

The Halloween Collection

by

The Indie Eclective



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Mind-Blower

Talia Jager

After driving up a steep incline, Daxton parked, and we got out of the car. He took my hand and led me into the forest. “Where are we going?” I asked for the millionth time. Patience wasn’t my strong suit.

“I told you Kassia, it’s a surprise.” He grinned at me, showing off the dimple on the right side of his mouth.

“Good thing you’re cute.”

He laughed and we continued walking beneath the dark canopy of trees overhead. Small animals scurried around. Coming to a flat area, he stopped walking and said, “Close your eyes.”

“You’re kidding, right? We’re in the middle of nowhere and you want me to close my eyes. What if I trip and fall over a branch?”

He stood in front of me, his brown eyes shifting to a softer shade of gold. “Do you think I’d let you fall?”

I knew he wouldn’t. I trusted him completely. Sighing, I said, “Okay, fine.” Slowly, I closed my eyes.

His warm hand slid into mine and he very carefully led me further. A few steps later, he stopped. “You can open them now.”

I sucked in a deep breath. We were high in the sky, on top of a mountain. A cliff was before me and all around the leaves were turning brilliant colors of red, orange, and yellow. “It’s like one of our dream spots,” I said softly.

Daxton nodded making his sun-kissed hair fall in his eyes. I reached up and brushed a lock back to the side. The corners of his mouth pulled up into my favorite lopsided grin.

“I stumbled upon it and knew you’d love it here.”

Peeking over the edge, I said, “It’s a long way down.”

He laughed. “We’re not going down. We’re staying right here. I have more surprises in store for you.”

He spun me around. A blanket was spread out on the ground beneath a cooler, some lights, and a couple more blankets. I smiled. He sure did know how to win a girl over.

“What did I do to deserve all this?”

He put his arms around my waist and pulled me close to him. “You fell in love with me.”

Blushing, I responded, “Wasn’t hard to do.”

Slowly, he leaned toward me and whispered in my ear, “I love you.” His voice sent a tingle through my body, setting it on fire.

I moaned quietly and closed my eyes. His lips were upon mine in a second and we moved together in harmony. I didn’t ever want to let him go. Knowing I’d have to, I

gently pulled away. Our eyes met and I swear I saw into his soul. I could see how much he loved me.

“You want me to take you anywhere?” he asked breathless.

“No. I don’t need a dream tonight. This is perfect.”

Daxton was a dreamer. His gift was that he was able to take himself and anybody he was touching to another world or place. We didn’t physically go there. Our minds did. It was a wonderful, beautiful gift that we loved to use. One much different than my gift of pain and death. I was a mind-blower, which meant I could cause pain to anyone in my sight. If pushed far enough I could even cause death. But tonight, I didn’t want to think about our gifts. Tonight, I wanted only to be with Daxton.

As if sensing my thoughts, he pulled me toward the blanket. “Let’s eat then. We don’t have much daylight left.”

He brought me over to the blanket and we sat down. He pulled out sandwiches and fruit, the ultimate picnic meal. “So, how did you happen to stumble upon this?”

He chewed his food and then answered, “Zane needed to talk. So, we went for a walk. Somehow, we ended up pretty far from home and found this place. It reminded me of the cliff in our dreamland. I knew I had to bring you.”

“What did Zane need to talk about?”

Daxton hesitated. “I shouldn’t.”

I gave him my ‘you-better-tell-me’ look. “You know you will.”

He sighed. “He’s just...worried. About Mira. He thinks she’s holding a lot in and he wanted to know what I thought he should do.”

“Oh.” I looked away. My best friend was Zane’s girlfriend. She had been attacked not long ago. Dealing with the ordeal was hard for her. She was so used to being strong and independent. Truth was, I was worried about her too. But, looking out into the horizon, I decided that tonight I needed to let that go and be with Daxton.

I changed the subject. “Did you hear about the ceremony coming up?”

“Yes. I hear they are honoring you.”

I felt the heat rise in my cheeks. “They are honoring all of us.” I knew that because I’d insisted. I told them I wouldn’t accept any award unless we all got one. They were giving me an award for saving the school and ultimately the world from demons in last month’s battle. That had been one situation where being a mind-blower had come in pretty handy.

It was nearing sunset. The sky was exploding into different shades of pink and orange. “Wow,” I said under my breath.

“Beautiful huh?”

“Mhmm.”

He held my hand as the sun went down below the horizon. I rested my head in his lap and he stroked my hair.

“What are you thinking about?” he asked.

“How lucky I am.”

He scoffed. “Lucky?”

“To have you. You could have had any girl you wanted and you chose me, even after the way I acted towards you the first day.”

“I believe in fate.”

“Really?”

“We were meant to be together. I knew it the second I laid eyes on you.”

“You did?” I remembered back to that day. I remembered holding his eye for quite a long time. I made him look away first. There was something about him. Maybe he was right. Maybe it was fate that brought us together and love that keeps us that way.

Some awful smell tickled my nose, and I hid my face in my shirt. “What is that?”

Daxton’s nose was crinkled up too. “Smells like...” He took a deep breath.

We both recognized it at the same time. The disgusting smell of sulfur. And outside of the science lab, the only place I had ever smelled it was when demons were near. “Do you think...?”

“Here?”

“What else could it be?”

A branch snapped in the distance, and I sat up. Something was coming. We were on our feet. I couldn’t see anything now that the sun was down. I grabbed his hand and pulled him.

“What are you doing?” he exclaimed.

“Running!”

Leaves and twigs crunched under our feet as we ran through the thick forest. Branches reached out like arms and yanked off strands of my auburn hair. Tears sprung to my eyes, but I knew I had to keep quiet if we were to escape.

“What are we running from?” he asked out of breath.

“I don’t know. I don’t want to know.”

“Can’t you just kill it—whatever it is?”

“Not if I can’t see it!” I yelled panicky. I heard more noises, but I couldn’t see anything. I felt blind and helpless. “C’mon! We’ve gotta get out of here.”

He ran next to me for a few more minutes. My heart was racing and my legs felt like they were going to explode. Daxton was breathing heavily beside me. Something grunted behind us, accompanied by the sound of pounding feet. It was fast, whatever it was. The tall trees were blocking the moonlight, and I couldn’t see a thing. I tripped a couple times.

“Damn.” I stood up and brushed something wet and sticky off my hands. Must be blood, but it was hard to tell in the dark. Pushing the pain out of my mind, I looked around trying to find an escape. “I don’t know what to do.”

“Kill them.”

“How? I can’t see them. I can’t focus. I’m powerless.”

“What if you try? I’ll help you.”

“How are you going to do that? It took a warlock and a shaman to train me.”

The sulfur smell made my stomach churn. The hair on my arms stood straight up. The demons were near. They were being quiet now. That scared me more than when I could hear them chasing us. Clenching my hands into fists, I spun around trying to find them.

Daxton grabbed me and pulled me close. “Let me help you.”

I let out a deep, shaky breath. “Okay.”

He turned me around and stood in back of me, his fingers interlocked with mine and our arms crossed in front of my chest like I was giving myself a hug. “Close your eyes.” I didn’t like closing them when there was danger around, but I did. “Now open your mind.”

“Open it to what?”

“Just...open your mind.”

I sighed and thought about the demons, their horrible smell and their scary eyes. I thought about how much I hated them and how I wanted to kill them all. “This isn’t working,” I muttered.

“Because you’re not letting it,” he said, his voice laced with frustration.

“I’ll try again.” This time I kept my eyes open, and I pictured the demons. I opened my mind and remembered how freaky they were. I thought about the purple swirls that came from my mind when I was focusing, and I tried to draw them out. *Okay, swirls, find the demons.* Wonderful. Now I was talking to the colors in my head.

The swirls responded. They seemed to erupt from my mind and quickly streamed out into the forest. When the swirls touched a demon, the whole demon lit up a purple color. “Oh!” I gasped.

“You’re seeing something?”

“You’re not?”

“No.”

“I can see them now.”

The cat-hound hissed at me with its pointy ears sticking straight up. Its nose crinkled and red eyes glowed through the purple making me shudder.

“What do you see?” Daxton asked.

“Cat-hounds. Lots of them.”

“You know what to do.”

I did. I focused on them, clenching and unclenching my hands over and over again. I let my power take over, starting from the innermost part of me until I couldn’t hold it in anymore. It poured out of my mind, commanding the demons to die. They screeched and flopped to the ground. Then they melted into the earth. I stood absolutely still for a minute, listening for more. The woods were quiet, and I didn’t hear anything else.

“Do you know where we are?” I asked.

“Um...no.”

Great. I had led us too far, and we were lost. Daxton took out his phone and tried to get a signal. He shook his head. I tried mine with the same result. “What are we going to do?”

“Ever been camping?” he asked.

“If you consider trekking across the country with Vala camping, then yes.”

He snickered. “I’m sure that was fun.”

I rolled my eyes. “Tons.”

He sat down on the ground and opened his arms. I snuggled into them. The night had brought on a chill. My thin shirt wasn’t going to cut it. I shivered.

Daxton wrapped his arms around me tighter. “I’ll keep you warm.” He put his finger on my chin and lifted it up. Our noses touched, and I could feel his breath on my lips. Gently, he brushed my lips with his. The soft kiss quickly became more intense, and I found myself heating up.

Pulling away, Daxton asked, “Is that better?”

“Mhmm.” I smiled lovingly.

He stroked my hair until I fell asleep in his arms.

* * *

A few hours later, a snort woke me up. Standing in front of us was a black demon bull with narrow red eyes. The stench coming from him was overwhelming. When our eyes met, chills ran through me. Silently, I squeezed Daxton's hand. I felt him tense behind me.

I concentrated on the demon, and he let out a terrifying sound. My power rose again and I released it at him. Before I could finish him off, something cold and bony grabbed my wrist. My head snapped to the side and I gasped when I saw little demons all around us. "They're everywhere," I whispered, kicking one away from my foot. He was fast and came right back, digging his teeth into my leg. I yelled out as the sharp pain shot up my calf.

Daxton quietly reached down to where he kept his dagger. "Kill the big one. I'll take care of the one biting you."

I looked back at the demon bull. He was standing up straight again and getting ready to charge. I knew I only had seconds. And that was all I needed. I focused and my body started to shake as the power took over again. *Die!* Two seconds later he was on the ground, this time for good.

I turned to see Daxton shoving the dagger into the demon that was chewing on my skin. He flung backwards and melted into the ground. The other little demons around him started chattering. Even though I couldn't understand their language, I knew they were angry.

Focusing on the demons, I let my power rise once again, and took them down. "Where are they coming from?" I asked.

"I don't know."

"We need to get out of here."

"I know."

I squinted into the darkness as a soft glowing light appeared up ahead. I couldn't look away from the warm, calming, light blue glow. The hazy ball seemed to be pulsing. Somehow, I knew it was nothing to be afraid of.

"What is that?"

When he didn't answer, I looked back at him. He was staring at the light, too.

It grew brighter and floated closer until it was within arms' reach. Then the light morphed into a beautiful faery with translucent wings fluttering quickly. She had long brown hair, which reached halfway down her back and big, green eyes. "I'm Laurel. Noe sent me."

"Noe?"

"Yes. She said you were lost."

Oh that Noe. I could have just kissed her. Noe was a predictor. She could see the future. She had trouble seeing things when demons were involved, but she must have been able to see us getting lost. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." She smiled. "Now, let's get you out of here."

Nodding, I stood up. "Ow!" I yelled and fell back to the ground. I had forgotten the demons had chewed off a piece of my leg for dinner.

"What's wrong?" Daxton asked.

Laurel turned back around and flew closer. I pulled up my pant leg a little higher exposing the nasty wound.

“Demon bite?” Laurel asked.

“Yes.”

She put her tiny hand in her pocket and pulled out a vial. “I have some faery salve. It’ll help.” I knew it would help. I had used it many times when demons had gotten a hold of me. I could hardly feel her touch as she smeared the salve over the wounds. “There. Give it a few minutes, and you should be able to walk on it.”

She flew a circle around us. I assumed she needed to make sure the area was still demon free. My leg started tingling. I leaned on Daxton and stood up again. Very carefully, I put pressure on my leg. It felt a little weird, but it wasn’t painful. “I think I’m ready now.”

