

The Raven Bound

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I walk a tightrope above an abyss. The silver line of wire is all that keeps me from 1,000 feet of darkness yet I feel no fear. I flit across the rooftops of London like a cat, I lie flat on top of underground trains as they roar through sooty tunnels. I climb the ironwork of the Eiffel Tower and I dance upon the girders at its pinnacle, daring gravity to take me. And all of this is so dull.

Dull, because I can do it.

I move with the lightness and balance of a bird. I never fall, unless I throw myself wantonly at the ground. Then I may break bones, but my bones heal fast. It is not difficult. It will not kill me. All these wild feats bore me, for they hold no challenge, no excitement.

What is a vampire to do?

I see him in a nightclub. He could be my twin: a brooding young man with a lean and handsome face, dark hair hanging in his eyes; his eyes lovely miserable pools of shadow. How alone he looks, sitting there oblivious to the crush of bodies, the women glittering with beads and pearls. He is hunched over a glass of whisky and he raises a long, gaunt hand to his mouth, sucking hard on a cigarette stub. Dragging out its last hot rush of poisons.

"May I join you?" I say.

"If you must." His voice is a bored, English upper-class drawl. I love that.

"There is no free table." I wave to emphasize the obvious; the club is crowded, a sepia scene in a fog of smoke. "My name is Antoine Matisse."

"Rupert Wyndham-Hayes." He shakes my hand half-heartedly. His cigarette is finished so I offer him another, a slim French one from a silver case. He accepts. I light it for him — an intimate gesture — and he sits back, blowing smoke in sulky pleasure. "Over from Paris, one assumes? First visit?"

"I have been here before," I reply. "London always draws me back."

He makes a sneering sound. "I should prefer to be in Paris. Funny how we always want what we haven't got."

"What is preventing you from going to Paris, Rupert?"

I look into his eyes. He doesn't seem to notice that I am not smoking. He sees something special in me, a kindred soul, someone who will understand him.

He calls the waiter and orders drinks, although I tip mine into his while he isn't looking. Presently his story comes tumbling out. A family seat in the country, a father who is proud and wealthy and mean. Mother long dead. Rupert the only son,

the only child, with a vast freight of expectations on his shoulders. But he has disappointed his father in everything.

"All the things he wanted me to be — I can't do it. I was to be a scholar, an officer, a cabinet minister. Worthy of him. Married to some earl's daughter. That's how he saw me. But I let him down. I tried and failed; gods, how I tried! Finally something snapped, and I refused to dance to his tune any longer. Now he hates me. Because what I truly am is an artist. The only thing I can do, the only thing I've ever wanted to do, is to paint!"

He takes a fierce drag on his cigarette. His eyes burn with resentment.

"Isn't your father proud that you have this talent?"

"Proud?" he spits. "He despises me for it! Says I'll end up in the gutter."

"Why don't you leave?" I speak softly and I am paying more attention to the movement of his tender throat than to his words. "Go to Montmartre, be an artist. Prove the old man wrong."

"It's not that easy. There's this girl, Meg..."

"Take her with you."

"That's just it. I can't. She's the gardener's daughter. My father employs her as a maid. D'you see? Not content with being a failure at everything else, I go and fall in love with a common servant. So now the old man tells me that if I don't give her up and toe the line, he'll disinherit me! And Meg's refusing to see me. Says she's afraid of my father. Damn him!"

I have not been a vampire so very long. I still recall how hopeless such dilemmas seem to humans. "That's terrible."

"Vindictive old swine! I'll lose her and I'll be penniless! He can't do this to me!"

"What will you do about it, Rupert?"

He glares down into his whisky. How alluring he looks in his wretchedness. "I wish the old bastard would die tomorrow. That would solve all my problems. I'd like to kill him!"

"Will you?"

He sighs. "If only I had the guts! But I haven't."

So I smile. I rest my hand on his, and he is too numb with whisky to feel the coldness of my fingertips. I have thought of something more interesting to do than just take him outside and drain him.

"I'll do it for you."

"What?" His eyes grow huge.

I should explain, I am poor. It seems so cheap to go through the pockets of my victims like a petty thief. I do it anyway, but it yields little reward. The wealth I crave, in order to live in the style a vampire deserves, is harder to come by.

"Give me a share of your inheritance and I'll kill him for you. No one will ever link the crime to you. Natural causes, they'll say."

