflected on the silver. "She gave this to you."

"No, she gave it to us." Jeda stuffed the bouquet in Velnya's surprised hands, then tied the necklace around her neck. "Wear this always, ma biche, and it will bring you luck." She blinked back the emotions. "Come, they will be starting."

The words had barely left her mouth when the music began. Jeda gave her sister a last look and a quick hug, and then hurried through the door to make her descent as the matron of honor.

Velnya took her place in the hallway and waited nervously for her cue. She could see Traven standing at the bottom of the stairs, ready to walk her down the aisle and give her away. It wasn't that she disliked Traven. In his own way, he had done what he thought best for all of them, but she always felt that beneath the surface of his smooth words and suave demeanor was something coiled, like a snake, waiting for the opportune moment to break loose and reveal his true intentions.

I won't need to worry about it any longer, she told herself. Nor would she need to worry for Jeda's safety. She was his wife. No man would allow harm to come to their own wife.

The first strains of the wedding march swirled up the stairs and Velnya straightened her shoulders and glided down the stairs. Her eyes moved from the flowers and gleaming candles, to the assembled

guests, each dressed in their finest. Her fiancé had very few guests; only his neighbors from Virginia and a dark haired man he'd introduced as Jamie. The rest were acquaintances of Traven and Jeda, part of the burgeoning vampire society in the area.

At the far end of the room, between two large gilt candleholders, stood the minister – The Guild's official minister, no less – in his robes and finery, the bible in his hands. And in front of him stood her fiancé. His dark hair hung down his back and he wore his usual black suit. What was different was the rose in his buttonhole.

Though he couldn't see her face, she felt as though he met her eyes, and a smile stole across her lips. In his face she could see the reflection of her girlhood dreams. Here was her future, her fairytale prince, the man that would take her hand on winter strolls and whisper good night in her ear. His were the arms that would shelter her when she rained tears and the laughter that would celebrate when she bubbled with joy.

And he would be hers for eternity.

She wouldn't have to be alone ever again.



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About the author:

Joleene Naylor is the author of the glitter-less ***Amaranthine*** series, a world where vampires aren't for children. As a compliment to the novel series, she has also written several short story collections and the ***Amaranthine Files*** encyclopedia.

In what little time is left she watches anime and updates her blogs, all from a crooked Victorian house in Villisca, Iowa. Between her husband and her pets, she is never lonely, and should she ever disappear one might look for her on a beach in Tahiti, sipping a tropical drink and wearing a disguise.

Ramblings from the Darkness at <http://www.joleenenaylor.com>
You never know what you'll find in the shadows....

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