



Of Predators And Prey

The Hunters Hunted II
Anthology

Edited by
Justin Achilli

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Foreword

One of the most rewarding aspects of running a Kickstarter campaign is planning the stretch goals. More accurately, it's seeing how excited players get about a Kickstarter campaign, and how many stretch goals the campaign meets. *Hunters Hunted II* had a great Kickstarter campaign — it added a bunch of new material on the various hunter organizations that (hopefully) help the World of Darkness hold the creatures of the night at bay, and it also earned enough to make this fiction anthology a reality. The name itself, **Of Predators and Prey**, was suggested by the community. What better way to say thanks to the players who made this stretch goal possible than to let them choose the title of their reward?

Choosing the fiction writers was no mean feat for me. Everyone herein was personally invited. I didn't want to do a shotgun submission, I wanted to craft the anthology specifically with the voices of writers who I knew had something unique to offer. In some cases, it's a personal history that attaches them to the World of Darkness, but in others, it's a chance to say something new, or to take the World of Darkness in a new direction. Nine new stories, from nine writers. Why did I choose these writers in particular?

The anthology opens with a story from the writer of the original *Hunters Hunted*, Bill Bridges. It's a nod to the fiction in that first hunters' volume, published over 20 years ago, not to spoil any surprises. Bill went on to continue developing the World of Darkness, with groundbreaking work on **Werewolf: the Apocalypse** and later **Mage: the Awakening**.

You know Richard Dansky from his work on **Wraith: The Oblivion**, *Mind's Eye Theatre*, and as the Central Clancy Writer for Ubisoft's Red Storm studio. Rich's story "HOA/ DOA" takes an interesting look at the hunter experience from a suburban perspective. So often, **Vampire** lends itself to ultra-urban locales, when in fact, those Kindred who would like to lay low (or who have been forced out of the prestigious domains) take refuge outside the city proper — but the hunters there are no less vigilant.

Jess Hartley is another White Wolf veteran, with most of her work done in the new World of Darkness, but with a great grasp of storytelling. Her short story here in the anthology tells the story of a hunter encountering multiple conflicts core to the

World of Darkness, and it does a great job of showing that hunters versus vampires isn't always a cut-and-dried issue. What if the hunter needs the Kindred so that he can continue being what he is? How many Kindred "should" be allowed to survive?

When reading fiction, I enjoy a story that feels like a concise moment in time, especially when that time may feel dated the next time you read it. The story Natasha Bryant-Raible offers feels like that, a story designed to feel *now*, with its names and trends, and *now* will inevitably become *then* at some point — like a Bret Easton Ellis story, designed for zeitgeist. Natasha worked on the World of Darkness MMO and then moved into designing social games. You'll see some of her other professional interests in the story, as well.

Jason Andrew comes to the World of Darkness via the Mind's Eye Theatre route, and though he's new to hobby games writing, he's already worked up a strong bibliography. He's contributed to both **Hunters Hunted II** and **Anarchs Unbound**, and is one of the story writers for the By Night Studio's "Blood & Betrayal" event, debuting at 2013's Los Angeles by Night. Jason's story takes an action-oriented look at the life of a hunter, and the price that life exacts from those who live it.

The story Sarah Roark shares with us leaves the reader wondering who's the greater victim: a Kindred's thrall or those whose paths she crosses? Every hunter's career begins somewhere, and that moment obviously makes such a grave impression on the hunter-to-be that it takes precedence over every other thing in her life, even if she had already committed herself to helping others and had been led astray by love. Sarah contributed to some of the classic World of Darkness sourcebooks and makes her return to it here and in **Anarchs Unbound**.

You might be familiar with Alan Alexander from his work on **Exalted** and **Vampire: The Requiem**. He did some work on **Anarchs Unbound**, upcoming, and here he takes us into the mind of a Kindred who finds himself hunted. Now, usually, our vampire stories focus on the quick, clever, strong, or otherwise remarkable Kindred or those who hunt them, but Alan's story has a twist. He instead shows us what it's like to be one of the less connected and unsophisticated vampires, one of the ones who the hunters get the drop on and who ultimately serve as cautionary tales to the surviving undead. Still, flawed as he is, the protagonist is certainly sympathetic, and raises the moral question of the hunter's calling.

When he's not working on other World of Darkness titles for Onyx Path, Matt McFarland — Black Hat Matt — designs his own games. He's a contributor to the **Hunters Hunted II** supplement, so his story here is a perfect fit. It also takes a fresh, modern look at what it means to be a hunter in the age of Internet celebrity, over-produced reality television, and world-spanning conspiracy.

Edward Austin Hall is a White Wolf alum who has worked as an editor and developer on a number of classic titles. I find his story "Patrol" to be one of the most terrifying in this collection, both because it captures the feeling of the powerlessness of youth and because of its supporting details. The verisimilitude of the story ratchets up its fearsome effect, and the fact that it takes on two perspectives not normally assumed in **Vampire** stories really elevates the whole piece.

It all comes together here in **Of Predators and Prey**. Now, let's let these writers spin their tales....



Shut In

By Bill Bridges

“I’m sorry. You’ve wasted your time. I don’t let anyone in the house after dark.” The last word screeched through the old speaker system with a sudden spike of static, a sign of the once-great lodge’s decay.

The chauffeur grunted as he stretched his arm out from the Mercedes-Benz window to reach the speaker button. “You don’t understand. Mrs. Fontaine has an appointment. We are expected.”

“Your appointment was for 3 p.m. It’s now 9:13 p.m. I don’t let anyone in after dark.”

“I called and left a message — the pass was closed due to snow! And it’s still falling. We can’t go back tonight.”

“Not my problem. Goodbye.”

The chauffeur cursed and banged his palm against the steering wheel. He saw Mrs. Fontaine’s cigarette lighter flare in the rear-view mirror, followed by her slow inhale and release.

“Tell her that if she turns us away, I’ll make sure that nobody buys this house from her. We’re her last chance.”

The chauffeur nodded and reached out to press the button once more. “Mrs. Fontaine would like to remind you that she is here to buy your house. Nobody is going to place an offer on a house she’s turned down.”

He waited. “Paranoid bitch,” he muttered.

The speaker’s static squawk returned. “I’m opening the gate. But I warn you... I have security measures in place.”

Mrs. Fontaine snorted in the back seat. “What, does she think we’re going to rob her? Really, now.”

The chauffeur let out an exasperated grunt, shifted gears, and drove through the widening steel gate and up the curving driveway to Last Look Lodge. The wiper blades smeared falling snow across the windshield.

He parked in front of the wide main door, set the brake, and shut down the engine. He pulled himself out of the door and walked around to the other side to help Mrs. Fontaine from the car. As he came around the rear, he saw a shape in the window watching him, a sliver of curtain drawn back. He nodded and continued on, swinging open the rear passenger door and offering his arm for his boss.

Mrs. Fontaine flowed out of the car, her bare touch on his arm a mere formality. She straightened like water filling a mold and glided toward to the front door. She flicked a dollop of cigarette ash on the topmost stair and settled at the doormat, waiting.

The door opened. A middle-aged woman peered out. She wore an expensive sweater and jeans, the sort that passed for cold-weather fare among the rich vacationers of the Colorado Rockies, although most of their kind had fled months ago, escaping winter. She'd been left behind, again, as she had been for twenty years. By choice. She sized Mrs. Fontaine up like a hunter taking the measure of a black bear that had wandered into camp.

The chauffeur took off his cap and held it in both hands at his waist.

Mrs. Fontaine broke the silence. "Lovely place. Well, it was once. It can be so again. That is, if you'll let me see the property, Ms. Barringer."

The woman behind the door sighed and seemed to accept her defeat. She stepped back, opening the door wider, revealing the shotgun in her hands, its barrel now dropping to the floor. "All right, then. Come in. I'll show you around."

Mrs. Fontaine smiled, amused at the gun, but the chauffeur frowned. The locals said Barringer was crazy, a shut-in, but they didn't say anything about brandishing guns at potential homebuyers. Mrs. Fontaine slid into the house. The chauffeur took one more look around at the snow-draped driveway and surrounding hills and followed his employer in.

Last Look Lodge was once one of the premier mountain lodges in the area, the summer retreat of the Barringers, back when that name meant something. When Robert Barringer, the steel magnate, passed away, his fortune was already dwindling due to poor management of his company's affairs. His daughter dropped the ball. Tasked with taking Barringer Steel to new heights, she instead had a breakdown, stepped away from running the company and retreated here, to the family lodge, never to again emerge into society. That was twenty years ago. Years that, judging from her appearance at the door, had not been kind to Susan Barringer.

"Can I get you something to drink? Tea? Coffee?" Susan Barringer said, somewhat sheepishly, showing signs of coming around to her hosting responsibilities. "I don't get many visitors. I made coffee earlier, but that was when I thought you'd be here at three."

"As my chauffeur explained, the snow detained us," Mrs. Fontaine said, rolling her eyes. "We had to wait for a snow truck from in town to clear the pass. I almost gave up and turned back, but my mother had such wonderful memories of this place, and I so wanted to see it."

Susan wrinkled her brow. "Your mother?"

"Yes, Liddy Fontaine. Don't you remember? She and my father used to come for martinis with your parents back in the '60s. You would have been, oh, ten years old?"

Susan seemed struck, looking away, embarrassed. "Oh, yes. I'm sorry. I... I do remember now. He smoked those cigars. That was the only time my father smoked cigars, when your father came over. I... I didn't recognize the name. It's been so many years." She looked at Mrs. Fontaine, her eyes misting over. "Violet? You're Violet Fontaine."

Mrs. Fontaine laughed, smiling wide. "Yes! I'm so glad you remember me now. I thought when you agreed to see me that... well, that you had known." She slipped off her coat and draped it over her arm.

"No, I... I just need to sell the place. I didn't realize it was you." Her shoulders slumped, as if sloughing off a sheet of snow, and she leaned the shotgun against the wall. She gestured at it. "We get a lot of bears up here. And kids who try to break into the lodges during winter."

"Surely that's not a shooting offence? Thank God I never got caught when I was a kid! Teddy Harbaugh and I used to sneak into the Tanager's place to neck."

Susan smiled. "I was always too... busy for that sort of thing."

"You were your father's daughter. He was grooming you for the succession, and you always obeyed."

Susan nodded. "I guess I didn't allow myself much of a childhood. I gave mine to Robert." Her eyes fell.

Violet looked down. "I'm sorry about Robert. He died so young. We were all expecting a world-famous artist. Do you know I actually stole some of his crayon drawings on one of my visits here? I thought they'd be valuable one day."

Susan wiped away a tear and smiled. "I'm glad someone got to enjoy his work. But let's not get all maudlin. Let me show you to the kitchen."

"Where can I put Mrs. Fontaine's coat?" the chauffeur asked.

"Oh, yeah, there's a closet down the hall there. Just meet us in the kitchen when you're done."

The chauffeur took the coat from Violet's arm and headed down the hallway. Susan led Violet into the kitchen.

"The place hasn't changed as much as I'd expected," Violet said. "You've kept much of the same furnishings. Good lord, I remember those drapes. That fishing pattern."

"My father loved them. His one concession to his vacation home, to remind him that he was supposed to be fishing instead of working."

"You said you had high-security measures put in. What kind?"

Susan stiffened. "Many of them are unique. I supervised the installation myself. Most commercial systems can be hacked by employees of their companies. Mine are unhackable. Only I know and set the codes."

“All that for bears?” Violet tilted her head, smiling.

Susan laughed. “It does sound ridiculous. But you won’t need to worry. Most of the systems don’t come with the house. I’ll dismantle them before I go. You can put in whatever you like.”

“I like the sound of an impregnable fortress keeping out the night. Didn’t you say commercial systems could be hacked? Why don’t I offer to buy your systems with the rest of the house?”

“No. These aren’t for sale. I need to keep the technology proprietary.”

“Now there’s the old Barringer I once knew! A business venture! You’re not out of the game completely after all. Do you need investors?” She walked past Susan into the kitchen and spun around at the marble island in the center of the room. “Where do you keep the booze, girl?”

“It’s not a... I hadn’t considered commercializing it. It’s just for me.”

“Oh, come on. You know as well as anyone that if you’ve got something special you need to get it to market before someone else trumps you. I can help. I know you’re selling the lodge because you need money. But even with a fair price, this place isn’t going to give you the kind of money you need to live like a Barringer deserves. You were too good an executive to walk away from all that.” She opened a cabinet and hummed as she pulled out two whiskey glasses. “Let’s have some of the hard stuff tonight. Remember when you’re father let us have a sip? He and my dad were three sheets to the wind and our mothers nowhere in sight.”

“There’s some scotch in the liquor cabinet over there. I haven’t touched it in ages.”

Violet sauntered over to the cabinet, drew out a bottle of Glenfiddich, and poured it into the two glasses. She walked back over to Susan and handed her a glass, tapping it with her own. “Down the chute!” She threw hers back with one gulp. “Ah! God, that hits the spot on a cold night!”

Susan sipped hers, smiling and shaking her head at Violet. “So you really want to buy the place, or are you just here to walk down memory lane?”

“No, I want to buy it! You know my dad didn’t keep our place. I’ve always resented him for that. I love this mountain. It’d be nice to come back.” She frowned. “But what are you going to do?”

“I’ll buy a place in town. Something more affordable.”

“You’ll come up for parties, of course! Don’t you dare say no, or I won’t buy. It’s one of the conditions of sale.”

“Me? At parties? Look at me. I’m old and no good for socializing.”

Violet put her hands on Susan’s shoulders and looked her in the eyes. “You can’t mourn him forever, Susan. Twenty years is too much. You couldn’t possibly have rescued him from that fire.”

“He didn’t die in the fire.”

“I don’t understand. He was in that campus flop house that burned down. Took out half the art department.”

Susan sobbed, her shoulder shaking. "I've never told anybody this. I was there before the fire. I saw him. He was... he was..."

"What? What the hell did you see, Susan?"

Susan stared into Violet's eyes. "He was Damned. Lost to us."

Violet stepped back, tilting her head quizzically. "I didn't realize you'd found religion up here. I don't care what those bible-thumpers told you, Robert isn't damned or in Hell or wherever fundamentalists like to say that gays go. He was a beautiful human being, and wherever he is, he's at rest now. Don't you dare let those gay-bashers say otherwise!"

"You knew? You knew he was gay?"

"Everybody knew he was gay." Violet put her hand to her mouth. "Oh, my God. You mean... you didn't know? How could you not know? You were twins, for Christ's sake!"

"I think I must have known, but refused to accept it. I was my father's daughter, remember? He was so disappointed in Robert. I must have known, on some level."

"So when you went into that house, you saw him with his boyfriend? Is that what freaked you out so much?"

"No," Susan grimaced. "That was... a shock, yes. But his... boyfriend... was a fiend."

"Where do you get these words? You have to stop watching cable TV."

"I mean it, damn it!" Susan slammed her fist into the kitchen counter. The pain made her step back and take a deep breath. "Why am I telling you this? I haven't told anyone this. Nobody would believe me."

"Susan, oh my God, my sweet dear," Violet said as she reached out to hug Susan. "You have been alone for too long."

Susan accepted the hug and melted into her arms, sobbing. "I have to be alone. I don't know if they're coming for me."

"Nobody's coming for you, dear. Nobody keeps a grudge for twenty years like that!"

"These people do. They don't forget, because they don't die. Unless we kill them."

Violet released Susan but still held onto her shoulders. "Susan? Have you... have you done something you want to tell me about?"

"I killed Robert's boyfriend. Then I killed Robert. That's why they burned down the place. To hide the evidence."

Violet stepped back, her hand once more covering her mouth. "Oh, my God. Are you joking with me?"

Susan shook her head. "No. He was a vampire. Do you hear what I'm saying? A fucking vampire!"

Violet stepped back farther, putting the marble island between herself and Susan. "You... you killed someone because you thought he was a vampire? Oh, God, Susan — gay people aren't vampires!"

“I know that! I mean — I didn’t know Robert and the vampire were in love. I didn’t kill him because he was gay. I killed him because he drank people’s blood to survive!”

“All these years... you’ve locked yourself up here all these years because you think... you think vampires are out to get you?”

“I killed one of them, Violet.” Susan stopped, silent for a moment. “Two of them. Robert had been turned. I had to keep him from hurting anybody.”

“Who are you to judge, goddamn it?! Who are you to go — what? Stabbing people with stakes? Is that what you did? That’s what you do to vampires, right?”

Susan nodded. “Yes, I used a stake. And then I cut off his head with an axe.”

Violet looked like she was going to vomit. “How could you do that to someone you loved? How could you do that to your own twin brother?!”

Susan slid to the floor, sobbing and hugging herself. “Robert! Oh, God, Robert, I am so sorry! I would do anything to have you back, alive. Here! I miss you so much, Bobby.”

“Your contrition is what I came to hear.”

Susan’s head shot up. The chauffeur was standing at the edge of the kitchen, staring at her with those eyes. The eyes of a vampire.

“It’s all right, Susan. I won’t kill you. I came to understand.”

Susan’s head jerked left and right, looking for a weapon. Nothing was in range. She looked at Violet, who still stood on the other side of the marble island.

“It’s okay, Susan,” Violet said. “He won’t hurt you if you don’t try to hurt him. He just wants answers.”

“You...” Susan opened her mouth in a grimace of horror. “You used me. Got me to talk to you. To open up. Are you even Violet?”

“It’s me. He sought me out. He’s spent years researching you, dear. He has shown me a taste of the night. He can show it to you, too.”

The chauffeur’s hand shot up and Violet stopped talking, chastised. “No. I’m not offering that. I’m not here to recruit. Like I said, I just want to know. When you killed my childe, did you understand what you were doing? Did you regret robbing the world of his great beauty? He loved your brother with all his soul, and I can’t tell you how rare that is in my world. Did you really hate your brother that much?”

Susan shook her head slowly, sobbing. “No.”

The chauffeur nodded. “Did you even speak to him? Hear his testimony? Or did you just storm in and attack? I’ve tried to understand what happened, tried to give you the benefit of the doubt. Oh, my kind told me to ignore you, to stay away. ‘She’s her own worst enemy,’ they said. ‘And she knows. Knows of us. Wait. Watch. She will do herself in.’ But I couldn’t wait. Not anymore. I had to know. My childe... he was my masterpiece. Young, yes, but so much potential.”

Susan’s face melted into a grimace of grief. A cataclysmic sob lodged in her throat for a moment before leaping from her mouth. The sound of twenty years of pent-up agony and guilt echoed through the kitchen.

“Oh, honey,” Violet said, stepping toward Susan but then stopping, nervous. “It’s okay. You were scared, right? I would have been, too.”

Susan’s right hand fumbled into her jeans pocket but then froze. The chauffeur was suddenly standing right next to her, his face inches away from hers, a mountain lion gaze boring into her.

“And what’s in your pocket? Don’t be stupid here, Susan. I came to know, not to avenge.”

Susan swallowed. “My... my handkerchief,” she said softly. “I need to blow my nose.”

The chauffeur smiled. “Well, then. Okay. I sometimes forget about such matters. I haven’t ‘blown my nose’ in over a century. You may proceed... carefully.”

Susan slowly withdrew a monogrammed handkerchief from her pocket. Without moving her eyes from the chauffeur’s cat gaze, she held it up to her nose and wiped away a stream of snot.

The chauffeur stood up and walked over to the cabinet, pulling out a glass. “I think I’ll have a drink, Violet. Some habits should never die.”

Violet smiled and poured scotch into his glass. “Oh, Susan. Let’s all just calm down now and relax. I really do want to buy your house. Everything I said was true. I do have fond memories here, and I do want to help you. Matthieu doesn’t want to hurt you. He wants to help you. That’s why he came to me.”

Susan, still on the floor, wiped her tears from her cheeks with her forearm. “Are you like him now, Violet? Did he make you one of them?”

Violet looked at Matthieu, a longing in her eyes. “No. Not yet. But he has given me his blood. Oh, Susan — you have no idea how good it feels!”

Matthieu shook his head. “And you won’t, Susan. I have no intention of letting you taste my blood. You clearly have a deep dislike of it.” He took a long sip from his glass, eyes closed as he savored the aftertaste.

Susan fumbled into her pocket again. Matthieu’s eyes shot open and locked with Susan’s. She pressed the button on the fob in her hand. Matthieu shot to her side, yanking her hand from her pocket.

A thunderclap pealed throughout the house, followed immediately by a series of clanging echoes as steel doors slammed shut on every wall in the house, sealing the lodge in a carapace of hard steel.

Matthieu growled, his teeth inches from Susan’s neck, his body vibrating with anger barely held at leash. “Turn... that... off.”

“I can’t,” Susan said. “It’s on a timer. Once engaged, it won’t open until after sunrise tomorrow.”

Matthieu released her arm and laughed. “Of course. Your ‘proprietary security.’ I knew it had something to do with us, but I didn’t think you’d be this paranoid — to turn your entire house into a safe room. I admit, you have taken me unawares.” He bowed to her.

“Kill me if you like. I don’t care anymore. But only I know the code to open the house again.”

“I think, dear Susan, now that we have some time together, that you will come to appreciate me. I do have that effect on people.”

Susan looked away from him, fear in her eyes.

Matthieu laughed. “It’s not like Bela Lugosi, dear. I don’t have to hypnotize you for you to succumb to my charm. My presence is enough. And you’ve ensured you’ll get enough of that.”

“Don’t be cruel to her,” Violet said. “She’s scared.”

“Not as much as she’d like us to believe. Yes, I can hear her heart beating wildly. She’s certainly worked up. But she’s devious. She’s planned for this, yes? Well, not this particular scenario, I’m sure. We’re supposed to be on the outside, clambering to get in to kill her, unable to pierce her steel walls — that famous Barringer steel, right? But here we are, on the inside. With her. An interminable dinner party that the guests refuse to leave.”

Susan stood up. “Can I have some more scotch, please?”

Violet laughed and clapped her hands. “That’s the spirit! Why does this have to be so difficult? Let’s just have some fun!” She brought the bottle over to Susan and poured a fresh finger. “Nothing loosens like liquor!”

Susan threw back her glass and drained it with one gulp. She walked forward and slammed the glass down on the table next to Matthieu’s. He raised his eyebrows. “You came to know all about me, right? About that night? Well, there’s nothing more to tell. I killed a goddamn vampire and then I killed my brother because he was a goddamn vampire. Oh, and I killed two more goddamn vampires that night, too. Funny you didn’t mention them.”

Matthieu shrugged. “They weren’t my children. You don’t think that we all give a shit about one another, do you? Believe me, we treat each other worse than we do your kind.”

“If you’ve studied me, you surely read my journals, yes? The ones I sent to Georgetown?” Matthieu nodded. “Then you know what I know about you. You know what I felt about that night. Why did you spend twenty years getting here? What did you hope to discover?”

“I told you earlier. I wanted your contrition. You took from the world a thing of great beauty — two things, for your brother must have been beautiful to spark such love as my childe had for him. I live for beauty. I cannot endure this existence without it. To see it snuffed so cruelly... so meaninglessly. I had to find meaning, you see. I had to complete the circle and know that you suffered. Not from fear, but from regret for our lost paradise.”

Susan’s mouth quivered. “Are you so inhuman that you couldn’t know that by looking at my life? Who the fuck locks themselves in a cabin for years? A sad, small woman like me. A woman who saw that her brother had found love and still stabbed him with a fucking stick.”

“Yes. Inhuman, indeed.”

The lights went out.

Matthieu snatched Susan and had her in a headlock before she could blink. Red safety lights flickered on, bathing the kitchen in crimson.

“What trick was that?” Matthieu hissed.

“I forgot to charge the backup generator that powers the house when it’s in lockdown,” Susan said, unable to move in Matthieu’s grip. “Outside power is automatically cut. So are the phone lines. A generator in the basement runs everything. Well, two generators, but the secondary one has to be turned on manually. It’s only needed if the first runs out of fuel.”

Matthieu chuckled. “So you think I’m going to let you go into the basement and pull out some other weapon or trap? No, we’ll just sit in the dark.”

“It also controls the heat. It’s going to get very cold in here. I’m sure that won’t affect you, but Violet won’t be very comfortable.”

“Then she can wear her coat. I put it in the closet in the hall. Why don’t we all take a trip there, slowly and carefully.” He released Susan.

“Can I get my coat, too?” Susan said.

“Once I check its pockets, why not? Let’s go. Again: slowly.”

He led the way from the kitchen to the front foyer. As he stepped toward the hallway, Susan lunged to the wall and snatched her shotgun. Matthieu smiled and waited, his arms open wide. She pointed it at him, the barrel shaking.

“I already checked that when Violet took you into the kitchen. Just an all-American shotgun with buckshot. No incendiary rounds or silver or holy water or garlic cloves. Go ahead and shoot me, Susan.”

Susan swung the barrel again and fired. Violet’s blood painted the wall as pieces of her head spread out in a cone behind her collapsing body.

Matthieu screamed and jumped to her side, cradling her body and caressing the pulpy stump of her neck. Tears streamed down his face as he kissed the neck, sucking up blood from the declining pulse. “No, no, no! I wanted you with me longer.” He kept sucking at the neck, drinking the dead body dry before its blood thickened and stilled.

Susan bolted down the hall and flung open the basement door. She hurled herself down the steps and leaped into the open metal cage in the center of the room, frantically pulling the door closed behind her and sliding a steel bolt in place to lock it. She collapsed on the floor, heart pounding.

Matthieu walked down the stairs, licking his fingers. He stared angrily at Susan. “How could you? She was your childhood friend! One of the few people left who had any good memories of you. Christ, I didn’t just ghoulish her up to get in here. I really liked her, goddamn it.”

Susan clutched herself tightly with both hands and began to rock on her knees, sobbing fiercely. “Monster!”

“Don’t you dare! Don’t you dare call *me* that! I have the courage to love those to whom I give the Blood! But you! You kill anything you don’t understand! You and your fucking steel heart!”

“Just leave me alone. Please. Just go away and leave me alone.” Susan’s eyes scrunched closed, squeezing tears out.

“I would have. I might have toyed with you more, just to be sure you weren’t a threat, but oh, no. You are a threat. I can’t very well leave here now, even if you did open the gates. Or... maybe you weren’t telling the truth? Maybe there is a way out? Surely you wouldn’t have left yourself completely shut in?”

He crouched like an animal at hunt and moved slowly into the room, his eyes searching the dark corners. “A secret door, perhaps? A hatch with a one-way tunnel?”

Susan stiffened and stopped rocking.

“Ah.” Matthieu stopped and ran his fingers along the floor. “Here. So flush to the edge, someone might miss it.” He stood up and looked at Susan. “Be a dear and tell me where I might find the lever to open it?”

Susan knit her brow in confusion. “It’s... it’s...”

“Please, Susan. Please tell me.”

“It’s over there,” Susan said, pointing. But the look on her face clearly showed shock and surprise, as if she couldn’t believe what she was doing.

“I knew you’d help me, Susan. You don’t want to hurt me. *I am your friend.*” Matthieu chuckled as he walked to the wall, toward the lever that Susan had indicated.

“No! Don’t pull it!”

“You can’t stop me from within that cage, dear.” Matthieu yanked the lever and the floor dropped out. The entire basement, but for the floor within the metal cage, became a pit lined with wooden stakes, Vietnamese-style punji sticks.

Susan ran to the edge of the cage and looked down, scanning through the red safety lights for Matthieu’s staked body.

“You really do need to learn to look up to me, Susan,” Matthieu said, hanging from a pipe in the ceiling. “You shouldn’t blink in times like these; you might miss something. *A trou de loup*, eh? I choose not to fall into your wolf hole.”

Susan ran to the rear of her cage and flung open a metal chest. She pulled out a crossbow and dropped to her knees, pulling back the string with a heave. Her hands fumbled to load the bolt.

The cage rattled as Matthieu landed on it. He looked around the basement. The cage was an island surrounded by the pit of wooden spikes. The network of pipes in the ceiling stretched in all directions and back up the stairs. “I see that bit about the generator in the basement was a lie, too. You’re just a deceitful bitch, aren’t you?”

Susan shakily brought up the crossbow, aiming it up at Matthieu. He was instantly off the cage and swinging across the room from the pipes toward the stairs. She pulled the trigger and the bolt shot past the cage bars but bounced off a pipe, widely clear of its mark. As Matthieu reached the stairs and swung on the final pipe,

it collapsed under his weight. As he fell, the ceiling over the stairwell dropped out and a panel of punji sticks swung down and impaled him midfall. He hung there, unmoving, as the pendulum board swayed back and forth and finally stopped, hovering over the pit of stakes.

Susan dropped the crossbow and took a deep breath. After a while, she walked to the gate and opened the bolt. She fished her security fob from her pocket and pressed a button. The lights came back on. She pressed another button and the series of support struts on the floor slid back up from their recesses. She carefully balanced herself on these and stepped over to the stairwell.

Matthieu still hung from the punji stakes. From this angle, Susan could see his left eye watching her, smoldering with rage.

“I’ve seen that look before. Your childe gave it to me, when I staked him. Then it turned to anguish, as he realized what I would do to Robert next. Even paralyzed, he managed to cry out to him, to tell him he loved him. Who would you cry out to, Matthieu, if you could?”

Matthieu said nothing, locked in his body, merged with the wooden stake piercing his heart.

“That final pipe was a lever, of course. I’ve spent years working out these scenarios. There’s a whole different scheme of traps on the top floor, had you cornered me in my bedroom. But the basement was closer, so I came here. Is there anyone going to come looking for you? I know you can’t answer, and I doubt you’d tell the truth anyway. I’m going to have to assume that’s a yes.”

Susan stood looking at Matthieu for a while and then finally walked up the stairs. She stopped halfway up and turned. “I’m going to have to leave you there. They’ll come for you. You won’t have to wait twenty years like I did. But I recommend that you savor your time. They’ll come, but there will be a fire, just like that night Robert died. You won’t be shut in for long.”

She walked up the final steps, turning off the lights in the basement before closing the door behind her.





HOA/DOA

By Richard Dansky

14 May

Received a complaint today about 3019 Rosewood. Apparently one of the neighbors has detected a “funny smell” coming from the backyard, which is against the homeowners’ covenant. It’s right there in the document: Section 14, paragraph 9, clause 3. It’s the same one I had to quote when the Lefevres at 1102 Hawthorn decided to dress a deer carcass in their backyard. They said that since their backyard was fenced and nobody could see it, it was “nobody’s damn business but their own.” I pointed out that the Lesters next door had complained about the smell of the deer, and so they had to stop hanging up dead deer in their backyard.