“Follow me,” Laurel said, her bell-like voice sounding urgent.

Her glow brightened again, and she flew ahead of us. We followed. By the time we got back to the car a couple of hours later, the dark sky had started to turn to a lighter shade of blue.

Laurel turned to us. “Here you are.”

“Thank you so much Laurel.” I smiled at her.

“Yes, thank you,” Daxton added.

“You’re very welcome. I’m glad I could help, child of the angels.” Our eyes met and she smiled back. Then she flew away.

Daxton laughed. “Child of the angels, huh?”

“It has a nice ring to it.”

“How’s your leg?”

“It’ll be fine. Are you okay?” I realized I hadn’t asked him if he had gotten hurt.

I lifted up his shirt and examined his back and chest before he could even answer. He laughed. “I’m okay. I guess you’re tastier than I am.”

I smiled and threw my arms around him. “I love you.” I pulled him closer and kissed him.

A shudder ran down my back. It felt like we were being watched. “Let’s go home.”

We hurried into the safety of the car, but as we pulled away, I could see a pair of red eyes in a bush. I knew they were always watching...waiting for their chance to get us.

* * *

“The Gifted Teens” Series by Talia Jager

Book One: [The Ultimate Sacrifice](#)

Book Two due to be released at the end of 2011

Talia Jager spends most of her time writing in the bathroom with a steady supply of chocolate, counting the days until her hormonal teenage daughter leaves for college...

<http://taliajager.blogspot.com/>

The Village of Those Who Touch the Dead

M. Edward McNally

Yu Pao Long was not much of a horseman. He was a man of back alleys and twisting lanes, and so had never had much cause to climb up on an animal's back. It felt unnatural, but thankfully the spare horse brought by the village boy proved a docile beast. The boy led the way on a pony and the horse followed without Yu Pao having to convince it to do so.

They passed beneath the great Jade Gate of Tshéh and out of the port city to the desolate countryside stretching south. Polished brass cannons on the ramparts behind them pointed the way, but the guns were only ornamental. No invader would ever approach the city from the south, for the terrain there was unsuitable for an army. Centuries ago the lowlands had been drained, and a wide stone road on arches had been built by some Duke or Prefect who wished both a monument to his own practicality, and employment for the people of the city. In time the area around the sublime bridge had become a fashionable place for the wealthy of Tshéh to raise funerary monuments to both their ancestral and newly dead, and a vast network of graveyards and gardens came to fill the lowlands. It had been a beautiful place of tranquility and repose, as Yu Pao understood it, but such things never last.

A generation ago a typhoon off the bay had breached the coastal berms and dykes, inundating the lowlands and leaving the grand stone road as a muddy causeway that bisected what was now a shallow, dismal swamp. Twisting trees and stone memorials to the long-since dead stretched to the horizon. The taller monuments jutting above the brackish water were choked with vines and creepers that seemed to be trying to strangle the stone, with the patience of eons.

The place was not pleasant and it had an evil reputation, so while the causeway still rose above the morass few people cared to use it after dark. There was heavy traffic even in the late morning, and the two riders moved around groaning wagons bound for the great port that acted as a magnet for the produce of the whole province. The sun was bright but the autumn day cold, and while the brambly swamp to either side did not look quite so miserable by daylight, Yu Pao's mood as he rode in silence remained dark.

They were not going far. After only three miles the ground rose as the area of the flood was behind them. A cluster of inns and freight yards lined dry ground by the road, but the boy on the pony led Yu Pao around them and up a modest hill along a well-worn path. A small village was nestled just beyond the rise, facing out over the swamps and the obscured monuments. When the necropolis had enjoyed its time of fashion, this village and its people had enacted the funerary rites observed there. They were made to do so well outside of Tshéh's walls, for the mortuary profession was among the most Unclean of callings. Though that time was over and the village of today was little different than

any other around the port, it still retained an old name in the rustic dialect of the peasants. They called it the Village of Those Who Touch the Dead.

The center of the village was made up of old stone buildings that had once been workshops—of a kind—or crematoriums. All were now homes. Around them in a circle stretched ruder hovels, and the boy on his pony led Yu Pao to one on the northern outskirts, with the swamps immediately below at the back end of the hill. Yu Pao had never seen the cottage, but he knew it from Jing-Sheng's fond description: Humble but scrupulously maintained with a swept walk and bright red shutters under the sweeping eaves of old, mismatched tiles. The village was largely empty with the peasants out in the fields, but a cluster of old men waited by the front walk, keeping their distance from the dark, open door.

The boy dismounted first and held the horse's bridle. Yu Pao swung out of the saddle, long hair in a top-knot swishing across the iron-shod *tetsubo* club strapped to his back. The weapon, along with his crisp civilian clothes, was enough to identify the man from Tshih to the old villagers. They knew what he was, and they gave polite bows.

Yu Pao ignored them for now as he marched down the path to the front door, and inside. The place was small, having only two rooms, and the door allowed in just enough light to hint at a clean kitchen of modest furnishings, countertops and an old plank table. The second room was separated by a painted screen before the doorway, and the smell made Yu Pao jerk his head even as he entered.

The back shutters were open, allowing in light and more than a few fat, black flies from the swamp below. The room was a sleeping chamber with mats on the floor, and Jing-Sheng was sprawled across the larger of the two. Yu Pao knew him mostly by the intricate tattoos from his left wrist to elbow: Images of choppy waves, a sea dragon, square coins with hollow centers. Jing-Sheng's face was mauled, the blood already congealed in his long hair on the floor around his head like a dark corona. His abdomen was dug out like a half-made canoe, and the flies trundled busily about on exposed entrails.

Yu Pao looked down at his old friend and Clan brother only briefly before spreading a blanket over the remains. Flies trapped under it buzzed angrily. He turned away and marched back outside.

The boy with the horses and the village elders had found somewhere else to be. One man waited in the packed-dirt street, leaning on a staff. His face was so wizened it seemed to be shriveling into itself beneath a sparse beard of long gray and black hairs intermixed. The shapeless old robes draping him may have started as white long ago, but they were now a grimy yellow. One eye was milky and sightless, the other was sharp and steel gray. It was that one he focused on Yu Pao before bowing.

"Gentleman of the city," the old man said.

Yu Pao had no interest in pleasantries. "What happened here?" he demanded, hands in fists at his sides. Besides his *tetsubo*, Yu Pao wore a long *tantu* dagger in a sheath on his hip. The shorter blade of a throwing *uchni-ne* rode within his right sleeve.

The old man straightened as much as he was able and got quickly to the point.

"None know for certain. The woman Baojia awoke and found your friend as you see him now. She has no memory of anything that happened in the night."

"That seems unlikely," Yu Pao said, voice as ever polite, but unmistakably hard. "It would not have been quiet."

“No,” the old man agreed. He had plainly seen Jing-Sheng’s body, the lower ribs snapped and wrenched open. “Yet what happened in that room may have occurred without the woman knowing, for she may not have been there. Not as herself.”

Yu Pao looked more carefully at the old man’s robes: Voluminous and of a cut that had once been in style, long ago. The feet poking from beneath the hem were in worn cloth shoes with pointed toes.

“You are no sort of mayor of this village,” Yu Pao said, and the old fellow shook his head once.

“I am not. My name is Da-An, and for a time I was court *wujen* in the Emperor’s service.”

“A wizard,” Yu Pao said, though without much enthusiasm. As a native of the cosmopolitan city of Tsheh he was not burdened by any superstitions regarding the practitioners of magic. He did, however, know that their craft was often about as reliable as a wet matchlock pistol. Yu Pao was a man who appreciated the sureness of a tempered steel blade.

“So I was,” Da-An said. “And though it has been many years now since I walked that path, I still know the shadow left behind by the visit of a dark spirit.” The man’s single eye focused on Yu Pao’s. “It is something that is easier to show, than it is to tell.”

* * *

The woman awaited them at a neighboring house some distance from her own. The mistress of that place was in her yard with a pack of small children running around her, one of whom stopped playing and met Yu Pao’s eyes. He was a small boy whose face was familiar enough that he must have been Baojia’s young brother.

Baojia herself sat inside at a kitchen table, though she stood as Yu Pao entered. Her eyes were red from weeping and they widened as she saw him, for they had met several times when she had visited Jing-Sheng in the city.

“Mr. Yu Pao Long,” she said formally and began to bow, but Yu Pao stopped her with a gesture.

“Do not concern yourself with that, Jia,” he said familiarly. “This is a time for condolence, not manners.”

The woman met his eyes. She was indeed very pretty, for Jing-Sheng had loved pretty things. Peasant or not, the young woman had the look of health and cleanliness, accentuated now as she had plainly just bathed. Whatever had or had not happened in her sleeping chamber over the night, it was likely she had awakened soiled by her lover’s disembowelment.

“I am so sorry, Yu Pao,” she said. “I have no idea, cannot imagine...this thing is unspeakable.”

“For us both, I am sure,” Yu Pao agreed.

Da-An had entered behind him and moved quietly to one side, across the table from Baojia. The woman gave the shriveled old man an uneasy look. He held a small, flat object wrapped in cloth before him, little bigger than a deck of painted cards.

“You understand what Da-An believes has happened?” Yu Pao asked, and Baojia nodded, glancing from him to whatever it was the *wujen* held, and back.

“Yes, but I do not believe I could...”

“Jia,” Yu Pao said, catching and holding her dark eyes with his. “Two weeks ago, after we all attended the spectacle at the Imperial Theatre, you chose to return here alone, after dark.”

“My brother was sick,” Baojia said. “And you and Jing-Sheng had to...work.”

Yu Pao nodded. “Da-An says you returned to the village only at daylight, and in a disheveled condition. With no memory of the journey home.”

“Were you marked?” Da-An asked, and Yu Pao saw that Baojia would not be a good bluffer at a game of dice or cards, for she was all tells. Her head snapped toward the old man and she blinked rapidly, one hand rising toward her own breast before she lowered it back to her side and gripped the material of her coarse robe.

“I...I was...”

“Bitten,” Da-An said, and the woman gave a nod that was almost a spasm.

Yu Pao met the wujen’s eyes and nodded. He looked around, picked up a dry cloth from a counter, and swiftly twirled it into a band. Baojia blinked at him with her slashing eyebrows high.

“Da-An believes, if things are as he thinks, that there will be a shadow upon you,” Yu Pao said gently. “Something that can be seen, but only by others. It is necessary that you are blindfolded, though only for a moment.”

Da-An set his object on the table and carefully unwrapped the cloth. There was a woman’s hand mirror within: An expensive thing of clear, unblemished glass, wrought around in silver scrollwork. Baojia looked from it to the blindfold in Yu Pao’s hands and seemed as alarmed by the one as the other. He mouth moved without speaking, and Yu Pao said her name again.

“Baojia. I am the friend and Clan brother of Jing-Sheng, who cared for you greatly. I vow that you need not fear me. I am here to help, as my brother would want.”

Baojia stared at Yu Pao, blinking more and more as it seemed her eyes might fill with tears. Da-An had begun to mutter, moving one hand with crooked fingers above the mirror on the table. Yu Pao held up the blindfold, and after a moment Baojia took it in trembling hands. She tied it across her own eyes while her hands continued to shake.

Da-An fell silent and held up the mirror with only his fingertips on the silver edges, as far as possible from the glass. Yu Pao took Baojia gently by the shoulders, and turned her to face across the table. He looked at her reflection in the mirror.

It was still her. Though instead of the blush of health and youth, her face was gray and waxy, cheeks hollow and her fine nose now wide, with flaring nostrils. But the main difference was her mouth. It stretched twice its real length in the glass, almost reaching her jaw bone. It was a line of sharp, snagged shark teeth: So many that it seemed they must be locked together to hold her mouth closed. But they moved, rasping together like steel as she spoke.

“Can you see anything?” Baojia asked. Yu Pao focused all his will to not dig his fingers into her narrow shoulders.

“A shadow,” he said, and nodded for Da-An to lower the mirror before he removed the blindfold.