His breathing quickens. His hands shake. Does he know what I am? Yes and no. Look into our eyes and a veil lifts in your mind and you step into a dream where anything is possible. "My God," he says, over and over. "My God." And at last, with a wild light in his eyes, "Yes. Quickly, Antoine, before he has a chance to change his will. Do it!"

I am standing in the garden, looking up at the house.

It's an impressive pile, but ugly. Grey-brown stone, stained and pitted by the weather, squatting in a large, bleak estate. A sweep of gravel leads to a crumbling portico. No flowerbeds to soften the walls, only prickly shrubs. It's tidy enough but no love, no imagination and no money have been lavished upon it for many a cold year.

In the autumn twilight I traverse the lawns to the rear of the house. The gardens, too, are austere and formal, with clipped hedges standing like soldiers on flat stretches of grass. But there are chestnut and elm and beech trees to add sombre grandeur to the landscape. Brown leaves are scattered on the ground. The gardener has raked them into piles and I smell that English autumn scent of bonfires and wet grass.

Somewhere behind the windows of the house sits the father, the rat in his lair, Daniel Wyndham-Hayes.

It's growing dark. Rooks are gathering in the treetops. I am taking my time, savouring the experience, when a figure in a long black overcoat steps out of the blue darkness and comes towards me.

"Antoine, what are you doing?"

It is another vampire. His name is Karl. Perhaps you know him, but if not I shall tell you that Karl is far older than me and thinks he knows everything. Imagine the face of an angel, one who felt as much bliss as guilt when he fell, and still does, every time he strikes. Amber eyes that eat you. Hair the colour of burgundy, which fascinates me, the way it looks black in shadow then turns to crimson fire in the light. That's Karl. He's like a deadly ghost, always warning me not to make the same mistakes he made.

"I am thinking that this house and garden are the manifestation of the owner's soul," I reply archly. "Will they change, when he is dead?"

"Don't do this," Karl says, shaking his head. "If you single out humans and make something special of them, you'll drive yourself mad."

"Why should it matter to you if I am driven mad?"

He puts his hand on my shoulder; and although I have always desired him, I am too irritated with him to respond. "Because you are young, and you'll only find out

for yourself when it is too late. Don't become involved with humans. Keep yourself apart from them."

"Why?"

"Otherwise they will break your heart," says Karl.

They think they know it all, the older ones, but they will each tell you something different. You can't listen to them. Give them no encouragement, or they will never shut up.

We stand like a pair of ravens on the grass. Then I am stepping away from him, turning lightly as a dancer to look back at him as I head for the house. "Go to hell, Karl. I'll do what I like."

I am inside the house. The corridors are draughty and need a coat of paint. Yet Old Masters hang on the walls and I finger the gilt frames with excitement. Riches. This seems ironic, that Daniel should collect these grimy old oils for their value and yet consider his own son's potential work valueless.

Following Rupert's instructions, I find the white panelled door of the bedroom, and I go in.

The father is not as I expect.

I stand beside the bed staring down at him. With one hand I press back the bed-curtain. I am as still as a snake; if he wakes he will think someone has played a dreadful joke on him, placed a manikin with glittering eyes and waxen skin there to frighten him. But he sleeps on, alone in this big austere room. Dying embers in the grate give the walls a demonic glow. Like the rest of the house it is clean but threadbare. Daniel is hoarding his wealth. Perhaps he thinks that if he disinherits Rupert he can take it with him.

Why did I assume he would be old? Rupert is only twenty-three and this man is barely fifty, if that. And he is handsome. He has a strong face like an actor, thick chestnut and silver hair flowing back from a high forehead. His arms are muscular, the hands well-shaped on the bedcover. Even in sleep his face is taut and intelligent. I stand here admiring the aquiline sweep of his nose and the long curves of his eyelids, each with a little fan of wrinkles at the corner.

He will not be easy to kill. I expected a frail old goat in a nightcap. Not this magnificent creature, who is so full of blood and strength, a lion.

I bend over the bed. I am salivating. I touch my tongue to his neck and taste the salt of his skin, the creamy remnant of shaving soap, such a masculine perfume... I am shaking with desire as I press him down with my hands, and bite.

He wakes up and roars.

I try to silence him with my hand in his mouth and he bites me in return! His teeth are lodged there in the fleshy part of my hand but I endure the pain, I don't care about it; all is swept away by the ecstasy of feeding. We lie there, biting each other.

His body arches up under mine.

A scratching noise at the door.

We both freeze, like lovers caught in the act. I stop swallowing. Slowly I withdraw my fangs from the wounds. Daniel gives only a faint gasp, though the pain must be excruciating. We look at each other; the door opens; an apparition floats in.