They ended up taking it down, and they moved a month later. Just as well, really. We don’t need that sort of behavior here at Aspen Grove.

I’ll follow up on the complaint tomorrow. We’ll see if I can wrap it up with a phone call.

15 May

Called Mrs. Belcher, who’d made the complaint about 3019 Rosewood. She was very upset about the whole thing. Said that when it was hot and the wind was blowing right, it smelled like “something fucking died over there.”

Mrs. Belcher is... very straightforward. According to the HOA records, she’s also made nine other complaints against covenant members this year, ranging from “overgrown lawn” to “painted house different shade of green than prior without receiving Association approval”. I’m inclined to take this one with a grain of salt, but I promised her I’d check it out.

16 May

Stayed late at work tonight and wasn’t able to follow up on the complaint against 3019 Rosewood. Got four voicemail messages from Mrs. Belcher asking why I hadn’t acted on it yet.

17 May

Called the listed number for 3019 Rosewood. Nobody answered. I let it ring 17 times before I hung up. I waited an hour and tried again, and I didn't get an answer this time either. I realize a lot of people don't have land lines these days, but the ones that do tend to have answering machines. It's just weird.

18 May

Got another phone call from Mrs. Belcher today. She wanted to know why I hadn't dealt with her neighbor yet, and threatened to report me for not acting fast enough. I begin to see why the other members of the Landscaping Committee sent her to me.

20 May

Tried calling 3019 Rosewood today, and I actually got an answer. Well, an answering machine. They still had the generic message on the thing. I wonder if they just bought it.

21 May

OK, I admit it. I'm curious. Did some digging on 3019, just to see what I was up against, and to prep myself for going over there since calling wasn't working.

The house is registered to a Ms. A. Simkus. She bought it in 2010 and paid \$220K for the place. It was slightly above market value for the neighborhood, but only by about \$5K. And, to be fair, we're trying to elevate property values around here now that the city's promised they won't do another assessment for ten years, so I think it's safe to say the board was happy with that.

Anyway, she bought the place in 2010. Never showed up at any HOA meeting, never voted in any elections, and never gave her proxy to anyone to vote in HOA elections. Which, to be fair, is not exactly uncommon. Some people just never get around to the little things they don't necessarily know they're supposed to do.

I'm getting distracted again. So, she bought the house, she moved in, and that's about the last anyone has heard of her. No complaints against her before Mrs. Belcher made hers, and she didn't make any complaints, either.

Nor, I see, did she pick up her pool pass, and she didn't take a table at the community garage sale. Some people are just anti-social, I guess.

I'll go over there tomorrow. Ring the doorbell, introduce myself, explain why I'm there, and I'm sure it will all be fine.

22 May

Went over bright and early today. It was a beautiful Saturday. Lots of neighbors were out and working on gardens and lawns. It was really nice to see. I drive through some of the other neighborhoods around here and there's nowhere near as much pride in home ownership as you see with our neighbors. Our community, really.

I will say this for the lawn at 3019 Rosewood: It was well tended. I mean, you could have used it for a putting green. No flowers anywhere, just some shrubs up near the house and a bunch of those solar powered lamps along the walkway. Tasteful ones, at least. Brass patina. You can get them at Home Depot quite reasonably.

The backyard is fenced off, and I didn't get a look at it. The fence was in good repair, recently stained and in compliance with all covenant regulations. The house looked well kept up, too. I made a mental note to check out Mrs. Belcher's place when I was done and see if her house was up to code as well.

Didn't smell anything, either. Like I said, it was a nice day. Not too hot, but it certainly wasn't freezing. If there was anything to smell, I'm sure I would have smelled it.

With all that out of the way, I walked up to the front door and rang the doorbell. Nobody answered. I waited a minute and then rang it again, and this time someone came to the door.

It wasn't Ms. Simkus, though I suppose people have all sorts of living arrangements these days. It was a man, maybe in his late 30s. He was wearing a t-shirt and tan slacks, and he had the start of what they call a "farmer's tan".

"Yeah?" he said when he opened the door.

I introduced myself as a member of the Landscaping Committee and asked if Ms. Simkus was home, as there had been a complaint.

He said that she was home but that she was sleeping in, and that he'd be sure to pass along any message. He also said that he was horrified that there had been a complaint, and that he'd take care of it himself immediately.

He certainly looked horrified. I think he was really embarrassed by the whole thing.

I gave him my card — the one for the HOA, not my business card — and told him to call me if he or Ms. Simkus had any questions. He said he would and thanked me for my time, and asked who had complained, so he could make sure they were satisfied with the solution he put in place.

Normally we don't hand this sort of information out, but Mrs. Belcher really was out of line. So told him, off the record. He thanked me, then shut the door.

It wasn't until I got home that I realized he hadn't given me his name.

23 May

Found myself walking by the Simkus place on my evening constitutional. No lights on, but I swear I heard someone working in the backyard behind that fence. Shovel sounds. Not the sort of thing you do in the dark.

Weird.

Will call tomorrow to follow up.

24 May

Called the Simkus house. Got no answer. Decided to walk by instead. Just a walk, nothing big. Saw the garage door closing as I came around the corner, but no sign of a car. No lights, either. I guess they went out for the night.

25 May

Got another complaint from Mrs. Belcher today. Said that she's suddenly got trespassers in her backyard after the sun goes down, and they're throwing things at her bedroom window. I told her that it was a police matter, and hung up before she could ask me about Rosewood.

27 May

I got four more calls from Mrs. Belcher tonight. I swear, she's driving me nuts. Says the trespassers are now climbing up the outside of her house and knocking on the window, then running away before she can see them. I think it's time to stop paying so much attention to Mrs. Belcher's complaints.

Made sure to walk past the Simkus place on my route tonight — again, just wanted to see if anything had changed, or maybe I could get a glimpse of the owner. Nothing doing on either count, but as I was walking past, I made a weird decision: I wanted to get a closer look at the house.

I mean, I have every right to take a close look at the house. I have a right to look at any house in the subdivision. I *am* on the Landscaping Committee, after all. So I need to know that everyone's in compliance on the covenant regulations, and sometimes that means... taking a look at things. I don't break in and I don't break things, but sometimes I just need a closer look.

So I went around the side of the Simkus place, avoiding those solar lanterns, and tried to get up close to the house.

The first surprise was those bushes. I couldn't tell from the road, but they're holly. And that means dense. They're hard to get through and painful to mess with. The entire house is lined with them, which is probably bad for the crawlspace, which could mean black mold issues down the line, but the important thing was that it meant I couldn't get close to the windows to get a good look.

Mind you, I can see why Ms. Simkus planted them. They're great for keeping people away from the house. A burglar would have to be very determined to get in that way. Much more determined than I was, really.

Instead, I got as close as I could without getting poked too hard by the leaves. Holly leaves are sharp, after all, but that's not the point. Actually, it is kind of the "point." I crack myself up sometimes.

What I could see from where I stood was kind of strange. Most people in the neighborhood use venetians. Simkus has what look to be very heavy, very dark shades. They were solid and I couldn't even see around the edges. That sort of thing really makes a room feel smaller.

Since I wasn't getting anywhere with the house, I decided to take a look at the backyard. It was fenced in, solid post construction and kept up nicely. They must have stained it just this year. It was tall, too. Definitely a privacy fence. I'm over six feet and I couldn't see over the top of it. Maybe next time I'll bring something to stand on.

Next time. Who am I kidding? I've got no business poking around in there. And I didn't smell anything.

But what did happen was... weird. I don't know how else to describe it. I was standing there on that lawn, looking at the fence, and all of a sudden it felt like someone was watching me. It made the hair on the back of my neck stand up. I looked around but there was no one there. Still, I couldn't shake it. It felt real. It felt like I had to get out of there.

So I did. And I didn't look back.

30 May

Stayed away from the Simkus place for a couple of days. It seemed like a good idea. Got a couple of emails and a text in all caps from other members of the HOA steering committee, who want to know what's up with Mrs. Belcher. Apparently she's talking to them non-stop, too. I almost feel sorry for the old bat. I should go over there. It might make her feel better. And it would take my mind off Simkus.

31 May

Took my evening walk later than usual tonight. No lights on at the Simkus house, as usual, but the guy I talked to that one time was standing on the porch as I went by. I waved. He didn't wave back. I walked past the house and he went back inside. Slammed the door hard, too.

I kept going until I got to the Belcher house. Mrs. Belcher is actually a widow. Her husband died a couple of years ago. They were some of the original residents in the neighborhood, back when it was built in the 80s, and I think she views it as her private property. Like she has to watch out for the neighborhood or something.

Her house isn't kept up as nicely as Ms. Simkus keeps up hers. There's some water damage on the garage door and I saw some grass poking up through the seams in the front walk. The brick needs pointing, too.

Typical, really. I've found that the people who spend the most time paying attention to other people's situations are the ones who don't take care of their own. The more I looked at Mrs. Belcher's place, the more I understood why she spent so much time poking her nose into everyone else's business.

But I wasn't there to judge, so I knocked on the door. Twice. Mrs. Belcher didn't open it. She did yell at me to go the hell away, however, and she threatened to call the cops if I didn't. I told her I was there from the Landscaping Committee, but she said she didn't believe me. Said that those damn kids were coming to get her, and it was probably a trick to get her to open the door.

I know when to quit. I told her good night, then walked down to the corner. And I stood there for a while, and I waited. I didn't see any kids come by. I didn't see anyone.

But about two hours in, I did hear a kind of loud thump coming from her backyard, and then all the lights went on. You could hear Mrs. Belcher yelling from there.

I guess the kids who were responsible just cut through someone else's yard to get to hers. Probably someone whose parents she'd annoyed with a pointless complaint. Still, we have a covenant for a reason. So I ran for the Belcher place. Went around the side of the house and into the back yard, yelling for whoever was there to cut it out.

There was no one there. I mean, Mrs. Belcher was there, hanging out her bedroom window and screaming that she had called the cops. Then she saw me and started screaming even louder. I tried to tell her that I was there to help but she wouldn't stop yelling, and then the police arrived, and I spent a long night at the station explaining that I was in fact part of the Homeowner's Association board and that I heard the ruckus and had come to offer assistance.

Whew.

It took until 3 in the morning to get out of the police station. I guess you can't blame Mrs. Belcher for being cautious, but really, this isn't what I signed up for when I agreed to head the Landscaping Committee.

1 June

Terrible day. Got yelled at by the floor manager at work today for "lacking focus." I told her that it was because I hadn't gotten home from the police station until very late, which I guess was the wrong thing to say, because the next thing I knew I was in the HR office trying to explain what happened. That took three hours, which put me way behind on my deliverables. I ended up staying late to catch up. By the time I got home it was dark.

I thought about skipping my usual evening walk. I didn't want to be in the wrong place at the wrong time again. On the other hand, I didn't want to just sit at home and stew. So I went out, and I was very careful not to go anywhere near Mrs. Belcher's place. Everything was quiet. There was no one else out walking, but I could see lights in windows as I walked through the neighborhood. It was very therapeutic, except for one thing.

Something smelled terrible.

2 June

Called the city to complain about the smell in the neighborhood. Apparently no one else noticed it because they were sitting inside their houses, not out walking around like me, but I thought it was worth reporting. Probably something died in the sewer, and they needed to clean it out.

3 June

Got a long voicemail from Mrs. Belcher blaming me for everything. She said it was my fault for not solving the problem with Ms. Simkus and that the smell was still there. Actually, she said the smell was stronger outside her window when those kids came around at night. She also said that if I hadn't stirred things up she'd be fine right now. I guess that means she wishes I hadn't tried to do something about the smell, except she's mad I didn't fix the smell.

I'm very confused.

Anyway, it went on for twelve minutes. I know, because I timed it. By the end of it I felt sorry for her. I mean, she's older and she's alone and people are being mean to her. No wonder she complains all the time. What else has she got?

4 June

Took a walk around the neighborhood at night. It was hot today and the evening air was cooler.

Also, I'm starting to like these night walks, when no one else is around. The longer I'm on the Landscaping Committee, the more I realize I don't really like my neighbors that much. I just like their houses. It's because they don't appreciate the neighborhood, I think. They come home and go inside, and they only see their little part of it. I see it all, and how it fits together. It almost makes me appreciate Mrs. Belcher. At least she looks outside of her house every once in a while. At least she notices other people once in a while.

Whew. Got a little worked up there. I guess I'm a little frustrated.

Anyway, when I made the turn onto Rosewood, I noticed something strange. The garage door on 3019 was open.

We'd had a rash of break-ins a while back. According to the cops, someone had cruised around the neighborhood with a garage door opener and randomly clicked. A few doors opened in response, so they robbed those places. Mine was one of them. I don't think they were professional thieves, because they just grabbed whatever they could. I lost some tools, a five-gallon gas can, a can of Fix-A-Flat that had probably passed its expiration date and a few other random things. Nothing valuable, and nothing expensive enough to file an insurance claim for. I didn't even bother reporting the things as lost.

But it was very embarrassing for the whole neighborhood, and we'd had a police cruiser come through a couple of times a day for a while after that. You don't act quickly on things like that, word gets around to undesirable elements and you get more and more of it. And that's bad for property values. No, you have to nip that kind of thing in the bud, or it gets out of control.

So when I saw the garage door open on 3019, I got worried. I mean, what if they were being robbed? I didn't see any lights on, so I guessed no one was home. And that meant I had to check it out, just to make sure a neighbor wasn't getting their house broken into. As a member of the Landscaping Committee, it was my responsibility.

I walked over, very carefully. I didn't see anyone, so I walked up the driveway and called out "hello?"

Nobody answered.

I stood there for a few minutes, saying things like "Hello" and "Your garage door is open." Still nobody answered, so I went inside to make sure there wasn't a burglar in there. And it was dark, so I took out my phone and used it as a light.

The garage was empty. There was no car there and nobody hiding or stealing power tools or anything. It was very neat and very clean. I didn't see any of the usual clutter you find in a lot of people's garages — no garden tools or extra paper towels or cardboard boxes or anything. What I did see against one wall was a giant tool rack.

That looked like the obvious target for any thieves, so I went over to take a look. There were a lot of tools there. Some of them were regular tools, others looked like they were used for gardening. And then there were a couple I didn't recognize, or didn't understand why they were in a garage. I mean, some of it looked like medical equipment. Some of it just looked... strange.

And while I was looking at it, someone came up behind me.

"Can I help you?" asked the man I'd met previously.

I confess, I nearly jumped right out of my skin. "Oh, you're home!" I told him.

"I am. Why are you in my garage?" He didn't seem happy.

So I told him about the burglaries, and how I was worried he was being robbed.

He stopped me there. "You don't need to worry about this house. We can take care of—"

And then he stopped, because a car was pulling into the garage. It was a BMW Z3, and the woman who got out of it was very beautiful. She looked at me, and she looked at the man, and said "Derek, who is this and why is he here?"

I introduced myself then and explained I was from the HOA, and that I'd had gotten a complaint. She interrupted me when I tried to tell her what happened and turned to Derek.

"Derek, is there anything here this gentleman should worry about?"

He said, "No, ma'am." That made me rethink how they were related. I mean, who calls their girlfriend "Ma'am"? Maybe he was a butler or something.

Then she asked if I had seen anything that was likely to upset me, seeing as I was with the HOA. She put some weird emphasis on it, but Derek said no, there wasn't. And then she looked back at me. She was short and thin and had very sharp blue eyes. She wore a navy business suit, which seemed weird for that hour of the night, and her hair was pulled back tight into a bun. And she told me that she appreciated my concern, but that she'd already had a long night, and she'd really appreciate it if I just went home and let Derek deal with the malfunctioning garage door.

I agreed, of course, because it was all very logical and sensible. And I went home.

5 June

Was out walking tonight. Saw Ms. Simkus drive past. She looked at me, but she didn't wave. She looked very serious.

6 June

City called back to say there was nothing in the sewers and they couldn't find the source of the smell. They said it was probably kids messing around. I told them the kids were busy elsewhere. They didn't understand what I meant.

8 June

Overslept. Got into work late. Got yelled at again.

11 June

Got another very long voicemail from Mrs. Belcher. I hadn't heard from her in a couple of days. I thought maybe she had given up or lost my number, but I was wrong. This was ten minutes of ranting and raving. It wasn't kids in her backyard, she said. It was a vampire trying to drive her crazy. That's why there was tapping at her window.

She even said she'd seen the vampire. What she described sounded a lot like Ms. Simkus.

I figured she was crazy. She'd been fixated on Ms. Simkus for a while, and the kids targeting her from her backyard could have pushed her over the edge. No wonder she was saying all these insane things. Anyone would, if they kept getting pushed like that.

She ended the voicemail with an announcement that she'd gotten a picture of the vampire and that she would send it to me. Sure enough, I got a text message with a picture.

I opened it. It was clearly taken from Mrs. Belcher's bedroom window. And there was something that maybe kind of sort of was a shape in the backyard, and if you bought into the fact that it was a shape, you might think it kind of looked like Ms. Simkus.

I deleted it, of course.

13 June

Took a long walk tonight, double my usual. Work's been rough lately. There was some talk of a reassignment, or maybe of going on probation. Which makes me mad. I'm doing the best I can. It's just hard with all of the other responsibilities I have for the HOA, and I haven't been getting a lot of sleep.

I thought a walk would clear my head. It was a nice night. Very cool, which I liked, but there was no wind. I barely needed my jacket.

The first time I walked past the Simkus house I just kept on going, because I had no interest in getting yelled at or anything.

Second time I walked past, though, I couldn't help myself. There weren't any lights on, but there never were, not at that house. I mean, Mrs. Belcher was obviously nuts, but you always want to be sure before you dismiss a complaint or regard it as resolved.

I made sure no one else was looking, then I walked across the lawn, over to the fence. Like I said, it was too tall for me to see over just standing there, but there was a place where one of the boards had kind of warped a little bit, and there was a gap you could almost see through. I leaned up against the wood there and worked the gap a bit, just enough that I could get a good look. And then I looked.

I didn't see anything that could have caused a bad smell. I didn't see anything scary. All I saw was a lawn with a couple of trees in it. And on one side, it looked like someone had been digging.

14 June

Couldn't sleep last night. Mrs. Belcher's crazy got in my head. The digging in the backyard — I didn't see any plants there. What were they digging for?

15 June

There was a gunshot in the neighborhood tonight, and the sound of broken glass.

Mrs. Belcher, of course. She said the vampire was trying to climb in her window. The cops showed up and she told them it was a burglar. I don't know if they believed her.

16 June

Nightmares last night. Kept on dreaming I heard sounds at my window all night long.

17 June

Very strange voicemail from Mrs. Belcher tonight. She thanked me for doing what needed to be done and said that I had opened her eyes to how Ms. Simkus was really an inhuman monster. It went on and on like that, like how the whole "vampire" thing had been my idea.

This was too much. I tried calling her but there was no answer. After about six times, I decided to just go over to her house to tell her what was what.

She wasn't home. I pounded on her door for a bit until one of the neighbors came out, then I tried to explain. He looked at me funny. I don't think I'm getting reelected to the HOA board next year.

Then it hit me. If she wasn't home... if she thought Simkus was a vampire... if she had a gun...

I ran. I ran around the corner and I ran two blocks over and I ran straight for 3019 Rosewood.

Which was on fire.

I ran up to the front door but it had been bolted shut. Same thing for the back door. There was no way anyone was getting out of that house, and the flames were licking up the sides of the building as I watched. I called out for Mrs. Belcher, but she was gone. Or at least, she didn't answer. I did find the things she'd used to start the fire, a couple of cans of gasoline by the corner of the house.

One of the gas cans looked like the one that had been stolen out of my garage, along with a bunch of tools back in the day.

I wondered if those tools could be used to bar doors shut. I thought they could.

There was screaming coming from inside the house, and a horrible old meat smell. I didn't care.

I just turned around and started walking home, so I could finish this before the police came for me. Because they would be coming for me, and this diary would be the only thing that could maybe prove I was innocent.

Maybe.

And somewhere, Mrs. Belcher is laughing.





Lest Monsters We Become

By Jess Hartley

The Campfire was blazing by the time we drove past. Whoever named the place couldn't have anticipated how ironic it would sound, when the country bar burned to the ground.

"Keep driving," I ordered. "Don't slow down, don't look at the fire, and for the love of God, no matter what happens, do not stop this car."

I swapped out the shotgun I'd been clenching in my fists for the camera I kept tucked in the glove box, and took a series of photos as we sped past the inferno. Most wouldn't come out — I didn't dare use flash, lest I tip us off as something other than disinterested passersby — but hopefully the flames themselves would provide enough illumination to glean something useful later on. Information is power. That was something Antoine had taught me, a long time ago. No weapons can protect you if you don't know what's coming.

And those folks at The Campfire? My guess was none of them had any idea what was coming for them.

Mercifully, from what I could see, the parking lot, and thus the bar, had been lightly populated. Only a few cars — some of them burning as brightly as the building — paid testament to the now dead (or worse) victims of this pack's latest raid. A graffiti-covered van confirmed my suspicions as to the group's identity. They changed out vehicles like some folks changed socks, but always customized their current choice with the markings of their pack. Sometimes it was done in red spray paint, other times, in blood — The Unbroken were flexible like that. Self-centered, violent, inhuman monsters — but flexible.

"Where are we going?" Jake had followed my orders, piloting us past the fire, but now that the ruined bar was in the rear-view, and a four-way stop crossroad up ahead of us, he didn't know what to do. We'd only been partners for a month or so, but I'd seen this over and over. Jake was great at carrying through a plan, but when life threw him a curve ball, as it often did in the field, he tended to freeze up.

It was going to get him killed one of these days. I didn't intend to die beside him because of it.

That was one of the drawbacks of working with a partner: You were limited by their weaknesses, hobbled by their handicaps. Chinks in their armor became holes in yours. And when dealing with vampires, any flaw can be a fatal one.

I much preferred working alone. But desperate times require desperate measures, and I hadn't been this desperate in a long, long while. When my path crossed with Jake's, we recognized something in each other — a look, perhaps, or a bit of vocal inflection. Hunting left scars on the soul as well as the skin, and sometimes you can just *tell* when someone bears the same burden you do. So, in hopes that a change in process would change my luck, I took him under my proverbial wing.

On a good night, he was a decent driver, and an extra set of eyes. On a bad night? Well, it hadn't come to that, but in a pinch, the old adage about not having to outrun the bear, only your buddy? That applied just as well to vampires. And Jake wasn't that fast.

I thought for a moment before answering him. "Left. There's an old water tower down that direction. It should be tall enough to see which way they head out when they leave the fire, and let us figure out where they're going from here."

Without argument, Jake took the left turn.

I didn't wait for him to stop the car before I leapt out at the base of the tower. Time was running short for me, and if we didn't get them tonight — well, I wasn't sure I'd get another chance. I didn't like those odds. Not in the slightest.

I was halfway up the ladder before Jake could turn off the engine. The night-cold rungs were barely above freezing, but I climbed fast. My fingers didn't have a chance to go numb before I reached the top of the ladder and hauled myself out onto the maintenance walkway that circled the tank.

Although the sirens were too far away to hear, I could see the whole thing playing out from my perch. In the farthest distance, the lights of town sparkled innocent white. Nearer to me, beyond the city limit, the light faded, houses grew few and far between, and street lights quickly disappeared. The Campfire, far enough from town to avoid city liquor taxes and urban noise complaints, blazed orange-red against a backdrop of rural darkness.

Panting and shaking, Jake finally hauled himself up the ladder to the walkway, clutching the railing as he made his way over to my side.

"Jeezus, ya could've waited for me." He wrapped his arms around his chest, sticking his hands into his armpits to warm them.

I shrugged in answer. If Jake was going to survive, he was going to have to get faster and stronger. But no amount of me telling him that would bring about the change. I'd gotten it from Antoine, but I couldn't give it to Jake. He'd find his own way to catch up... or die trying.

As we watched, emergency lights approached from town, blinking blue and red as they sped toward the burning building. A single set of white headlights showed

the leech pack fleeing the scene in the opposite direction. They turned off before the crossroad, heading for a dark place that moonlight showed to be a largish copse of trees in the middle of otherwise flat farmland.

I pointed, just in case he hadn't followed the pack's progression. "There."

Jake squinted, and shook his head, unable to pick the lights out from that distance.

"Trust me. They turned off on that secondary road." I checked my watch. "Sunrise isn't that far away. They'll stop there to sleep away the day."

"Will the cops follow them?"

I shook my head. "They got out before the cops got a bead on them, and they don't leave behind witnesses. They'll have killed almost everyone."

"Almost?"

"Yeah." I answered while watching the van's red tail lights make for the forest. "If they follow their normal modus operandi, they've got some of the folks from the bar in the van. Five probably. One for each of them."

"Hostages?"

I shook my head. Sometimes I forgot that not everyone had the experience with vampires that I had. It takes time, and that's one thing that new hunters rarely get enough of.

"Food... And troops to cover their trail. They'll feed on them, then turn them and bury them somewhere along the way. If the cops do happen to follow up on anything more than a cursory investigation, they'll find the pit, and possibly a bloodsucker or two. Either the police will put them down, thinking they're high on bath salts, or they'll tear the cops to bits. Either way, it's usually enough to delay any further follow up, at least long enough for them to get away."

Jake nodded, as if he understood, but he really didn't. He'd come into this life almost by accident, when the restaurant he worked at got taken over by one of the snooty vamps. One night he saw something he shouldn't — the new owner taking a dinner break on one of the staff members. When the boss went after him to make sure he didn't break the Masquerade, Jake defended himself with a bottle of cooking sherry.

Luckily for him (if not for the vamp), the boss jumped him in the kitchen — discreet, but also home to the grill. And, while the glass didn't hurt the leech, the fire sure did. Instead of a dead body and murder charge, Jake ended up staring at a pile of ash, and a new hunter was born.

Well, he thought of himself as a hunter, at least. So far he'd mostly just been lucky. He'd taken out a couple of weak leeches, catching them during the day, or by using some mail-order anarchy recipes to sabotage their cars with do-it-yourself bombs. Good tactics for a fledgling or a loner. One-on-one, most folks don't stand a chance against a vamp with their blood-borne speed, strength, and resilience. Add in the broad range of mind- and emotion-controlling powers, shape-shifting, and

God only knows what else they're capable of, and you've got a recipe for disaster if you try to fight fair. Guerilla tactics were pretty much a hunter's best bet, and he'd taken to them like a duck to water.

But, he didn't really know what it was like at the heart of the situation — not yet, at least. He'd been dealing with stuff from a distance, and it wasn't something you really *got* until you'd been through the worst of the aftermath yourself.

Like everything else they touched, the carnage and destruction vampires left behind was worse than anything living people inflicted on each other. Mortal minds just don't want to imagine the depths of depravity that leeches were capable of.

That's what made their "Masquerade" — hiding behind a thin mask of humanity, while carrying out their monstrous acts in the shadows — even possible. Even when directly confronted with them, we still didn't want to believe. That's why the bar fire would be labeled arson, or a horrible accident, by the media. People want to believe there was nothing out there hunting them. They insist on believing it.

They are wrong.

• • •

The grave wasn't wide. There was barely room enough for one digger to work at a time, his grim task illuminated by an LED lantern at the edge of the pit. The others — three now, though there had been five in the group originally — were huddled in a whimpering, shivering knot of fading desperation as their fourth flung spade after spade of almost-black soil over his shoulder. I couldn't hear them, but their sobbing shoulders, rocking bodies, and nervously plucking fingers told their story clearly enough. They didn't react when the wet dirt hit them, didn't bother to wipe it away. Their minds — and their hope — had been broken by what they'd already seen. It was a mercy they didn't know that the worst was yet to come.

The last member of the digging party lay crumpled a few feet away, her skin paper-white as her sundress in the lantern light, save for where smears of her own blood stained them both dark. One of the vampires that held the group captive lounged back against a tree with the broken girl's wrist in his hands. Every few moments, he raised it to his mouth, sucking on it casually, like a drunkard nursing a beer. She groaned, barely stirring, in a gesture that could have as easily been pleasure as pain.

An hour ago, his beverage had been a person, with goals and plans and a life. Maybe she'd worn that dress for the first time, hoping to catch someone's eye. She had no idea what she was in for. An hour ago, she'd been completely unaware that vampires even existed. Now? She was a juice bag, a source of sustenance for an inhuman predator.

Ignorance may be bliss, but it can be extremely hard on one's longevity.

The rest of the gang couldn't be heard or seen from my vantage point. We'd kept the car at the turn off, then snuck up to the woodline to get a bead on their position. They'd offloaded their prisoners here, in what looked like a clearing usually used by high school kids for weekend debauchery, then headed off deeper into the underbrush,

likely to hide the van well beyond the likelihood of casual discovery. When your stolen vehicle doubles as the only thing protecting you from a lethal sunburn, investing some time and energy into choosing a sleeping location makes sense.

A quick check on the map showed this road making a lazy loop through the wooded area, across a one-lane bridge, past a campground that had been closed since before the decade-old map was printed, and then rambling over to connect with the highway again. It was a detour to nowhere, useful to no one — the perfect hideout for those who didn't want their daytime slumber to be interrupted.

The vamp guard took another drink, his expression heavy with boredom. His captives were diffident, and like a cat who loses interest in a mouse once it stops squirming, whatever entertainment they had once held for him was now long gone. He pulled his mouth away from the wrist he'd been sucking on, shaking the unresponsive arm before raising it to his mouth again. Crimson droplets of blood splattered his cheek as he drank again.

My vision blurred as the binoculars started to shake. I lowered them, letting the strap around my neck hold them in place, and knit my fingers together to try to stop my hands from trembling.

“What's going on?” Jake's whisper sounded like a shout, in the otherwise still forest.

I silenced him with a scowl, glancing over to see if the vampire had reacted to the sound. Despite Jake's indiscretion, the leech seemed focused on draining the last bits of sustenance from his victim.

“One here, four in the van.” I kept my voice low, a whisper of a whisper. I wasn't banking on luck to keep the nearest vamp from overhearing again. To hedge my bets, I continued rather than making Jake ask the questions I knew would come next.

“He's low man on the totem pole, so he got stuck with guard duty. He'll kill them when the grave is finished, dump the bodies, and then head to the van himself.”