* * *

The rest of the afternoon was busy. Yu Pao spoke at length with Da-An, saw to it with the village elders that Jing-Sheng's remains would be handled, then returned on the borrowed horse to Tshah. He spoke to the chief councilor of the Clan, a man he called "Uncle," and obtained certain permissions. Then he went to the Concordant Market by the south docks, and there found Qiao Lan—working. She was tasked this day to oversee the merchants, ensuring that those who were paying protection to the Clan were not robbed, while others were. Yu Pao bought her dinner from a cart with a great steaming vat of noodles on top, and they ate from wooden bowls while standing in the busy market square, adroitly handling chopsticks and slurping loudly as was the custom. Both stopped eating for a time, Yu Pao explaining the plan while Qiao Lan stared at him, aghast.

"With the eye of the *buso* that infected her," Yu Pao concluded, using the common name for a dark spirit, "the wizard says he can fashion a cure for the disease. An untreated person will become *buso* themselves in a matter of weeks."

"So what?" Qiao asked. "That is beyond your duty here, Yu Pao. Our Clan brother is dead, the debt we owe is upon the one who killed him. All obligations will be paid. There are no exceptions."

"There are not," Yu Pao agreed. "But the woman was only a weapon cast by the *buso*. I have spoken to Uncle, and it has been agreed. The thing we do will be to the honor of the Clan."

Qiao rolled her eyes. Her face was rather plain apart from a full mouth that was distractingly expressive.

"Why is it that 'honor' only gets involved when I am to be used as bait?" she asked, frowning sharply. She eyed Yu Pao and paused to inhale one more noodle. "And why come to me? Surely any of our brothers and sisters would be willing to do this thing, since it is so very honorable."

"Because I am, as ever, confident in your abilities, Skillful Orchid," Yu Pao said, and she smirked at him. "Also, you owe me."

Qiao blinked and pursed her lips. "How do you figure?"

Yu Pao looked to either side. Evening was drawing near, but some mothers with children were still buying dinner at the food carts on their way home. They gave Yu Pao and Qiao Lan a wide berth, for the club across the man's back and the pistols at the woman's hips left little doubt what the pair of them were, and no one wanted to jostle a *yakuza*. Still, Yu Pao leaned in closer to Qiao and spoke quietly.

"I 'figure,' because while I performed certain services for you, of a sexual nature, they were not reciprocated before you had moved on."

Qiao blinked again, though her mouth flickered in a smile.

"Oh. Right. I had plain forgotten that."

"Thanks a lot."

Qiao snorted and chuckled. She had a throaty laugh that was not very ladylike, but could also be quite distracting.

"Fine then, for honor and obligation. When do you mean to do this?"

"Tonight."

Qiao tilted her head. "What, like *now*?"

"I'm sure you had other plans when your shift ends," Yu Pao said, "but bring him along. We'll need a third. Who would it be these days, anyway?"

"Hao Gao."

Yu Pao raised his own eyebrows. "The dumb bumpkin from the north?"

Qiao pursed her lips again, apparently considering the defense of her present beau, but finally gave a shrug.

"That's the one."

* * *

Hao Gao's name meant Good and Handsome, and it was annoying to Yu Pao as it suited the young man. He was tall and well-assembled in face and form; his silhouette in the moonlight looming above Yu Pao's as the two men walked slowly down the causeway road. The northerner's straight back was unbowed by the heavy musket on a sling. Far ahead of them, a single spot of light shone where Qiao Lan was walking alone.

Hao said nothing for a long time, until the trio separated by distance had walked perhaps half the length of the causeway connecting the city to the village. To either side, the aspect of the swampy graveyard was entirely different under the night sky. The clouds above were patchy, and as they moved across the landscape of black trees and silvery stone, the shafts seemed to flicker and beckon like signals. Or warnings.

"Mr. Long," Hao Gao said, formally as Yu Pao ranked him within the Clan. The boy would have only a single band of tattoos on his wrist at this point. Yu Pao made no answer as he watched the bobbing lantern light out ahead of them intently. It was swaying quite a bit, which would mean Qiao was walking with a pronounced and fetching roll to her hips. Probably not necessary in these circumstances, but surely habit whenever she operated as bait.

"I feel as though I should say something," Hao Gao said. "I am not ignorant of your previous relationship with Qiao Lan, and feel it should be...in some way acknowledged."

"Nothing to acknowledge," Yu Pao said. "The Orchid found my love-making too...piercing and world-shaking. It is a burden I bear."

Hao Gao stopped walking for a stride; Yu Pao knew because they were carrying a limp fishing net between them and he felt the tug. He sighed and looked back at the tall fellow's shape in the dark.

"You have the woman, Hao Gao. Why not leave me with that?"

Hao paused another moment before saying, "Fair enough." He resumed walking, and Yu Pao thought the young man from the north country was perhaps not as dense as he often seemed.

They were well beyond the halfway point when the light ahead stopped, as did the men. Yu Pao gave Hao a push on the shoulder and the two moved apart, raising and stretching the net between them. Yu Pao narrowed his eyes though he could see nothing but the unmoving light in the distance, for a larger mass of drifting clouds had blotted out the moon and stars. Hao started to speak but Yu Pao hissed for silence.

The light ahead dropped to the ground, the wick within the lantern sputtering, and Hao gave a cry.

"It is fine," Yu Pao whispered. "She dropped it to run. Lower the net."

Hao did so along with Yu Pao, lowering the weighted casting lines to the stone surface of the road so that Qiao could run across it as she fled toward the men, and they could stand to snare what chased her. It was a simple plan, which Hao threatened to unravel immediately.

“She’ll never make it back this far.”

“Shut up. Yes she will.”

“You...you can’t know that for sure...”

“Trust her. She’s not shy, she would be screaming by now were there trouble.”

The net was pulling in Yu Pao’s hands as Hao inched forward. Yu Pao hissed and gave it a sharp tug, then fell over on his back as Hao released his end. The young man shouted Qiao’s name, and raced toward her in the dark.

“Terrible taste in men,” Yu Pao muttered, scrambling to his own feet and leaving the now useless net lying in the road as he ran after the tall dullard, whipping his tetsubo from his back.

What happened in the dark was totally predictable. Qiao and Hao Gao collided at a sprint with a grunt and an irate profanity. Yu Pao could only dimly make out the thrashing tangle of them as he stepped around it, holding his club out in front and snarling “Light something!” The blackness ahead of him was profound, though he thought he could hear nails rasping across stone.

“Give me a flint!” Qiao’s voice demanded.

“I, I don’t have one...” Hao Gao mumbled thickly, sounding half-stunned. Qiao swore again.

“It is a good thing you are pretty,” she snarled, then rose behind Yu Pao and fired a pistol in the air.

She was holding the oil-soaked head of a torch to the breech of the wheel-lock. In the flash of the spark, Yu Pao saw something gray and humanoid scrambling toward him on all fours, and he lunged to meet it, swinging his club. The torch bloomed into life and he saw more detail. The buso was a naked thing of gray flesh pulled tight around sharp bones, with a now-familiar gaping mouth of shark teeth in rows, set beneath a single, red eye in the center of its horned skull. Yu Pao swung low for its knee, thinking to cripple it, but as the creature was loping on all fours the iron-shod tetsubo crashed into its left elbow.

Bone snapped and the buso emitted a hissing roar but it pressed on, shoulder driving into Yu Pao’s side and spinning him to the ground as though he had been clipped by a passing wagon. The thing sprang at Qiao Lan, holding her torch aloft, and she whipped the creature across the face with her spent pistol even as it plowed into her. It tried to seize her but the arm Yu Pao had hit flopped useless and only one clawed hand of filth-encrusted nails snagged her tunic. Qiao shook loose of the garment and it tore the rest of the way off of her, revealing a thick vest of heavy leather from which three charged pistols still hung. Her arms were bare and the left was tattooed from wrist to shoulder, and as Yu Pao knew from fond experience, more than halfway across her back.

The buso rolled across paving stones, scrambling up to face the trio of yakuza again. Yu Pao got to his feet and dropped his club in preference of his uchi-ne, sliding the blade into his right hand from the sleeve of his coat. Qiao dropped the spent gun and drew another, but before he could throw or she could shoot, Hao Gao stood up in front of both of them.

“Get down!” Yu Pao and Qiao shouted together, but before either could have added “Jinx!” the buso sprang on its sinewy legs and crashed into Hao Gao as he struggled to shake his musket free from the shoulder sling. The big man reeled back, jerking his head away as the toothy maw snapped in front of his face and the red eye gleamed. Filthy nails

tore bloody gouges down his thighs through heavy trousers as Hao Gao screamed and flailed, musket swinging loose from one arm. The stock of the long gun whipped through the air, and hit Qiao in the ear.

Her eyes fluttered and she sat down hard in the road, torch falling to the pavement. Yu Pao let the mass that was the creature raking and snapping at Hao Gao stagger past him, then stepped behind it and drove his uchi-ne hard into the buso's armpit.

The thing made its hissing roar and sprang away, scampering across the road even as Hao Gao finally fell to the ground. It took Yu Pao's blade with it and the cord connecting the hilt to a loop around his wrist played out, for an uchi-ne was meant to be drawn back in, if a throw missed. Thinking the blade would pull free Yu Pao dove for Hao Gao's musket, but as the buso reached the edge of the circle of torchlight, just at the edge of the causeway itself, the creature grabbed the cord with its good hand even as it dove off the side.

Yu Pao widened his eyes and was yanked forward off his feet, knees and elbows bashing stone and his right arm shooting forward as all the creature's plummeting weight pulled at the cord. He slid roughly after it, drawing his tantu dagger to slash the cord, but did not have time before his chin banged the curb. The world behind Yu Pao's eyes went white and star-filled, and he seemed to be falling through space. He heard but did not really feel the splash.

The water of the swamp was awful, slicked-over with algae and tasting of corruption. It was however enough to shock Yu Pao back into the world and he jerked and spat as he sat and then stood in it, the cord to his wrist now slack. The water was only to his knees but the night was again wholly black down below the causeway bridge. There was tall stone beside him and Yu Pao put his back to it, though he did not know if it was a stanchion or a grave.

"Yu Pao?" Qiao's voice called above him, and when he answered, "Alive," the guttural hissing came from only a few feet in front of him.

Clouds passed by the moon. The gray light shown down on an alleyway of monuments, the names on the graves long-since scoured away by the brackish water. Yu Pao had his back to one as did the buso facing him, shattered arm hanging limp and black blood staining its side. The red eye burned and row upon row of teeth were revealed as the thing's whole face seemed to split in a leer.

Club up on the road, two blades lost in the water somewhere. Yu Pao had nothing in his hands but his hands, and the soulless thing leapt at him.

* * *

Baojia underwent no change that night, but not surprisingly she could not sleep. She had been sealed inside her home by her friends and neighbors, shutters and doors all nailed shut, and the little house was hot and cloying. She sat in a chair in the dark kitchen, for though she had scrubbed the sleeping chamber all day after Jing-Sheng had been removed, with the windows shut the lingering smell was trapped inside with her.

Long after midnight there was a knock on the door that made Baojia jerk, then cringe away. The knocking was repeated, and her name was softly called. Baojia crept to the door and put a hand flat against the wood, answering in a whisper.

"Yu Pao?"

“Yes.”

There was the whine of iron and wood as Yu Pao used a bar to pry the nails from the doorjamb. Baojia felt her way familiarly around her own kitchen and had the lamp lit on the table by the time the door opened, and Yu Pao limped in.

His face was scratched, clothes filthy, but he seemed otherwise well. He bowed to Baojia formally.

“It is done. The buso is slain. My friends have taken its remains to the wujen.”

“Da-An, he can...he can make a cure?”

“He claims so, yes.”

Baojia stared at the man, at Jing-Sheng’s good friend, and felt the deep grief she had walked with all day erupt within her. She sobbed, hard, and threw her arms around the yakuza.

“I am so sorry, I am, I wish...I wish I had been killed by the monster, rather than this. It is not fair...”

“Very little ever is,” Yu Pao said, wincing for his aching body. Baojia noticed and released him, drawing back.

“I am sorry, you are injured...”

“Trifles,” he said. “I have had worse and surely shall again.” He looked at her tear-tracked face in the lamplight. “You need rest, Jia. Have you slept at all?”

Baojia shook her head. “I cannot. I do not know where I go when I sleep.”