She's wearing a thick white nightgown and she carries a candle that reflects in her eyes. "Daniel?" she whispers. "It's midnight..."

I can tell from her manner that she hasn't come in response to his cry. I doubt she even heard it. No, she comes in like a thief and it's obvious that she is here by appointment. I am partly hidden by the bed curtain so I have a good look at her before she sees me.

She is lovely. Dark brown hair flowing loose over the white gown. Ah, such colours in it, the lovely strands of bronze and red. She has the sweetest face. Dark eyes and brows, a red, surprised bud of a mouth.

She's coming towards the bed. Daniel rasps, "Meg, no!" and then she sees us, sees the blood on his neck and on my mouth. The candle falls to the carpet, her hands fly to her face. She is backing towards the door crying, "Oh, God, no! Help! Murder!"

I have to stop her. I launch myself at her, pinning her to the door before she's taken two steps. I'm in a frenzy now, I must have her, I can't stop. I savour his blood still in my mouth as I bite down, and then he is swept away by the taste of Meg flooding over my tongue. Ripe and red and salty and...

Her head falls back. She clings to me. It is so exquisite that I slow down and draw delicately on her until she presses her body along the whole length of me and I feel her heart pounding and the breath coming out of her in little staccato cries of amazement.

For some reason I can't kill her. My fangs slip out of the wounds they have made and I hold her close as she sighs. I haven't the energy or will to finish it. No, I like her alive. I love the heavy warmth of her body slumping against mine, and her hair soft against my wet red mouth.

We stand like that for a few minutes. Then I feel Daniel touching my shoulder. He has staggered from his bed. "Who are you?" he whispers. His big hand wanders over my arm, my shoulder blade, my spine. It slides in between me and the woman and lies warm against my ribs. He's resting against my back. The three of us, pressed together.

Well, this is cosy.

I am in the garden again when she finds me. I am pacing back and forth on the grass beneath the cold windows of the mansion with the moon staring down at me; and suddenly there is Charlotte. She steps from the shadow of a hedge to walk at my

side.

"It's difficult to leave, isn't it?" she says, slipping her cool hand into mine. "What are they like, your family?"

"Interesting," I say. "Rupert, the son, is in love with the delicious housemaid, Meg. How am I to tell him that Meg slips in regularly to service the father? No wonder Daniel has forbidden Rupert to see her."

Charlotte utters a soft, sensuous laugh. "Oh, Antoine, hasn't Karl told you what a mistake it is to ask their names, to become involved in their lives? You know you shouldn't, yet you can't stop. That's always my downfall, too."

Ah now, Charlotte. She is Karl's lover and her presence is all it takes to reveal the folly of Karl's advice. Don't get involved with humans, he tells me? Hypocrite. For he took Charlotte when she was human, couldn't stop himself, couldn't leave her alone. And who could blame him? There is something of the ice-queen and something of the English rose about her. She is the perfect gold and porcelain doll with a heart of darkness. She's like a princess who ran away with the gypsies, all tawny silk and bronze lace. But ask which of them is the more dangerous, the more truly a vampire — it is Charlotte.

She is the seducer. She is the lethal one. You will never see Karl coming; he takes you swiftly and is gone before you know what happened, no promises, no apologies. But Charlotte will worship you from afar, and bring you flowers, and run away from you and come back to you, until you are so mad with love for her that you don't know which way to turn. Oh and then she'll turn on you and take you down, our lady viper, and soak your broken body with her tears.

Not that I was her victim, you understand. But I have watched her in complete admiration.

"Why must it be a downfall?" I ask, annoyed.

"Humans are so alluring, aren't they? You can't go only for one taste. You can't be like Karl — just strike and never look back. You're like me, Antoine. You want to play with them, to get to know them, to love them. Is the pleasure worth the pain? I never quite know. You have to do it again and again, to see if it will be different this time."

"It's only a game to me. I don't care about them. I'm doing it for money, that's all."

"Really?" she says. "Then why couldn't you kill them? Why are you still here?"

Charlotte stands on tiptoe and presses her rosy mouth to mine; and she's gone, in a whisper of silk and lilac.

Behind this hedge I find a kitchen garden, where Meg's father lovingly grows vegetables to feed the household. Ah, now I see. He is a man who despises flowers and prettiness, loves prosaic potatoes and beans — just like his employer. The air is thick with the rot of brussels sprouts, the scent of wet churned soil and compost. Through a gap I see the cold shine of the greenhouse, and — where the garden

meets the servants' area of the house — the tantalizing glint of glass in the kitchen door.