I didn't mention how the pack had rotated through that position over the time I'd followed them. It wasn't pertinent to the situation at hand, and extra details just confused Jake.

I checked my watch, and mentally calculated the minutes until dawn. “Less than an hour to sun-up. He's cutting it close.”

Sure enough, when I raised the binoculars to check again, the leech was on his feet. He gestured wildly at the digger in the hole, while the rest of the group cringed away from his rant. Then, with no more effort than a man picking up a puppy by the scruff of its neck, he reached down, grabbed the digger, and tossed him out of the hole. The prisoner flew across the clearing, hit a tree hard enough to bring down a torrent of twigs and leaves, and then slumped unmoving to the ground.

Wet soil sprayed out of the hole in a near-fountain as the leech moved with impossible speed to finish the grave.

I lowered the binoculars. I knew what was coming next. It was easier not to watch than it was to try to hide my reaction in front of Jake. And, at least for a few minutes, I wouldn't have to worry about us being overheard.

"You ready?"

Jake patted the overstuffed backpack beside him, gingerly. "Ready as I'll ever be."

That was true. I'd done everything I could... everything I was willing to do... to prep him for this. From here on out, it was just hoping to hell that he didn't mess up badly enough to make me pay the price for it.

"Tell me the plan."

Jake frowned, like a child being called on to recite his multiplication tables. But he did as ordered.

"Once the guard leaves for the van, I flank around — not too close — on the far side. I make sure the fifth leech gets in the van, and wait for sunrise. After the sun is up, I wait another half hour, just to make sure no one's moving, and then set the bomb. I get away and meet you here with the car. We take off for the next town, and plan our next move."

I nodded. That was the plan. Well, at least his part of it. Thankfully, he was wrapped up in his own bits enough not to worry overmuch about mine.

A scream cut through the air. It started off human, but ended something entirely different. Every muscle in my body tensed at the same time. Jake looked in the direction of the clearing.

"You sure there's nothing we can do to save them?"

He was such a white hat.

"We are saving them, Jake. Saving them from a fate worse than death."

"But, can't we...?"

"Can't we what? Rush in and stop the bad guys? Save their lives?"

He looked sheepish, but nodded, none the less.

"Their lives are over, Jake. They ended the minute their paths crossed those leeches. Everything they were before? That's gone now. Even if we pulled them out, still kicking and screaming and bleeding, they would never be what they were before."

That was the truth. No one crossed paths with vampires and came away unchanged. Not those prisoners. Not Jake. Not me.

I shook off old memories, shivering like someone had walked across my grave.

Jake listened to the too-long silence before breaking it with a question he couldn't bring himself to finish. "But isn't anything better than..."

"No. No, it's not. There are far worse things than just dying, Jake."

I'd never spoken truer words, but I could see he didn't really believe me. Like I said, the kid is young. He hasn't seen what I've seen. Been where I've been. It's

not his fault. He just doesn't know what the world's really like out there. With them.

"It's a moot point, Jake. There's no way we could do it. Not without getting ourselves killed — or worse — in the process."

That, also, was the truth. One fully-fed vamp was enough to take me out on even ground, and Jake wasn't even a consideration. He wouldn't slow down a housecat that had been turned, let alone a full-on Sabbath member. No, our best bet was waiting until daylight and blowing this pack to Kingdom Come while they slept. And as for their prisoners....

"Rest assured, Jake. These people won't have given their lives in vain. We're taking out the monsters that did this to them. And we'll make sure they rest in peace. That's the best thing we can do for them, now."

Bless his heart, I think he believed me as he walked away.

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Sunrise is my favorite time of day. It means breathing easy for the first time since dusk. Relaxing bunched-up shoulder blades that twitch just waiting for a knife blade between them. It's more than a few fleeting hours of freedom — it means I've survived another night.

Thoughts like that, and even the nastiest grave robbing seems not quite so bad.

I started digging before the sun was fully over the horizon. The guard had been gone for twenty minutes or more. It was safe to bet that the Unbroken were asleep in their van, with Jake ready to cut them off at the pass if they decided to head out for a pre-dawn jaunt. He'd left me with my duffel bag, which had everything I needed.

I laid things out neatly, shotgun, tools, bag open and ready to repack in a hurry if things went to hell, all arranged within arm's reach at the grave's edge. Last, I put up the small tarp lean-to, to shade the grave. It wasn't much, but it didn't have to keep the sun away for long. When everything else was precisely aligned, I started to dig.

The folding shovel wasn't ideal for excavations, but the grave wasn't deep, especially not for five bodies jumbled in like a game of Twister gone bad. I hit flesh before I'd gotten more than a foot or so down.

It's a lot easier to throw bodies into a grave than it is to pull them out. Limbs get tangled all around one another, dirt gets packed in, body parts go every which direction. While sunrise was enough to keep them sluggish, I wasn't taking any chances. I hauled the first corpse — the girl in the stained sundress. He'd saved her for last, thrown her in on top of the others. If he was human, that might have meant something — maybe he was hoping she'd survive, even if the others didn't. But he wasn't human, and she'd been the furthest from the grave. That was reason enough for her to be on top, and reason enough for her to be the first I hauled out into the shaded morning light.

Vamps aren't strong when they're first turned, and they're weaker still when the sun's up. Plus, they're usually pretty addled, at least the ones who get pumped

and dumped like these. There's a reason I don't take on the coddled chosen few who get brought over on a bed of silver spoons and catered cocktails. I've seen firsthand how strong that kind of treatment can make a new vampire. Cocky, even. Those whose last few minutes as a human full of nothing but pain and terror? They're still reeling if you can get them before they dig their way out of the grave.

They're weak (comparatively) and dumb (comparatively), but like any creature, they've got a powerful drive to survive, and they know instinctively what they need. They're hungry, and like a rabid rodent, can do a lot of harm in their search for food.

Luckily, just like dealing with rats, the proper gear can go a long way toward dealing with a newly turned leech. It used to be, you had to make your own. You cobbled together blacksmithing gear, or leatherwork designed for saddles, and hoped for the best.

Nowadays, through the wonders of the Internet, anyone can own their own shark-resistant full-body armor, titanium ring mail or the like. But honestly, that's not going to do you any good if you're going toe-to-toe with someone who can rip your head off (helmet and all) without blinking. The best protection is knowing what your enemy can deal out, regardless of whether that's a great white or a bunch of bloodsuckers.

That's why I was leaving the experienced pack to Jake and his explosives. He'd clear them out, or I'd be long gone before they woke. Either way, I was keeping my distance.

For these new ones, however, and the string of other shovelheads packs like these left behind them? A little preparation evened the odds down to a fair risk ratio, especially when the stakes were so damned high.

Get them on their first morning, before they've had time to feed on each other or anyone else. Have all your tools ready. Here's where modern technology takes the lead again. Used to be, you'd have to make do with leather gloves. Now, you can start with Kevlar-mesh reinforced gauntlets, clear to the elbow. Designed to be needle (fang) resistant, those work well for holding one of the new ones down for a heartbeat or two. One glove over the chin, fingers up into the eye sockets, and what's left of their instincts not to blind themselves made them settle down long enough to whip out the finisher.

The customized cordless finish nailer, that is. That's another modern advance that's head and shoulders above the old ways. While probably nothing quite equals the satisfaction of pounding a foot-long pine stake clear through a leech's chest cavity, there's definitely something to be said for quantity versus quality of the experience. Although they're far less efficient when using wood dowels rather than metal nails, these devices can throw a dozen miniature stakes into a vamp's chest, as fast as you can pull the trigger. Just press it up under the ribcage and squeeze. Repeat until that bloodsucker stops squirming. It takes a little engineering to get it right (and believe me, you do not want to find out about a jamming issue when you're knuckles-deep in some leech's eyesockets.)

Once they're staked, vampires are a whole lot easier to deal with. Which is good, because the next bit was the tricky part.

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When Jake's backpack exploded, it sounded like an artillery strike, like a cannonball crashing into a building made of metal and glass. While we'd discussed his methodology, it didn't suit my unique requirements, and so until now I didn't have firsthand experience with the actualities of it. Even from the distance, I could hear metal groaning after the initial concussive blast, followed by the delicate chiming of glass shards raining down.

I hurried to finish my work, but some things won't be rushed. Blood, even in young vampires, won't flow faster just because the person siphoning it out is in a rush.

Living humans bleed out fairly easily. The average person gets a wound in a major vessel, they can eject a fatal amount of blood in less than a minute. But vamps — even new ones — aren't human. They don't circulate blood the way people do. You cut off a vamp's hand, even their entire arm? Sure, you'll hurt them — enough to piss them off, at least — but they're not going to bleed out.

That takes equipment — suction, collection devices, and the like. And efficiency. Fortunately, I had had a lot of practice.

I had four of the five drained, and the last leech on the pump by the time I heard Jake drive up.

"You okay? What's taking so long?"

I sighed, wiping my mouth with the back of my arm. My sleeve came away clean. "Jake, you were supposed to meet me at the road."

That was the other thing I didn't like about working with partners: they never stuck to the plan.

I carefully began placing the screw-top plastic jars of blood I'd collected thus far into the duffel bag, rearranging my equipment as I did so.

Jake walked over to the edge of the tarp-tent, peering under at my work area.

"What are you doing?"

"Killing vampires," I answered nonchalantly, as I continued to size up Jake, waiting for him to make a move that would shift our balance from partners to adversaries.

His weapon was still in his holster, and I could tell by the tilt of his head that he wasn't concerned yet. Just curious. Couldn't blame him for that. I don't know what he'd expected to see, but it probably wasn't this line-up of pump-your-own vampire vitae along with the late owners of the liquid.

I'd severed the heads of each of the first four neo-vamps after I'd drained them, but left them neatly stacked beside the bodies under the tarp so they wouldn't catch fire. Normally, this was a matter of discretion — fire meant smoke, which drew

attention from miles away. The oily-black vapor that the former Sabbat pack's van was leaving made this a moot point in general, this time, but old habits die hard.

Jake leaned closer, looking at the makeshift pump I'd set up to siphon the blood from the staked leeches. I could see the gears spinning behind his quizzical expression, but I let them spin, while I tidied up my work area. Never be the one to speak first. Wait for them, and their words will tell you more about their thoughts than any questions you could ask. That was something Antoine had taught me, back when he'd first taken me into his fold. Antoine, who was forced to flee France by a bloody Revolution. Antoine, who needed a face in the New World, someone not limited by nighttime hours and Old World ways. Antoine, who'd bound me to his side with his charisma, his lies, and eventually his blood. Antoine, who'd made this all necessary....

I'd never met anyone who knew people better, even if he didn't remember what it was like to be one himself. He'd made me what I was today. Literally.

"Why are you taking their blood?"

That was a fair question, so I answered it, though again, with no more details than he'd specifically asked for. Let them show you their concerns, rather than pointing out potential problems. It was as valuable here as it had been in a hundred years of business transactions on the behalf of the vampire who held my reins — and eighty some years of hunting leeches after a hunter more skilled than I took Antoine out.

"I need it."

"Need it for what?"

Now came the tricky part.

"To keep myself alive."

I could see him jump to his first conclusion — vampires drink blood — and straighten slightly. Hidden by the now-full duffel bag, my hand tightened around the stock of my shotgun.

I'd hoped the fact that I was — as we spoke — standing in the full early-morning sunshine was going to be enough to stop Jake from barreling too quickly down that oh-so-wrong path.

Jake, however, was not the brightest guy I'd ever met. He reached slowly, placing his hand on the butt of his pistol.

I was more annoyed than concerned. I knew my capabilities, and the blood I'd drank as I was packaging up the rest for use later only bolstered my confidence. As long as his gun stayed holstered, I was willing to allow that gesture. As long as it was in the holster, we were fine. No stray shots could take out the vitae I'd had such a hard time obtaining. I'd been willing to do anything — even take on a partner — to get this batch, and I wasn't about to let anyone or anything put it at risk.

In an attempt to calm the situation, I met his gaze and reiterated: "I'm not one of them."

He nodded, but the questions were still in his eyes. Once again, I played the patience game, waiting for them to actually emerge. The process took a long string of seconds. Long, slow heartbeats. A veritable eternity.

“What *are* you?”

Unfortunately for Jake, the question came with a movement. Maybe it was the first muscle twitch of an attempt to draw his weapon. Maybe he was just shifting his weight from one foot to the other. Maybe — and I admit this in all honesty — maybe I grew impatient with the discussion, knowing full well that regardless of its outcome, our ways were parting. Maybe the blood called to me, telling me to get it safely away before anything or anyone could wrest it from me.

It doesn't matter. The response was the same.

“I'm a monster,” I said. But I don't know if Jake heard me over the sound of the shotgun round.





Psy-Fri Friday

By Natasha Bryant-Raible

June in the city was thick, awash with cloying scents that hung like curtains. Pedestrians' faces betrayed their senses with a twitch as they passed through, under, along. A heady smell of damp cement evaporated wetly from warm sidewalks after the morning's summer shower, not unpleasant. Dumpsters were sweet and rank at once, their smells clasped to wrinkled noses by invisibly sized drops. Cars and buses stopped frequently and spit exhaust into the streets as their engines groaned to push them toward the next light.

Beneath a red neon sign that blushed "Sam's Sammiches," a handful of fat black flies gorged themselves on turkey that had fallen from a patron's deli sandwich. One fly was missing two legs and part of a wing, and rubbed its remaining feet over the forgotten meat with less vigor than its peers. And just two strides from their feast, inside the restaurant, Delilah watched the cripple with all the deliberateness of a person who has time to waste. She wondered if it had friends who would miss it, who would be lonely when it failed to come home.

"Can I get you anything, Miss?" the cashier-and-cook asked, again. "Another Pepsi?" She had lingered at least an hour past the leisure-time that her first soda had purchased, making motions on her iPhone while she let her eyes be distracted by the scenery of street and sidewalk.

"Yes, please," Delilah agreed, polite, with about-to-leave movements. "To go, please." She did not particularly wish to provide the proprietor any cause to remember her, to recall her presence as out of place with the regular bustle of a busy downtown street. It was her third visit to the street in as many days, and there weren't too many perches from which to stare at the block of city townhomes that so interested her. The houses themselves were far from interesting, all one concrete rectangle peppered with a line of doors. It was understood that, despite lackluster appearances, their expense imparted a healthy bump of social status due to the "ideal urban location."

This time, Delilah did not pause to envy the hipness of the townhome residents. She cared who lived in 105 Main Street only inasmuch as that was the address

that her sister Claire had texted her, the last time her sister Claire had texted her. Until the next evening, Delilah had thought she might have gone with a guy to the address. Under the premise of afterpartying, she assumed, or it would have been unusual to invite her sister. But, dark-haired Delilah did not remember fair Claire flirting with any of the anime-haired men of Ampersand that night, and in any case it would be a little unlike her to pursue romantic or sexual interests other than Alex.

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Claire had been delighted to take shots with the social royalty of Psy-Fri Fridays, a drunk little glow illuminating her angel-face as she purred at her bar friends and made look-at-me eyes to anyone who stared.

“Drink up and fake it ‘til you make it,” Delilah smirked from under a pink laser at the other, upper bar. Her conversation didn’t stir a response from the kid whose company she had bought with body language and a whiskey-soda. He was younger than her, with blackened hair (artificial) and ice-blue eyes (real). She was very attracted to him, in an impermanent way. *Chris*, Delilah recalled. *His name is Chris*.

“Hrm. What are you even talking about?” Chris was also staring in Claire’s direction, and his eyes glazed with interest that had not been there minutes before with regard to Delilah’s scholarly ambitions.

“Listen Chris...” she began, wondering how to continue. He didn’t care about her. Not that Delilah particularly cared for him either, but *he* didn’t even care how she especially shone that night, in green eyeliner, with freshly cut hair, and shell-colored top that made her breasts look amazing.

“Chase,” he corrected, with an abrupt flirtatious upturn to his mouth. *Men*. “My name is Chase.”

“Chase.” She inclined her head to indicate. “My little sister, Claire.”

“What of her?”

“Doesn’t she just... ache for validation?” Drinks made Delilah bolder, to expose her sister to this stranger. “How sad she must be. We come together every Friday without her boyfriend. ‘Girl’s night.’ It’s a nice time, or whatever, but she watches those girls like a lovesick nerd after the head cheerleader.”

“Well...” Chase side-smiled awkwardly.

“What.”

“Who doesn’t want to be with them? It’s Psy-Fri Friday. It’s DJ Valissa. That’s why we’re here.” He shrugged to indicate the whole club. “They run this shit.” Delilah stared further. Valissa was the silver-blonde (to Claire’s honey), with a distinguishing shaved undercut on her left temple. A dove-gray silk romper hung effortlessly on her frame, covering a narrow torso and hips but leaving golden legs and shoulders modestly on display. The white headphones draped about her neck glittered with hundreds of crystals. Tacky. Enchanting. Her pod of friends was faceless and earthy in her glow.

“What’s the point, Delilah?” *So he knew her name.* “You sound like a hater right now. Let’s go hang out with your sister and make friends.” He took her forearm, prepared to guide her through the crowd.

“I...” she flushed. Chase halted, looked down at her with pale eyes. She *was* jealous, after all. She felt her company should always sufficiently entertain her younger, less worldly, if cuter by some standards, sister. But her lips curled up happily. “Who are the minions then?” She placed the flat of her palm high on his back and pressed him onward past three bros in white v-necks and embroidered jeans, descending down a curved sweep of staircase from the balcony bar.

“The redhead in black is Rachel.” He buried his words in Delilah’s hair. “Talking to Claire now, that’s Joy. Valissa’s bitch.” Chase laughed. “I’m kidding. But she handles her equipment, sets it up and shit when Valissa goes on. They’re always together. All three of them promote this party, actually.” He pulled forward now, too far for conversation. The dance floor was full but limp, only tolerating the opening DJ’s dated electro tracks. Chase tugged her all the way to the front bar, where violet LED lights illuminated the frosted glass counter.

Delilah disengaged her escort’s grip and approached her younger sister amicably. Claire was whispering into her cupped hands by Joy’s ear but pulled away to welcome her sister.

“Joy just told me that she like, *creates* techno music. Trance, or... some other stuff I guess.” Claire offered. “Valissa’s even going to play some of her new stuff tonight.” Delilah glanced to Chase, who shrugged and put a hand on her waist.

“Who’re your friends?” he murmured to Delilah with intent. She caught Claire’s eyes. Her fair sister giggled and gently pushed Delilah forward.

“My sister Delilah,” she introduced warmly. “This is Valissa, Rachel, Joy...” she eyed the several meticulously outfitted shapes who strained to hear her with bated breath, holding out for inclusion. There was none.

“Delilah,” copper-haired Rachel pulled her inward to embrace, with short kisses on each cheek. She smelled of vanilla. “We’re having a lovely time with Claire. Who’s your charming friend?”

Chase smiled arrogantly, “I’m her charming friend.”

Rachel flicked her mobile from a beaded clutch and pressed the home button to reveal the time. “Valissa is going to go on in a little bit. Do you guys want to join us backstage? We have drinks and can chill out a little bit first.”

“Please, let’s,” Valissa breathed, lifting an elegant hand to decline the orchid-adorned cocktail that one of the well-dressed shapes had bought her.

The six eyed each other in agreement and Joy broke the circle to lead. The DJ mixed into James Lavelle’s remix of “Everything in its Right Place,” his first compelling selection. Delilah followed Valissa, soaking in the longing stares and heads turning after her slow, languid steps. There was something invincible about belonging, even as it is fleeting.

A suited bouncer lifted a plush black rope and ushered them through two stanchions.

They ascended, taking four stairs up to the pale marble surface of the stage to shouts of support, before plunging directly back into a dark pocket behind one of two soaring plaster columns.

It was a stark difference, the green room behind the stage. Cheekily painted green, it had none of the faux baroque glamour of Ampersand's main room. Not a speck of gold leaf glittered in the dim light. A smaller lounge through a black door on the back wall had more intentional decor and was generally reserved exclusively for the out-of-town headlining DJs that Ampersand booked.

"This way," Joy informed, opening another door on the right wall into a dry, dark hallway. Directly across from the green room door was a medium-sized concrete space that seemed to have been repurposed for a dressing room and lounge.

"Valissa likes the option for privacy," Rachel explained. "But it's nice for all of us to have our own space to retreat to. It's the least they could do, really, for how much we do to run Psy-Fri every week. It's not as though there's much money in it."

Delilah took in the room that Valissa had claimed. The blonde DJ was already curling up on the room's single loveseat, still cigar-club chic despite tarnished studs and cracked espresso leather. The sparkling headphones cupped her ears and she opened a Macbook Air onto the low oriental table that boasted opalescent gleams of abalone and mother-of-pearl inlays. A large steamer trunk bound by polished brass bands suggested additional seating, and Delilah sat. Chase nudged her over with his angular shoulder and took the place next to her. Claire examined her own face in the wall-mounted dressing mirror bordered by classic round bulbs. The mirror also sported a wooden ledge hosting neat piles of makeup and crystal bottles of perfume and scented oils.

Joy had left the room, but came back now balancing a steel bucket of ice and a tray holding five glasses and Gray Goose.

"Drink fast," she said, "Valissa's up in a few minutes." She set everything down and sat close to Valissa, head bowed over her shoulder as she checked out the modifications being made to V's DJ set on the laptop with interest.

Claire, Rachel, and Chase chatted happily while pouring drinks, handing a stiff vodka-soda to Delilah who began to feel exhaustion slump her shoulders, and eyelids, but she drank heartily and resolved to see this enjoyable foray into social elitism with her sister through. She tried not to stare at Valissa, whose heart-shaped face and smudge of dark lashes seemed even more captivating than they ought to be. Delilah angled her knees toward Chase seductively, but glanced at the girls in the mirror as often as could go unnoticed.

Valissa and Joy cuddled very close, their faces pressed together. Had they kissed? Delilah was very tired now, and buzzed from the cocktails. She considered herself progressive enough but the unexpected relationship was difficult not be curious about. Valissa's platinum hair fell over her face that was plunged deep against

Joy's pale neck. She was kissing below her ear, sucking hard, nipping and then biting. *Was she, though?* Joy didn't flinch or betray an unusual interaction at all. And then Chase was on her, pulling Delilah's jaw with his fingertips into their first kiss. He traced her collarbones with a finger, down across the tops of her pushed-up breasts. *Yes, please.*

Everyone was standing up.

"It's time," Rachel announced. "We can all go out on stage, but just dance and be excited please, to hype the crowd." Chase took Delilah's hand, and Claire's boldly in his other. She found she didn't mind.

Valissa stood, smoothing gray silk over her thighs. Her cheeks flushed beautifully, and her lips were parted and moist, bright with natural color. She was alert and energized, clutching her laptop to her chest while striding out, across the hall, through the green room, onto the stage. Pink lights exploded onto the DJ stand that she and Joy approached, relieving DJ Mediocre from his opening duties. Cheers and catcalls burst from below, a white-lit blur of clubbers whose hands rose above their shadowed faces to wave and clap.

Joy adjusted the equipment, unplugging cords and moving others, opening Valissa's laptop onto a stand where she could easily see and reach it over the Pioneer mixer and CD turntables. When Valissa put her hands on the CDJs, wide melodic synths filled the room and climbed the scale. A kick-drum set the tempo while the snare rolled in, then more urgently, her admirers screamed and begged for the drop.

• • •

Delilah's memory faded. She had definitely entertained Chase that night, when they fooled around in her car, but she woke up alone in the suburban apartment that she shared with Claire. Chase may have driven her home in her Acura. Shamefully, she didn't even really remember. Claire's text invitation had gotten lost in the night, unread until Delilah woke up groggily in the afternoon. Claire's phone, of course, was dead or off now. Her room was also empty, bed neatly made with the bright sari-silk bedspread she had ordered on Ebay from India. Delilah pulled the blinds, let beams of midday sun spill into the room. Stillness.

Claire's Twitter account revealed nothing more than vague bullshit people normally tweeted from clubs.

*What is this DJ? Waiting for @Love_Valissa to do her <3 magic <3
omg soooo hot*

Tonight is the TRUTH

Nothing. Delilah clicked the tag to see Valissa's account. Haunting gray eyes in a porcelain face stared out from her avatar. She had over 8,000 followers, an amount worth remark considering her relatively few tweets. Delilah clicked "follow." Valissa had only tweeted once on Friday, earlier in the night, before any of them had arrived.

Come see me tonight at Psy-Fri! I'm on at 1:00 <3 #ampersand #girl DJs

Delilah put down her phone, with a sick feeling like anticipation, like forgetting something important. She had to start getting ready to work that night at Lotus, the Japanese-fusion restaurant where she hosted part-time. She didn't listen to cheesy Top 40 pop on Spotify, as she customarily did, while she washed her hair and lathered her skin. While she pulled on a conservative black dress. While she painted the worry out of her face in the mirror.

• • •

Claire's prison was agreeable, and clean. *For a prison.* She clenched her short nails into her palms bitterly. The room had a stylish daybed of reclaimed teak where she could hate her life in relative comfort. A pristine tiled bathroom housed a toilet and sink, but no mirror or door. Hardwood steps led up to a massive steel door that lacked a handle or latch from the inside. She had relentlessly banged on it with her fists and arms, initially, and was eventually rewarded by being thrown bodily down the stairs as the door flung inward, an incident from which she now sported bruises on her elbows and thigh. *And that was when...* Claire ran to the toilet and heaved, while worrying her raw neck with her fingers. She hadn't eaten, but acidic bile splashed from her throat as her stomach churned over again.

"Claire." A melodic voice demanded her attention. Valissa stood there, in a short robe of painted silk. She was holding two thick white towels. "The one is damp. For you to clean up with."

Claire pushed herself from the porcelain bowl, looking up with wet eyes. "Wh-who... what the fuck. What the fuck is this, Valissa?" She reached for the towels regardless, grateful for the hot damp cotton to rub over her reddened eyes and sour mouth.

Valissa sighed, as if Claire asked too much of her.

"I like you," she explained. She swept her platinum hair back from her face with her fingers. "I used to be a lovely nobody too. The boredom... and *angst.* No one gives you the credit you deserve, for your potential." She perched on the edge of the daybed, crossed a long milky leg and pedicured bare foot over the other. "Don't you want to be like me?"

Claire was caught off guard by how the question cut to her, and seemed somehow reasonable. Before this day, she hadn't just wanted to be like stunning and elegant Valissa, she had wanted to *be* her. *But, no... please, no.*

"No." Claire whispered, her sculpted features a mask of despair. "I just want to live."

"Well." Valissa rose, tightening the robe about her slender waist. "You'll come around from that." She left Claire abruptly, alone to weep.

• • •

Delilah slumped into her car outside of Lotus. She tried to be pleased that she had been tipped out well that night, but panic gnawed at her guts and shortened her breath. Claire's boyfriend Alex had reluctantly agreed to meet up with her after she insisted that

her sister could be in real trouble as opposed to having blown him off for other dudes. Delilah pulled up to his house after a short drive, parked, walked briskly up the path to the door. Alex's roommate answered while her fist was lifted to knock, and she lowered it.

"Hi, Ben." she was impatient to go in.

"Hi, Dee." he grinned through sandy stubble and went in for the hug.

"Not now, please. No offense." Her voice crackled with torment. Surely he had the sense to notice? "I just need to talk to Alex." He shrugged and walked away to fix some cereal.

Delilah stepped inside, where Alex sat comfortably in their living room. She took a seat on his sofa and faced him, absorbing his expression. Where previously he had been incredulous, even angry, Alex now reflected the fear in Delilah's gaunt face. He swallowed thickly.

"Just... tell me what happened, I guess." Delilah recalled how they had gone to Ampersand, partied with some girls, and that there had been no male object of Claire's attentions. She admitted to losing track of the night as she had been distracted by Chase, and that Claire had texted her at about 2:30 am with the address.

"So who lives there?" Delilah shook her head in ignorance. "Maybe one of the girls...but I don't know." Alex continued "She's been gone... 24 hours? Almost? Have you called the police?" Delilah shook her head again.

"Well why the fuck not?"

"I guess I thought... I hoped... she might be with you." Delilah had known that she wasn't. She had *known*. "You might have picked her up." Alex exhaled slowly. He was exasperated.

"Come on, Dee." He squeezed her hand for a moment. "I'll take you to the police station."

"Delilah..." she corrected meekly.

• • •

Alex drove Delilah west in his Explorer, out of the winding suburbs to a station near to the club where Claire was last seen. Delilah thought how pretty the city lights were as they approached, and how alien to human heritage. She wondered if skyscrapers had always been their destiny, or if there was another way they had missed out on entirely.

Alex parked. The station was not still. Two officers brought in both members of a couple who shrieked obscenely at each other even as they were handcuffed and hauled bodily inside. The building itself was drab, not new. Alex opened Delilah's door and guided her out by the elbow.

"Let's go," he said simply.

Within, Delilah approached a bearded officer in uniform who reclined behind a peach-colored counter. The couple's voices grew fainter as they were properly sorted, down some hall.

“Sir...” Delilah began. Her palms were moist and her mouth dry. “My sister, my sister Claire...” her eyes welled involuntarily. “She’s missing.”

His nametag introduced him. Clark. He sat up with barely-checked disinterest.

“For how long has she been missing?”

“One day. And night. 24 hours.”

“Do you believe her to be in any immediate danger or harm?”

“I...” Delilah’s eyes narrowed. “I don’t know, sir, *she’s missing*.” Behind the desk-officer, a young man in neat civilian’s clothes filed folders into an office cabinet. He glanced at them but didn’t pause at his work.

“I’ll not thank you for your attitude,” Officer Clark warned. He swiveled in his chair. “Jack, 10-57 paperwork please.” The man nodded and reached for a lower drawer.

“She sent me an address,” Delilah choked. “She texted me. You could go there.”

Clark clipped the papers into a clipboard and slid it over the counter. “Just fill this out please.”

Delilah took the clipboard, her lips pursed together firmly. She wrote out her personal information, her bare story, how to contact her. She returned the form over the counter.

“When should I...?”

“We’ll call you.” Delilah flicked her eyes toward Alex, waiting in a hard plastic chair.

“Thank you, sir.” She turned to go.

“Miss!” Delilah looked back. It was Jack, folder in hand. “I’m sorry about your sister.”