“That will be remedied soon,” Yu Pao promised. “At least sit down, and let me open your windows. The air in here is...unwell.”

Baojia nodded, and allowed Yu Pao to settle her down on a chair. The man limped back to the open doorway, where he had left the heavy iron pry bar leaning.

“You are far too kind to me, Yu Pao Long,” she said. He took up the bar.

“Nothing that has happened here is your fault, Baojia. You are a good woman and a good person. A good sister to your brother, and a friend to my friend. The obligation is on me.”

Baojia did not fully understand that, but she nodded anyway as Yu Pao stepped behind her.

* * *

The tall yakuza with bloody bandages wrapped around his legs deposited the basket on Da-An’s table, and lifted the lid. The old man stared down at the terrible visage of the buso: A nightmarish thing if ever he had seen one, no less fearsome in death than it had been in the quasi-life of the dark spirit world. A black bullet wound was blasted in its forehead, just above the intact red eye.

“Good shot,” the wujen said.

“Yes it was,” the woman with the brace of pistols strapped to her chest agreed. “You say your potion will keep?”

Da-An nodded, though a trifle sadly. He looked down at the eye and sighed. The woman spoke curtly.

“Then make it, and save it should something so terrible ever happen here again.”

The yakuzas moved for the door, and Da-An looked after them.

“It is not too late,” he said. “I can still cure the woman. Her role in this was none of her doing. The cause of your Clan brother’s death is dead in this basket.”

Hao Gao and Qiao Lan stopped, the tall fellow looking at the woman almost hopefully. Her gaze was steely in return. Hao Gao sighed, and spoke the mantra of the yakuza before the two of them returned to the darkness of the night.

“All obligations will be paid. There are no exceptions.”

* * *

Thanks for reading. The preceding story is set within the world of the Norothian Cycle (by M. Edward McNally) a Musket & Magic fantasy series in which Yu Pao Long is a player.

[The Sable City](#) (Book I)
[Death of a Kingdom](#) (Book II)
The Wind from Miilark (Book III), Coming Soon

Ed McNally is unable to produce a brief bio at this time as he has been treed by a marauding pack of javelinas in the Sonoran Desert.

<http://sablecity.wordpress.com/>

Haunting in OR 13

Alan Naves

The hospital corridor buzzed with activity. People wearing white lab coats dashed down the halls in both directions. Some sported Halloween regalia—Obama, Spiderman, and Wolfman zipped by. Above all the commotion, the intercom blared out loudly.

“Dr. Wilkens. Extension 2-0-1-6 stat...2-0-1-6 stat.”

Sara McCaffe blinked her pale blue eyes before looking briefly at the speaker overhead. Hmm...2016, she thought to herself. Medicine intensive care. Not her idea of fun.

While spending what seemed an eternity on the medicine service, she had grown to hate those stat pages. All of them emergencies. She was ready for a change. As a junior med student at California Medical College, she was looking forward to her next rotation—surgery. All her life she’d dreamed of being a surgeon. Now she’d get her chance. She couldn’t blow it.

Ignoring the throbbing in her head, Sara rushed down the crowded hallway, brushing by a fourth-year student in a beat-up Tiger Woods’ mask. Like her, he was in a hurry. The constant pressure was enough to drive a sane person mad. After what happened last year around this time during the surgery rotation—a student in the class ahead of her had cracked under the strain, and rumors were he’d been institutionalized—she vowed no amount of stress would ever cause her to buckle. No way.

“There,” she mumbled, staring toward the end of the corridor. A faded sign read McDermitt Building. Sara paused for a moment. It’d been two and a half years since she’d been in McDermitt building. Seemed like ages ago. Recalling what her instructor had told her, the surgery greens were kept in the basement.

Pushing the blonde bangs from her oval face, Sara walked to the entrance and shoved the dark gray door open. She ducked past a fake spider web. What was it with these people? Didn’t they realize Halloween was one big joke? Ghosts and goblins and witches and hauntings—great for kids, but not for someone serious about a career. Who really believed in that shit anyway? Not her.

She looked to her right. A flight of stairs led up to the second floor. From there it was a short walk to the operating rooms. To her left, a short ramp led down to a second door into the basement.

Descending toward her left, Sara could hear her breathing echo lightly off the narrow enclosed corridor walls. Shivering slightly, she didn’t remember it being so cold and damp in McDermitt Building. Folding both hands up under her arms, Sara neared the heavy metal door leading down below. Unexpectedly, it swung open, barely giving her enough time to step aside.

“Oh, didn’t mean to startle you.” Two women in green surgery scrubs stood in the doorway.

“No problem,” Sara lied, taking in a deep breath. Leaning against the wall, she gave the two scrub nurses some room to pass. “I’m a third-year med student. I was told to pick up my surgical greens down here.”

“Happy Halloween,” the plumper one wished.

“Halloween’s tomorrow,” Sarah corrected her. She would never understand all the fanfare associated with the day of werewolves and zombies.

“Okay,” the plump nurse replied, rolling her eyes at her skinny companion. “Oh, the greens. Keep going ’til you pass a large laundry chute. Across from the chute you’ll see a rust-colored door with disposal written on it. Just around the corner from that door they’ll be some shelves. Just pick out the size that fits,” she finished, resting her hands on her broad hips.

“Don’t I need to check them out or something?” Sarah asked.

“Na, there’s no one down there.”

“And only take what you need,” the thin nurse piped in. “If you students continue to walk off with the surgery outfits, there won’t be enough for us nurses.”

“Right,” Sara nodded, feigning concern.

Before Sara could leave, though, the plump nurse asked, “When’s your first surgery?”

“Early tomorrow morning. Supposed to be scrubbed and ready by 6:30.” Sara took a step toward the basement door.

“Where?”

“OR 13.”

“Operating Room 13?” The two nurses exchanged quizzical glances.

“Na, can’t be right,” the heavier one said. “Been no surgery in OR 13 for a long time now. How long you think, Bess?”

“Not for well...fifteen years. Who told you OR 13 anyway?” The thin one peered at Sara.

“My clinical coordinator. She gave me the schedule.”

The skinny nurse continued. “You relook your schedule, hun. Must be a typo. There’s been no surgery in OR 13 since the accident.”

“What?” Sara’s eyes widened.

“Very unfortunate. All five of ’em—just incinerated.”

“Come on, Bess,” the large nurse interrupted. “Quit making such a big deal about it to the new student. She’s gonna have enough on her mind with clamps and sutures.” Then looking back to Sara, “Hun, pick up your scrubs and don’t pay no attention to what ol’ Bess says.”

Sara watched as they began to leave.

Suddenly the plump one stopped. “Bess is right about one thing, though. Check and make sure you got the right operating room number.” Turning, the two nurses headed up the ramp out of McDermitt Building.

“You bet,” Sara nodded after them, wondering if they were just feeding her some hospital hearsay. Scrub nurses; they were probably trying to get her riled before her first case tomorrow. As if they were thinking it being Halloween wasn’t enough. Well, it didn’t work. Frowning, Sara started into the basement.

A stack of soiled surgical linen piled on the concrete floor marked the laundry chute. Most of the clothes were stained various shades of red.

Opposite the chute, she noted the door marked disposal. Now just around the corner.

“Shit,” she mumbled, clutching her knapsack tightly against one side, as a sudden metallic clang from the disposal chute caught her off guard. With her heart racing, she spun around and faced the origin of the absurd noise. A split second later, she sighed in relief. A new batch of dirty scrubs lay scattered below the chute opening.

Chuckling to herself, Sara returned to the business at hand—picking out her surgical greens and then getting back up to civilization. She didn’t like being alone in the basement.

Rounding the corner, Sara located the line of shelves. On the opposite wall, directly across from the uppermost stack of clothes, some jokester had taped a large cardboard skull. Real amusing. Grow up people.

She walked over to the uniforms and began to search. As the nurses had hinted earlier, the selection was not great. After several minutes she located what she was looking for, a medium top and a small pair of bottoms.

Stuffing the set of scrubs in her knapsack, Sara turned to leave. Around the corner she heard another load of dirty surgical scrubs hit the floor. This time, though, she reacted calmly, until the sudden wave of foul stench caused her to gag.

“Damn,” she grimaced looking about. Instinctively she began to breathe through her mouth. “What in the hell is that?”

Twisting around, she looked further down the hall leading past the scrub shelves. She wasn’t sure, but she thought it led to the freshman anatomy lab stairwell. However, this smell wasn’t of formaldehyde and cadavers. It resembled more the fetidness of decaying flesh.

Sara held her breath to avoid further gagging and started back toward the basement exit. Suddenly she stopped—dead in her tracks. The sight before her forced a breath as she gasped in surprise.

A tall emaciated figure dressed in poorly fitting faded green surgical scrubs stood silently about twenty feet in front of her. The man remained motionless in the passageway beside the stacks of dirty linen. In addition to the green scrubs, the silent figure wore an old frayed surgical mask covering his entire face except the eyes. Under one arm, he lugged an orange plastic pumpkin. It looked plastic anyway, though parts of it appeared to have been melted. And his eyes—something about the eyes.

Sara stepped back several paces. Her initial irritation turned to fear. The stranger’s eyes never blinked. She watched, trying to control her breathing. The dull, staring eyes didn’t waver; instead they remained fixed on her now perspiring face. She quivered slightly as a dribble of sweat slid down her neck. What the hell did this creep want? A fucking candle for his ugly melted pumpkin.

“Excuse me...Miss.” The emotionless voice caused Sara to jump. “I...just...needed...some...extra...surgical...gowns. Got...a...special...case...on...Halloween.”

Sara remained silent. Who the fuck was this clown? At the sound of his voice, though, her fear lessened somewhat. Stepping closer, she saw he also had on a thin blue hair net, the kind worn by personnel working around the operating rooms. Sara stood quietly while she watched him bend over, set the pumpkin down, and seize several scrubs

from the basement floor. After a few seconds, she decided this stranger meant her no harm. Probably just a prankster.

Hesitating at first, Sara spoke. “Ah...I’m one of the surgery students. I’m supposed to start tomorrow—just down here getting my scrubs.”

Sara waited for a response. There was none.

She cleared her throat. God, she had to get out of here. “What’s that terrible smell?” she asked in exasperation.

“What...smell...Miss?” Although the voice sounded almost mechanical, Sara detected an underlying sinister tone this time. *What smell!* She wanted to shout, but instead chose to keep quiet. This bozo had either lost his sense of smell or his marbles, or both. Whichever it was, Sara didn’t plan to wait around and find out. He and his deformed pumpkin could go and frighten someone upstairs if he thought this was so entertaining.

She could feel the stranger’s eyes on her as she stepped toward him. As she neared the spot where he stood, the vulgar stench increased in magnitude, leaving no doubt as to its origin. She felt her knees begin to tremble. Yet the strange figure remained quiet, never taking his cold stare from her. Sara did her best to avoid his eyes. Looking toward the damaged pumpkin instead, she took several rapid steps and rushed by.

Hyperventilating, she made a dash down the hall. Pushing through the metal door, she ran up the inclined passage out of McDermitt Building. She ignored the odd stares from onlookers as she rushed down the hall past the cafeteria. Nearing the closest exit, she began to slow her pace. Breathing deeply, a feeling of relief flooded her senses as she stepped out into the sunny California air.

Sara walked to a nearby concrete bench and sat down. Glancing at her hands, she was not surprised to see them still trembling. A group of nursing students, a few in witches’ garb, nodded to her as they strolled by. Wiping the residual perspiration from her forehead, Sara returned the gesture and forced a smile. Maybe she should loosen up some. After all, Halloween was supposed to be fun. Next year, she decided, she would wear a costume, maybe come to the clinics pretending to be a ruptured appendix or gallbladder. Perfect since she was going to be a surgeon.

The breeze tugged at her bangs clinging against her moist skin. She suppressed the desire to massage her throbbing temples. What a day, she thought in frustration as her fear gradually subsided. Reaching for her pack, Sara now wondered if she’d possibly misread her morning surgery schedule. She pulled the folded memo out from amongst her books. Eyeing a list of about twenty students’ names, it didn’t take her long to find what she was looking for. Sure enough, there, printed near the bottom of the page, was Sara McCaffe. And beside her name was a surgery case scheduled at 6:30 a.m. in OR 13.