When Rupert discovers that I have not killed his father, he is volcanic with rage.

We meet beneath a line of elm trees. The rooks squawk and squabble in the bare branches above us.

"You liar!" Rupert screams. "You traitor!"

He flies at me, arms going like windmills, but I hold him off. He's useless at fighting, as he is at everything. Perhaps he is a useless artist too, merely in love with the idea of brooding and suffering and being misunderstood.

"Why didn't you finish the old devil off? You only wounded him!"

"I was interrupted."

"What the hell do you mean — interrupted?"

So I tell him. Rupert rages. He paces, he punches trees, he weeps. Finally he turns to me like a man in the grip of a fatal illness, his face white and frail as the skin of a mushroom.

"This is a disaster!" he cries. "If Meg and my father are lovers, then I have nothing left to live for. They'll have a child, and I shall have no inheritance, no house, no wife — nothing!"

He flings himself at me, grabbing the lapels of my coat. I am really enjoying this.

"Kill me," he begs, tears running from his beautiful, anguished eyes. "Kill me instead."

Oh, my pleasure.

Only I can't do it.

I hold Rupert close and we are the same height so he looks into my eyes for an instant before my head goes down to his throat. He is tense, desperate for oblivion. But then the inevitable happens. He softens in my arms and clasps my head. He sighs. He forgets what he was angry about.

We are locked together, his blood running sweetly into my open mouth, his groin pressed hard against mine. And it happens. I fall in love with him.

And I'm satiated so I stop drinking; I just want to hold him against me. But I haven't taken nearly enough to kill him and he knows it.

"You bastard," he says weakly. "You liar."

He faints. I let him go. I leave him lying there, slumped on the roots of a tree, and I run. .

I don't go far. There is an ancient rose arbour halfway across the grounds, with a

dry fountain and some sad-looking, mossy statues. Here I hesitate, undecided, my mind full of Rupert and Meg and Daniel. I want them so badly. I am in anguish.

Karl startles me. I am not looking where I'm going and I don't see him there in the shadow of a rose trellis. I almost step on him. He's like a statue coming to life, with fire for eyes, and if I had been human I believe I should have died of fear. He's still following me, watching me, warning me — just for the hell of it, I swear.

"Are you simply going to leave him?" He grips my arms, forcing me to meet his gaze. "You have a choice, Antoine. Go back and finish them all; or leave now, and never come back. Make a decision or this will destroy you!"

"Why don't you leave me the hell alone!" I growl, pulling free of him.

"I shall," he says coldly. "But I have seen so many of our kind sabotage their own existence through their obsession with mortals. I have even known them to kill themselves."

"Kill themselves?" The idea is shocking to me. Abhorrent. What's the use of becoming immortal only to waste it?

"As soon as I am sure that you understand, then I shall leave you to your folly."

I laugh. "Karl, do you really not see? How boring do you want our existence to be? Oh, yes, I have tried all the things that new-made vampires think will thrill them. And it does thrill, for a little while. I have climbed mountains where the cold and the lack of air would kill humans. I have swum deep in the ocean. I have thrown myself like a bird off the Eiffel Tower and walked away with a broken wrist."

"And have you not found wonder in any of this?"

"The thing is that when such feats come so easily to us, there is no point in doing them. No challenge." My voice is throaty and I hate myself for being sincere and fervent in front of Karl, but there it is. "All that's left, the only challenge, the only chance of passion" — I point across the garden at the grey-brown hulk of stone — "lies in that house."

"I disagree," says Karl, but his eyes betray him.

"If you disagree, my friend, why are you pestering me? There is no reason under the moon for you to be haunting me, except that you get some frisson of excitement from it."

Karl can find no reply to that. I dance away, quite pleased to have silenced him for once.

I am back at the house again. Moth to the flame. Of course.

I'm outside the parlour window and they are inside, sitting there by the light of an open fire and gas lamps. A brown scene, with little touches of green, red and gold. To my surprise, Rupert and his father are sitting in armchairs on opposite sides of the grate. They are not speaking but, my God! At least they are in the same room! They are sipping brandy from balloon glasses and the liquor shines like rubies in the

fire-glow.

Meg is perched on a couch, sewing. She wears a simple skirt and cardigan — not the maid's uniform I expected — and her hair is coiled on her head, beautifully dishevelled. They are listening to music on the wireless — such a big box to produce such small, tinny, jaunty sounds! But this is not a scene of happy domesticity.