• • •

Delilah slept deeply. She had thought that she wouldn’t be able to, but dreamless rest cloaked her sweetly until she woke at dawn into an instant panic attack. Delilah could only breathe. In. Out. After two hours, she crawled from Claire’s bed, where she had slept. She brushed her teeth and donned sweatpants. In sunglasses and a cap, she paced Main Street. Door 105 never budged. She went home, she worked, she slept, she returned. She watched flies. Nothing.

• • •

“If you could just...” Delilah had called Officer Clark, who had not called her. “She texted me that address. That’s where she went.”

“Miss, we understand your concern and we’re very sorry for your distress,” Clark explained soothingly. “And I want you to know that we investigated all the information you provided thoroughly. The residents of 105 were extremely cooperative and allowed us to search their home very graciously.” *Liar*. She would have seen.

“Thank you, Officer. I appreciate you taking this to heart,” Delilah replied delicately. “Who are the residents of 105? She did go to their house, and perhaps they could turn me in the right direction.”

“Miss.” His voice was iron. “I told you that the matter was investigated thoroughly and there was no further information. Your sister was probably swept off her feet as young girls tend to be and is off on a little fling. These things are rarely trouble. I suggest you wait it out.”

“I see.”

“And now, I wish you the best. I’m very busy.” He hung up.

Delilah stared at her phone. She was exhausted and felt Claire’s absence keenly. She opened Claire’s Twitter from her phone. Just to feel her close again.

Having a great day.

Delilah started. *What the fucking update.* Her heart pounded. She began to weep, not optimistically. On the contrary, her skin crawled with knowing something terribly twisted had occurred. Claire did not write that. Claire did not “have a great day” and casually kill her older sister with fear. With short breath and choking sobs, Delilah tapped again to Valissa’s profile. Startling gray eyes.

Love me or hate me, either way it’s an obsession

Don’t forget to see me at Psy-Fri this weekend! Text me 4 guestlist. <3 #ampersand

That fucking creature. Delilah wondered if anyone who was so fawned, so simpered over, could realistically escape narcissism. She felt sick with pity, then. Fleeting pity.

Even as Delilah stared at her phone, it began to ring. Startled, she answered quickly.

“Hello?”

“Is this... Delilah?” the voice asked calmly, “It’s Jack. From the police station.”

“Oh!” she gasped. “Officer, thank you for calling me.”

“I’m not an officer. I’m... I am a detective of sorts. Listen to me, please, Delilah, I’d like to meet with you to talk. Soon. I’d like to help.” Hope crept into her heart. They made plans to meet at the restaurant where she worked.

• • •

Jack approached the back table where Delilah waited. She had already ordered them some tea. He removed the khaki fedora that was angled over his eyes as he sat.

“I’m sorry to be so abrupt with you, Delilah.”

“No. Please. I’m grateful for anything you tell me.”

“This will be hard. I have to ask for your trust, though I have done nothing to earn it. I want you to have a chance, though, and for Claire to have a chance.”

“I don’t follow,” she replied slowly. “I want to, but I’m not sure...”

“There are monsters, Delilah. Like in books. Like in horror movies. They look like people or sometimes they don’t, but they are out there and they ruin lives. For fun, maybe. For their own survival, almost certainly.”

“Jack,” she squeaked, “Why do you think that monsters have Claire?” He nodded, impressed — almost — by her quiet acceptance.

“Their influence runs deep. Clark wouldn’t have lied to you about investigating Claire in any other circumstance.”

Delilah sat speechless. She took a sip of tea. A mistake. She felt like throwing up. Jack had replaced his fedora and now buttoned his coat. He pushed his chair back.

“But, Jack...” Delilah grasped at a question.

“Yes, Delilah? I do have to be going.”

“What should I do? I mean, what do you suggest that I do?”

“Delilah, I suggest you kill them.”

• • •

Delilah flicked through Valissa’s photos on Twitter. It seemed to make perfect sense that this girl was a monster, so unbearably graceful and remarkably cold. She navigated back to her timeline.

Tomorrow Night! Psy-Fri Friday featuring me on the decks! <3 #ampersand

She would have to confront Valissa. *What if Claire was already...?* No. That tweet from Claire’s account. Somehow. Claire could be saved, they could run away, who cares to where so long as there are no *monsters* there to hunt them. Delilah’s phone rang. Alex.

“Delilah,” he breathed, not waiting to be greeted.

“Yes,” she croaked. “I’m here.”

“It’s that girl Valissa. I saw her come out of 105. I watched all night when you worked.”

“Alex...” she started. She wondered how far to go. She wanted his help, and couldn’t stand to scare him away with this... conspiracy? “Alex, that man, Jack, from the police station called me. He said there was no investigation. They must... there must be some bribery, or something.”

Alex whistled. “That’s heavy.”

“We have to do something. I’m going to do something. Please help me. Alex, please help Claire.”

“What do you have in mind?”

“I can take Valissa’s house keys, to start.”


“Are you going to hurt her?”

“If I have to! She’s not innocent! Do you not love Claire, do you not care to protect her?”

“Yes, Delilah. Please calm down. I love her. Of course I’ll help you. Tell me what you need.”

She wept in relief. “Just come over.”

• • •



They had cleaned up nicely in black pants and shirts. Nondescript. Thursdays at Ampersand were no Fridays, in any case. It was just another bar, not too busy, with the manager's iPod playlist on the speakers for entertainment. With no club lights illuminating the marble stage and no DJ, it was trivial to slip back into the green room.

"Are you okay?" Alex asked Delilah, and folded her into a hug, amid those green walls. She wept. The anticipation of a thing overwhelms in ways that *the moment* cannot. As though the nausea and the thudding, bloody heart are a price the body pays forward so that when the enemy rears, a switch flips and the hands and the mind do the things that they must. Autopilot. Delilah knew what she must do.

"Yes," she wiped tears across her cheeks. "I just... miss her... so much. And I am going to get her back." Delilah breathed quickly. Too fast. A panic attack. She was managing.

They cracked the door to the hall. Many dark rooms nestled there. The more heavily trafficked storage rooms were for liquor and were graciously far down and around a corner, behind the bars. Alex and Delilah crossed from the green room to Valissa's private lounge. They would stay there through the night, so as not to place them at Psy-Fri. Should anything... happen. It was also the greatest chance to intercept Valissa, alone. She would come early as she always did to prepare for the party, to direct the promoters and staff, and to lock up her equipment. If luck was on their side, Valissa would dress in her lounge alone. Delilah would be waiting for her. She had insisted, and Alex had been curiously complacent. For all his support, Alex had remained a touch irked by the whole business. Understandably so. Delilah didn't wish at all to be here, to do "this." This had been done to her.

Alex would stand sentry, quietly in the next storage room over where he could face outward and see if any additional problems came through from the green room. He would warn Delilah by thumping on the adjoining wall with his fist. If he needed to, he would protect her. They had to have those keys. He thought of Claire's short, golden hair, of her heart-shaped pout under his lips, of her soft body under his hands. It had all seemed so unreal these few days, but he felt it with all the force at this moment and a sob escaped his lips. Delilah looked at him, her own throat constricted, and nodded.

• • •

Valissa stretched out artfully over an ice-white silk satin comforter that topped her walnut king-sized platform bed. Her seafoam lace garments accented her creamy skin such that she could have been a mermaid floating on a white ocean.

"Rachel," she purred. The red-haired beauty she called sat on a pintucked bench of pink velvet, hoisted by carved and gilded legs. She was applying a cat-like swoop in black liner atop jasper eyes.

"Yes, my sweetheart?" she fluttered her cat eyes for Valissa's benefit. "Oughtn't you to be dressed, or at least clad enough to leave the house?"

"Well, naturally," she agreed. "But I don't have the motivation. Can't you see how ill I am?" On the contrary, she was nothing short of divine. "Please make Joy come to me. I *need* her."

Rachel giggled, but acquiesced. She left the room and minutes later, Joy joined Valissa on the bed.

“Are you nearly ready to go?” It was a gentle suggestion.

“Of course. I’m about to get up. I just need you.” She stretched out her fingers and grasped Joy’s forearm, pulling her close. A bemused smile flickered across Joy’s dusky features as she allowed it. Valissa lifted her friend’s wrist to her lips, as she had before, opening it first with a pointed nail and then worrying the wound with her teeth until warm blood flowed into her mouth. She relished the tang, the salt, the rush, the energy. She gulped gracelessly.

“Do you have enough?” she sputtered, as Joy retracted her arm.

“Certainly. I’ve just had Claire. But you shouldn’t make yourself sick.”

“You’re right, of course.” Valissa wiped her lips and chin with her hands, getting up now to wash in the master bathroom before leaving for Ampersand. Happy. Potent.

• • •

Stuffing bled from the espresso loveseat. Delilah had punched into it relentlessly with her boning knife made from Japanese steel. The set was one of her finer possessions, a gift for her once-upon-a-time engagement. It hadn’t worked out. For that she tried to decide that she was meant to be given the knives, that the Universe had conspired to arm her for this circumstance. Delilah had no qualms with the sofa particularly but nor had she ever exerted violent force. Not ever, she recalled. Through the day she had practiced, stabbing boldly at boxes, furniture, and anything comparable to the resistance of human flesh. *Monstrous flesh?* She did not know what to expect. Whatever Valissa was, she looked human enough to die.

At 6:00, Delilah flattened herself against the corner wall that the door would open against. She challenged herself to breathe as quietly as possible. Straining her ears uncovered no sense of Alex. It comforted her to know he was there, bound to her in terror. She tried to feel Claire as well.

A scuffle.

“...and don’t bother me!” a faint demand, perhaps as far as the stage. It was Valissa, wanting to be alone. *Thank you, Universe.* If any footsteps followed, they dissolved into the carpet of the green room, but at once the door to the hallway shut with a click. The tap of heels, just a few steps, and a jingle. *Keys? Jewelry? Keys, please, keys!*

Valissa opened her dressing room and the door bounced gently off Delilah behind it. There was no more time for the terrible beauty to not see the damage that had been done in the room. Delilah pressed the door closed and kicked in the back of Valissa’s knees, intending to disable her.

A sound escaped Valissa’s throat as she crumpled, her shriek of surprise made short and guttural with impact. Delilah was on top of her without delay, sitting on the small of her back, slamming her knees and shins down in an effort to pin Valissa’s arms to the floor. Delilah’s boning knife was at her throat.

“Is Claire alive?” Delilah growled, miraculously focused.

“Yes,” Valissa choked. “Whaaat—” she was cut short as her captor cruelly gathered all her hair into her left hand.

“Is she at your house?” A slight nod both answered and elicited a gasp. Delilah tightened the press of the knife but let go of the hair, straining to grab the snakeskin clutch Valissa had dropped. The keys were under it. She must have dropped them as well. *Claire*. Delilah snatched them.

Valissa flipped over as the pressure released, now facing but underneath Delilah still.

“You... can’t help her.” she was blasé, resigned to the attack but confused by the brunette girl’s passion. Her eyes glinted violet now.

Delilah plunged the knife into her chest at that moment, consequences be damned. The sound of metal on bone, then blood flowed freely into her hands, on the floor, soaking Valissa’s hair, sticky red, and mortal... so mortal! Delilah could have vomited into the warm mess right then had not all her limbs and tongue turned to lead. *The keys!*

Valissa became limp as her life leaked away, brows furrowed in anger and gaze fluttering shut, but strangely quiet.

“Valissa,” her would-be murderer croaked. Delilah stroked her enviable face with crimson fingers. Tiny breaths escaped parted lips.

“Valissa!” Delilah gasped, tearful. This was a mortal girl, dying under her hands. *By her hands!* She pulled the knife out of her ribs with a *ssssst!* The girl’s eyes opened then, halfway. She looked up at her assailant, lip twitching in a final expression of disdain.

“Who... who *are* you, even?”

The door crashed open. Delilah could not have been more compromised, straddling Valissa’s fading corpse on the floor and soaked in her blood. She earned the briefest glare of astonishment before Joy was on her knees, in front of Delilah, cradling Valissa’s head and frothy pink hair.

“I...” Delilah wept, wanting to grasp Joy and grieve with her, knowing that she couldn’t. Olive-skinned Joy lowered her lips to Valissa, dragging them softly down her face and shoulders. Lapping blood as she worked.

At once mobile, Delilah leapt upward. Only she didn’t. Joy held her in place over Valissa easily with slender fingers wrapped around her wrist. Joy’s chin and lashes raised, elevating her gaze to meet Delilah’s saucer-wide eyes.

“Do you have any idea how much time I put into her?”

• • •

Adjacent to the last *crunch*, Alex wet himself. He couldn’t guess the capabilities of the woman who had entered the room his ear was pressed to, but he hoped desperately that she could not smell him. Delilah was dead. Delilah was dead. She was so dead. And Claire was alive.

Blood Will Have Blood

By Jason Andrew

*“A brave man’s blood is the best thing on this earth when
a woman is in trouble.”*

— Bram Stoker, *Dracula*

Mel skirted past the velvet rope with the grace of a ballerina executing a flawless pirouette. The bouncer clamped down on her bare shoulder with a meaty hand and spun her around. She shrugged, peeking up at him through blue strands of hair that covered her eyes. A throbbing cacophony of drum beats and guitar riffs washed over them, making conversation impossible as the DJ blasted the next set. Frustrated, the bouncer shook his head and waved her through.

Branch bit down on his lip to mask his relief, flashed his military ID at the bouncer, and trailed her into the building. *Vain* was a notorious 21-and-over club that occasionally allowed younger girls entrance if it looked like they could be discreet. Mel was a year shy of formally qualifying and without her, this entire hunting trip would turn pointless quickly.

Flickering lights formed colorful patterns on the black walls. Writhing flesh swayed to the rhythmic, unyielding beat emanating from the speakers. Branch sidled up to the bar, finding the perfect spot to keep his back solidly against the wall while also granting him a wide view of the dance floor where Mel was already staking out her turf at the center of the crowd.

He hoped that, somehow, he’d gradually adjust to the stench of stale cigarettes, cheap perfume mixed with sweat, and desperation. This rat-hole was supposedly the hub of depraved entertainment for the vamps in the area, providing the drugs, gambling, and whoring typical of Detroit.

Branch tapped on the bar twice, slipped some cash to the bartender, and then accepted a cold bottle of beer. He gulped a long swallow then glanced aside at the dance floor. Mel had already found their potential first victim: a thin man with dark curly hair and a face etched with a permanent expression of disdain.

The target matched the vague description of Gustav, but then again, so did a dozen other douchebags at the club. Mel tilted her head toward Branch and fidgeted with her left earring. He acknowledged the signal with a curt nod, fished his phone out of his pocket, and then texted the others a single phrase. *Semper Fi!*

Mel took the vampire's hand and led him through the dance floor. The throng parted unconsciously, allowing them egress to the other side as though they sensed a predator. Branch followed at a distance, a single face lost in the crowd.

Gustav stopped just short of the flashing green sign above the exit. The vampire cupped Mel's face in his hands and then lifted it slightly to expose her neck. He sniffed her slowly and whispered into her ear.

Branch bit his lip, angry, but waited behind the corner just out of sight. His phone buzzed with the response. He checked it and found a single word. *Ready.*

Mel giggled and then kissed the vampire. She slid out from under his arms and then pushed the metal door open with both hands. Spinning around seductively, she beckoned Gustav to follow.

Branch waited until Gustav prowled through the exit to quietly close the distance and caught the door just before it could latch shut. He peered through the crack in the doorway to monitor their progress to the kill box.

The alley lead to a secluded alcove between the club and a once-beautiful art deco hotel that had been abandoned in the '80s and now showed a series of gang tags. Kowalczyk and Davis smoked cigarettes near the dumpster watching as Mel and the vampire strolled past them.

Davis gave a knowing wink as Mel dragged the vampire past them. He inhaled a final drag off the cigarette butt, flicked it onto the concrete then ground out the embers with his steel toed-boot.

Mel lured the vampire into the alcove and leaned against the wall. She removed her lace choker revealing a series of barely healed scars along curve of her neck. "Don't worry, no one can see what we're doing back here."

Branch quietly joined the others as they maneuvered into position, closing the trap. Kowalczyk tossed him a teak stake, his favorite, carved from one of the trees near his trailer.

The vampire brushed his fingers against her scars. "Others have tasted you." Mel nodded shyly. "You've developed a taste for this, haven't you?"

"I've developed a taste for you." Mel pulled the vampire's face to her neck. "Please."

The vampire snarled, his hunger evident, and then bit into her. Mel gasped. The orgasmic cry made Branch's cheeks burn. His hand squeezed the wooden stake until his fingers ached. *Wait for it! She can do this.*

Gustav screamed, recoiling from Mel with fresh blood on his lips. The vampire hissed through bared fangs as black lines snaked across his greyish blue skin. Agony stripped away any veneer of humanity from the monster as he stumbled backward. "What did you do to me?"

They had learned from hard experience never to speak to a vampire until the fight was over. Kowalczyk gripped the handle of his polished wooden baseball bat, stepped into position, and clocked the vampire squarely on the back of the head with a wet thump.

Gustav staggered toward Mel, reaching for something to stabilize his fall. Her false innocent expression dropped, replaced by a grimace of disgust. She sidestepped him, letting the vampire crash flat onto the pavement and then kicked him in the side.

Davis raised a sharp homemade machete with a duct-taped handle and then hacked and chopped without mercy. The vampire rolled to his side, flailing and screaming, attempting to find some way to escape.

They boxed the vampire on all sides, constantly attacking him, denying him any leverage to maneuver out of the trap. Branch waited for just the right moment, when Gustav seemed to weaken and falter, and then signaled for their *coup de grace*.

Davis and Kowalczyk flipped the vampire onto his back and pinned his arm to the ground. Branch felt the vampire's chest, making certain he had the right spot and then drove the stake deep into the vampire's chest.

Gustav gasped, a final act of desperation, and then froze. Branch knelt down to perch above Gustav's chest and opened the vampire's eyes.

"I'd love to leave you out here to die at sunrise, but that's just not convenient. Thankfully, Davis has a new knife he wants to christen." Branch checked on the team's position. Mel had already moved to ensure the door to Vain remained closed. Davis raised his machete with a determined grimace. "In the movies, you'll see the good guys taking off someone's head with a single blow. That's nonsense. This sort of job takes a bit of effort. You have to saw at it for a while to get through the neck muscles. Good thing my friend here is a hard-working guy."

Davis nodded in agreement. "Momma raised me right."

Branch stood, dusted off his pants, and turned to Davis. "Take your time with this one."

• • •

The scent of onions and bell peppers mixed with the soothing sizzle of cooking eggs smelled like victory. It was a tradition Branch adopted from his time in the marines. Always cook for your men after a hunt. It was a good way to remember why you were fighting in the first place and a way to remind you that you were still human.

Branch surveyed the array of red and blue plastic cups and discarded pizza boxes strewn about the trailer and tried not to shake his head at the others. He felt the urge to yell at them yet again for making yet another mess, but instead, dished out a portion of the meal, and set it on the counter for Mel. "Careful, that plate's hot."

Mel downed another glass of orange juice and scratched under the blood-stained bandage on her neck. Branch saw the latest notch on her neck and nearly dropped the skillet. He scrambled to recover his grip, clanking the metal against the stove.

“You, OK?” Mel asked.

“Yeah. Still fired up is all.”

“I hear ya. I don’t think I’ve slept a full night in weeks.” Mel took the plate into her hand and shoveled a large bite into her mouth. “Hmmm...thanks.”

Davis and Kowalczyk camped out in front of the giant flat-screen TV battling via avatars in a kung-fu video game saturated with grunts, death screams, and gouts of blood.

Kowalczyk pried his gaze away from the television, over the back of the ratty couch, toward Mel and Branch. “Hey! Why does Mel always get served breakfast first?”

He knew it was a joke, but Branch couldn’t help but scowl. Mel answered before he could. “You want to eat first? Why don’t you put on a short skirt and wiggle your ass in front of the vamps? See if they take the bait.”

“My blood would just make them that much meaner. Better to keep them away from the good stuff.” Kowalczyk waved his hand over his face and torso. “Those vamps couldn’t control themselves if they caught a whiff of all this. It’d be a feeding frenzy.”

Mel flinched as her cheeks flushed. “Meaning my blood is the bad stuff, right?” She set down the plate and folded her arms. “That’s what you meant, right?”

Branch put his hand on her shoulder. “I’m sure Kowalczyk didn’t mean anything by it.”

“Ah, crap! Come on, Mel, I was just razzing you.” Kowalczyk shrugged apologetically. “Hell, I wish my blood was poison to the vamps.”

“I’m not a freak!”

“No one said anything about you being a freak.” Branch tilted his head. Mel had been on edge, even more than usual, for weeks. “What’s this about?”

“Just tired.” Mel rubbed her eyes and then returned to her plate. “I try to catch up on my sleep, but I can’t. I can’t seem to close my eyes for more than an hour or two at the most.”

“We’ve been through enough to have nightmares for the rest of our lives.”

Kowalczyk snorted. “Jesus, Branch, if you were trying to be comforting, you suck vamp balls at it.”

Davis ignored the conversation and took full advantage of the distraction. His avatar threw Kowalczyk’s onto the ground, punched through his chest, and raised his palpitating heart into the air with a savage cry of victory. “This is why we can’t send you in to honeypot those vamps, dipshit. You’re not smart enough to pay attention to the game.”

“Seriously?” Kowalczyk groaned and dropped the controller. “Sneak attacking me again?”

“That’s how we win,” Davis observed.

“Listen, I love hanging out with you guys, but do we really have to stay here all night?”

“You want a vamp to follow you home and kill your little boy?” Branch dished out a smaller portion of eggs into a small bowl and left it on the floor for his cat. “We all agreed to the protocol. We don’t separate until daylight. Remember what happened to Teddy?”

Mentioning Mel’s dead brother killed the tone of the conversation. Kowalczyk shook his head. “That’s not fair and you know it. What do we have to worry about now? Gustav was the last one, right?”

“He’s got a point. We nailed all the vamps that were killing folks in 8 Mile.” Davis stifled a yawn while checking his watch. “I need to actually sleep in my own bed for a change. Hell, it’s only an hour to daylight. Let’s catch up later. I have an afternoon shift tomorrow. Can’t be late again or I’ll get fired.”

Branch tried the stress-relief technique the doctor taught him. He opened and closed his hands again and again. “There are still more of them out there.”

“What? Are we supposed to kill them all?” Kowalczyk stopped for a moment, locking his gaze with Branch. “That’s what you want, isn’t it? You want to keep going.”

“What happens when someone else dies?” Branch turned his back on them, not wanting to look at them, returning to the kitchen. “What happens if it’s someone we know?”

Kowalczyk pointed to Mel. “How many times are we going to use this poor girl as bait? Look at her neck!”

Mel covered the scars on her neck defensively. “Whoa! Don’t use me as an excuse to quit. The only time I can sleep anymore is after we put down a vamp.”

“How many times do you think you can take that hit for us?? Davis asked. “How long ‘til you start to like it, Mel? We don’t know anything about why your blood is poison to them. What happens when we find a vampire immune to whatever is in you killing them?”

Mel shrugged her shoulders. “I’m willing to keep going as long as we can.”

“Can’t we try reaching out to that doctor you found in Boston on the internet? What’s his name?” Kowalczyk asked, snapping his fingers. “We know there are more vamps out there, right? We can’t be only ones fighting them. Seems to me the smart move is to see if we can hook up with the others.

“Dr. Zukera? It’s hard to tell if he’s legit over the internet. Claims to be an authority on parapsychology, but he teaches at Boston U”

“We looked him up, remember?” Branch shook his head. “Zukera’s research is funded by the government. The last thing we need is the military weaponizing vamps and mass producing those fuckers. The world has enough nonsense in it.”

Davis sighed. "Look, I finally have a good gig at the shop. You know how hard it is to get a union job? I can't burn the candle at both ends forever, you know?"

Branch rubbed his temple a moment. "Don't you think I want to quit? Tell me how."

"We've been hella lucky this far and the odds are against us. Sooner or later, those vamps are bound to figure out our tactics and then what? We can take one of them down when they're weak on Mel's blood, but only because we have the method down pat. In a straight fight?" Davis shrugged his shoulders. "What the hell are we supposed to do then?"

Mel shook her head. "Guys, we don't have to decide anything tonight, do we? Let's split up and get back together next weekend and figure out what's what."

"Mel's right. Let's hook up later and clear the air." Davis stood up from the couch, stretched, then headed toward Branch to offer his hand. "I have nothing but love for you. I know you're looking out for us."

He tried to think of something clever or profound to say. Branch had never been that good at expressing his feelings. He simply accepted the hand and squeezed it tightly. One by one, they said their goodbyes and headed outside onto the gravel driveway.

Kowalczyk paused, tilted his head, and pointed to the old, rusted relic of a truck that Davis had used to schlep them around the neighborhood since school-era football trips. "Your tires are flat. All of them."

"Seriously?" Davis paced around the front of the truck, bending down to examine the flat tires. "When I find out which of those little bastards in the park that did this..."

Branch tried to think of a trailer kid brave enough to screw around with Davis's truck, especially carrying his machete as he did at night around the park, and thought of exactly zero suspects. His trailer was at the outer edge of the park, near the woods, where hardly anyone dared to venture. "Something's not right here."

A blurred ripple vibrated through the air, culminating in a pulpy thud. Branch had never seen anything move that fast. *Was that a vampire?*

Kowalczyk coughed, surprised to find black blood on his lips. He stumbled slightly, confused, and looked down at his stomach. Blood spurted from a savage wound on his belly that exposed ruptured muscles and mangled guts. He fell to his knees with a pleading look upon his face, lacking the life in his body to scream.

His murderer, now visible, turned and hissed at the hunters with yellow, jagged fangs. The vampire's black claws dripped blood and gore.

Branch drew his stake and lunged at the vampire, hoping that his quick action would surprise the monster. The monster swatted Branch aside effortlessly, knocking him onto the gravel and sending him skidding several feet toward the trailer.

Davis hacked with his machete, drawing blood and rending the dead flesh of the vampire.

Twin bestial vampires with misshapen pale bald heads with bent ears and hideous mandible jaws ambushed Davis, seemingly out of nowhere. Fetid rags billowed from the blinding speed of their savage attack, pinning him to the ground. He struggled against their grasp, trying to roll under the truck.

They clamped down on his shoulders and then glanced to the lead vampire for permission. He nodded an approval and then they savagely bit opposite sides of his neck.

Davis screamed and then fell silent. Branch tried to ignore the chilling slurping sounds the vampires made as they fed upon Davis. He drew his pistol and fired at the monsters hoping that he could distract one of them off his friend.

Mel stumbled back, her face twisted with horror. "Not again."

"Again?" Branch tried to stand. His knees buckled. He glanced over to Mel. Her eyes were wide as saucers, terrified, and her hands shook. The vampire who murdered Kowalczyk stepped closer, visibly enjoying the sheer helplessness of their situation. He tried to come with a plan — anything to buy them a couple of seconds to regroup or escape. "Run, Mel. Run!"

Mel blinked, as though snapping out of a trance, and stepped forward with a newfound determination, placing her body between the oncoming vampire and her friend.

Sweltering wind blew through the trees and around the trailer. It felt like standing next to a welding torch on a scorching summer day. The windows in the trailer and the truck exploded all at once, cascading with a loud pop.

Mel's face twisted with confusion as she raised her hands, palms up, toward the night sky. Fire flickered like a snake's tongue from her palm. Flame burst from her flesh in an expansive, blinding flash. The vampire's eyes flashed scarlet as he faced a timeless enemy long feared by the undead. He hissed and scrambled to flee.

The twin monstrosities raised their heads like wolves interrupted during a feeding. They snarled as they rose from their prey, cautious, trying to discern what had happened.

Mel raised her hands, examining them as though she had never seen them before. They glowed with righteous fire. The vampires hissed, trying to intimidate her. They left Davis and came at her from different directions, but the intensity of the fire forced them to turn from her and flee into the night.

Davis rolled to his side, holding onto his neck where the vampires had bitten him. "That fucking hurt."

Branch turned to Mel, waiting for her to move, trying to find any acknowledgement of the horror of what had happened in her expression. He slowly pulled himself to his feet, his entire body ached from the fight, and limped over to Davis. "We need the medical kit in the trailer. Mel! Are you listening to me?"

She shook her head as though waking from a nightmare. "Got it!"

Branch knelt down to Davis and helped him sit his back against the truck. Mel brought the medical kit from the trailer then waited near them hesitantly. He found the emergency butterfly bandages that would hold Davis together until he could manage some quick and dirty stitches. "The last thing we need is for you to bleed out."

“What was that?” Davis asked.

“The vamps must have caught us killing Gustav and followed us home.” Branch wasn’t interested in saying *I told you so* at the moment. “We’re lucky to be alive.”

“I figured that part out all on my own.” Davis shook his head. He pointed accusingly to Mel. “What the hell did she do?”

Mel examined her hands, keeping her eyes low to avoid looking at them. “I dreamed of fire.” Branch saw that they were clean, not a burn or a mark upon them.

“Shit! I knew there was something about you that wasn’t right.” Davis tried to stand, despite Branch holding him down. “You’ve been lying since the start, haven’t you? Something freaky happened after that first vampire bit you. You’ve been getting strength from them after they bite you. Feeding on their filth? You’re becoming like them, aren’t you? That’s why you wanted to keep going.”

“No.” It was a weak protest. Mel winced as though she were considering the possibility despite her objections. “I wish I could explain. It’s like I’ve been dreaming of this for weeks and only just remembered it right before it happened.”

“We don’t have time for this bullshit right now.” Branch peered over his shoulders, worried. “Mel scared off the vamps, but she only hurt one of them. The other two vamps are out there waiting to stir up some serious shit.”

“If they know about us, they might know my family,” Davis muttered. Branch helped him stand. “Mamma and the girls’ll be helpless.”

“Not to mention Kowalczyk’s son,” Mel added.

Branch nodded, grimly. “Thankfully, his ex moved last week. If we’re lucky, the vamps won’t know that. We can’t take the risk that the vamps would just follow us there just for spite.”

“I have her number. I can warn her,” Mel offered. “She should know what happened.”

“Make it fast.” Branch turned to Davis. “We only need to hold out an hour before dawn. You guys still have the station wagon, right?”

“Just fixed the tranny last weekend,” Davis answered weakly. “Should be able to take all of us, but it’ll be a really tight fit.”

“Good enough for now. We’ll grab Mel’s car once we leave the park.” Branch picked up the machete and handed it to his friend. “Let’s make this happen quickly and quietly.”

“What about Kowalczyk?” Mel asked.