On October 31st.

* * *

Having gulped down a ham and cheese sandwich, Sara retraced her steps down the hall to McDermitt Building, this time ascending the flight of stairs leading into the surgical suites.

Stepping into the second floor hallway, Sara approached two drab gray doors festooned with Happy Halloween. Under the pagan greeting, the words Operating Room

stood out in bold black lettering. Walking briskly she stepped through them into McDermitt Surgical Suite.

Pausing to get her bearings, Sara's attention focused on one of the nearby surgical rooms, OR 5 she thought it read. Two orderlies were busy transferring a patient to the operating room table. Several others, the surgeons Sara guessed, stood by the sink waiting to scrub in. Another doctor was busy with the oxygen cart at the patient's head. The hectic pace of the entire scene acted on Sara's adrenaline. She realized she'd be in their places one day—if all went as planned.

After a moment of reflection, Sara turned away from the ongoing scene and located the administrative nurses' station. "Excuse me."

The wrinkled gray-haired woman across the counter remained attentive to a chart in front of her.

"Excuse me," Sara persisted. "My name is Sara McCaffe. I'm a new third year student."

"And I'm Nurse Jenkins. What can I do for you?" She set the chart aside.

Sara reached into her knapsack and pulled out her copy of the AM surgery schedule. "Nurse Jenkins, according to my schedule here, I'm supposed to be in Operating Room 13 tomorrow morning. Is this—"

"That can't be right. Let me see that sheet," the craggy nurse cut in, reaching for the paper. "Miss McCaffe, I don't understand. It says right here OR 12, not OR 13. Who told you OR 13?"

Sara opened her mouth to answer. However her reply caught in her throat.

"God that odor," she whispered.

"What?" The nurse sounded perturbed.

Sara didn't care. Looking around, she failed to see anything unusual, though. The door to OR 5 was closed and besides the old administrator and herself, the only other person in the area was a tall masked orderly in surgical greens standing motionless next to an oxygen tank a ways down the hall. Was he watching her? She glanced away. To her dismay, though, she could find nothing to explain the faint but unmistakable scent of *dead tissue*. Sara's gaze darted back to Nurse Jenkins. The elderly lady's eyes were fixed on her.

"Ms. Jenkins?" Sara started before clearing her throat. "Do you smell anything odd?"

"No, why do you ask?"

"I don't know. It's just that...well, I just got the whiff of something like...ah...decaying tissue."

The old nurse grinned wryly. "You can do better than that for Halloween."

"I wasn't joking."

Sara glanced back down the hall of the surgical suite but saw no one. The orderly had vanished, along with the oxygen tank. She sniffed again. The vile smell had faded, too. She stood in silence, a puzzled look on her face.

"Now, Miss McCaffe. Let's get back to your schedule."

"Sure," Sara responded, her mind still clouded with the uncanny odor.

The wrinkled nurse continued. "As I was saying, your schedule is correct. Just show up on time tomorrow at OR 12 and your case will go as planned.

"What?" Sara questioned, reaching across the counter for the schedule.

"I said you will be in OR 12."

With a confused look, Sara examined the Xeroxed copy carefully. She paused. Sure enough, next to her name was OR 12. She scratched at her neck. This was really getting weird. Folding the schedule, she returned it to her pack.

“I could’ve sworn it said 13,” Sara yielded, stepping away from the counter.

Without smiling, Jenkins spoke. “You’re just nervous about tomorrow. Others in the past have been the same way. Every year we lose one.”

“What do you mean?”

“Lose one—a student drops out, fails, quits, goes loony. The stress of medical school breaks some of them.”

Sara forced a smile. “Well, that’s not me. Oh, one more question. Why don’t they use OR 13?”

Already clutching another chart in her hands, Nurse Jenkins replied, “They rarely use OR 13 anymore, especially on Halloween.”

“Why?”

“The medical center has other operating rooms that don’t carry that... stigma.”

“I’m not following you. Are you alluding to the fire that happened a long time ago?”

The nurse wouldn’t look at her as she perused a patient’s admit note. “The accident, yes, but more because of superstition, I suspect, than anything else. Surgeons prefer not to operate where some of the medical staff burned to death.”

* * *

An unexplainable blanket of apprehension hung over Sara as she wound her way out of the medical school complex and over to the library. Several things were on her mind. How could she have misread her surgery schedule? Something was not right. She didn’t make mental errors like that. And then that damn *dead* odor. Why was it only her that seemed to notice it?

The ten minute walk in the early evening air helped clear Sara’s head. Gazing at some of the brighter stars in the dusky sky, she wished Halloween were already here and gone. Then she’d be through with her first case and she’d know what to expect.

“To hell with it,” she finally sighed as she stepped up to the library entrance.

Positioned on a wood planter sat two big orange pumpkins, their crudely cut-out eyes staring at her. She stuck her tongue out at the largest one and went inside.

“Hello, Erma,” Sara smiled. The buffalo-humped librarian was busy shelving some books when Sara entered. Erma had been with the medical school for ages, it seemed.

“Evening, Sara. You doing okay?” the bent librarian inquired, standing as straight as her arthritic spine would allow.

“Start my surgery rotation tomorrow. Got my first case in the morning.”

“Uh-oh. Long hours.” Erma sounded concerned as she went back to shelving.

“Well, it shouldn’t be too bad. You know that’s what I plan to do—surgery.”

“That’s great. A real-life surgeon,” Erma smiled.

“Yep.” Suddenly a thought entered Sara’s mind. “Erma, how long have you been working here at the hospital?”

“Years, Sara.” She paused. “This library used to be over in old McDermitt Building, you know. Right where the anatomy and biochem labs are now.”

“Really?”

“Yes ma’am.”

Sara remained silent a moment, her mind working. “Erma, you don’t happen to know anything about an accident in one of the old surgery rooms some years back?”

Erma leaned back against one of the bookshelves, taking some of her weight off her feet. “You don’t mean that terrible Halloween fire, do you?”

“What happened?”

“Sara, dear, it was God-awful.” Erma looked solemn. “If I remember correctly, back then one of the operating rooms was used to treat psychiatric patients.”

“Psych patients?” Sara wavered.

“Used to take the really crazy ones up there for, what do you call it...shock treatment? Anyway, it was on a Halloween. They don’t really know what happened, but they think someone had turned the oxygen on and a short in one of the electrodes ignited the tank. Kaboom! The entire room became a raging furnace.”

Sara purposely tried to slow her breathing. “Any survivors?” she asked, trying her best to hide her angst.

“Are you kidding? The devil himself would have burned in that inferno. It was so unfortunate. We lost two doctors, both nurses, and oh that poor patient. Supposedly, he’d once been an orderly here, but was dismissed when a med student reported him for starting a fire in one of the hospital rooms. He was being treated for pyromania and severe schizophrenia.”

“How terrible.”

“What’s past is past.” The librarian patted Sara’s arm. “Study hard, dear.”

“I will.” But the throbbing in Sara’s head had returned.

* * *

Sara McCaffe, gowned in her surgical greens, stood outside the observation window of OR 12. An aseptic smell permeated the entire surgical suite. A short distance away, two surgical residents were busy scrubbing their hands, getting ready for the morning’s first case. Feeling anxious, Sara reached for her right eye in an attempt to mask the irritating twitch that had suddenly become evident. Screw Halloween. Just her bad luck—her first case in surgery fell on the devil’s day.

“Morning, Sara. You nervous?”

Sara turned toward the friendly voice. Recognizing Julie Charmaine, a fellow third year student, she smiled ruefully. “Got my case coming up, and for some reason, I don’t feel real confident.”

She was telling the truth, too. From the time her alarm went off at 5:00 a.m., Sara had felt a strange premonition about today.

Julie eased her pretty figure beside her. “Hey, don’t worry. From what I hear, they don’t let us third years even near a suture, much less a scalpel. We just gotta watch and act interested. Besides I’m going into psychiatry, not surgery. What room you in?”

Sara glanced back, somewhat puzzled. “OR 12, here.”

Julie thought for a second. “That’s odd. My case is supposed to be here. See, there are the two residents scrubbing in.” Julie pointed to the near scrub sink.

Sara didn’t answer. Damn, she should have brought her schedule with her, she cursed quietly.

“Who told you OR 12?” Julie asked, tying her surgical mask in place.

“Some nurse on the evening shift.”

“Hm. There’s one other OR on the other side of that surgical supply room.”

“Julie, you ready?” A loud voice boomed from the scrub sink.

Julie turned to Sara. “See ya later. Oh, and good luck. Don’t let the goblins bite you.”

“Not funny.” Sara watched Julie leave. “What is this bullshit,” she muttered under her breath. Her first day on the toughest rotation of med school and already a screw-up. Happy fucking Halloween.

Checking her watch, Sara decided against rushing back to scheduling administration. She’d definitely be late then. Shrugging her shoulders in frustration, she walked toward the next operating room. With each step, however, she noted an increasing awareness to all her senses. She could hear each breath clearly. She was conscious of each beat of her heart. She even felt the muscles of her legs tense.

Just past the open door of the surgical supply room, Sara slowed. Nearing the next observation window, she came to a halt. A one and a three glared at her from above the door.

Without holding back, Sara stepped up and peered into the gray interior of OR 13.

* * *

Expecting to see an empty operating room, Sara experienced an immediate feeling of relief at the scene on the other side of the glass. She watched as two individuals in green scrubs arranged several trays of instruments on the metallic table next to the far wall. Although they were facing away from her, Sara thought they looked like scrub nurses getting things ready prior to the patient’s arrival. Green surgical sheets were draped across the OR table. Off to the side stood the anesthesia cart. Even the OR lights were on. So they still use this damn room, she thought, somewhat vexed that she’d allowed herself to be disturbed by the scheduling confusion.

“Let’s do it,” Sara mumbled. Walking to the scrub sink, she reached for a mask at the nearby dispenser. After tying it in place, she began scrubbing—five minutes each hand. Hearing the OR door open, she looked up just in time to see three more figures dressed in green enter the room, the last one carrying an oxygen tank and something orange. Straining her neck, Sara caught glimpses of them through the window as they moved pieces of medical equipment in an animated fashion. She looked for some of the other surgery residents, but the rest of the surgery area was oddly deserted.

With her sterile hands held out in front of her, Sara walked to the OR door. Placing her back against the hard surface, she pushed her way in so as not to contaminate them. Once inside, she turned and faced the operating room table.

At the sight of the empty surgery sheets, her pulse quickened. Wondering where the patient was, Sara groaned beneath her mask when the same irritating twitch she’d felt earlier returned. This time, though, she was helpless to massage it without dirtying her hands again. The two individuals by the surgical trays stood motionless, their backs to Sara. The doctors faced each other by the OR table, as if locked in an emotionless trance. Neither moved.

Sara took a deep breath, and then another. Suddenly the air seemed so stifling. Her temples began to throb, only making her twitch worse. Breaking out in a cold sweat, she

felt her legs shake. Damn, she wanted to scream, “What’s happening?” but her voice strangled in her constricted throat. An instant later, the now familiar decaying odor penetrated her mask. Gasping, Sara froze in fright. Afraid to look, she slowly turned in the direction of the anesthesia cart.

Sara stared in shock at the sight before her. The same tall emaciated figure she’d encountered in the basement two floors below now stood by the oxygen tank. His partially melted pumpkin sat at his feet.

Only this morning—*he wore no mask!*

Sara suddenly felt queasy as she tried in vain to keep from looking at his face, or what was left of it. The horrendous hypertrophic burn scars of mounded skin made his features humanly unrecognizable. Charred teeth jutted grotesquely from a gaping wound where his mouth should have been. Two irregular holes piercing an ill-angled scar were all that remained of a nose. And those eyes! Sara gulped hard. God, those eyes—those mean unblinking eyes. *They had no lids!* Horrified, she stepped back toward the operating room exit.

“Who...are...you?” she stammered. The stench thickened.

Still the ghastly figure did not move. He remained silent, wearing only a hideous sneer on his inhuman face.

A subtle movement caught Sara’s attention. Her eyes darted to his hand. Within seconds, she heard a hissing noise, like the sound of a tea kettle beginning to boil. She stared in abject terror and disbelief. *The hissing was coming from the single tank of oxygen!* It increased in intensity as the horribly contorted fingers twisted their grip.