There is a dreadful tension between them. Even through the glass I feel it.

They're waiting for me, thinking of me. I can feel the heat of their dreams and desires. For me they would forget their quarrels, even forget their relationships to each other, just to feel my lips on them again and my fangs driving into them... to lose themselves in bliss. I long to go to them. I want to feel their arms around me, and their bodies pliant under mine, and their genitals stiffening and opening like exotic flowers and their blood leaping into me, God, yes, their blood...

The woman pricks herself with the needle. I watch the blood-bead swell on her finger. Then her lips close on the wound, and my desires throb like pain.

My hand is on the window...

Meg looks up with her finger still pressed to the moist bud of her mouth, and sees me. I grip the frame of the sash window and push it upwards. The warmth of the room rushes to meet me and I hear her gasp, "He's here!"

The men jump to their feet. Their faces are rapt, eyes feverish, lips parted. All three of them are coming towards me and I long to stroke their hair, to feel the heat of their bodies through their clothes and taste their skin. Brooding Rupert and leonine Daniel and sensual Meg. Three golden figures in a cave of fire. "There you are," they whisper. "Come in, Antoine, come in to us."

I reach out to them, as they are reaching out to me. Our fingertips touch...

Someone slams down the window between us. A hand grips my arm.

"They will suck you in," says Charlotte into my ear. "They will be your slaves and you will be theirs."

Now if it had been Karl who shut the window I should have been furious. But I can never be angry with Charlotte; not for long, anyway. In a flash I am detached and ironic. "That sounds quite appealing."

Their faces are pressed against the cold pane, staring into the twilight. Charlotte pulls me aside so they can't see us. I yield, and we walk slowly along the back of the house, with grit and soil and the debris of autumn accumulating on our shoes. A graveyard scent. I'm looking for another way in. I feel like a revenant, scratching at windows, rattling door handles.

This path leads us into the kitchen garden again. In the gloom there are rooks on the furrows, pecking at the delicious morsels

Meg's father has turned up with his digging. Will he know what his daughter does with Daniel, and with Rupert, and with me? Will he join us? An old man, smelling of

sweat and earth, creating green life from the ground... I should like to taste his essence.

"If you go in, they won't let you go," says Charlotte. "You won't be able to leave."

I pull her to me and kiss her neck. "I shouldn't want to leave. I love them. And you sound thrilled at the idea yourself."

She laughs. "Wasn't I right, Antoine? Yes, this is excitement. This is ecstasy. Shall I tell you why Karl is so cold? Not because he's different to us. No, it's because he's the same, he can't leave humans alone. Only he hates the consequences. Oh, I always plunge in head first, I can't help myself, I always think it will be different this time. But Karl... he's the realist."

And Karl is there, as if he stepped out of thin air in the shadows. He has been waiting for us. Now he's strolling on the other side of me, his hand so affectionate upon my arm. They are guiding me away from the house, along the grassy path towards the hedge at the top of the garden and the bare trees beyond, away, towards redemption. Every step is agony.

"The trouble is, there's a price to pay," Karl tells me. "You can say 'yes' to them and you can let yourself fall; but you can't have them and keep them. They're dying, Antoine. The more you love them, the more you kill them."

"Don't think it won't hurt you, when they die," says Charlotte. "Don't imagine the pain of it won't claw your heart to pieces!"

"But if I..." My voice is weak.

Charlotte knows what I'm thinking. "Yes, you could make them into vampires," she says crisply. "With a great amount of energy and will and strength, you could do that. But it won't be the same. Then you will have three cold-eyed predators, vying with you, resenting you, perhaps hating you. But your warm, moist, blood-filled lovers will be gone."

"So leave," says Karl. "Leave them now!"

We have reached the gap in the hedge. I stand there despairingly. I raise my arms in anguish and the flapping of my overcoat makes a dozen rooks rise in alarm. But one remains. It hops in circles on the grass, trailing a damaged wing. It cannot escape the earth.

I break away from Karl and Charlotte. I run back to the house and stand outside, breathing hard.

My lovers are inside, waiting for me. I can hear the blood thundering through their hearts, their red tongues moistening their lips in anticipation. I only have to turn away and they will remain like that for ever: aching for me, waiting, their lust turning to fevered agony — but alive.

Grief will, I think, be interesting.

I press my fingers to the cold glass of the kitchen door, and I go in.