Branch forced himself to look at Kowalczyk’s corpse. He had heard enough death rattles to know when a body simply had nothing left to give. “Can’t do anything for him. He’d understand. We need to take care of the living.”

“You still want me to go?” Mel asked.

“This ain’t over by a longshot. There’s going to be words between us, but you don’t leave family behind.”

Davis led through the worn paths under laundry lines and between the bushes that marked the borders between trailers. Their hurried steps crunched the gravel. He stopped at a double-wide trailer with a rusted jungle gym and a parked station wagon in front. Davis unlocked the front door and turned to Branch. "I'll wake them and bring them out."

He entered the trailer leaving Mel and Branch standing guard.

"Thank you," Mel whispered.

"For what? You're the one that saved us."

"I'm a freak," Mel admitted. "I might be a monster. I dreamed about burning those vamps. And it felt good."

"I've known you your entire life. I knew that before... whatever it was you did back there with the fire."

"I didn't know I could do it. Not for real. I dreamed about it and a voice."

"A voice? What do ya mean?"

"I know it sounds crazy, but I think it was an angel."

"What did this voice tell you to do?" Branch asked.

"Kill the vampires."

"I'm not gonna lie. You should have told me about this shit when it was first happening." Branch scratched his head. "I'm scared to death and this isn't the time to go all soap opera about. We grew up with you in this neighborhood. We don't abandon one of our own."

Snarling and growling, the twin monstrosities again emerged from some deadly shadow and swooped upon them like a pair of wolves. Branch pulled Mel to the side, trying to place the giant teak tree between themselves and the vampires. They swiped at Mel, grabbed her other arm, hurled her to the grass and dirt.

Branch fired his pistol twice, trying to draw their attention. "We need you to do it again."

Mel pushed herself up from the muck. "Again?"

"Burn those fuckers!"

"I don't know how I did it the first time!" Mel protested.

A high-pitched cry came from the front porch. Telah, Davis's youngest sister, wept with fright. The malignant twins grinned, flashing their twisted teeth. They snatched the child from the porch and held her between them like a ragdoll. "Surrender and we may spare the child."

"You'll kill her anyway," Branch argued. "Can't leave witnesses, can you?"

They spoke together, in perfect unison. "There are many ways to die."

Meekly, Mel held up her shaking hands in a gesture of surrender to the vampires. They half-grunted to each other while their mandibles clicked.

She knelt before them and spread her arms apart welcoming them to simply take her. "Take Telah and run!"

Branch waved the little girl toward him and hoped for the best.

They came at Mel from divergent angles. They spoke as one once more. "It is pity that your blood is as ash upon our tongues."

Sweat bubbled on Branch's forehead as heated gusts of wind blustered around them. The very air shimmered as wave after wave of heat washed over them. He wrapped his arms around Telah to shield her from the blast as a pillar of flame erupted from Mel.

A bonfire of destruction blasted upward, transforming for a brief moment into an afterimage of skeletal wings. Once the light faded, he looked up to see the vampires blackened and burnt from the fire. Their flesh cracked and flaked like leaves at autumn. They floated away until they became ash upon the wind.

Mel dropped to the ground, unconscious, surrounded by a ring of scorched grass and ashes.

Davis finally popped out the trailer holding onto his baby sister and dragging his mother behind in a nightgown. "What happened?"

"Mel killed the monsters," Telah said, awed.

"What now?" Davis asked.

• • •

Sunrise over Highway 403 might be the most beautiful thing that I've ever seen. Branch glanced over at Mel in the passenger's seat and amended that thought to *second most beautiful.*

For the fifth time in the last hour, he leaned over the back seat to verify that the old station wagon still followed them. With any luck, Davis and his family would get a fresh start in Boston.

"What happened?" Mel asked.

"You fainted. That last blast nearly wiped you out."

She glanced around her car and then looked in the backseat. "What about the others?"

"Look for that old station wagon. We made sure everyone got out OK."

Mel sat upright and looked for signs on the highway. "Why are we on the 403?"

"That's where your Dr. Zukera has his research place, isn't it? Where else are we going to go?" Branch asked.

"It could be dangerous?"

"I think we're long past dangerous."

"What if he's just a quack?"

Branch shrugged. "I bet there are vamps to kill in Boston. That's as close to a happy ending as we can expect."



The Ivy Twines

By Sarah Roark

There wasn't a rule I didn't break for Isabel.

Curfew was 8 PM sharp, and you had to call in by 4 PM if you were spending the night somewhere else, no exceptions. I signed her in like three or four times when I didn't have the slightest idea where she was (doing my best to copy her signature, even though Hell would've frozen over before anyone actually checked handwriting, because *what if this one time they did*).

Residents also weren't supposed to smoke in the building. Whenever I checked her room and found butts, I'd hide them inside something else and throw it in the trash. I reminded her over and over to sign up for her chores and finish them — but there were so many days when she was too out of it to get out of bed, forget mopping a floor with baby food and trampled kitchen scraps and other mysterious gunk all over it. So I'd do it on the sly while people were at group or grocery shopping, straining to hear what she had playing on the old jambox in her room as I worked. It was usually that one station, you know, the community-college one on AM, that plays classical and folk and a little lunchtime jazz and a little NPR. Sometimes I'd hear her laugh for no reason, and I'd think maybe the music was cheering her up, but a little later I'd find an excuse to walk past her room and find her still just lying there, one arm hanging off the bed.

If any of the other residents or staff knew how I was covering up for her, they never called me on it. Frankly, I doubt they noticed. I don't think it would even have occurred to them. After all, *I* was the hardass. *I* was the rules police. I was the one who could calmly and patiently explain to Case #2013-85 that we were kicking her and her two little kids out of the DV shelter early, because she wouldn't wash the dishes and we had a waiting list of families desperate to replace hers. I was the one who could still look in the mirror after three years of doing that. Even the coordinator pushed those kinds of duties onto me. So I really don't have a good excuse for making Isabel the exception to everything. I can't claim naiveté or burnout or principled objection. I don't think I was even in love, at first.

She *was* beautiful, though it was the kind of beauty that showed best in motion, when she laughed or smiled or got angry at someone (as she did, several times, always suddenly. They wrote her up for it, which is why I worried that she was already on thin ice). Her chin was triangular, her nose snub. Her hair was about chin-length, and fell in perfect shining chestnut waves, like a Breck Girl's in one of those old ads. But whenever she slept or went quiet, her face would sag into its lines and take on this pasty, sickly cast. It bothered the hell out of me when she looked like that. Clothes hung off of her carelessly — yes, they were donations, the best we could find for her, yet somehow I knew we could put a thousand dollars on her back and it'd be the same. All the things she wore and carried and lived among seemed provisional, not because they *were* castoffs but because she *treated* them that way, as incidentals that could come or go at any time, unworthy of her attachment. I liked that about her, but I didn't think anybody else would agree. Especially not a prospective employer.

She had no photo ID, no Social Security card, no birth certificate. A lot of women don't. They flee on impulse, just up and run without even packing a bag, or sometimes their abusers have hidden or destroyed their papers. I told her we could help her apply for replacements, which she'd need if she was going to get a job.

She just looked at me and said, "I've never had a job. Not a proper job." Thoughtfully almost, like, *what about this 'job' business now? Is that actually a thing?*

I'd heard this admission before, of course, but never in that tone of voice. Other clients said it with embarrassment, or resentment, or whatever. Because everybody knows you're supposed to have a job. In the populations we serve, being a mom doesn't exempt you. Some of them, when they come in, they're financially supporting the guy who's beating the snot out of them.

"Well, you have three more weeks here," I told her. "After that you can apply for an extension, but I'm warning you right now, especially as a single woman, they're only gonna grant it if you're actively looking for work. Let me help you do that."

"I'm not sure you should bother," she murmured. "I may not be worth it."

"Of course you're worth it." Why did it fluster me to say the same things to her that I said to everybody else? Why did it suddenly sound stupid? "Listen to me. No matter how bad things seem now, try to remember you've taken a huge step here. You have your freedom—"

"Freedom?" She gestured at the burglar-bar-covered window and barked a laugh. "Look around. This is a prison, Sonia. *You* decide what we eat, where we sleep, when we can come and go. It's like where I was before, only smaller and smellier."

"This is just a station stop in your life," I protested. "This is temporary. You've dared so much for the chance at a better future, Isabel. Now it's time to start planning that future."

She just shook her head. “And now you’re assuming that I have one.”

“Our confidentiality is the strictest in town. I don’t care who this asshole is, he can’t find you here.” There I was, defying my training again. *Never promise* was bullet point number one. *Never assume* was number two.

She looked down and traced a finger along the quilting lines of her bed’s coverlet, gracefully, like she was doing calligraphy.

“Or is there something else?” I finally asked. “Are you sick?”

“You could call it that,” she said, with a shrug. “Close enough. At any rate, I doubt I have very long. This was my hometown. That’s the only reason I came here.”

“You came back — to die?”

“I wanted to see the botanical gardens again.” The ghost of a smile haunted her lips for a moment and then vanished. “And the library. The old pier. A few other things. It’s not a long list.” She stretched. “I’m almost through it, in fact, except for the gardens.”

“We could go there,” I said. Telling myself it was my duty to propose therapeutic activities, anything that might give her a reason to hang on a little longer. So many of the women have to fight off bouts of suicidality during their stay. “I can give you a ride. You could show me... what it is about the gardens that makes them special to you. I really don’t know a lot about gardening. My mother did some when I was small though.”

“The ivy twines, it climbs, it clings; it pleads for purchase, strains for light/its will to live, though innocent/will soften stone to dust, in time...”

“That’s pretty. What’s it from?”

“Oh, I don’t remember. But there’s an arbor on the north end... or was... that always made me think of it.” She glanced at me sideways. “Yes, you can take me, if you want. I find my social calendar pretty clear.”

I did. By week’s end, we were lovers.

• • •

Isabel did seem frailer with the passing days. When she read on the living room couch or pattered around in the kitchen fixing coffee, the afternoon sun leached all the color out of her, the same way it did the fading signs on the decades-old businesses along the nearby tollway. None of the other residents spoke to her much. She wasn’t part of the circle — she didn’t have kids, she didn’t go to group, she didn’t tell her story, and those occasional flares of temper, brief as they were, had set her apart. Sometimes it almost felt like she’d died already and I’d missed it somehow, and I was just remembering visions of her.

The nights were a different matter. Then she was watchful as a cat; we all quickly learned not to approach her out of the corner of her eye after sundown. She never slept well. The couple of times I messed up and fell asleep after we had sex, I’d wake to find the whole bed trembling from the tension in her little body, low

moans escaping her, her hair slicked down with sweat. And she sleepwalked. The residents complained because she'd open her window at 2 or 3 am and start pulling on the bars, or even bashing her chair into them, all the while she was dead asleep. One time when I was on the night desk she walked right past me, fully dressed, eyes vacant, and went to open the front door. She undid the chain all right, but she couldn't seem to find the deadbolt, and a second later she was throwing herself bodily into it like a battering ram. No more concern for her own flesh and bone than you'd have for an old rag doll. *Thud. Thud.*

I ran and grabbed her, wrapping my arms around her and calling her name. She sobbed hysterically and tried to twist out of my grasp.

"No, he needs me," she was saying. "He's calling me. He's cold, so cold without me. I have to go."

I tried to shush her. "No, you don't have to go anywhere. You're done with him, remember? You've given him enough already. Come on, honey. Wake up. Look at me, Isabel. Please wake up."

"So cold..." She shuddered all over and then exploded into a silent tantrum — pushing, kicking and scratching at me. I think the only reason I was able to contain her at all was I felt almost as desperate as she did. I didn't know why this was happening, what this horrible thing was that could literally possess my Isabel. I mean who the fuck *was* this guy? How had he wormed himself so deep into her being that her own sleeping mind kept trying to betray her to him?

We were both shaky from adrenaline overload by the time she'd spent the last of her fury and collapsed onto my shoulder. I couldn't carry her back to her room, so I helped her over to the sofa, dabbed some alcohol on my scrapes and watched over her for the next few hours, till it got light and the morning shift came in. At least she was docile for them and went back to bed like a good girl. I wore long sleeves for the next week or so to hide the red streaks on my arms.

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I admit, I started checking the missing-persons reports after that. The online databases, Facebook, flyers people tacked up on bulletin boards and telephone poles. Just stuff that was publicly available, just on my own time. So it is true that I was snooping, or on the lookout anyway. And it's true that I was reading the newspapers again for the first time in forever (does *anyone* read newspapers anymore, I wonder? Anyone from this century, anyway).

But where I finally found her wasn't in the police blotter or the court reportage. It was — honest to God! — in the *Weekend Style* section, one morning when I thought I was going to relax over a latte and some snarky movie reviews. I opened it up and there she was, right in the middle of the second page.

I took it to her room after dinner that evening and tossed it down on the bed.

"Happy Birthday," I said.

She stared at me for a second and then said, carefully, "That's not till June."

“I know that’s what you put on your form,” I said. “But look at this.”

It was a short article, but the picture was big. Beautiful black-and-white portrait. She was sitting at a white wrought-iron table with a tea set on it, her head thrown back like she was about to laugh. She was wearing a light silk dress and sheer stockings. *Celebration of Local Poet’s Centenary at Portman House*, the headline read.

“Belinda Traverse. This is you.”

“She does look a great deal like me,” she allowed.

“Yeah, she does. Funny, isn’t it?” I paced away. I didn’t like the way she was looking at me, her gaze darkening, watching me like I was some wild creature that might pounce. But I had too much energy boiling up and no place to put it. “Guess what else is funny. She also wrote those poems you quoted from, the one about the ivy, and that other swan one you recited to me *from memory* at the reflecting pool in the gardens. Don’t act surprised. Google search sees fucking all.”

“She might have. But Sonia, listen to yourself—”

“*And she’s wearing your charm bracelet.*”

Her hand moved absentmindedly to cover the traitorous piece of jewelry, as though to protect it.

“You can’t treat me like a goddamn idiot, Isabel. Or Belinda, or whatever your name is. This is you, somehow, this is you. I know you. I know what a picture of you looks like. I know your smile... look, this is you. I don’t care if it’s possible or not.”

She smiled now, gazing down at the article.

“Well,” she said at last. “Forgive me, but I did always want to be a Gemini. None of my books sold, you know... I’m really quite surprised anybody remembers me fondly enough for a blurb. Surprised, and touched. Thank you for showing me this.”

I took her hand, kissed it, tried to warm it with my own skin. “*Please talk to me,*” I begged her. “Tell me what’s wrong. How this is possible? Look, you wanted one last love affair and maybe I’m not anybody’s number-one choice for that, but here I am. And you already know I’d do anything for you. Do you really want to die without talking to anybody?”

She touched my cheek, brushed back a wisp of my hair. Gathered me in her arms like a child. That was everything I wanted in the world, right there. I think I was crying, but I can’t say for sure either way. She was my whole awareness, her breath, her voice, the thin sliding fabric of the old robe she wore.

“I wanted to die... as myself,” she said quietly. “In my own right mind. Unfortunately, part of me will never be my own again. Now you see why I needed a prison, at night anyway.”

“No, I don’t see. Please tell me.”

“He’s a vampire, Sonia.” And you know, the next day I did question it all, over and over again, I told myself I was crazy, she was crazy, we were both on the

express train to Crazyville. But in that moment when she first said it, nothing but relief blossomed in me. Because it *fit*. It made sense. And she said it so very calmly.

“We fell in love, oh, it was almost eighty years ago now. He didn’t want to make me like him. He said it was the life in me that he treasured and needed, the way a freezing man yearns for a fire. So he baptized me in his blood. Gave me a living immortality — of a sort — and took away part of my soul in exchange. But now that I’ve left him, his gift is withering away. Time is playing catch-up with me, I’m afraid. Soon enough it’ll have caught me.”

“No,” I mumbled into her chest, putting my arms around her. “No, there has to be another way.”

She just sighed. “He warned me, at the time, that the gift was also a curse. I was young, Sonia, and afraid, so afraid of my own mortality. I thought more time was what I needed. But I was wrong. What have I done with all that time?”

“No, Isabel.” I had to sit up at that. “That’s what that bastard *took* from you, the life that time should have given you. There must be a way to get it back. If it’s... some kind of supernatural fucking curse? Curses can be broken.”

“Sonia.” She stroked my hair again. She was looking at me very differently now; it was like she was really *seeing* me for the first time, like the veil that always hung just behind her eyes had finally parted, and I was actually *with* her. Not reaching for her, but touching her. Not trying to figure her out, but understanding her. You have to realize how powerful that feeling was for me, to grasp why it was that just then the very last thing I’d have consented to do was stand idly by and let death take her without a fight.

“Do you mean it when you say you’d do *anything* for me?” she asked.

• • •

The plan was simple, though the execution surely wouldn’t be. It all hinged on the fact that she’d done this before — five times before, as she ruefully explained: run away, only to come crawling back a couple months later as she felt the chill begin to steal through her bones. During the day, *he* himself would be helpless and senseless (*he* had a name, of course, or an alias anyway, perfectly pronounceable. It was Stephen Pruett. But neither of us said it very much... some kinda speak-of-the-devil thing). He did keep one valet, actually a highly trained ex-military bodyguard, who’d also partaken of the vampire “gift” and was strong as a bear because of it. However, that valet had long since gotten used to seeing Isabel back on their doorstep all bedraggled and contrite. He wouldn’t question it when she turned up again. He’d let her in, and tut-tut over her a while, and she’d find a chance to put him out of action and then let me in to finish the job. We got hold of some temazepam for her to slip into the valet’s ever-present Scotch glass. Yes, two chicks were going to roofie a big burly man, and it wasn’t even a porn flick. Too bad for him.

Like I said, simple. In fact she could have done it all by herself — if not for the damned curse in her blood that made a sobbing wreck of her anytime she tried to pick up a stake or a lighter. So only I could deliver the killing blow. I was ready

to do it, too. More than ready. All the abusers I'd dealt with, all the bruises and cuts and less-visible wounds they'd left on their kids and the women they claimed to love. And what did we do about it? Hide the survivors away. Put them behind bars. If they were lucky, smuggle them out to a "new life" where they'd still never get to stop looking over their shoulders. The victims ended up serving the sentence while the criminals wandered around free. I am done living in that ass-backwards world — done forever, now.

• • •

We left in the middle of the night and it was a five-hour drive to Santa Fe, so the sky was still grey and the light bleary when we pulled up near the house. Decent neighborhood, seemingly on the upswing of a regentrification curve. Mostly Queen Annes and other brickwork houses with an occasional newer place done in adobe. *His* was a Queen Anne, absolutely impossible to tell apart from its sisters, two stories tall. The hedges were even trimmed.

"So where is he?" I asked, peering at it. "The basement?"

"Not even they like to sleep in a musty basement for decades and decades," she said dryly. "No, he's up in the master bedroom, there on the upper-left-hand corner." I gave her a questioning look, and she smiled. "It's a false window...he had an inner wall put in behind it, years ago."

"Damn. Otherwise I guess we could just break the window and let the sun in."

"Exactly." She glanced around the street. There were some cars pulling out of garages, starting their morning commute, but no people out and about. "You should probably park down at the end of the block, or even further. I'll get out and walk from there. And stay *totally* out of sight from the house while you're waiting. Randolph can spot things from quite a way away."

"I will, I will," I grumbled. I still wanted to get the lay of the land, as if that would really help.

"I mean it. Don't worry. I will call you when it's time to come, believe me. I'll see you soon." She kissed me softly, twice, and then she was going. I watched her huddling into her thin coat. Her gait was growing a bit uneven lately, as though her hip pained her. At least the guy would have to be really paranoid to take her for any kind of a threat.

I didn't dare go too far away but I didn't want to look like a suspicious character, so I ended up at a playground a few blocks away, pretending to read the book I'd had sitting on the SUV's back seat (a history of Our Lady of Guadalupe sightings), and getting up to walk around every so often so I didn't get too stiff in the cool air. Like I was waiting for someone, which of course I was.

About an hour in, the shelter called. I let that go to voicemail, but just seeing it on there made my stomach churn. It was another hour before I heard from Isabel.

"Come along up," she said. "It's fine." She *sounded* fine, calm. And she wasn't saying the distress codewords we'd agreed on.

But a half-choked “Okay. Coming,” was still the best I could manage. It was all I could do not to run the whole way there. Walking seemed glacial. Tectonic.

“Poor thing, your nose is red,” she said when she opened the door. She really did say that. I almost expected her to offer me hot tea. She bundled me through a shallow foyer, and into a living room where a flat-screen TV was going but no one was watching it. There were polished wooden stairs going up.

“What about the guy...” I had to know.

She gave me almost an annoyed look at that, but she put a finger over her lips and led me toward the back of the house, through a dim dining room into a doorway opening on a sunny kitchen. I could see a man there, sitting at a round dinette table, a near-empty glass in front of him. His back was turned to us, his head leaning backwards, one arm hanging at his side. He didn’t stir at our approach. But the sight of the straps across his back — straps for a shoulder holster — chilled me.

“See? He won’t be bothering us,” she whispered, putting a comforting arm on my shoulder as we walked back up front, back to the foot of the stairs.

“Is that the way?” I asked — staring up toward the stained-glass window over the landing, which scattered its colored lights over us like a blessing.

“That’s the way.”

It was the way. All my earlier anger had deserted me. Now nothing was left but an act of sheer cussed will to walk up those steps. To ignore the tiny squeaking sounds my shoes made, the rustling of my backpack’s contents, the hammering of my heart. To move toward death, instead of away from it.

• • •

I don’t know what I was expecting it to look like, the inmost lair of the vampire. I guess the thing that really appalled me was how ordinary most of it was. There was a light switch on the wall just inside the bedroom door, which Isabel’s slim fingers easily found and flipped. (Of course she knew where the light switch was. This had been her home for how many years?) I saw a lacquered-wood dresser with Chinese pulls. A mirror, reflecting our own grim faces back at us — *we* were the ones who looked weird and out of place, honestly. Clothes folded over an upholstered chair. An open closet door. A king bed in that same lacquered wood, covers tousled. At first, even the lumps in the bed looked okay, splayed side by side, the way probably any couple looks before they wake up in the morning.

Isabel’s breath caught when she saw two figures there, and we both froze for a second. But nothing happened, and after a moment, I gave her a silent nod and we crept closer, around the side of the bed.

He was a handsome man, I had to admit. Dark hair, slightly long, a high-bridged nose, and a shadow of stubble covering his cheeks. His skin was only a bit pale, and his lips were rose-pink, although he did have a bit of dark discoloration under his long-lashed eyes. I wouldn’t have even believed what he really was — except that usually, if you hold still and watch closely, you’ll see the bedcovers rise

and fall a little bit even on a deeply sleeping person. I *did* watch closely, just in case. This was where I'd finally find out if we were both insane, after all. Nothing. No hint of motion anywhere. I held a hand right under his nose. No wisp of breath.

There wasn't any from his companion, either. I glanced up at Isabel questioningly. Another vampire?

Her mouth drew into a tight line. She reached out and turned the woman's face away from where it had been buried in the crook of his collarbone.

We both immediately saw the wounds in her neck. You know how in the movies, it's always these two neat little round holes? Yeah, this wasn't that. This was a ragged, broken circle with coagulated blood welled up inside the ridges of scraped flesh, and a deep pinprick bruise in the middle. At 10 o'clock and 2 o'clock I could see wider indentations, from which little goutts of blood had streamed down — that and the really dark suction mark were the main things setting it apart from the human bite marks I'd seen before at the shelter. Other than that, it was all too familiar.

So I didn't get my real shock until I looked at the woman's face. Injuries, I'd seen lots of. Livor mortis was something new. The side of her head that had been lying against him had darkened to purple, except for the high part of the cheekbone, while the other side was jaundiced and blanched. When you saw that, you knew there was just no way. Her eyes had fallen open too, enough for me to see that they'd rolled up and clouded over.

And her chin was triangular, her hair shortish, dark brown and wavy. She could've been a sister to my Isabel.

Isabel saw this too. I know she did, because she stood there with her eyes wet and her hands steepled in front of her mouth.

"Oh, Stephen," she said.

Oh, Stephen? I looked up at her sharply and put a finger over my mouth.

She shook her head. "He can't hear us. You can talk — just don't shout."

"And I guess *she* can't hear us either."

"No..."

There was a bloodstain on the sheets under her, but it wasn't very big. It suddenly hit me, *that* was why he looked more normal than she did — there was hardly anything for her to bleed out, because it'd all gone inside *him*. That was why his lips were nice and pink.

"Is she gonna turn?"

Isabel shook her head again. "No. No, don't worry. It takes more than that."

"She deserves a burial," I said. "After I take care of him."

She took on a strained, sort of strangled look at that. "Turn around and walk out," I told her. "I'll call you in a minute. Turn around, Isabel. Now walk out. And shut the door behind you. Shut it."

Her movements were heavy as lead, every step looked like a struggle, but she obeyed.

I had a stake. Actually, I had *several* stakes with fire-hardened points, just in case. You don't want to get there and end up breaking your one and only stake, right? And I'd brought one of those not-fucking-around drill hammers with a five-pound metal head. I pulled down the covers to find he was already bare-chested. He was skinny, too, but I still had to feel of him to find his sternum and ribs, locate the best intercostal gap to plant the point in. (Thank you, Internet, for that page on placing EKG leads, because your technical data on vampire-slaying is on the sketchy side.)

The few times I've told this story, people always ask if I was afraid he'd wake up in the middle of all that prodding. Apparently that does happen with some of them, so *now* I worry about it, but that night, my honest answer has to be no. Because except for his almost-healthy color, he was so hard to take for anything but a corpse. I mean he was literally deathly still, inert, cold to the touch. I even listened briefly for a heartbeat, but I got exactly what I'd been told to expect — nothing. He was a dead thing. No question. So it wasn't until I actually got that stake positioned and started hefting the hammer for a swing that the shakes started up. I wasn't turning squeamish. All I had to do was think of what this man had done to my lover, or better yet, what he'd done to this poor bleeding piece of flesh right here — sucking the life out of her, then cradling her corpse to his chest to warm his death-sleep with her last traces of body heat, probably calling her Belinda the whole time. But I knew I had to get this done fast or not at all, and I didn't know if I had the physical strength.

Strike once, with every ounce of rage you have, and *immediately* again just as hard, just in case. One-two. That's still the way I get through it. A raw, animal sound came out of my throat as the hammer fell and I felt the shock of it in my other hand through the glove. The point collapsed into his chest, carrying me down a little with it. I think I saw him flail out of the corner of my eye and he might have made a sound of his own, but I can't swear to it because I was so focused on that one spot, and I didn't want to look at him until that wood was sunk *deep* in him and he couldn't hurt me anymore; and so I drove a third blow home, and a fourth, and by then it was about halfway in, and there was no blood and no screaming and none of the things that *should* have come along with such terrible violence, and it started to feel like a bad dream, and I cried out and dropped the hammer, still shaking.

The door opened and Isabel ran to my side. *Now* I was hyperventilating, and she was shushing me, throwing her arms around my shoulders.

“Shh, shh, Sonia. It's all right. It's all right. You did it.”

We sat together on the bed like that for a minute, and then she finally worked up the courage to look at him. His mouth was open and foamed up with spit, the yellowed tips of long canines just peeking out. His eyes had flown open too. She gently shut them all again and wiped his lips off with the edge of the bedsheet. Now I could see a *little* blood, so dark it almost looked black, gathered around the wound. But it was still nothing like it should have been.

“Isn’t he... supposed to turn to ash, or burn up, or something?” I asked. I was already unhappy enough having *one* body to dispose of somehow, and I was afraid she was going to start saying goodbye to him, or kissing him or something.

“No,” she said.

“Well... how do we know he’s dead then? Dead dead.”

“Sorry, darling,” she murmured. I don’t know which of us she was talking to. She picked up one of the spare stakes from beside me, and took his hand with her other hand. Then she dug the point into the space between the bones on his inner arm and dragged it down a few inches. More blackish blood pooled up in the gash and she lowered her mouth to it with an exhalation of relief and pleasure, sucking it up.

At first I was too shocked to stop her; I just sat there saying “What are you doing, what are you doing, Isabel?” A moment later something snapped and I grabbed her, forcing her head away. She gave me a horrible glare and gritted her teeth, her gore-streaked lips drawn back.

“Isabel!” I shook her shoulders helplessly, took her face in my hands.

Slowly her grimace relaxed into a smile and the murder left her eyes. I thought she was coming out of it, like with the sleepwalking. “Sorry, darling,” she said again, laying her hand over mine. “I didn’t mean to shock you. But I feel better now, so much better. Oh, you should have some as well. You must be so tired.”

“Drink his *blood*? Are you crazy? God knows what that shit would do.”

“I know what it does. It’s the living immortality, Sonia,” she urged me. “We can share it, you and me, forever. It really doesn’t take very much. Just a few swallows at a time... sometimes he waited weeks to give it to me and I was fine.”

“What are you talking about? You’re saying we can just — keep him around, and keep drinking his dead blood and...” I looked at him with new eyes, her eyes; *realized* what he was to her now. “Except he isn’t actually dead, isn’t he.”

“No,” she agreed immediately. “No, he’s still undead. But he can’t hurt us like this, I promise. He can’t move a finger. He’ll probably be comatose in a few nights. All we have to do is keep him out of the sunlight. It’s like you said, darling, the life he stole from me, the time he stole... I can take it back. And I can bring you with me.”

I was so confused and she was so excited — for a minute it felt like I was actually considering this. The girl with the blood on her face was the one who was confident and in control, and the whole fucking world had turned over on its head. I can only imagine what this would’ve looked like to anybody just coming in. “Maybe we could, but Isabel, there’s only gonna so much blood in there, it’s not *really* forever. And then we’d both be sick like you’ve been.”

She shook her head vehemently. “That’s not true. We can get him more. We can give it to him without taking the stake out.”

“Get him more from *where*? You already killed that guy up front, didn’t you? Rudolph.”

“Randolph.”

“Whatever. You overdosed him, didn’t you? He’s dead. Your fellow victim, you killed him.” Reality, which had receded like the tide, began to wash back in. Nauseating reality.

“By now, possibly.” She visibly cooled. “Darling, you have no idea how he treated me. The beast he could be during the day when Stephen was asleep, because he knew how trapped I was, how little choice I had.”