With sweat stinging her eyes, Sara rushed for the OR door.

“Help me... Damn... Help me!” she screamed as the palms of her hands immediately blistered from the burning surface of the metal door. Panicking, she tried again. The door still would not budge. Terrified, Sara spun away, clasping her seared hands together in a hopeless attempt to lessen the pain. The putrid odor thickened more, choking the air from her lungs.

No longer able to hold it back, Sara doubled up, heaving into her mask. The acidic fluid stung her throat as she ripped the surgical covering from her face. Gagging, she coughed again in an effort to clear her lungs.

Suddenly a new terror touched her senses. Sara’s head shot up at the strange shuffling sound.

“Oh, God, no,” she grieved, as she felt the blood drain from her face. She looked on in horror as the other four lifeless forms turned and confronted her. All wore the hideous facial scarring of long past burns. None spoke as they moved robotically in her direction. Panic-stricken, Sara flung all her weight against the operating room exit door. It didn’t budge. She tried again and failed, only this time a sharp pain stabbed her chest. Gasping for air, she swung around.

“Help me! Goddammit, someone please help me!” she screamed, smothering in the foul stench. Sinking to her knees, Sara began to weep. “Oh no, please, no, not me. I want to be a surgeon.”

Looking up in desperation, her eyes glimpsed the intercom speaker. In one futile attempt, Sara lunged for it, flipping the button to the ON position.

“Help! Help! Stat to OR 13. Please, anybody, stat to OR 13, STAT!” Sensing an inanimate touch on her shoulder, Sara bolted around.

She cried out as the gnarled fingers dug into her flesh. Sinking to her wobbling knees, she began to sob uncontrollably.

As the grotesquely silent forms pulled her toward the operating table, her resistance drained. She caught glimpses of the deformed pumpkin, its toothless grin, and then the flames. The foul smell of singed hair intensified her panic. She screamed repeatedly while her flailing body was forcefully restrained under the steamy OR lights. The smell of burning human flesh climaxed rapidly into excruciating pain. She had time for one last bloodcurdling scream of undefined terror before the acute onslaught of convulsive agony blasted Sara McCaffe into abysmal darkness.

* * *

“Okay, that’s the last treatment. Quick, get me a tongue blade. She’s having a seizure.”

“Yes ma’am, Dr. Charmaine.” The thin nurse rushed to the crash cart.

“Oh, and Bess,” the concerned doctor added. “Tell them I’ll be down to the clinic in a minute. We’re almost through here.”

The experienced psychiatrist displayed confidence in supporting the woman’s airway. Her familiarity with post-electroshock seizures told her she’d be out of it in thirty seconds.

“Sara. Sara.” Dr. Charmaine spoke calmly into the patient’s face as she peeled away the electrodes from her temples. The woman gagged once and then coughed several times before resuming her regular breathing pattern.

“Dr. Charmaine?” Bess asked, returning to the table.

“Yes, nurse?”

“What was all that gibberish she was muttering between treatments? Something about Halloween?”

The psychiatrist shrugged. “At times, Sara locks herself in her own world where no one else is allowed to enter. I really can’t explain—except that when she’s trapped in this private place she goes, it must be incredibly painful for her.” Then turning, she adjusted Sara’s head position. “Sara, look at me. Open your eyes.”

“Dr. Charmaine. Dr. Charmaine. Is that you?” the woman moaned.

“Yes, Sara. I’m here.”

“Dr. Charmaine...Is it over?”

“Is what over?”

“Halloween?”

“Today is not Halloween, Sara. Now relax and take some deep breaths.” She watched closely as her patient drew in several good breaths. “There you go. Excellent.”

“Dr. Charmaine?” Her voice sounded strained.

“I’m listening, Sara.”

She paused, taking in one more breath. “I had the most horrible dream. There was a fire. But...I can’t remember any more of it. Just that it was on Halloween.”

“Events like Halloween can trigger bad dreams, Sara.” After checking her pulse, Dr. Charmaine pulled the green sheets back over her. “Warm enough?”

“I’m fine.” Sara closed her eyes. “You know what, though, Dr. Charmaine?”

“No, what?”

“I decided on what I want to be when I get better.”

“And what’s that?”

“A surgeon, a real-life surgeon.”

Dr. Charmaine looked on, shaking her head sadly. Her patient always said the same thing—every year for the last ten years. And what had she said in the past about the dream—she couldn’t recall. But she never failed to bring up Halloween.

“That’s nice, Sara,” she finally answered. “Very ambitious of you.” Then turning to Bess, “You can untie her hands now.”

Waiting for Bess to get started, Dr. Charmaine again focused her attention on the disordered mind before her. “Sara,” she spoke calmly. “We’re going to loosen your restraints. You can go to sleep and we’ll be up to check on you later. Understand?”

“Okay, Doctor,” she replied, seemingly oblivious to the tremor over her right temple.

“Dr. Charmaine,” Bess said. “Come over here, please. Look at this.”

The concern in the nurse’s voice brought the psychiatrist over. After examining the woman’s hands, she looked up, a puzzled expression forming on her face.

“That’s strange. I’ve never seen anything like this before.” Dr. Charmaine gently touched the palms of her patient’s hands. “Look at these blisters, Bess. It appears as if she’s been...*burned*.”

“How’d she ever do that, Doctor?”

“I have no idea. We’ll have to get those cleaned up and dressed.” Then studying the blistered palms once more, she muttered, “Strange, really strange. Oh, Bess?”

“Yes, Doctor?”

“Please tell the cleaning staff they can come in and prepare the room for the next case.”

“Sure, Dr. Charmaine.” Bess turned to leave but stopped briefly, glancing once more at the girl. “You know, it’s such a shame.”

Agreeing tacitly, the psychiatrist wheeled the stretcher-bound patient toward the double exit doors. On cue, they swung open. Pausing for a moment, she looked into the pained expression of Sara McCaffe. Dr. Julie Charmaine frowned. As if it was only yesterday, she could still vividly recall the disturbed looks on the security guards’ faces as they carried her former classmate, screaming, kicking, and gouging, from that empty operating room. What was it that made Sara’s mind snap so completely ten years ago? Not so dissimilar to all the others—seemed every medical school class since she’d graduated had lost a student to lunacy. Scary weird, and on Halloween, too.

And poor Sara. She still desired to be a surgeon. Dr. Charmaine gently moved a strand of hair off her patient’s forehead. The closest she’ll ever get to a scalpel is a plastic butter knife.

Pushing the stretcher through the doors, Dr. Charmaine headed for the elevators, passing right through the tall masked orderly waiting outside.

Behind her, the orderly watched doctor and patient only briefly, before turning away and entering the room. With scarred twisted hands, he collected the spent electrodes. Leering, he tossed them inside the melted pumpkin. Then hobbling out the exit, he purposely made his way to the last operating room, down past the surgical supply area. Methodically, he stared through unblinking eyes at every aspect of the vacant room—the surgery table, the anesthesia cart, the oxygen tank. A disfigured sneer formed behind the faded surgical mask.

OR 13 was ready for its next case.
Tomorrow was Halloween!

* * *

You can read more about Dr. Julie Charmaine and her strange dream cases in the twisted horror thriller [The Unnatural](#).

Alan Naves was born in Texas, writes in California, and will probably die...someplace else.

<http://www.anaves.com>

Haunted House

Julia Crane

“Finally, we can show our true forms.” Keegan giggled and shook her hips to make the bells jingle.

Keegan, Anna and Lauren had decided to humor themselves and dress as their true forms for Halloween. Keegan attached exaggerated elf ears, a short green dress and boots along with the elf hat. She could pass for one of Santa’s helpers at the mall. Anna rocked an awesome witch outfit—it was all black but ripped-up, and, of course, she had a broom. Lauren wore a flowing purple fairy dress, wings and a magical wand.

“This is hilarious.” Anna laughed. “We spend our whole lives hiding who we are from humans, and one day a year we can be ourselves.”

Lauren lived downtown, so they decided to walk. They wanted to see all the kids trick or treating.

“We probably should have worn jackets.” Lauren wrapped her arms around herself and rubbed her arms.

“Yeah, but then no one could see our cute outfits.” Keegan twirled around and laughed.

Anna looked up at the crescent moon in the dark sky and sighed. “I love this time of year. Halloween is the best day ever.”

“You know they say this house really is haunted. I wonder if it will be scary.” Lauren turned to face the girls as she walked backwards.

“Turn around before you hit Harry Potter.” Keegan laughed.

Lauren turned to see the group of children dressed in various customs. The cutest was a tiny girl about two waddling in a big pumpkin outfit. Her little arms were sticking out on the sides. The costume was much too big, which only made her cuter.

“I wish we could get some of their candy.” Keegan eyed the pumpkins as they walked by.

“Keegan, you are always thinking about food. Don’t even think of taking candy from a kid.” Lauren shook her head. “Anyway, back to the haunted house. Aren’t you guys a little scared?” Lauren bit her lip, her eyes wide.

“It probably is haunted.” Anna shrugged. “We all know spirits are real. I heard a woman was murdered by her husband and her ghost still lives in the house.”

“How did he kill her?” Keegan looked at Anna curiously.

“Well, there are several stories, but the most common one she was found hanging at a height that meant there was no way she could have done it herself. It was over fifty years ago. I doubt it’s a true story.”

“That’s creepy. I think I’d be worried if her husband’s ghost was haunting the house.”

When they reached the house, the line was around the corner. A loud scream startled the girls, causing them all to laugh. Of course there was screaming, it was a haunted house after all.

“The house does look kinda scary,” Lauren whispered. She swallowed hard and wondered to herself if this really was a good idea.

Keegan looked up at the big grey house, shivering.

The paint was chipping off of the weathered walls. On the porch, an old rusty swing moved gently as if someone was in it. Some of the windows were cracked and a couple of shutters were barely holding on. Leaves floated all over the place despite the fact the breeze wasn't very strong.

Suddenly, the screen door opened and slammed loudly, causing everyone waiting in line to jump.

Someone laughed. “Those are some good special effects.”

People relaxed and laughed.

An hour later, it was finally their turn to enter the house. Keegan grabbed a hold of her friends' arms after they entered through the main door. Haunting music was blaring and cobwebs were all over the place. Once they turned the corner a screeching dude in a zombie mask jumped out at them.

“Wow, that was really pathetic.” Keegan rolled her eyes and they pushed by the zombie.

Cliché haunted house decorations were everywhere. Giant cotton spider-webs graced the doorways, while skeletons that rattled and moaned hung from the rafters. In one room, a strobe light flickered on walls splattered with red, and in another, a man dressed as a vampire threw open the lid to his coffin, startling them. Keegan had to grin at it all.

They came to another room with a long table. The ghoul behind it motioned for Keegan to come closer.

“Go ahead. Stick your hand in this bowl.”

The opening of the bowl was just big enough for a hand. Narrowing her eyes at the girl, Keegan did as she was told and squealed, jerking her hand out and wiping it on her legs.

“Eyeballs!” the ghoul cackled gleefully.

“It's peeled grapes.” Anna sighed, bored, as she rummaged around inside the bowl.

The girls shared a laugh, relaxing as they tried the other bowls before moving forward in the haunted house.

“Ok, guys this is lame.” Anna put her hand on her hip and stared at them.

“We could make it more interesting.” Lauren leaned in as if she had a secret to tell.

“What do you have in mind now, Lauren?” Keegan raised an eyebrow.

“Well, they have the upstairs closed off, but I bet we could get up there unnoticed. It's dark in here and everyone is occupied.”

“I like how you think.” Anna smirked.

No one was paying attention to them so they casually walked towards the stairs and quietly made their way up. The stair beneath Keegan's boot made a loud creaking sound halfway to the top. It caused them all to giggle nervously.

Once they made it to the second floor, Keegan laced her arms through her friends' and they shuffled down the long hallway, huddled close together. It was dark, but, thankfully, the glow from streetlights streamed through the windows giving a little

illumination. The frightening music drifting up from the floor below gave Keegan the creeps.

“Maybe this wasn’t the best idea.” Lauren gripped their arms tighter.