“I don’t *care*,” I yelled back. “No. No, I mean, I do care, but — it’s not the point right now. This wasn’t what it was supposed to be, Isabel. I’m not going to share you with *that*, that evil corpse. Or share him with you!”

“And how did you think it was going to be, dear?” Something about the lines her face fell into, something in the color of her voice suddenly reminded me that this woman was old enough to be my great-grandmother. “You thought you would slay the monster, we would embrace over his dust, and then in a few weeks you’d hold my hand in sweet farewell as I turned to dust too?”

“I don’t know.” My eyelids prickled with tears and my nose ran. “I don’t know what was supposed to happen, I just wanted to free you.”

“I see. And who exactly decides how and when I’m free?”

“You’re still under his curse,” I protested. “You’ll still belong to him, that piece of your soul. That’s not what you said you wanted.” My work clearly wasn’t done. I took hold of the vampire’s arm, dragged him up to half-sitting, and started trying to work him partway over my shoulder to carry him without knocking the stake out. She fought me, tearing at my clothes, pulling at him. I managed to stagger up to my feet somehow, but she tripped me and we all tumbled to the ground.

I was checking on the stake in a half-panic when I felt the hardness of metal against my ribs. *How’d she get my gun?!* was my first thought — if you call any of this thinking. Because of course I’d brought my gun from home in my inner jacket pocket (just in case!), and she had to know I had it. I hadn’t exactly brought it up, but I hadn’t troubled myself to hide it either.

“Let him go, Sonia.” She lay beside me, her voice hoarse, her breath fast and shallow. “I did mean what I said... I’ll take you with me, *if* you’ll drink from him. But I won’t let you kill us. Take your hands off him and put them up.”

“Isabel. Please, honey.” I stealthily felt inside my jacket. Nope, my gun was still there. She must’ve taken Randolph’s, stuck it in her back pocket where I wouldn’t see or something.

“It’ll be all right. I promise,” she whispered, as I slid my gun around free of my jacket. “Hey. This was for *us*, wasn’t it? So we could stay together? You did say you’d do anything.”

“Yes,” I said. “Yes, I did.”

I have no idea if she tried to shoot at the same time I did. She *should* have been able to fire it easily if she wanted; it was the kind that doesn’t have a safety switch

or grip or anything like that. Neither of us were what you'd call experts. But it doesn't take an expert.

I got her in the throat. I did try to stop the bleeding right away, tried to lean her over to keep her throat clear, but it was just too fast. She drowned in open air right in front of me, gagging and coughing out sprays of red. I said I was sorry. Over and over. *Sorry* doesn't take back a bullet, and she might not have even heard me. It was just noise coming out of my mouth.

The only noise in the room, soon enough.

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Isabel and the other girl fit okay into the back of the SUV. I laid them down on the shower curtains from both bathrooms, and covered them over with blankets and some random bags of hardware stuff from the garage, not that I planned to get pulled over. The valet I left where he was sitting, still motionless — even if he wasn't actually dead, he'd never seen me or my car. With the vampire, though, I decided to see if it was true about the sunlight. It's not hard to drag someone downstairs when you don't care about giving him a concussion. I pulled him right through the kitchen to the wood-fenced backyard and out onto the patio. For about a half a minute it looked like he was just going to get the world's worst sunburn, reddening and blistering, popping and peeling as I watched — but then he caught, at his hairline and on the backs of his hands, and soon there was a pale flame licking all over his skin, and then his clothes started going up, and it just went crazy fast after that. I'm afraid it didn't smell quite like a barbecue, but I was on my way out in a hurry. I didn't bother to clean up the black spot or the little bits of cloth or the charred remnant of the stake; God only knew what forensics was going to think anyway, whenever they finally showed.

I didn't drive back home. Instead I headed west, keeping the windows open and the wind rushing in my ears *almost* loud enough to drown out thought. Around five in the afternoon my adrenaline finally crashed — hard — and I had to stop at a motel to nap. When I woke up three hours and four nightmares later, I found the nearest hardware store, just as they were about to close, and bought myself a shovel and a couple of lanterns.

Yes, I still wanted to bury them semi-decently. Yes, I knew I'd be doing good to dig even a shallow grave, even working the whole night through. Yes, I was stupid and new at this. I did have the sense to find a good spot at least, a turnoff where the ground around it dropped off a little ways, and someone would pretty much have to park right there with their headlights beaming out over the edge to see what I was doing. Somehow I maneuvered the SUV down there without flipping it over and killing myself, and I opened up the back hatch and started unloading.

My work was halved: there was only one body back there. Isabel was gone.

No one would believe the stuff that went through my head for that next little while. I thought somehow the back had cracked open, somewhere along the drive, and she'd fallen out. I thought somebody had come along in the motel parking lot

while I was asleep, and broken into my car, and found two dead bodies, and stolen *one* of them. I actually considered retracing my entire route to find her, all the way back to the house in Santa Fe if need be, even if it was crawling with cops already.

But as I sat and wept dazedly, it did begin to creep up on me. What must have happened to my Isabel. Because once you eliminate the impossible, only the almost-impossible is left, isn't that what they say? And she died with that bastard's black blood in her mouth, in her belly. She got to take him with her after all.

I knew she was too smart to go back to Santa Fe, but that's where I started looking, because I knew there had to be others, others who'd heard of her or Pruett and could tell me where she might run. And even if they couldn't, I could at least send them to the Hell they belong in. I'm covering Northern California now; I got a good lead off of this fucker I turned up in Flagstaff that Pruett had vampire "family" up here.

I'll find you, Isabel honey. Don't count on outlasting me. If I start to get too old, and I have to start drinking their clotted insides out before I kill them, I'll do that with a smile on my face.

Because I meant what I said, too. I'll do anything for you. I'll set you free.





Feeding Habits

By Alan Alexander

Feeding is always tough. It's even tougher if you're a young, poor, low-bred vampire like Randy MacNeil. Mind you, watching who you drink was much easier if you're one of the elites – the older vamps who've had centuries to either accumulate enough wealth sufficient to just buy blood outright or to develop the supernatural powers that cause mortals to beg for you to take their blood. Randy was *not* one of the elites. The elites referred to vampires like him as “caitiff,” which Randy had needed to look up in a dictionary to learn it was basically a medieval term for white trash. And when you're a caitiff like Randy who barely scrapes by, only twenty years dead and with neither money nor prospects nor anything but the most basic supernatural abilities, you have to exercise a little self-control.

The Tequilaville Bar was dark and pathetic, just the way Randy liked it. As he pretended to drink his beer, he studied his fellow patrons to see who would be the best choice for his next vessel. It was around 3:30 on a Saturday morning. For Randy, Friday night was his Cheat Night. For the rest of the week, he fed exclusively on animal blood, mostly provided by a Halal butcher shop on Jefferson Street owned by a very nice Lebanese man with whom Randy had a... relationship. But Cheat Night was the one night of the week when Randy made a point of feeding from a human being.

Animal blood was gruel in a world filled with over seven billion T-bone steaks. Randy had tried to quit human blood cold turkey seventeen years earlier after what he described as “a moment of clarity,” but after a month of nothing but animal blood, he started to develop cravings for the good stuff, cravings that tore at his resolve almost as much going without blood altogether.

Finally, after a few near slip-ups, Randy came across a book on the psychology of dieting and hit upon his current strategy — feed from one mortal a week, always on the same night. And that, surprisingly, ended up working pretty well. One mortal feeding per week took the edge off of Randy's hunger, allowing him to make it the rest of the week on animal blood. As a result, Randy was a week away from

celebrating his seventeenth year without having taken a human life. Like AA for vampires. One night at a time.

Oh, there had been some close calls along the way, but no actual fatalities, which was something that was very important to Randy for reasons that most of his peers would find either sentimental or just plain dumb. But then, that was why they were Monsters and Randy was still a Man (and in Randy's head, those words were always capitalized). He'd made a promise seventeen years before and he worked hard to keep it, thinking perhaps that if he did so for long enough, he might actually find some measure of redemption in a world that seemed to offer none.

Unfortunately, the pickings in Tequilaville were pretty slim tonight. He'd meant to be here by midnight, but a few of those same elites had thought it would be fun to fuck with the caitiff by asking him to do some dog-and-pony nonsense, basically just to prove that they had the political status (under the Code of Vampire Bullshit, or whatever obscure rulebook the elites followed) to waste his time on trivial errands. Anyway, that took up most of the night, and it was after three when he arrived. He'd debated giving up, scoring a few pints of goat's blood off of his butcher pal, and doing Cheat Night some other time, but his seventeenth anniversary was just a week away and principle was at stake.

After a quick study of the room, the most likely targets seemed to be the three good ol' boys over by the pool table. They'd gone through at least one pitcher since Randy had arrived, and he thought they were all tipsy enough for him to use his vampire mind whammy. Presumably, the elites had a more elegant name for it, but Randy neither knew nor cared what it was. He only needed a few seconds of eye contact and a single word with each redneck to knock them out. Then, he could take enough from each without any of them even noticing the blood loss.

Still, Randy was reluctant. He knew it was silly to be so finicky, but he just didn't like the idea of feeding on guys. He'd had been completely hetero in life (and a pretty vanilla one at that), and while sexuality was pretty much a meaningless concept to the undead, feeding still had a potent effect on mortals. Many of them found it, for lack of a better word, orgasmic. Consequently, the thought of big burly truck drivers moaning in sexual ecstasy while he was lapping blood off their necks made Randy... uncomfortable. He would certainly feed on males if he had to, but he wouldn't enjoy it as much, and having one night of enjoyment was pretty much the point of the whole Cheat Night concept.

Aside from the three guys at the pool table, Tequilaville seemed empty, but Randy eventually noticed one young woman sitting alone in a corner booth he'd missed on his first pass. She looked to be about twenty-five or so, with bleach-blond hair and dark roots, more mascara than seemed wise, and weathered coat trimmed with fake fur. She wiped some of the mascara away with a tissue, and Randy realized she'd been crying. The predator side of his mind immediately perked up and said "Bingo!" The still-trying-to-be-human side chided the predator side for being a manipulative asshole but also acknowledged that a lonely, crying female presented a pretty viable target for a quick score.

Randy rose and ambled over to her, and as he did, he willed himself to be more alluring and attractive, enough to catching a lonely woman's eye. Like the mind whammy, it was another trick of the blood he'd picked up. He didn't know the fancy elite name for this power either, so he'd taken to calling it Sexy Face, not that he'd ever had any vampire compatriots with whom he could share his little joke. At the edge of the woman's field of view, he coughed gently and said, "Pardon me, ma'am. I saw you sitting alone. Would it be okay if I joined you?"

The woman looked up, and her eyes widened at the sight of the ruggedly handsome yet still sensitive and approachable and probably incredible-in-bed figure who stood before her. She stammered a bit and wiped some wet mascara from her eyes. "Um, yes, that would be okay." She spoke with an accent, something Eastern European, Randy guessed. He eased into the booth.

"My name's Randy," he said, emphasizing his Texas drawl. His accent was indistinguishable from that of any other native Texan, but when he had Sexy Face turned on, no woman could resist it.

"Danya," she replied shyly.

"You, ah, ain't from around here I take it?"

"No. I was born in Croatia. I moved to America five years ago. Philadelphia, at first. I only moved to Galveston a few months ago."

"Like it so far?" He smiled, winningly but falsely. He thought he already knew the answer to that question.

She laughed. "Not much. I..." She hesitated. She was a shy thing, almost unwilling to make eye contact, which Randy attributed to the effectiveness of his powers. Unfortunately, Sexy Face was a power that Randy couldn't exactly fine tune, and it sometimes could make a mortal so shy she was embarrassed to look him in the eye. When that happened, it could be problematic. He could make himself attractive to anyone who so much as glanced, but *control* took eye contact. After a few seconds of hesitation, she continued. "I came here with... a man. I thought we had ... something. Earlier tonight, I learned different."

Randy shook his head, the model of a sensitive shoulder to cry on. "His loss."

"Yeah," she sniffled. "I keep telling myself that."

They talked for a while. Randy always liked to feel some connection to his feeding partners (he refused to refer to them as "prey" even though that was obviously what they were), and he also liked to feel that he was giving them something back, in this case, by providing some encouragement to a sad and lonely girl. She was new in town, didn't know anyone, probably had a minimum wage job, and her lover had abandoned her. Such a tale would have been a tragedy in New York or Los Angeles, but to be abandoned by a lover in Galveston? That was just... pitiful.

For his part, Randy revealed little. He'd played this game for twenty years, long enough to avoid giving away any real details about himself. After a while, it seemed the martinis had caught up with her, and Randy gallantly offered to walk her to her car. She rose, unsteadily, and Randy took her arm and led her toward the

door, pausing long enough to drop some cash on the bar for both their drinks. As they passed out the door, Randy didn't notice as one of the three rednecks at the pool table pulled out his phone and texted a quick message.

Outside, Randy and Danya walked down the street together, with the vampire lightly supporting the woman as she occasionally stumbled. A few blocks away from Tequilaville, she pointed to an alley that she said was a shortcut to her car. Smiling, Randy followed her lead. About halfway down the alley, she suddenly turned back to face Randy and kissed his lips.

"What was that for?" he asked in surprise.

She smiled and bit one of her fingertips seductively. "Impulse. Am I being too... forward?"

"Nope. Ain't nothing wrong with knowing what you want and going for it."

She walked around him, trailing her fingertips across his chest. Then, she stepped back until she was leaning up against the alley wall. "I know what I want. I want rough sex with a handsome stranger in an alley. What do you want?"

To be honest, he wanted blood, but he wasn't averse to taking it as sensuously as possible. He moved up in front of her, idly noting that this was his first feeding in a very, very long time that felt like something other than a mugging. He appreciated the difference and resolved to give Danya as good a time as was possible for a dead lover. She grasped his head with her hands, running her fingers through his hair as they kissed. Twice, he tried to move away from her lips, to nuzzle her neck. Each time, she pulled his head back up to kiss him even more forcefully. But kisses weren't part of his diet, and each time she pulled his head away from the blood pumping through her veins, it made his fangs ache inside his gums. "Vampire blue balls," he thought in frustration.

Finally, after the third time she unwittingly denied him, his hunger won out over his passion. He caught her eye and said "*Relax*" in an unnaturally deep voice and her body went slack. Yet even as he went in for the bite, he felt her body resist despite the mental command. He thought it must be some residual emotional trauma, something to do with her now ex-boyfriend. The first clue that he was wrong came in the form of a sharp pain in his side. Gasping in pain, he looked down and was somewhat amazed to see some goddamn metal thing sticking out from his side just below his rib cage.

"Well," Randy thought in pained confusion, "that's new."

Randy let go of Danya, who slid down the alley wall onto her ass, and turned to face the direction of the bolt's path. He instantly saw his attacker further down at the edge of the alley. It was some guy he'd never seen before, crouched behind a dumpster and nervously but efficiently reloading a crossbow. The attack had been more annoying than damaging. The bolt was metal which told Randy that the attacker probably didn't know much about vampires. Metal ones just stung. More confused than angry, Randy reached for the bolt and tried to pull it out, but the shaft snapped off in his hand, and he hissed in pain. The bolt's tip had some kind of barbed design that made it hard to remove without tearing up his insides.

Randy's mind reeled at the situation. He'd heard tales of vampire hunters. Hell, he'd seen enough movies to know what it meant when some asshole pulled a wooden stake instead of a gun, even though it had never happened to him in his whole unlife. Randy turned to Danya, still trying to decide whether to take her with him or make a run for it, when she answered the question for him. Still sitting on the ground, Danya now had a silver medallion of some kind in her left hand while she gestured with the right. With a sinking feeling, Randy realized that she was staring doggedly at his feet to avoid eye contact and the hypnotic powers that he could exercise through it.

In a loud voice, she cried out some Slavic-sounding word. Instantly, an invisible force snatched Randy bodily off the ground and slammed him against the wall behind him with enough force to crack the brickwork. Randy dropped to the ground and shook his head both in pain and amazement. "What the fuck is going on here!" he yelled in outrage. Randy had heard a few tall tales about things even weirder than vampire hunters, hell, even weirder than vampires. Werewolves, ghosts, aliens, and even mortals who could work real magic. He didn't know whether Danya was some kind of witch or a mutant, and he wasn't sure he wanted to find out.

While Randy struggled to his feet, Danya jumped up and ran down the alley toward Crossbow Guy, clearly not as drunk as she'd seemed. Randy briefly thought about running the other way as fast as he could. But his attackers were now running *away*, so maybe Danya wasn't as powerful as he feared, and he was pretty sure he could dodge a crossbow now that he knew it was on the menu. More importantly, he wanted answers about what the hell a nobody like him could have done to warrant what appeared to be an assassination attempt by these... people.

Randy followed to the end of the alley and saw the two hunters a half a block away. He quickly looked around to see if there were any witnesses. Another of Randy's little tricks let him move incredibly fast. It would cost him, but he could catch the two in an instant and bring them down without trouble (assuming Danya didn't have any new surprises up her sleeve).

Unfortunately, the elites *really* hated it when vampires used their more obvious powers in front of mortals, as most of elite society depended on the sheep not realizing how many wolves were among them. Randy didn't see anyone else on the street. Unfortunately, he didn't bother to look up to any of the rooftops, or he might have noticed the sniper hidden on the opposite roof who announced his presence by blowing away a big chunk of Randy's head.

That hurt a whole lot more than the crossbow bolt to the intestines. Instinctively, Randy flung himself behind a nearby parked car for cover, narrowly dodging a second shot. Suddenly, Randy's position was a lot more complicated. He now had a very obvious head wound which was only marginally impairing to a vampire but which would look ghastly to any mortal who saw it. That meant that his first thought — run someplace public so the crazy killers won't follow — was off the table until he could heal. He reached up for the car's side mirror and ripped it off with a grunt. First, he checked his reflection and, yes, it was as bad as he feared. He

leaned back and closed his eyes. In the distance, he could hear Danya and Crossbow Guy running off. Answers would have to wait for another day. Right now, his priority was surviving.

So he concentrated on the blood that rested stagnant in his veins. At his command, it flowed, warming the area around his scalp before quickly knitting his skull and scalp back together. Within a few seconds, his head wound was gone, though he was still a bloody mess. He thought about healing the hole in his side, but he didn't have time to fish out the barbed tip and anyway he was getting a bit low on blood. Who knew how much more he would have to spend to get out of this mess?

"Goddamit!" he thought furiously. "I haven't done shit to deserve this! The fucking Prince of this city feeds on nine-year-old boys! There's a group of vampire sorcerers who probably do human sacrifices and another that fucks corpses! And the goddamned Spanish Inquisition is after *me*?" He gritted his teeth and pushed his anger aside. "Survive now," he thought. "Find out the whys and wherefores later."

Carefully, he raised the side mirror in his hand up at an angle to see the opposing rooftop. After barely a second, the mirror shattered from a sniper's bullet, but it was enough for Randy to get a bead on his location. He edged to the front of the car, silently counted to three, and then bolted, willing his blood as he went to fuel a burst of incredible speed. Maybe not as incredible as most vampires with this particular gift, but it was enough to get across the street faster than the sniper could follow. As he sprinted, Randy could almost see the trail of two bullets fired in succession as he darted between them before making it into the alley adjacent to the sniper's hiding place.

He debated climbing up the nearest fire escape to hunt the hunter and then remembered that he was a weak vampire, low on blood, and, well, fundamentally a coward. Besides, even if he won, it would probably mean killing his attacker, and while the Monster inside him bayed for blood, the Man was still in charge, and the Man had a promise to keep. Seventeen years, no kills. Fucking Cheat Night.

Cursing under his breath, Randy used more of his dwindling blood supply to boost his speed again. Within seconds, he was several blocks away. Looking around, he saw no signs of pursuit, and if the hunters' dragnet was any bigger than a few blocks, he probably didn't stand a chance anyway. After taking a second to get his bearings, Randy stepped out into the street and hailed a taxi. He had a car near Tequilaville, but he certainly wasn't going back for it tonight. If he'd truly been targeted specifically, his pursuers might have tampered with it in some way.

As he slid into the back of the taxi, he leaned back and closed his eyes, trying to clear his head to figure out his next move. It was 4:18. Over two hours till sunrise, but the lethargy that came with daylight would overtake him before then. He needed a safe haven, but were any of his normal resting places safe?

The driver looked at Randy in the rearview mirror and gasped. While Randy's skull was now intact, his head was still covered in blood. "Jesus Christ! Are you okay?" asked the driver nervously. Randy caught the driver's eyes in the mirrors reflection. "*Drive.*" Without another thought, the driver flipped the meter and pulled

out into the street, Randy's blood stains now forgotten. The vampire closed his eyes to think. He couldn't risk the chance that his attackers already knew where he stayed. Better to do something unexpected.

Being as paranoid as the average vampire, he'd long ago prepared a concealed emergency haven in the basement of a warehouse near the harbor. The building itself had been condemned in the late 90's. Randy caught the driver's eyes in the mirror again and gave an address a few blocks away backed up with another mind whammy. The cabby nodded and changed course toward his new destination.

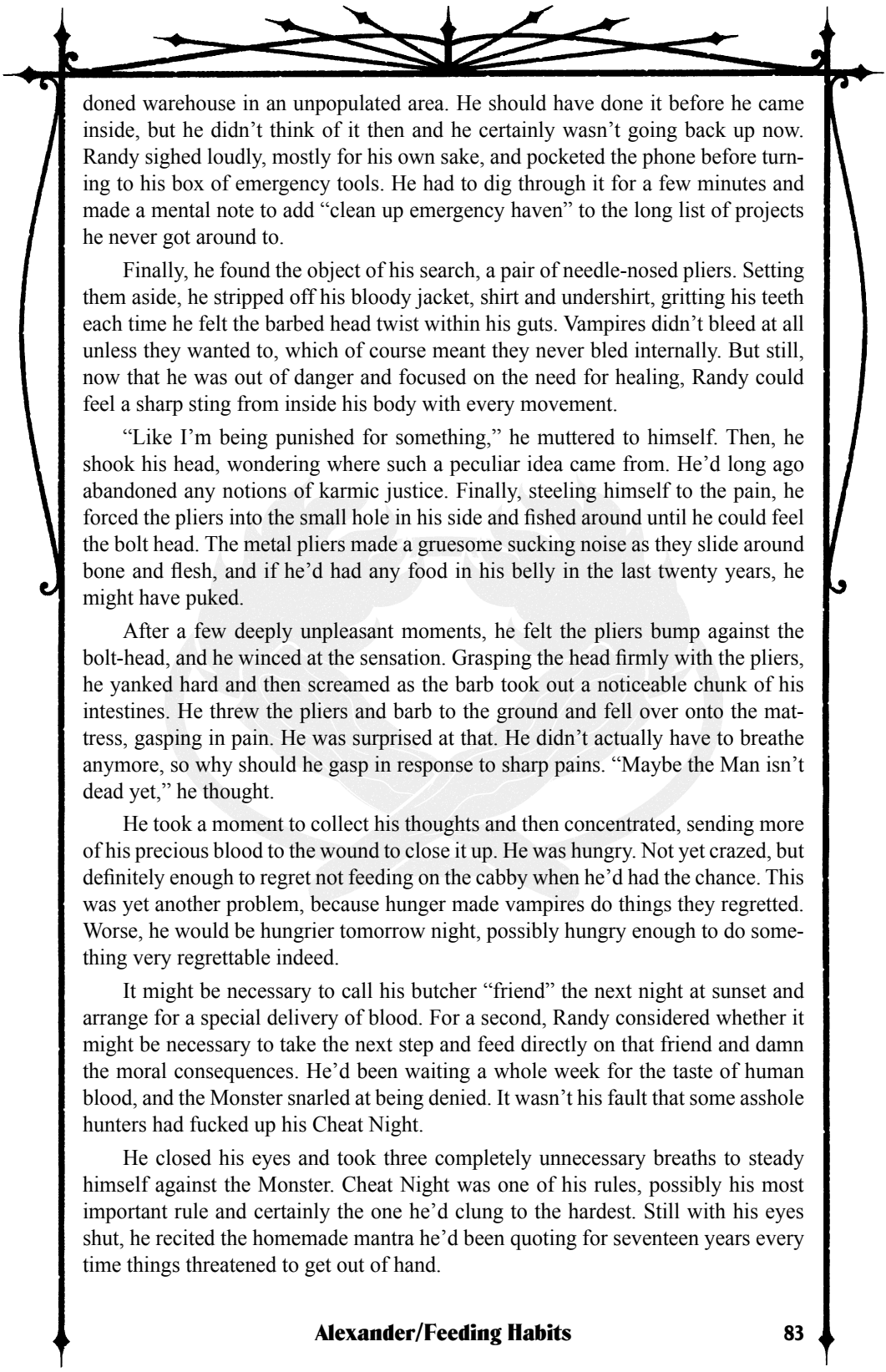
Periodically, Randy turned to look behind, but he saw no signs of pursuit. The warehouse was across town, and it took almost an hour for the cab to get there. Briefly, Randy considered feeding on the cabby, but he desperately wanted off the streets, and he was afraid that feeding so close to his secret haven might somehow defeat the purpose of coming here in the first place. His reserves of blood were now low enough (and his nerves were frayed enough) that there was a good chance he'd lose control and take too much. Even if he didn't kill the cabby outright, the way his luck was running, the guy would pass out from blood loss and crash his car right into the building where the emergency haven was hidden. Instead, Randy made eye contact with the cabby one last time and ordered him to forget all about his last fare.

Ten minutes later, Randy was inside the warehouse trying to shove aside a huge dumpster that was covering his spider-hole without making enough noise to wake up half of Galveston. It took a few minutes of effort, but he finally found what he was looking for: a metal trap door with a heavy padlock on the latch. He pulled the key from his pocket and opened the lock and the door below it, looking around nervously as he did. Paranoia gripped him, and every time he heard the slightest noise, he expected another bullet to strike him. Or worse, some weird attack from... whatever the hell Danya was. His senses, however, told him that he was alone in the building.

He quickly descended into his bunker, and lowered the door behind him, this time reattaching the padlock to a heavy chain that would hold the door from the inside. At the base of the short stairwell was the small, battery-powered lantern he'd left here. He clicked it on, and by its glow, he could see the fruits of his disaster planning: a padded mattress and sleeping bag in one corner, a backpack with two changes of clothes, fake ID and passport, a few bottles of water (for cleaning rather than drinking) and a small toolkit.

Randy relaxed for the first time since this whole hunter madness had started. Anxiety and fear were strange things for vampires to experience. Being dead, Randy had no heartbeat to pound in his chest, no breath to race, neither adrenaline nor endorphins to tell his body when to run or when to calm down. For vampires, fear was literally just a state of mind. He trudged over to the pallet and sat down, wincing as he did from the barbed bolt-head still stuck in his gut.

Pulling out his phone, the vampire tried to text a quick message to the few vampires he knew in Galveston (as opposed to vampires he knew but didn't give a shit about). No signal, of course. He was in a concrete bunker beneath an aban-



done warehouse in an unpopulated area. He should have done it before he came inside, but he didn't think of it then and he certainly wasn't going back up now. Randy sighed loudly, mostly for his own sake, and pocketed the phone before turning to his box of emergency tools. He had to dig through it for a few minutes and made a mental note to add "clean up emergency haven" to the long list of projects he never got around to.

Finally, he found the object of his search, a pair of needle-nosed pliers. Setting them aside, he stripped off his bloody jacket, shirt and undershirt, gritting his teeth each time he felt the barbed head twist within his guts. Vampires didn't bleed at all unless they wanted to, which of course meant they never bled internally. But still, now that he was out of danger and focused on the need for healing, Randy could feel a sharp sting from inside his body with every movement.

"Like I'm being punished for something," he muttered to himself. Then, he shook his head, wondering where such a peculiar idea came from. He'd long ago abandoned any notions of karmic justice. Finally, steeling himself to the pain, he forced the pliers into the small hole in his side and fished around until he could feel the bolt head. The metal pliers made a gruesome sucking noise as they slide around bone and flesh, and if he'd had any food in his belly in the last twenty years, he might have puked.

After a few deeply unpleasant moments, he felt the pliers bump against the bolt-head, and he winced at the sensation. Grasping the head firmly with the pliers, he yanked hard and then screamed as the barb took out a noticeable chunk of his intestines. He threw the pliers and barb to the ground and fell over onto the mattress, gasping in pain. He was surprised at that. He didn't actually have to breathe anymore, so why should he gasp in response to sharp pains. "Maybe the Man isn't dead yet," he thought.

He took a moment to collect his thoughts and then concentrated, sending more of his precious blood to the wound to close it up. He was hungry. Not yet crazed, but definitely enough to regret not feeding on the cabby when he'd had the chance. This was yet another problem, because hunger made vampires do things they regretted. Worse, he would be hungrier tomorrow night, possibly hungry enough to do something very regrettable indeed.

It might be necessary to call his butcher "friend" the next night at sunset and arrange for a special delivery of blood. For a second, Randy considered whether it might be necessary to take the next step and feed directly on that friend and damn the moral consequences. He'd been waiting a whole week for the taste of human blood, and the Monster snarled at being denied. It wasn't his fault that some asshole hunters had fucked up his Cheat Night.

He closed his eyes and took three completely unnecessary breaths to steady himself against the Monster. Cheat Night was one of his rules, possibly his most important rule and certainly the one he'd clung to the hardest. Still with his eyes shut, he recited the homemade mantra he'd been quoting for seventeen years every time things threatened to get out of hand.

“You gotta have rules if you’re gonna make it, Randy. You need rules if you want to even try to call yourself human. No rules, you became an animal, a Monster. No rules, you do things you regret.” As the words flowed from his lips, Randy focused on an image from his memory. A round face with green eyes streaked with tears. The face he’d made his promise to seventeen years ago.

Randy opened his own eyes again having found his center and perhaps a momentary bit of peace. Sitting up on the mattress, the vampire reached for a bottle of water, along with the mirror and rag from his tool box. Wetting the rag, he cleaned the dried blood off of his face and his side. After a few minutes, his reflection looked almost like that of a human being. Almost.

After returning the mirror and cloth to the tool chest, Randy lay back on the mattress as he reviewed the events that had led him here. There had been at least three hunters. Maybe more, but there was no reason to think that except paranoia. Unfortunately, Randy was feeling pretty paranoid at the moment, so he had to suppress the urge to imagine a torch-wielding mob ready to bash down his doors. The big question on his mind, however was “Why me?”