“Shhh, be quiet.” Anna elbowed her.

A closed door waited for them at the end of the hallway.

“Should we open it?” Anna asked.

“I don’t know. Maybe we should just go back downstairs.” Lauren’s voice wavered.

“Let’s just peek in. We can’t sneak upstairs at a haunted house and just run back downstairs.” Keegan grasped the handle and pushed the door open.

It was a large, empty area with high ceilings and a beautiful crystal chandelier that swayed gently above the center of the room. The walls were wood-paneled, dark and dingy with several empty, built-in bookshelves.

Anna pushed Keegan through the door and followed behind her with Lauren hanging on to the back of her dress. They had only taken a few steps on the scarred, hardwood floor when the heavy door slammed shut behind them. Jumping, they exchanged wide eyed looks.

Lauren ran over and tried to open the door, but it wouldn’t budge. Planting one foot firmly against the wood, she grasped the antique door handle and tugged with all her might.

“You’re going to hurt yourself. Let me try.” Anna pushed Lauren to the side. Wrapping both hands around the doorknob, she jerked and twisted her body, groaning with the effort.

“If you guys can’t do it, I’m not going to bother,” Keegan joked when Anna finally pulled away.

“Guys, we’re locked in a haunted house. No one would even hear us if we tried to scream over the noise below.” Keegan wrapped her arms around herself and stared up at the chandelier.

“Do you think that is where the woman was hung?”

“Shut up, Anna! You’re freaking me out!” Lauren inched closer to Keegan.

“I wish we could see better. Try the light.” Anna reached over and flipped the switch, but nothing happened.

Anna laughed, closed her eyes, and willed the flames to rise from her palms. “We almost forgot I’m a witch. Ready made flashlights.” At least there was something she could do. Anna had just recently gained a mentor to teach her about her powers. It was a slow process and she had a long way to go.

“Well, use your witchy ways to get us the hell out of here,” Lauren’s voice cracked as she spoke.

“Wasn’t this your bright idea, Lauren?” Keegan glared at her and tried the door herself, but it still wouldn’t budge. She banged on the door and screamed. “Help us!” But no one came to their rescue.

“At least we can see better thanks to Anna.” Lauren sounded relieved.

Suddenly, the chandelier started swinging more forcefully. They watched it with their backs pressed against the wall. Keegan squeezed tight to Lauren whose entire body trembled. Anna’s hands were shaking, causing the flames to waiver.

“If there is a spirit in here, we are not scared of you,” Keegan loudly proclaimed. She hoped she sounded braver than she felt.

The door they had just come through open and shut quickly. Anna let out a scream, her flames disappearing from the loss of concentration, and Lauren grabbed Keegan's arm with a death grip.

Keegan jumped then said quietly, "Ok, maybe we are a little scared."

"Please, let us go. We were just having fun. We didn't mean to disturb you." Anna sunk down on the ground and circled her arms around her knees. "We're sorry your husband killed you. My mother is a spirit walker. I'm sorry you have not been able to move to the other side."

A beautiful woman materialized in front of the window. Her long black hair and wan skin shone in the pale light of the moon shining through the window.

As she floated slowly towards the girls, they involuntarily moved backwards. "What do you know about me?" Her voice sounded musical to Keegan's ears. How could something so scary be so beautiful?

"We have heard rumors that a woman was killed by her husband in this house and her ghost still haunts here." Anna said meekly.

"That is all?" She sighed and looked up at the chandelier.

"Although, no one really believes the story. They think it was made up." Anna's voice sounded a little more sure this time.

"Your mother is a spirit walker?" The spirit asked, a hint of curiosity in her voice.

"Yes. She helps spirits crossover after death." Anna smiled slightly, thinking of her mother.

"Do you think she could help me?" The spirit floated closer to the girls.

"How could she help you?" Anna scratched her head and stared at the spirit.

"She could take me through to the other side. I have been stuck in this house for over fifty years. The new owners are boring. It's not even fun to scare them anymore. I swear if I have to spend one more day around those bratty kids..."

"Why didn't you go after you died? What made you want to stay in this world?" Lauren wondered aloud.

Her jaw hardened and her fists clenched tightly at her sides. "I wanted to see if my husband paid for what he did to me."

"Did he?" Keegan asked curiously.

"No, the bastard got off scot-free. They wrote my death off as a suicide. I haunted him until he eventually died of old age. After that, I could no longer cross over. I think I might have missed my chance. It makes me so angry to think he was able to cross over and I am stuck here."

Lauren looked up. "You can't leave this house?"

"No, I died here and this is where I have to stay, since I refused to go when my spirit walker came for me at my death. I have regretted it for years."

"I'm going to call my mom, if that's ok?" Anna opened her phone and stared at the woman.

The woman nodded her head and Anna called her mother and explained the situation. Anna closed her phone and said, "She is on her way over."

"Why didn't we use our cell phones to begin with?" Lauren groaned.

"Because we were too scared to think straight." Keegan laughed.

"This is so cool." Lauren clasped her hands together and grinned.

“You didn’t think it was so cool a few minutes ago when you were about to cry.” Keegan nudged her.

“Yeah, yeah, I admit it. I was terrified.” Lauren smiled sheepishly.

“Well, fairies aren’t exactly known for their bravery.” Keegan smirked.

“Hey, that is not true. I didn’t see you tapping into your elfin powers. I think we were all too scared to think straight.”

“Why did your husband kill you?” Anna asked.

“He thought I was cheating on him with his brother.”

“Were you?” They all said in unison.

“Of course not. He was just a crazy fool.”

Just then Anna’s mother, Jennifer, breezed through the closed door. “Wow, Anna, your mom is awesome.” Lauren clapped her hands together smiling. “It’s so cool to see her in her spirit form.”

Anna’s mother stood before the other woman. She was just as translucent, although Anna’s mother had a golden aura surrounding her.

“What is your name?” Jennifer asked softly.

“My name is Olivia. I am very grateful you agreed to come see me. Your presence humbles me. I was hoping you could help me move on from this life? I made a mistake, and I do not wish to be left here for eternity.”

“This is against regulations. You missed your opportunity. When death arrives you should not hold onto your old life.”

“I’m sorry. I couldn’t let go at the time. The spirit walker explained the rules and I still refused to go. If I could turn back the hands of time I would. I allowed revenge to cloud my judgment.”

“Tell me your story Olivia,” the spirit walker said gently.

The girls listened in awe while the woman told the story of her life and how it ended at the hands of her husband.

“I will take you. I believe you crossed paths with my daughter for this reason. Take my hand.” As the two women joined hands, they suddenly disappeared.

“That was crazy cool.” Anna jumped up. “I’m so glad we could help her. Can you imagine being stuck in a house for generations? That would really suck.”

“Let’s get out of here.” Keegan reached for the door and pulled. “You have to be kidding me! We are still locked in.” Keegan slammed her hand on the door.

“Calm down Keegan. We have our phones, remember?” Lauren shook her head.

“Who should we call?” Keegan turned to stare at them.

“Who do we always call when we are in trouble?” Anna grinned.

“Oh yeah, I’ll call my Aunt Katrina. She’ll love to be part of this.” Keegan dialed her aunt’s number. “Hey Kat, we’re in a bind.”

“Have you girls been drinking?” Katrina asked wearily.

“No, we haven’t been drinking.” Keegan chuckled. “We’re locked in a room at a haunted house.”

“Do I dare ask how that happened? You don’t sound very scared so I take it you are ok?”

“Yes, we’re fine. We’ll fill you in when you get here. It was actually pretty cool. You know the old Wilson’s house they set up every year? That’s where we are.”

“Keegan, I really don’t know about you guys sometimes.” She sighed.

“Just come in through the front door and go straight up the stairs. You’ll see a door at the end of the hallway.”

They heard scratching on the door about fifteen minutes later. They huddled closer together again. “Bahahahaha I’m coming to get you my pretties.”

They relaxed and laughed. Katrina was such a dork at times.

The door swung open. “It wasn’t even locked. What is wrong with you girls?” Katrina put her flashlight under her chin and attempted to make a scary face.

“I always have to bail you three out of trouble.”

“We know you love it.” Keegan grinned. “Wait till you hear what happened...”

* * *

Read more about Keegan and her friends in [Coexist](#).
Look for Book 2 Conflicted coming in September 2011

Julia Crane writes young adult novels of elves, love, and destiny and the struggle between light and dark. She can most often be found at her home in Dubai hunched over her laptop with a two year old clinging upside down to her head.

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To Taste of Shimmering Revenge

Jack Wallen

*England 1611
Castle of the King*

The King's daughter. Madrial. Her name was a lilting music on my vampiric tongue. I had longed to taste her pure, blue blood since her birth and now, at a time when my power seemed to know no bounds, I would have her.

"Come to me my sweet. Have me. Drink of me." Madrial's sweet whisper entreated me to partake. The time had arrived...my destiny. From the branches of the tree I would devour the royal lineage until there was nothing left of the crown or throne. My hatred for the king was an intense fire ignited by his refusal to allow Madrial to be my bride. And when the King sequestered his daughter from me, I knew she had to die. The King would suffer as I suffered; only I would feel Madrial live on in my blood.

The nearer I drew to Madrial, the more enthralled I became. Her scent was that of life and sex itself. Beauty had been completely redefined upon her birth...and she would be mine.

Her soft, frail neck tilted just enough such that it gave me access to her sweetest of meats. I could see, hear, feel her pulse racing; her blood burning to be drawn.

"I am yours."

This was a moment I would remember for all eternity. My teeth dropped and I gently bit into the supple, virginal flesh of the young maiden. Madrial's blood rushed into my mouth, like a river of lust and passion. I immediately knew something was amiss. There was a hidden taste to the life-giving liquid. Madrial's blood held something not human... something not right.

In the distance, a low, haunting laughter could be heard. The sound mingled with Madrial's beating heart. As the sounds blended together, I could feel myself falling into the black abyss of sleep. The laugh belonged to the King's Mage. Madrial had been a trap.

"Vampire, you shall sleep in the earth forever." The raspy voice of the King's Mage proclaimed my fate with a sickening pride.

*United States, 2011
Los Angeles, California*

"I have returned!"

My voice echoed out over a vastly changed landscape. What was once a thick forest of evergreen and moss-covered stone was now nothing more than a panorama of filthy

industry and humanity. What had happened? The last waking moment I remembered was locking my fangs onto the fragile neck of the king's most precious of daughters.

Madrial's blood was as intoxicating as her scent and she gave herself to me willingly. Almost too willingly.

Images of that moment flooded my system; Madrial tilting her head to me to offer her flesh, my fangs piercing the virgin skin...and a laugh...of the King's Mage. In a cold flash of rage it all hit me; the blood of the King's daughter had been enchanted and I, the most feared and hated Vampire since Vlad Tepes, had been tricked into torpor.

How long had I been asleep? What was the year? Where was I?

And how would I exact my revenge on the King?

These questions would all be answered in due time. And along with those answers would come a revenge that would be whispered in fear for all eternity. The land would tremble at the very mention of the name Vlad...Vlad...

Oh Hell, I couldn't even remember my name!

"Creatures of the night, answer my call." I yelled out into the darkness for my darling children to join me at my side. Certainly the years would have brought to life more of my kind. Extinction is no beast to best the vampire. With their assistance, I would feed and then I would rain down chaos across the country side until I had the answers I sought.

"Dude, what's your deal?" The strange young man approached me with a brevity I had never witnessed.

"You dare confront a creature as feared..."

"Holy shit! Can you do that again? I want to catch that on my phone. You're fucking hilarious man." The stranger laughed.

The insignificant whelp reached into the pocket of his pants. Certainly he was about to dash me with holy water. In my weakened state, I would be no match for the blessed liquid. The weapon he revealed was nothing I had ever seen. I might have misjudged the man.

"Okay, dude, say exactly what you said again. This will go on Youtube and bring me fame and bitches! Ready. One, two..."

"Come to me." The scent of the young man was overwhelming. My blood lust was beginning to boil from deep within. I had to feed. I had to take this stranger and devour him skin to soul. Reflexes overtook me and my fangs dropped. The young man had no idea the candle of his life was about to be snuffed.