Since establishing his self-imposed feeding habits, Randy had been truly careful, amazingly so compared to some of his peers who often seemed to leave exsanguinated corpses around like cigarette butts. “Maybe that was it. Some other asshole got sloppy and caught the attention of some hunter group. Hell, maybe Prince Fucking Vampire of Galveston had finally gone after the wrong person’s nine-year-old boy. Now, they’re probably after everybody in town and are starting with the small fry first.”

Certainly, the trio was from out of town. Crossbows and sniper rifles may not be that unusual, especially in the South where hunting was a major pastime, but Randy was certain he’d have heard of.... Well, he still had no idea what Danya was, but he knew he’d have heard of anything like her in a city this small.

He thought some more and frowned. It didn’t add up. Danya had targeted him pretty specifically, going right to his favorite bar, setting herself up as the perfect bait, and leading him into an ambush. She’d even risked her own life to keep his attention on her instead of looking down the alley and perhaps noticing the archer. A more aggressive vampire might have drained her before Crossbow Guy could even get off a shot. The more he thought, the more certain Randy became that these hunters were after him specifically. But for what?

He pulled his hands up to rest behind his head, grimacing a bit as he stretched the muscles in his side. His wound was healed completely, but tearing damage always felt tender for a few hours after healing. He closed his eyes once more and spent the next hour or so mentally reviewing every Cheat Night he could recall to see if he might have exposed himself in some way. His clearest memories went back at least six months, but he couldn’t think of anything that would give him away. No clues there.

Then, his eyes shot open, and he sat up to look around the room. He did have one clue, which his attackers had thoughtfully left behind lodged in his lower in-

testines. Spotting a glint of silver in the floor, Randy snatched up the crossbow bolt head from where he'd tossed it. One of the "Kindred" in town had a special vampire gift that was above his understanding — she could handle objects and read their history with a touch.

Her name was Ariana St. Clair. Well, that was the name she went by. Privately, Randy thought that if her name was really Ariana St. Clair, he was the King of Brazil. But she did have the gifts to read the bolt head and maybe give him some answers. He'd take it to her tomorrow night, right after feeding. She'd want something in return, but that was another worry.

He took some time to study the devilish barb in his hand. It was an odd little thing, cylindrical, metallic and about four inches long, with a sharp tip and what looked like half-inch nails soldered into the side of the cylinder pointing away from the tip. The bottom had a small depression, and Randy guessed that the shaft had been designed to break off after the head had entered the target. Nasty. He turned it over to examine the tip when he heard a soft rattle from inside the barb. Was the thing actually hollow?

He thought carefully for a few seconds until he suddenly noticed his hands were shaking. Thoughts of Ariana and her pompous name fled his mind, replaced by a terrifying idea. He gently took the bolt head in both hands, careful to avoid the barbs. Then, he twisted in opposite directions until the bolt head snapped in two. A small metallic object dropped out and bounced on the floor. With trembling fingers, he picked it up and examined it. It was shiny and black, less than an inch long and half that wide, with what looked like a very tiny battery attached to the end.

Randy was not an educated man. But he wasn't stupid either. He'd seen things like this before, on television. It looked exactly like the GPS transmitter chips he'd seen in some late night commercials on *Animal Planet*. You could buy them at pet shops and insert them into the collar of your dog or cat.

So you could track them.

A wet bead slowly traced its way down his left temple. Without thinking, he wiped it off and then realized he was sweating blood. Randy dropped the transmitter like it was red hot and stomped it to bits. He felt a burning sensation in his lungs — the Monster was close to overtaking the Man, not out of hunger or anger, but out of mounting terror. He'd only frenzied out of fear a twice before, and he'd wondered if that the burning was the result of the mental impulse to hyperventilate running up against the fact that vampires didn't naturally breathe.

Randy looked around his safehouse wildly. Maybe the GPS wouldn't have a signal here in the bunker? Shit, they'd have had plenty of time to follow his signal while he was in the cab. He thought he'd been so clever finding a hidden basement to use as an emergency haven. Now he thought he was a stupid fool who was probably about to die. The haven's safety depended entirely on no one knowing where it was. If they'd tracked him, it meant he was now trapped in a room with only one way in or out and which was now barred only by a chain and a padlock. He had no weapons stored here. He checked his phone again. A few years back, he'd actually

found an app that kept up with sunrise times year round. He struggled to press the right buttons with his trembling hands, but he soon managed it.

Sunrise – 6:47

Current Time – 6:39

With a rush of panic, Randy pulled himself up and rushed to the trap door to listen. Closing his eyes to block out all other stimuli, Randy willed his hearing to become stronger. There! He could make out footsteps above. Four people at least, maybe more. Randy stepped back from the steps... and immediately fell to the ground as his legs gave way. Must be the phone's clock was a few minutes slow. To the East, the sun was tipping over the horizon, and as it did, a powerful urge to sleep blanketed Randy just as it every other vampire in Galveston and, as far as he knew, in every part of the world exposed to sunlight.

With a snarl of fear and desperation, Randy struggled back to his feet. Stress kicked his brain into high gear, and a plan started to come together. He had one chance. He didn't know any of the advanced forms of mind control, but he was really pretty good at the limited mind-whammy effect he'd mastered. If he could hit each hunter with a quick command as they came in, he might be able to get them fighting with each other. It was a long shot, but he saw no other options.

With a bang, the trapdoor jerked up until the chain grew taut, leaving a gap of only a few inches. Slowly, Randy backed away, waiting to see how the hunters would respond. His heart sank when he heard a soft whoosh from above and then saw the flame of a butane torch enter the gap to cut the chain. With difficulty, Randy suppressed the urge to whimper.

As he watched the torch slowly melt through the chain, Randy noticed that he could taste blood and realized that he'd been biting his own lip without realizing it. The Monster was very close to breaking free from the Man now, and Randy fought to stay in control. Suddenly, the chain snapped and the trap door flew open. He tensed, ready to cry out a hypnotic command against the first hunter to enter, but no one came. Instead, there was a soft "tink" as a small object fell down the opening and bounced off the steps towards Randy.

"Fuck," he said, with surprising calm.

Instinctively, Randy called upon his reserves of blood, adding hunger to fear and anger as possible triggers for a wild frenzy. In a blur of motion, he snatched up the mattress to use it as a shield. He felt the bang of the flash grenade as it pushed him back a few feet, but he didn't see it and, more importantly, wasn't writhing on the floor completely blind in response to it. As he realized what had happened, he actually felt relieved — he hadn't gotten a clear look at the grenade and had actually assumed it was explosive or even incendiary.

On the other side of his makeshift shield, Randy heard footsteps quickly descending the stairs, and with a grunt, he hurled the mattress in that direction. The impact knocked the first hunter (Crossbow Guy, he noticed) to the side, but a second figure was already following him down. The flash grenade had left the bunker hazy,

but it was obviously Danya. “Good,” he thought. “She’s the most dangerous, but I know my powers affect her.”

He darted forward to establish eye contact and intoned a command. “*Defend me.*” It had absolutely no effect. Then, the smoke cleared and he noticed the ear muffs she and Crossbow Guy wore. Big industrial strength ear muffs, the kind you wore if you worked at an airport and didn’t want to go deaf from the sounds of 747’s. Danya raised her hand toward him and spoke, her voice distorted by the ear muffs that kept her from hearing a damn thing he said. Another wave of force erupted from Danya, this time slamming Randy against the wall and holding him in restraint.

All other hope gone, Randy resorted to begging. “Wait! Please! I’m not like the rest of them! I’m not a killer!” He knew they couldn’t hear him, but perhaps they’d take pity if he looked pathetic enough. Before he could even finish, the guy with the crossbow rose to his feet and aimed towards Randy’s exposed chest. It was a point blank shot, and he could see that *this* bolt was not metal but wood. “Listen, goddammit! I don’t deserve....”

The words died in his throat as the bolt pierced his heart, paralyzing him. He was still fully aware, but frozen, as if in rigor mortis. Danya released her hold, and Randy tumbled to the ground. Silently, the two came forward, grabbed Randy by his feet, and dragged him to the middle of the room, as others descended the stairs and circled his prone body.

Though he was paralyzed, Randy’s mind was screaming in fury and terror. “Please, I don’t deserve this. I’m a vampire, but I don’t kill!” The circle of hunters parted to make room for one last member of their group, a young man in his early twenties who stared down at Randy with eyes full of cold hatred. Green eyes.

• • •

He was still young, newly dead and on the run. He hadn’t asked for the Embrace, hadn’t asked to be caitiff, hadn’t asked to be a monster. But he was hungry, and he had to feed. Forced out of Dallas under a Blood Hunt — they took illegal sirings seriously there — he’d been driving down a Texas back road when hunger led him to a trailer just off the highway. He’d only wanted a quick feed and maybe to steal some cash. But the husband had come after him with a .22 rifle, and the Monster took over. Like a wild animal, Randy jumped the man, snapping his neck and draining him dry almost instantly.

The wife had been next. In a moment borne of ignorant superstition, she’d actually tried to ward him off with a silver crucifix. Randy was coming down from his frenzy but the Monster was still in charge. He ripped the crucifix from her hand and threw it aside before tearing into the woman’s neck. Finally, after she was dry, the red haze cleared. Only then, could Randy hear a soft whimper coming from nearby. He turned and looked down into the face of a terrified, six-year-old boy staring up into the face of the monster who’d just eaten his parents.

His eyes were a deep green, and from then on, Randy would always think of green as the color of judgment. The Monster demanded that Randy take the child

too. "No witnesses!" it roared. *The Man won that night, and Randy fled the trailer as fast as he could, blood leaking from eyes that could no longer cry tears. Randy made a promise that night, and every time he came close to breaking that promise, he remembered those green eyes judging him.*

• • •

The same green eyes that judged him now. And just below those judging eyes, around the young man's neck, hung the silver crucifix that seventeen years before had been ripped from the hands of a terrified woman who only wanted to protect her child. "No way," he thought. "It can't be. You can't have been looking for me all this time."

One of the other hunters handed Green Eyes a machete, and the others stepped aside as he moved around toward Randy's head to look him square in the eye.

"You don't know me," he said, and Randy would have laughed hysterically if he'd been able, "but I remember you. I remember what you did to my mama and my daddy. I remember how you just looked at me, like I wasn't even worth killing, before you ran off. I remember how no one believed me. 'Psychological trauma,' everybody said. I made a promise to my family. I promised that I would find you and make you pay."

"I made a promise too," thought Randy. "I bet you'll never, ever guess what it was."

Green Eyes waved the machete toward his fellow hunters, all of whom looked down on Randy with undisguised loathing. "This is my new family. They took me in and taught me what things like you were. How you feed on decent people like cattle. How you ruled in the shadows and pretended you were better than everybody else when you were really just parasites. They even had the gifts that let us track you down after all these years."

"You..." his voice broke for a moment, and Randy could see the beginning of tears in the young man's eyes. "You're my first kill, but you won't be my last. I'm gonna kill every one of you bastards I can. And even if one of you kills *me*, I'm okay with that too. It'll be worth it, just for this one moment."

The hunter took the machete in both hands and raised it high for a decapitating strike. His tears flowed openly now, his face a mask of pain and hate. "Burn in Hell, you motherfucker!" he screamed.

"Yeah," thought Randy, "that's probably what will happen next." And in the last second of his unlife, Randy was surprised that he felt no fear, no anger, no hatred for his killer. Instead, he felt a curious sense of calm detachment and satisfaction, as the question that had driven him for seventeen years had finally been answered by the green-eyed killer who, coincidentally, had also been Randy's last victim.

There was no redemption to be had in this world for monsters like him. None at all. Nor was there any forgiveness nor any kind of penance. There was only sin.

And judgment.



Showbiz

By Matthew McFarland

When I found my wife dead, the thing that struck me was how *clean* everything was. I'd been hunting vampires for about three years at the time — well, about two years publically and then another year professionally. I'd never actually seen what my now-deceased coworker and cameraman would have called an “exsanguination site” before, but I'd figured on wall-to-wall blood, arterial spray, chairs and couches overturned. Maybe some bats.

But it was just... the living room. The dingy-ass white couch that we had angry sex on right before we separated. The little table and the two chairs that would creak like they were begging for mercy if someone on the wrong side of mesomorph sat on them. The bookshelves with all the highbrow books she bought and never read.

And her, sitting on the couch, head tilted back, two tiny holes in her neck, white as paper. When I touched her body, I felt her skin slide over muscle, and it made a noise like a snake slithering over a concrete sidewalk. Like a whisper. Not a drop of blood left to her.

I think I probably tried to cry, but I kept looking around for the camera. That's what this life does to you. Gets you looking over your shoulder, timing your emotions so that if you have to lose it, at least it'll make for good TV. This shit makes you paranoid, but it makes paranoia into a fetish. I can't cry unless someone's watching. I can't get scared unless there's a camera on me. If it's not on TV, it's not real. None of this is real.

It might be the TV. I guess it could also be the vampires.

• • •

“This is the biggest load of horseshit I have ever seen.” She said it with an endearing smile. Her hair was pulled back so tightly it made my scalp hurt to look at it. She was dressed like Uma Thurman in *Pulp Fiction*, but she didn't really have the face or the hips to pull it off. Not that I cared, because I had a feeling what she said next would get me laid for years.

“Yeah, we’re picking you up.” I think I fist-pumped in the air. I know she shook my hand really hard. I know I called Rex from the car and babbled at him all the way to his house. I almost threw my cell phone when I got out. It wasn’t that I was suddenly rich and famous, it was that, *holy shit, we got picked up.*

Rex and I sat up all night talking about the show. *Modern Van Helsing*s. It was brilliant. The vampire craze was experiencing one last spurt before it went dormant again. The reality TV show market wasn’t what it had been, but with webisodes and digital content, it was still solid. The “stupid dudes look for paranormal shit in dark places” genre was still doing fine, mostly because people liked to laugh at them, but enough people in enough crazy subcultures still bought it. Maybe Bigfoot was out there licking tree moss. Maybe ghosts really did make EMP meters go nuts. Maybe it wasn’t all bullshit.

I mean, I had a buddy who worked in the public schools who had a sixth-grader claim that she’d seen a show where a dude had been eaten by a giant lizard, and OMG it was totally true. It was a fictional show, of course, but shot in found footage. Where’s the line between reality and fiction, if our fiction is so real you can’t tell, and our “reality” TV is all staged and scripted?

*Modern Van Helsing*s. We knew we couldn’t decapitate people or have a lot of blood, because on what we were given as an effects budget it would look like shit anyway. But we also knew that there were still a *lot* of people who honest-to-God called themselves vampires. Did they really believe it? Or did their moms just not love them? Who gives a shit? If they were 18 or over and could hold a pen long enough to sign a release, fuck it, put them on the air.

We did a bunch of interviews with people in spooky-looking houses and basements (usually their own, because never underestimate the creep value of a 20-something who’s decided he’s a vampire), posing as a “documentary crew.” And then we followed them, using night-vision cameras and hand-helds and whatever other bullshit we could come up with, and show ourselves carrying crosses and silver and so on (but no guns, and no hammers and stakes — we devoted a whole episode to why those methods didn’t actually work and never once mentioned the words “aggravated stalking”).

We found two weird things during that first season. Well, we found a shitload of weird things, but two that really stood out. The first thing was the “psychic vampire.”

A lot of people who self-identify as vampires are blood fetishists. They like cutting their partners during sex and licking the blood, or being cut, or being poked with needles, or whatever. I’m not one to begrudge people their fetishes, and it gave people a thrill to talk about it. The ones that were really basket cases were the ones that had a lot of unresolved guilt, and by “confessing” to us — by pretending to be actual, honest-to-God vampires, they got a legit thrill. Like, “Yeah, I’m really a creature of the night and an evil monster, so it’s OK that I like cutting people.” The ones who just liked what they liked and were cool with that didn’t talk to us, but sane and stable people make for lousy TV anyway. But psychic vampires, man, they were in a whole other category.

The psychic vampire is a person that thinks she (usually, she) drains “energy” from her lovers. What’s “energy?” Fuck if I know, but everyone we talked to just nodded really gravely when they told us about it. Like, you couldn’t be around these people if you were sick or depressed or tired, because they’d suck away your “energy” without even meaning to and it could be dangerous. We interviewed one woman — she was the total package. Hair dyed black, perfect white skin with a whole bunch of intricate tattoos, silver jewelry. She was absolutely convinced she’d killed her own grandmother when she was 14. Sat in the hospital room after granny’s stroke and the next morning, granny was dead. The woman felt terrible about it at first, but then granny came to visit her in a dream and forgave her because she was just learning about her gift, blah blah blah. You could *smell* the daddy issues coming off this woman, but she was so proud of herself for learning to control her “hunger,” and only using it on people who gave her consent.

We interviewed a few of the people who acted as “energy donors” for psychic vampires, too. Mostly they were just in it for the sex, I think. They were subs, they liked being humiliated or playing these little games, and so that was fine. What we loved about the whole psychic vampire scene was that they took themselves so goddamned seriously. They really thought of themselves as vampires. They thought they were actually having an effect on their victims or donors or whatever, and that made them look crazy and dangerous. *That* got us viewers like, whoa.

The second thing we discovered, of course, was the vampires really, truly, honestly do exist.

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We went on a shoot in Cincinnati, toward the end of our first season. Cincy is a pretty big city, but unlike the other cities in Ohio, it’s red (probably due to proximity to Kentucky, but I’m not a sociologist). On the one hand, that means that it was a little hard to find people in subcultures who were willing to talk about it with a camera in their faces, but on the other hand, we got that “I’m breaking the rules by talking to you” vibe from *everybody*. We were interviewing a psychic vampire, or so we thought. He was tall, skinny, and really pretty. Olive skin; long, slightly curly hair; dressed in black and a gold ankh around his neck. He talked about how he had, at one point, been a “bio-vampire” (that is, one that drinks blood, but he said “bio-vampire” with such disdain that it became our preferred term for them as well). But then he’d learned how to drink breath, and finally simply to live on “energy.”

Rex had a minor in physics, and it drove him nuts when these people talked about energy. We got drunk with a psychic vampire in Anaheim, our second show, and the girl mentioned “drinking energy.” Rex said, “What, you mean *force times distance*?” She made an excuse and left right after. I smacked him around for cock-blocking me. When this guy talked about energy, Rex got the same exasperated look he always did, but the psy-vamp (here’s a fun party game: try to find a cool way to abbreviate “psychic vampire.” You can’t) caught his look. I was expecting him to flounce — he looked like a flouncer — but he very patiently explained what he meant.

“The human body generates energy.” He moved his hands when he spoke, and when we edited the shoot I had Rex cut back to the medium shots to show his hands. “It generates heat, sure. But on a smaller level, it’s chemical energy. Sodium rushes in, potassium rushes out, the charge changes, and once it hits the threshold, the neuron fires.” He folded his hands and sat forward. “A bio-vampire, like I used to be, drinks the blood and gets the energy that way. I don’t do that anymore, I just absorb the energy through touch. Same process, cleaner, more efficient.” He smiled, and I swear to God he had fangs for a second — well, I’ll come back to that. Anyway, he smiled, and said, “Bio-vampires are like big, gas-guzzling SUVs. I’m a hybrid.”

We cut there, because that was awesome and we wanted to prep him a little for the next shots. He made some suggestions about other people we could talk to in the area, offered to introduce us around. He said something about taking us to a meeting of vampires. We thought he meant a munch or a play party, because like I said, most of these people were into kink to some degree. We kind of hemmed and hawed; parties like that were often good for enticing viewers, but getting permission to film was a nightmare, and we figured that in Cincy it would be even worse. So I said to him, “I don’t know, man. If people are getting naked it’s harder for us to film.”

And he smiled, and said, “No, no nudity. Not that kind of party.” And when he smiled *that* time, no fangs.

Now, normally you’d think, “Well, duh, obviously I was imagining them the first time.” But see, it’s not that expensive to get fangs custom-made, and a lot of the people we interviewed had them. The cheap ones, you could see those a mile off, they fell out a lot, they screwed with people’s speech, and we usually told people to leave them out for interviews because they looked fake on camera. But the really goods were small enough that they were only noticeable if you paid attention. That’s what this guy — his name was Ahmed — had when he first smiled. Sharp, nimble-looking canines that just made him look somehow taller and hungrier. But then he smiled a second time, no fangs.

I figured it was just my imagination. We told him sure, we’d come to his vampire party. It was only a few hours away (he wouldn’t meet with us until after dark, but that wasn’t uncommon), so Rex and I headed back to our hotel to look through the footage, record our “battle plan,” get some dinner, and tool up.

We did the battle plan first. The battle was plan was just the two of us talking about whether this particular vampire was a threat. Some shows, we’d interview two or three vampires but only decide one was a threat. Some, we’d devote the whole show to one vampire — half for the interview, half for the hunt. Once, we had no “threats” at all, but the vampires we interviewed were kinky and exhibitionist as Hell, so we got enough good footage to keep an audience. Anyway, it was all bullshit. The ones we decided were “threats” were the ones that hung out in seedy-looking places or had donors that would let us film them getting cut. A lot of them didn’t want to be threats, so they wouldn’t agree to it. But Ahmed, he was going to take us to a “vampire party.” We just didn’t know what the meant, if it wasn’t kink.

“It’s going to be kink anyway,” said Rex as we pulled into the motel parking lot. “That’s all. He’s embarrassed, or he’s full of shit.”

“He’s full of himself, anyway,” I said. Ahmed was *really* self-assured.

“Yeah, exactly. So people will fuck and cut each other, or they’ll tie each other up and cut each other, and he’ll grab some girls by their throat and spank them or flog them and afterwards the endorphin rush hits and he stands by them and drinks their energy.” Rex almost spit the word “energy.”

“Right, but not their blood. He’s not a—“

“*Bio-vampire!*” we chorused.

In the end, we decided we’d call him a threat, but play the battle plan like we didn’t know what we were getting into. We went all-out. I called my wife and she played along (we recorded her half of the conversation later, using a voice actress). Rex called his mom, who could do her own damn voice work. We told them both, this is it. We’re chasing a big one. We don’t know if we can destroy him (actually, I think I said “kill” the first time and fucked up the take), but we’re gonna try, because he’s too dangerous to let go.

Sometimes it sucks to be right.

• • •

When we got to the vampire party, we knew right away something was wrong. This wasn’t a kink event. Those events always have someone at the door, checking IDs, making sure that the real creepers stay away. At sex or BDSM clubs, a lot of times they turn away single men. The security here... something was wrong. It was two women, both slim and fragile-looking. They stood near a set of heavy, oak doors in the foyer of what looked like a men’s club. Rex and I stayed in the parking lot, watching, filming. And then the vampire arrived.

Not Ahmed, though. A different one. She was maybe 12 years old. She arrived in a limo, and a dude who looked like he could have lifted the damn car got out and opened her door. We filmed her going in, and she turned and look at our van, but then she went inside.

Rex turned to me. “Did you see that?”

“Yeah.” I kept watching the monitor. We saw the girl walk up to the desk, talk to the security women, then go through the doors. Her huge bodyguard stayed outside and moved the limo. “Not a sex club, I guess.”

“Jesus, I hope not.” Rex was pretty appalled. He had a niece about that age. “Maybe we should call the police?”

“And say what, a girl walked into a building?” I admit, though, I’d been thinking it, too. “Let’s just keep watching. Ahmed should be here soon.”

As if on cue, those oak doors opened, and Ahmed came running out of them. He was still dressed in black, still lean and hungry-looking. But now his hair was mussed, his shirt was torn half off, and he was bleeding from the shoulder. He ran past the security women. One of them reached under the desk and hit a button, and the other pulled out a goddamn SPAS-12.

My wife was a soldier, and she acted as a technical consultant on my first show, which had a lot more guns and violence (and didn't get picked up). So I've never been a gun guy, but I have a pretty good memory, and for whatever reason I always thought combat shotguns looked pretty badass. Watching a 98-pound woman fire one from the hip? I forgot, one for second, that this was *actually happening* and I heard myself, "Holy shit, *sweet!*" And then sound caught up with light and I heard the boom.

Ahmed fell forward. He went right through the glass doors at the front of this place and landed on the sidewalk. The woman racked the shotgun and took a few steps toward him, but he was already up. His left leg was shredded, but he was walking. I looked at the footage later, and I saw his fangs. I saw that his leg wasn't bleeding so much as shedding blood. Like, it was falling out of his leg in clumps. But at the time, all I saw was that little girl.

She pushed past Shotgun Lady and started toward Ahmed. She *pounced*, jumping like a wolf spider, and landed on his back. He went down like he was made of toothpicks, and they fell out of my line of vision, but then Shotgun Lady looked up and saw the van. I don't think she saw us, but she pointed the shotgun at us.

Our sound guy, Mike, started the van and floored it. I'd forgotten he was there, but he took off over the grass berm, rolled out onto the street, and toward I-75. I don't know what he was thinking — maybe head south out of state, or north back toward Columbus (he had family there). But we only got a few blocks away when Rex started yelling at him to pull over.

He yanked the van off the road into a gas station lot, and Rex opened the door and threw up. A second later — and I mean, like, literally *one second* after Rex started blowing chunks, a cop pulled in behind us and flashed cherries. I got out and met the cop, and he took Mike's license and had his partner start running it. And then he took me aside.

"I know you," he said. "You're Eric Helsing."

"Yeah," I said. It's a stage name, but whatever.

"So that's Rex, right?" No one ever remembers Rex's last name.

"Yeah."

The cop nodded. "OK. Well, I watch your show all the time."

My knees started to wobble, mostly out of gratitude. If he watched the show, if he knew us, then maybe he'd believe us if we said we'd been on a shoot and something went weird? He wouldn't believe the shit about fangs and spider-girls, but maybe at least about the gunshot?

But then he said, "A lot of us watch it."

I looked at his eyes, and I saw something there. I don't know what it was, I don't know how many times I'd seen it before that, but I know every time I've seen it since. I can't describe it, but it's death. There's something about a vampire's eyes that lets you know they're dead. Ahmed had it, so did this guy. If my legs were wobbly before, now they went fully liquid, and I fell back against the van.

“Calm down,” he said. “I already talked to her.” *Her*. The little girl.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.” The cop smiled. It wasn’t a wide, crazy, “I am gonna eat you now” smile. It was a tight little smile, almost sympathetic. I’d seen it before on the faces of TV folks who liked what I was pitching but couldn’t sell their stupid exec bosses on it. “She says go ahead and air as much of this as you want. And keep it up.”

“Keep it up?”

“Sure.” He glanced back at his partner, who was getting out of the car. “Like I said, a lot of us watch the show. Be a shame if you got canceled.”

He turned and looked at his partner. “They all right,” he said. “Give him back his license. They’re fine.”

I should have left it alone. But I opened my stupid mouth, and said “What about Ahmed?”

The cop-pire turned around and smiled again, and this one was the toothy “you’re fucked” smile. And, sure enough, he had the same nimble, pointy fangs as Ahmed. “Ahmed? Sure was a crazy fucker, huh? You don’t need a follow-up with him, right? You already ‘destroyed’ him?”

I nodded, dumbly, and watched him get in his patrol car and drive off.

The next morning, we found Mike’s hat in the van. His scalp was still in it, but there was no blood. We buried it, reported him missing a day later, and did a tribute show for him early in the second season. We played it up like he was taken by the vampires, and donated all proceeds from that show to his family.

We were nominated for an Emmy for that episode.

• • •

“We have to actually do it.”

Rex looked at me like I was nuts. “No.”

“What do you mean, ‘no,’ dude? They *killed* Mike. They’re out there killing people. We have to—“

“Jesus, what are you, a method actor?” Rex stood up and walked into the living room. I saw four empty liquor bottles. Rex isn’t actually a big drinker, but he keeps booze around to cook with. He must have polished off what was left in each of the bottles. He picked up a bottle of gin and gulped down the last ounce or so. “We can’t do anything about it. Even if we wanted to, even if we could, we can’t. They have cops, remember?”

“Maybe that’s just in Cincy.” Rex gave me a look like I was completely retarded. “OK, no.”

“Jim, think. Just think.” He walked back into the kitchen and stood in front of me. “Think what we saw. I know you. You get caught up. But *fucking think*. They came after us, they sent a cop after us. They could have killed us. Obviously, they could, because they killed Mike. But all they said was ‘Keep it up.’ You get that?”

That's them really saying, 'You fuckers are so far off track that *it doesn't matter what you do.*' We've been going out and just playing pretend. They don't have anything to fear from us." He leaned back against the fridge, face flushed. Gin did that to him.

"I know," I said. I stared at his red cheeks, and then down at the floor. "I know. It's just...." I reached into my pocket and pulled out my wedding ring. I hadn't worn it since we'd separated, but I never really let it out of my reach, either. "It's just, fuck them, right?"

Rex smiled. "Seriously?"

• • •

"Fuck them, right?" Rex had been so drunk he couldn't stand. It didn't happen much, so I made sure to savor it when it did. "Those fuckers think they're so god-damn smart. They think they have, like, *degrees* in shit."

"They do." Mike was sober, or closer to it than we were. I'd been pretty gone earlier in the evening, but I was sobering up. I was trying to decide whether I wanted that trend to continue. "They *have* degrees. They have degrees in marketing and they think that means they know what will sell."

"Well, *fuck them*. Like I said." Rex poked Mike in the shoulder. "I mean, you don't know. They don't *know* what will sell." He tossed a bottle of beer out the apartment window. It broke with a popping sound on the sidewalk. I winced. "So."

"So fuck them, right?"

"Goddamn right." He opened another beer, and I grabbed it from him and took a drink. He looked confused for a second, and then grabbed himself one. We toasted. Mike didn't join in.

Fuck them, right? That became our mantra. We kept saying that after rejections for a year or two. Mike moved to England during that time, then came back right before *Modern Van Helsings* started. He never really got the joke. I couldn't have explained it to him, I don't think.

It was mostly just a dose of that young, stupid, bullish bravado. *Oh, yeah, mister TV executive? Oh yeah, mister high school principal? Oh yeah, mister cop?* Same idea. And then answer was always, *yeah, you stupid kid*, but for Rex and I that wasn't good enough. And that was the point. Maybe other people had the decision-making process, but we could figure out a way in. We could figure out their pattern and system, because there was *always* a system. So when I said that to Rex in the apartment, talking about vampires, he knew what I meant.

That's probably why he agreed.

• • •

Our first "off camera" hunt went entirely too well.

We thought about Cincy, since we actually knew where to look. But we figured it was a bad idea. They knew our faces, they'd see us coming. Instead, we decided

to focus on something Ahmed had said in one of the interviews. He'd mentioned Flint, Michigan, and how he'd been there recently. So Rex and I went there, waited for dark, and started cruising around in the van. We got permits to film (the city was thrilled, actually — turns out the mayor's daughter was a fan of the show), and we just... looked.

That's how goddamned easy it was. We just looked. We looked, and we found them. Three of them, walking down the street from a club, each with dates. They split up a block later. One got on a city bus, one jumped into a cab, but the third one, he just took his date into an alley.

The whole time, Rex and I told each other he was probably just going to try and fuck her. And maybe we could be heroes if he got too insistent or whatever, but *vampires*, come on. This was the last chance. If we'd been wrong, if he'd just been a normal, horny, drunk idiot, I think we'd have given up.

But the second he was in that alley, he bit her throat. Rex and I moved into the alley, both carrying a SPAS-12. What the hell, it worked on at least one of them.

He heard us coming and dropped her, and jumped at us. But he jumped, starting from a dead stop, and he must have cleared 20 feet. So that clinched it. We both fired. He staggered backward, and it was just like Ahmed, clumps of blood falling out of the wounds. We shot him two more times, each, and when he fell over, we ran up and pounded a stake into his heart.

The girl was out cold. We got her to the hospital, after we dumped the vampire in a trashcan and lit him up. I was amazed at how well it worked.

But that was the thing — it was so easy. Rex and I talked about it later. He must have been young, or stupid, or hungry, or drunk. Who knows? So we got lucky. And where do you go from there?

We went west. We hit Des Moines. We hit Seattle. Portland. San Fran. LA. Back around toward Albuquerque. Oklahoma City. St. Louis. Each city, we found them. We didn't always kill them. Sometimes we just marked them, took pictures, put them on the show so that other people would know.

And no one bothered us. I had a theory about that — I don't think they talk. Or if they do, word travels slow. But as we pulled out of St. Louis, Rex asked, "Where to?"

I knew what he meant. He meant, were we going to shoot the season finale in Cincy?

• • •

We went back through the footage and found the limo. Then we tracked it down. It took a few days, but when we found it, it was parked in the lot of a big old high-rise downtown. So we sat across the street, in our new van (we weren't quite stupid enough to use the same one), and waited.

That night, she came downstairs. She was still 12. Same dress, I think. And same huge dude protecting her. The limo pulled out and we followed, figuring they'd go to that same building. But instead, they headed across the river into Kentucky.

We pulled off right over the state line to talk. We figured out a plan. It was not a great one, and it involved making an assumption, which we both really hated. But, we thought, it would let us hit her without fighting her. And we were both terrified of the girl.

We waited until we saw the limo coming, and then we pulled onto the road behind it. It was almost sunrise. They were headed back to the high-rise, we figured. But first they would have to cross the Dan C. Beard Bridge, and we had a window of about twenty feet.

Rex was driving. He slammed into the limo and knocked it right. It rode up onto the concrete siding, sailed over the few trees below, and plunged into the river.

And we floored it. The sun was coming up. She'd surface, and burn to a crisp, or she'd melt in the running water.

Like I said, assumptions.

• • •

It didn't work out the way we'd hoped, of course.

I found Rex's body three months later. We'd kept moving north, eventually hoping to get to Boston. We got as far as Philly, and then I came into his hotel room one morning and found that he'd put one of the SPAS-12s under his chin. Hadn't heard a thing, despite being next door. I don't know how they managed that.

The police asked a lot of questions, and then of course they tied pictures from traffic cams in Cincy to us. Suddenly I was looking at charges for attempted murder. The network fronted me a legal defense, but then one day, I took a dinner meeting with my lawyer and the network woman who'd told me our show had been picked up, three years ago.

And another woman. I didn't recognize her, but I saw the *dead* in her eyes. I should have insisted on a lunch meeting.

At point during dinner, both my lawyer and the network suit got up to use the restroom, and she leaned over to me. "You two had a pretty good thing going," she said. "Guess what? You're getting picked up."

"Huh?"

"It's pretty simple," she said. "You've been all over the place. You've made a lot of enemies...but you've made a lot of friends, too. You picked off some idiots, but you've gotten lucky sometimes. You're pretty good at this."

"So... you want me to keep going?" I felt the words forming in my mouth. *Fuck them, right?*

"In a manner of speaking." She smiled. Pointy, nimble, vicious. Fuck.

When she came for me that night, I wasn't even surprised. I just kept looking for the camera.

• • •

I don't remember much of the next few nights. I remember a lot of pain. I remember getting shoved into a body bag and then a trunk, and then a lot of noise. And then I woke up in my old living room, sun coming down, my wife coming through the door.

"Jim?"

I sat up. I ran my tongue over my teeth. Pointy. Nimble. Fuck.

She came over and knelt down in front of me. "You OK? What are you doing here?"

"I don't know." My head hurt. My mouth was completely dry. I couldn't swallow... Hell, I wasn't even sure how I was *talking*.

"Everyone's been looking for you. The charges were dropped, but everyone thinks you're dead or something."

"Yeah."

"So where have you been?"

I really, really wish I would have said, "run" or "get out." But I didn't.

And the next thing I knew, I was in the bedroom, on the floor, blankets wrapped around me tight in a light-proof cocoon.

• • •

When I found my wife dead on the couch, I tried to cry. But I couldn't. I had no camera, no audience, no reason for that display.

The phone rang, and I picked it up. I didn't say anything.

"Like I said," said the woman from the restaurant, "you got picked up. Congrats."

I didn't say anything.

"We're sending some folks out with your contract." She giggled, like she'd just said something really funny. If she had, I didn't get it. "See you soon."

I stood there, watching the door. My wife had her car keys in her hand. I checked the clock — just a little bit past sundown. That meant I had a good six hours. I took the keys from her hand.

I could wait for them. I was pretty sure they were going to pay me to do what I was already doing. Or I could run. I had no idea how this all worked, though.

The people in charge, they have a pattern. They have a system. And you can beat that system. You can use it, if you recognize it, if you don't depend on it.

I set the keys down on the table, sat down on the couch, and closed her eyes.

Fuck them, right?



Patrol

By Edward Austin Hall

“What the hell? She—she didn’t ... what’s the word?”

I stared at Brad, or at his outline in the dark, anyway. Lynette was between us, lying face up on the warehouse floor. The little bit of illumination coming from the flashlight — also on that floor, where it fell while we were fighting — reminded me how much I did not want to think about what was under her. The flashlight was my dad’s good one, but I wasn’t going to be the one to pick it up.

I shook my head fast. “I don’t — what are you talking about?”

In the dark, Brad’s expression was invisible as he said, “Like on that TV show? Shouldn’t she ... explode or something?”

Across the room, Key started laughing.

I got scared all over again. “Are — are you okay?”

Key said, “I think my leg’s broken. Otherwise I’m fine. Better than Brad. He sounds like what little bit of brains he had got knocked out.”

Brad didn’t say anything, but I knew when Key said stuff like that it hurt Brad’s feelings. Key knew it, too.

Being careful not to touch Lynette, I took a step toward Key’s side of the room and stopped. “Are you in shock?”

“Actually I’m in a pool of pee, which is kind of shocking when I think about it, so I’m trying not to do that. Are y’all going to come help me? Today, I mean?”

The obvious pain in Key’s voice cut into me. “Yeah! Of course! Brad, you okay?”

“Yeah. I told you wearing my football pads was a good idea.”

Key panted with what sounded like distress. “I think that was the only good idea we had between us.”

Brad’s boots made squishing sounds as he passed through the flashlight beam. “Yeah, how did we get things so wrong? This went from ‘Mission: Rescue Lynette’

to trying not to get killed by her.”

Silence. I realized they were both waiting for an answer from me.

“Look, I told you what I saw. All four of them were drinking her blood. At the same time. I guess we were just too late and... she turned into one of them.”

Brad squatted near Key, who said, “And you killed her.”

“Whoa, whoa! I forgot I was even holding the stake! I raised my hands to protect myself, and she slammed into me so hard I couldn’t believe it....” I gestured toward the body at my feet. “And....”

“Uh huh,” Key said. “We could go to jail for this!”

“Prison,” Brad said. “They send murderers to prison.”

“God damn it,” I said, trying not to yell. “She’s a vampire! Was a vampire—”

“How can you be sure?” Brad’s low tones rose as he got more agitated. “What if she was hysterical? And thought we were the Martells?”

I said, “Brad, did you see her teeth?”

Key leaned against Brad, who said, “We need to get the hell out of here. No telling when the Martells’ll come back!”

Brad was right about that. The Martells were not the kind of people anybody should run into in a dark place. And that was true before we knew the truth about them.

What I said was, “Look, we had some bad luck and we had some dumb luck. It’s got to be our turn for some good luck, right? We can take the Martells. They’re, like, sixth graders.”

I could see Brad nod and thought he was agreeing with me.

“Four sixth graders,” Brad said. “And you said at least half of them have been held back twice.”

I said, “They’re small—”

“And they swing a mean skateboard,” Key said.

“Brad has a baseball bat! Come on, you guys! We can stop them right here—”

Brad and Key spoke as one: “No.”

I sighed. “I have to tell y’all some—”

A sound like four rapid-fire gunshots echoed through the building. Back to back with those noises was a kind of low hum.

Brad said, “Oh, shit. They’re skateboarding out on the loading docks.”

When Key spoke, she sounded the way I remembered her sounding in kindergarten. “That’s our way out! What do we do?”

• • •

How three high schoolers could worry so much about four brothers who — as Key said once — held the least-likely-to-graduate-from-anything trophy was

a story that began when I was in ninth grade. When the Martells moved into the neighborhood.

They were more like a gang than a family, and I heard about them from other kids long before I ever met any of them. Still, I didn't know what I was putting myself in the middle of that day. I was walking home from school when I saw a kid walking backward and holding a book, which he held just out of reach of another kid, maybe a head shorter. The younger kid was following the older one through the yard of a boarded-up house, toward the back. The little kid, maybe a third grader, kept saying, "Give me my book!"

I yelled, "Hey! Come here!"

They both looked surprised and came over to where I had stopped on the sidewalk, near the vacant house.

I stuck out my hand. "Give me that."

The kid holding the book handed it to me. A school library copy of a Captain Underpants book, stamped BRAUN ELEMENTARY. I asked whose book it was, and both boys said, "Mine!"

"Nuh uh," said the smaller boy. They began to argue.

"Okay, come with me. We'll get a teacher to sort it out." And with that I started walking fast toward Braun, just a block away. I didn't look behind me till we were walking up the school steps — when I realized the little kid was the only one still following me.

I handed him the book and said, "Well, that sorted itself out."

Later, I knew my mistake was in not finishing what I started that afternoon. The next few times the little kid's face was in front of mine, I didn't recognize him. The time I did was when Key stopped near a utility pole and jerked her chin toward a photocopied sheet of eight-and-a-half-by-eleven that was stapled in place.

Key — short for Chiodo, because she hated her first name — said, "Where do you think missing children go?"

I stopped next to her and read down the poster from its one-word message across the top. When I got to the picture I drew a short breath and whispered, "Oh, shit."

"What's wrong?"

"Remember I told you about the two kids and the Captain Underpants book?"

"Uh huh."

Eyes wide, I turned to look at Key. "That's the little kid."

• • •

My mom called the police, but we didn't recognize the uniformed man who came to the house early that evening. Until he died the year before, my dad was a plainclothes juvenile delinquent officer, so we knew lots a people on the force. This guy seemed really businesslike but also kind of cold.

Once I said what I had seen and done, the cop — Officer Pflugh, which he told us “rhymes with duke” — said, “Why didn’t you report this sooner?”

“Posters like that are always up,” I said. “I kind of stopped looking at them.”

He stared at me until I got uncomfortable. I said, “What now?”

Officer Pflugh looked from me to my mom. “Ma’am, with your permission I’ll take your son around the neighborhood to see if he can recognize any suspects.”

“That doesn’t sound entirely—”

“Ma’am, I promise your boy will be completely safe with me. No one will see him.”

It was my mom’s turn to stare at Officer Pflugh. “Please have him back here before nightfall.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He looked again at me and said, “Let’s go.”

As I followed Officer Pflugh to his squad car, I noticed it had a huge number eleven stenciled on the side. *Eleven is good luck*, I thought. He opened the rear passenger side door and I got in back, where the doors don’t open from the inside.

We rode slowly toward my high school. Halfway there he took a diagonal street that I knew by sight but had never been on. We passed what had to be dozens of rundown houses — more and more of them unfinished — before we stopped at a hilly dead end. The driveways to the empty homes were steep. Four kids were taking turns at skateboarding down the driveway in front of us.

Officer Pflugh did not turn as he spoke. “See those kids?”

“Yes, officer.”

“Recognize anybody?”

Even in the twilight — spring was ending, so it was already after seven o’clock — one of the boys looked familiar. As they reached the bottom of the driveway, they stopped taking turns to stand side by side and face us. If I hadn’t been in a police car, with a policeman inside it, I would’ve been a little nervous.

“Well?”

“The one on the left.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Stay here.”

Before I could say any of the three things that collided in my throat — *Where can I go? Where are you going? And, ridiculously, is it safe out there?* — he was out of the car. Worse, he left the door open, which meant the dome light stayed on, which meant all those scary-ass kids could see me.

I dropped to the floor. And I stayed there for what felt like a really long time. Finally, my ridiculous thought (*they dragged that cop down and killed him, and I’m next*) started to seem not so ridiculous.

That was when “the one on the left” slammed against the driver’s side of the car. He glanced over his shoulder fast, then he turned to look at me. His lips were pinched together so tight that his mouth looked like a hyphen.

And then he was gone, too fast to be running. *Is he flying?* From the floor, I stared up at the window he’d sprawled against. His hands left smeared, greasy prints — and some blood — on the glass. And I couldn’t manage to draw a breath — until I screamed when Officer Pflugh slammed against the same window. He was breathing hard and staring in the direction that the kid, I suddenly realized, fled on a skateboard.

Officer Pflugh turned to look at me through the glass. It muffled his voice. “You okay?”

All I could do was nod fast. I thought I might throw up. I was so glad to see he wasn’t dead that I almost forgot how mad I was that he had left me trapped in the car.

He got in the squad car and started it. All the way to my house he kept apologizing. I didn’t say a word. Between apologies he told me about the Martell brothers: Droh, Drew, Dray, and George. The fact that the police knew who they were and were trying to catch them should’ve made me feel better. Less scared, I mean. The fact that Officer Pflugh was one of those police made me feel much, much worse than I had. And downright terrified.

Once I felt like I could speak without calling him something my dad taught me black males should never even say around police, I said, “Whose blood is that?”

“Probably his. ‘Skateboarders always have bloody hands, officer. Keeps you from having a bloody face!’ One of the Martells said that to me the first time I ever questioned them. What he didn’t say is that they fight each other like pit bulls. I’ve seen them, when they didn’t know I was watching.” Officer Pflugh drove in silence for a moment. “But it’s all cover for what they’re really doing. That’s what I think, and that’s what my boss thinks.”

The squad car stopped in front of my house.

“And you think—”

“I think I’ve already said too much. I’m bound by the law, too, and I can’t prove what I think.”

Officer Pflugh got out and opened the passenger side door for me. “I’m really sorry. But if you tell anyone how badly I screwed up, they’ll fire me.”

I couldn’t make myself look at him. I nodded. “I won’t tell anybody.”

Officer Pflugh nodded and closed the door. I did a double-take. The metal had a deep new dent at knee level, in the middle of my lucky number.

“Man. Did that kid’s skateboard do that?”

“Yep. Little reprobate.”

“I’m sorry he dented your car.”

“It’s just a car,” Officer Pflugh said. “You stay away from them, hear me?”

I nodded. He walked me to the door. Mom opened it before we reached the stoop.

“Did y’all find anyone?”

“No, ma’am. The kids I had in mind weren’t at their usual haunts.”

I filed away that bit of information. Something else that I couldn’t quite make sense of was distracting me, which probably kept me from looking like a liar. Even though I said nothing to my mother.

Later I realized that a skateboard would have scratched the paint. Which meant that the squad car’s knee-level dent was made by something else.

Like a knee.

That was when I started thinking something was wrong here.

• • •

Key told me I was crazy. “It probably was scratched and you just missed it.”

“Or, one: the Martells have iron bones and, two: they don’t feel pain. You ever use part of your body to put a dent in a car? It’s not easy!”

“So ... what? They’re little terminator robots sent from the future to kill you?”

“From the future? No. Here to kill me? Yes. You should’ve seen the expression on that kid’s face!”

Key smiled and shook her head and sang at me: “Paranoia will destroy ya, yeah.”

I didn’t tell anyone else for a long time.

For the rest of ninth grade, every time I walked home from school I expected the Martells to appear like a little wolf pack on wheels. At first I was so scared that I thought about sneaking Dad’s old duty revolver out of my parents’ chest of drawers, but I knew I couldn’t get it past the metal detectors at school. Days passed, then weeks. And I didn’t see the Martells again. Not then.

Summer came. After a while, I didn’t jump anytime I heard the sound, like distant trains passing, of skateboards moving along sidewalks.

One day Mom asked me to go in the attic and change the filter for the air conditioning.

I stared at her. “Mom! There’s cobwebs up there!”

She stared back, one eyebrow up high, and said nothing.

I decided to wear a hoodie and goggles up there, even though I knew I’d be baking for the thirty seconds I hoped it would take to do the job.

I pulled down the folding stairs, climbed into the attic one-handed to carry the filter and turned on the only light. I never said it to Mom but our ancient insulation always made me think: *cotton vomit*. Much nastier than cobwebs.

Once I switched the filters, I two-fingered the old one by its edge. It looked like someone had painted a portrait of dust and framed it in cardboard. I let it fall

through the attic opening. *I'll put on Mom's dishwashing gloves to clean up any mess it makes.*

I was backing down the folding stairs when I saw something tucked under the boards alongside the attic opening. Glad there was no insulation in the way, I reached into the little space and felt something hard inside something soft.

I pulled out a Glock pistol wrapped in a rag. And I heard Mom call me. I returned the gun to its hiding place. For the first of many, many times.

Over dinner a few weeks later, I asked my mom whether my dad had been a good cop.

She stared at me for a moment. "Honey, did something happen with that... what was his name? Officer Duke?"

"Officer Pflugh? No. I've just been thinking about how hard it had to be for him. Dad, I mean."

"He always said being a good policeman was the second-hardest job in the world."

"What's the hardest job?"

She smiled. "Being a black policeman."

• • •

Fall came. I hate fall. I hate the shorter days, and that year I dreaded going back to school. But tenth grade started out okay.

Then in October I noticed posters for a missing girl. Lynette Hammer. She was older than me and Key. I remembered arguing about Lynette with Key when the two of us were freshmen. I was in the she's-kind-of-cute camp. Key was in the she's-kind-of-a-skank camp. Which is why I didn't even ask her to come with me the first time I went back to that unfinished subdivision where Officer Pflugh took me. I felt safe because I had the Glock and my dad's old Zeiss binoculars in my backpack.

What I didn't have was a sense of how long it would take to get home. I thought that area was closer to school than it turned out to be; after I found nothing there but half-done houses, I started toward home. And twilight got darker with every step I took.

While I was still on the road Officer Pflugh made me aware of, I came to a bridge I missed on my previous trips across it. It went over another road that had a few stretches of chain link fence protecting what looked like abandoned warehouses.

Another few hundred feet along the road I crossed a second bridge. I looked over its concrete walls and saw an overgrown corridor that ran behind the warehouses, or whatever they were. And I saw people on the loading dock. Four boys.

I squatted so the wall of the bridge would give me some cover and pulled out the binoculars.

The Martells. They stood at the edge of the loading dock, but they weren't looking in my direction.

Then the person I'd missed — because she was flat on her back — sat up: Lynette Hammer. Looking more punk than ever in a T-shirt with the arms torn off.

One moment the Martells were just hovering around her. The next, they were all finding places for themselves on her pale, bare arms. At first I thought they were kissing her arms.

They were sucking on her arms.

I was on one knee, my mouth hanging open as I watched them, when a street-light almost overhead flickered on. Lynette's head rolled around her shoulders, and she looked right at me.

I spun behind the bridge wall. Thought for a second and ran across the street, which put me out of their line of sight. From there, I ran almost all the way home. I turned to look behind me whenever I stopped or slowed for air.

• • •

After school the next day, the Martells attacked me.

It ended almost as fast as it started. I heard behind me the smack-hum of someone putting a skateboard into use. When I turned to look up the hill behind me, one of the Martells (*George?*) stepped from his hiding place behind a hedge and swung his skateboard at me like a baseball bat.

Behind me *and* the Martells a deep voice yelled, "Hey!"

I jumped, and the blow barely caught my shoulder. The same voice — which came, I saw, from an older kid on a bike — said, "Leave that kid alone!"

That was how I met Brad Burkett.

The Martells were already scattering. Brad rode over to me and stopped. He said, "You okay? Want me to call the cops?"

When I heard him say that was when I started shaking. "No. No cops."

"That kid tried to hit you in the head with a skateboard. He was trying to kill you!"

I thought about the Glock in my backpack and how useless it would have been to me if I had been hit over the head. Then I thought about the Martells getting hold of a gun — especially one that months of careful Internet research, taking the thing apart, and putting it back together told me was a throw-down, untraceable — and I got really scared.

In a small voice I said, "Thank you for saving my life. Do you think you could stay with me till I get home?"

• • •

That day I told Brad most of what had happened, what I had seen. He told me if he hadn't seen George (or whichever one it was) try to brain me, he would never have believed what I said about the warehouse.

"You don't think those Martell kids are really... I mean, there's no such thing. What's that dumbass show called? Puffy?"

I smiled. "Something like that."

"That's as real as vampires get: They really come on the TV."

I was quiet for a moment. "Doesn't matter whether they're real vampires. They act like they are. And they really have that girl, Lynette."

Brad smiled — and it was a good smile. "So, it's like football. We need to figure out what our play is."

I nodded. "Good thing one of us knows anything about football."

We both laughed.

As we talked more, Brad and I realized that he and Key were neighbors. Like a fool, I thought that was good news.

• • •

The next day we got together at Key's house because her folks were away. When she opened the door, I could tell from the look on her face that she was pissed about something.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Your new boyfriend is already here. He's out on the patio."

I gave Key one of those whose-porcupine-crawled-up-your-ass? looks and went outside.

Brad sat with an arm propped on the table; his hand was almost the same shade as the redwood furniture. He stared toward the Chiodos' garage.

"Hey, Brad."

He up-nodded. "Eubie."

Hearing him say my name reminded me why Key and I became best friends in the first place: We both hated our first names. I wondered if he knew hers from being in the neighborhood and called her Kim (or worse, Kimberly). That would explain her mood.

"What'd I miss?"

Brad shook his head. "Telling Key about football practice."

Ah. That'd do it. Since being the targets of some grade school bullies, Key and I assumed most jocks belonged to an especially mean human subspecies. Well, sort of human, anyway. *When she and I planned this meeting, I forgot to mention that he was a football player.*

Key stood in the doorway, her arms folded. "Mmm hmm. Fascinating stuff."

Brad turned to face Key. He looked wounded. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to bore you."

"I wasn't bored," Key said. "I was comatose."

As Brad recoiled in his seat, I jumped in: "Speaking of boards, do you think your dad will miss a piece of that lumber?" I pointed at a stack of wood inside the garage.

“No. That’s been there, like, forever. What do you need it for?”

“A project at home. I think that short piece will fit in my backpack.” I glanced at Brad to see if he seemed to know what sawing-into-long-triangles project I had in mind. He was still staring at Key as if she had somehow stuck him with one of those stakes-to-be.

Brad looked up at the two of us. “So, the advantage the... Martins?”

“Martells,” I said.

“Their advantage is mobility. I thought bikes might be the way to go, but even if we find this Lynette alive, we can’t assume she’d be in any shape to ride the handlebars or whatever—”

“I don’t have a bike,” Key said. She made it sound like an accusation.

“Which is another reason we should drive.”

Key and I stared at Brad.

I said, “You have a car? Why do you ride a bike?”

Brad’s smile appeared halfway. “Is that a serious question?”

Key unfolded her arms. “Can you drive it?”

“Uh huh. My uncle Brent taught me. He gave me his old car.”

Key spread her hands and frowned. “Then what are we waiting for? Let’s drive to that warehouse and grab the girl.”

“If we have a car,” I said, “especially one the Martells won’t recognize, we have a double advantage. We stake out their haunts, and once we see most or all of them away from the warehouse, we hurry there, grab Lynette and get out.” And at the moment I said it, I think I meant it.

We started serious planning then, including ass coverage so various parents would think each of us was at another one’s house, instead of where, two days later, we actually wound up: using the binoculars to scope out all four Martells as they raced down driveways in the abandoned subdivision, then driving over the speed limit to what we found out was a pitch-black toilet shaped like a building but laid out like a maze. With a gang of certainly homicidal and possibly supernatural skate punks blocking our way out.

• • •

With the Martells within earshot, we were whispering as Brad and I helped Key hobble through the dark. Brad held the flashlight again, but he was mostly keeping it off. Every five feet or so he’d turn it on for a second, with a muted little click, and turn it off again. The space had crates and furniture and broken bottles scattered everywhere.

When our instant of light revealed a doorway to what seemed to have been an office in better times, I said, “In there!”

Brad, on Key’s left side, where her hurt leg was, moved toward the opening. Click click. We all stopped.

Key panted. “Di— did I really see that? It looked like—”

“There’s no floor in there,” Brad said. He nudged us back onto our earlier path, deeper into the warehouse.

In her kindergarten voice, Key said, “We’re dead. We are going to die here.”

Another familiar voice — this one at the level of a roar — said, “Y’all smell that?”

Even with the echo and the distance, I knew I was hearing the first Martell I’d met. What I didn’t know, after all that time, was which name was his. Since the episode in the squad car, I thought of him as Lefty.

Another reedy kid’s voice that carried farther than I thought was possible said, “Your top lip?”

The next thing we heard was a smacking sound: a blow. After it came a clatter, a crash, and the sound of something sliding across a floor.

The second voice said, “Damn, George! If you didn’t hit like a pussy, that would’ve hurt!”

Lefty — George — yelled, “Shut up! Y’all can’t smell Lynette’s blood?”

Two voices that sounded way more nasal than George and his punching bag but a lot like each other said, “Oh, shit!”

The sound of running echoed all around the warehouse.

Punching Bag said, “Lynette’ll tear our asses if she got hurt and nobody was here to help her! I’m telling, George! It was your turn to watch her!”

“Lick my ass! It was your turn! You just can’t count!”

“Piss on—”

The sounds of running and shouting stopped at the same time. The three of us held our breath — until the worst sounds I’ve ever heard made us all jump: the sounds of children screaming at the same time. It started with surprised sounds and someone screaming Lynette’s name, but it changed really fast into a wail that went on and on.

I struggled with my backpack and whispered, “Give me the flashlight.”

Brad said, “Wha—”

“Damn it, just give it to me! This is our chance!”

I felt the cold metal of the heavy-duty light — the kind beat cops use to club people — against my bare left hand. The metal felt wet, and I jerked my hand away. I got my backpack onto the floor and opened it, took out a pair of dishwashing gloves and pulled them on. I grabbed the light with my left hand and drew the Glock from my backpack.

I aimed the light a few feet ahead of me and turned it on. I looked at Brad, whose terrified expression told me he could see the gun, and said, “Stay here.” And I ran toward the Martells. Once I was twenty feet or so away from Brad and Key, I yelled, “Nobody move!” I kept running, but I raised the flashlight until it was next to my head.

And as the light hit them, I stopped. Because at that moment, the Martells didn't look like a little wolf pack. They looked like a bunch of lost children. They had tears and snot streaming down their faces, and the four of them held on to different parts of Lynette.

In a tiny voice, George said, "It's that damn nig—"

I shot him in the head before he could finish what he was saying. George's blood sprayed onto his brothers. I shot two more Martells before the gun jammed. The last one screamed as he let go of Lynette, stood and ran at me. I waited till he was right in front of me and swung the flashlight at his head. The impact made a crunching noise — and the kid kept coming.

He hit me at least as hard as Lynette did when she surprised us earlier and threw us around like we were pillows.

I dropped the light and the gun. And then I was lying on the floor — *that* floor — and trying to keep this crazed child off me. He was so much stronger than he looked. And wild. I could barely keep this kid off me. We rolled, as I gripped him by his wrists, and I heard glass cracking under him. He kicked me and tears came to my eyes. We rolled again, I got my leg between us, and I pushed him away hard with my foot.

I felt the floor around my head for something — anything — I could use as a weapon.

I found the wide part of the stake, where it was sticking out of Lynette. I yanked it out of her and turned in time to see Brad break the baseball bat across the Martell brother's head. The kid went down like he was suddenly made of wood himself.

And Lynette sat up.

She had time enough to say, "You... *fuckers*," before Brad rammed his shard of a baseball bat into her chest.

Brad was breathing hard as he kept his weight behind the bat handle. "I'm afraid to let go. But I also want to pull this thing out and use it on you. You murdering son of a bitch."

• • •

Eventually, like he was dropping the leash for a pit bull that he totally expected to turn on him, Brad let go of the bat and jumped away from Lynette. Lit from the floor, where the flashlight again rested in a puddle of unknown fluid, Brad stared at me for a moment. He bent to retrieve the light, shook droplets from it and left me standing there, corpses all around me. He vanished into the darkness and returned less than a minute later with Key hobbling alongside him.

Neither of them said a word to me as they passed. I didn't look up at them because I was still trying to get the gun unjammed, which I managed to do maybe ten minutes later. A minute after that I was pressing the gun into Lynette's hand and using her finger to fire a bullet into the ceiling. Another ten minutes passed before I made my way outside, where I blinked in the late afternoon sunshine.

As I expected, Brad's car was not under the bridge near the sealed entrances to the warehouse. But Officer Pflugh's squad car was parked just past the other bridge.

I had to pass it on my long walk home. As I got near the vehicle, the driver's window went down.

Officer Pflugh turned slightly and said, "The force needs resourceful young people to stay strong. Want a ride?"

"What happens if I say no?"

"The same thing that happens if you say yes: I phone in the fire that's about to consume that warehouse. But you don't get a ride."

"I don't need a ride." I walked past the squad car and didn't look back.



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