"Holy shit! That's awesome! How did you do that? Where did you get that grill?" Joy issued from the mouth of the babe.

"Insolent mortal, you will bow before me." My voice carried my wrath, but hid my curiosity as to how the human sapling hadn't dropped to his knees in dread fear. It must be my weakened state. Time had sapped me of my powers. Soon they would return and my triumph would be glorious.

"Oh my God, this is too much. Dude, you must be lost. Oh fuck, wait—it's Halloween. The premier of *Nightfall* is like ten miles north of us. How in the hell did you get this far off? Come on, let me drive you...it's the least I can do in exchange for the fucking entertainment."

The young man's aura was twirling with the colors of honesty and joy. He was completely unaware of who and what I was—an advantage I would certainly use. I had no idea what premiere he was referring to, but if he was willing to aid me in my time of

need...I would allow for the assistance until the moment came for me to finally sate my ravenous hunger.

"Name's Alex by the way." He smiled the grin of ignorance I'd seen so many times over the years.

In the name of Vlad Dracula I wanted so desperately to tear into the insolent flesh of this boy, end my suffering, and snuff out his dim-witted light. Instead, I allowed myself to step into his odd machine, unsure of what was to happen.

"Don't worry, I'm a good driver." Alex grinned.

As soon as the heavy door was shut, the metal box shot forward as if it were propelled by the machines of Hell. The speed of the machine was incredible. I had only ever travelled this quickly when in bat form, flitting through the darkened night sky. The feeling was exhilarating. We would arrive as instantaneously as thought.

"Damn, chicks dig the whole vampire shit now. You dress up like this to get laid? Does it work?"

I wasn't sure how to answer Alex. The colloquialism *get laid* escaped my comprehension. Instead of making an absolute fool of myself, and arousing any suspicions, I joined the man in his odd celebration of *vampire shit getting laid*. Our combined laughter echoed off the metallic beast carrying us into the night.

"What did you think of the first film? Personally I thought it was gay. Seriously, when did vampires sparkle? I wasn't sure if it was the casting of all those pretty boys, but the vampires were lame. If I had the power of mother fuckin' Dracula, I wouldn't let some grade-B piece of ass mesmerize me with her stoner eyes and promise of nothing in the sack. Stupid Hollywood fucks."

The ice cold heart in my chest caught fire at the sound of the farcical troll invoking the name 'Dracula.' This simply would not do. No human ever spoke the name of the King of Kings and lived without consequences. Rage and reflex took hold and my hand shot over so that my fingers could wrap around the neck of Alex. I could feel some of my powers returning...enough to control the yammering insect.

"What the hell! Dude, let go. Seriously." One of the mortal boy's hands grabbed at mine, but to no avail. Even in my weakened state a human was no match for my strength.

"Stop the vehicle." My voice carried with it the ability to hypnotize by mere suggestion. My powers were gaining strength. They would become endless once again.

The car came to a squealing halt. Alex was motionless in my grip, save the tears of fear flowing freely down his cheeks. The intoxicating stench of urine tickled my nostrils, giving me a much needed boost. All that was left was the first blood. After such a long slumber, first blood could prove a shock the system. The trick was not to take in too much at once, lest the ecstasy of the moment drive me to the ground, a helpless, paralyzed victim awaiting final death in the morning sun. But this was my third time coming out of torpor, so I was more than familiar with the ways of torporial recovery.

"Alex, I am about to drink from you. But before I do, I have a few questions you must answer."

"Yes."

Alex was safely in trance. The power I exerted over mankind often had me giddy with delight. Even a vampire of my age and status could be giddy. There was no shame in joy.

"Alex, what year is it?"

"Two thousand eleven."

The date hit me like thousand rays of sunshine. I had been under for nearly four hundred years. And with the King's Mage most certainly gone, my revenge would have to take on a different form.

Not realizing my grip had tightened, bones began to snap in Alex's neck.

"What is this *Nightfall*?"

"Vampire movie. Sequel to *Dawn's Breaking*."

"Alex, I am going to feed on you now. I want you to begin counting out loud as I do. When I am done with you, you will take me to this *Nightfall*. Is that clear?"

"Yes."

Alex's voice was soft, transfixed on some point in time that either never had or ever would exist. He was lost and would remain so until I broke the tether to his mortal life.

I twisted the young man's neck to reveal his pulsing artery. It had been so long, this feast would be like none I ever had. When my fangs dropped and broke the sweaty skin of his neck, the rush of a thousand joys washed over me. My body spasmed as the flood poured into me, giving me life.

"1, 2, 3, 4..." Alex's voice was a distant drone, but the numbers were clear enough for me to know. To avoid disaster I had until the count of sixty. Beyond that, I would die the final death as the drunkenness of too much first blood rendered me unconscious, ready for sun to have its holy way with my flesh.

"...15, 16, 17..."

Alex's memories overcame me in glimpses. A fragment of his first awkward sexual encounter, the death of his younger sister, our fateful meeting...everything from his short, insignificant life came to me in bits and pieces.

"...39, 40, 41..."

Souls began to intermingle, I was getting lost in Alex, he in me; where I ended and he began was becoming ever more indistinguishable.

"...45, 46, 47..."

There was no need to tempt the fates any longer, so I pulled out of the embrace. Alex's head fell forward, his body temporarily without the will to continue on. He would survive.

"Now, my friend, take me to the premier of *Nightfall*."

"Yes...master."

Ah the endearing *Master*. The word carried such loyalty, spoke of power and ownership. Over the years I had possessed many whose servitude was always repaid in kind with a life longer than their humanity would normally allow. Granted this life was spent serving me and my whims...whims often leaning toward the sadistic.

"We have arrived." My ward's voice brought me back into the moment.

I had been so lost in memories of my various servants I hadn't realized the mechanized beast had carried us to our destination. Four hundred years had certainly brought man into a new age. I wasn't sure I cared for their progress.

"Alex, you are to remain here until I return. Do not move, do not speak."

When the night air hit me this time, it was not the air of death but the air of life. My strength had returned, my senses were alive, my name remembered.

I am Vlad Kurval, progeny of Vlad Dracul. I am the ruiner of land. I am a plague. I am a pestilence on mankind.

I had returned to sow the seeds of sorrow and waste among the firmament of Earth.

“Kneel before me weak and powerless vermin. You are but cattle to me and I will taste of your...”

“Woo! Team Tyler! Go Vamp or go home!”

The young female dared cross my path and not revere me or kneel in abject terror. Instead she held her hand aloft, bearing a haughty pagan gesture with her finger and laughed.

“Trick or mother fuckin’ treat, Count Chocula.”

The male escort accompanying the wench shouted over his shoulder.

Somehow I had missed the crowd of people around me, standing in line. Were they waiting for slaughter? Judging from their light colored auras, if they were being lead to the slaughter, they were completely unaware. Such a shame to waste fear and horror with ignorance.

Above the heads of the crowd, in brilliantly lit letters, was *Nightfall*. Below the letters was a perfectly rendered portrait of what looked like two lovers in thrall. Only... only...the male was...

Vampire.

This could not be. When I was put to earth, I was the only one of my kind. Now, now I must contend with an overly coiffed, made up, fop laying claim to fangs.

“Go Team Tyler!”

Another young girl spouted the same nonsense. I grabbed her by the wrist and pulled her to me.

“Who is this Tyler?” My spell took hold immediately.

“V-Vampire. In the movie.” Her voice was distant, powerless as she pointed toward the portrait in the spotlight.

“Take me to Tyler immediately.”

I released my grip on the girl. She turned toward the building, and began to walk. As I followed, the other scraplings yelled in some misbegotten anger.

“Fucking cutter!”

“Where do you think you’re going jerk face?”

“Look at the loser in the cape.”

Careful children, lest I lose my temper.

“Tickets please.” The man behind the glass demanded.

My stare needed no voice to back up the spell. The young man silently waved us on, into the building and insisted we “Enjoy the movie”.

Once inside, the smells and the sounds were caustic. The voices were too young, too shrill. Young ladies, who should have had more self-respect than to parade themselves around in such little attire, bounced about as if they were nothing more than piglets on their way to the meat house. There were select few in the crowd paying homage to the vampire in overly done make up and false fangs. Had I not been intent on finding this ‘Tyler’ I would have paused to rip the teeth from the masqueraders and introduce them to the truth.

My young ward opened a set of doors and beckoned me inside. The room was dark so my heightened sense of sight kicked in to reveal a massive crowd of humans awaiting their fate. This ‘Tyler’ must wield significant power to have enthralled so many at once. My lady offered me a seat. I was to sit among the cattle and wait for this vampire? Blasphemy.

I stood. I waited.

“Look at that guy Marissa. What a douche. Who does he think he is?” The whisper was easily heard.

When I turned toward the sound, two of the frailer girls, clad in what looked like nothing more than their undergarments, pointed in my direction and laughed. Had I not been so eager to meet this unknown vampire, I would have gladly dismembered the youngsters and sucked the blood from their limbs. Youth is so delicious when innocent. Although, looking at the crowd, I had to wonder how much innocence was actually intact.

Before another thought could grace my mind, one wall of the room lit up like the sun and the most incredible, brilliant, moving and speaking images appeared. This was powerful magic. Could it be possible a vampire more powerful than myself was alive? It had never been, nor had I thought it to ever be.

“Tyler, I love you!” One of the girls shouted above the din of the overly-loud music.

“Team Lindle!” A young male voice rose above the crowd.

“Fag!” was the reply. Gales of laughter followed.

On the lit wall, the face of the man in the portrait appeared. Tears of blood streamed down his cheeks as he spoke.

I love you Elizabeth. I can't live without you.

The larger than life vampire began to shimmer, sparkle. Members of the audience started screaming and weeping.

Take me Tyler. Make me one of you.

A doe-eyed girl with pouty lips and the curves of a young male servant spoke, her eyes overflowing with sadness.

Elizabeth, you know I can't. I have never fed on a human and I won't start now.

What? Never fed on a human? How could this be? Before I realized what was happening, my feet had carried me down to the front of the room, where the faces of the two lovers were within reach.

“Hey, Old School McGhoul, down in front!”

“Yeah, get your dusty cape out of the way!”

The voices rang out from the crowd. My patience with these mortals had run its course. I turned to address the masses.

“How dare you. I am Vlad Kurval and you will bow down and offer up your lives to me!” My voice cracked with rage.

“Get the fuck out, Count Doucheula!”

The time had come. Without a word, I pointed to one of the young females seated nearest me and drew her near with a single finger.

“Give yourself to me.” I whispered.

The young girl tilted her head so that I could feed. I indulged. With the first blood out of the way, I could drain the girl of her very life.

This had been apart from the usual ways of the vampire. The lineage of Vlad Tepes refused his progeny the gift of draining the lives of man. My maker, Vlad Dracul, saw to it his lineage broke free from the bonds Vlad Tepes had defined for our kind. Although Dracula was our God, he was a God all too kind for our kind. We were the bringers of death, not mercy.

The task of draining the young miscreant took but a brief moment and the girl dropped to the floor, her life expired. With the complete draining of a human life came the succulent after-effect of the victim's soul becoming one with mine. From this act, I would grow even more powerful.

"Awesome!"

"I didn't know they brought in an actor to do this."

"The guy's gay...he's probably like forty years old!"

"He's kinda hot."

More whispers poured from the crowd. My finger beckoned another youngster to meet the same fate. The voices behind me interrupted my spell.

Tyler, the sun! Can't it hurt you?

No, that's only a myth. This shimmering aura will protect me.

I shut out the sound of the voices behind me and returned my complete attention to the crowd. "Take me to this Tyler! I command you!" I roared above the din.

"You're staring right at him, ass hat!"

I stood between a mockery of my kind and a mockery of mankind.

"I am to be feared!" My voice shook the walls.

My words were met with laughter. My next actions would not. I beckoned a male to me. The laughter from the crowd rose. This would all end soon. I gestured the boy to kneel before me. When he did the laughter rose to a distorted level.

"Suck him!" A female voice rose above the laughter.

"Your life ends now young man." I whispered to the boy, hoping the words would make it through to his conscious mind. When the tears began flowing down his cheeks, I knew he comprehended what was to happen. His jaw quivered. The smell of his fear rose up to greet me, overpowering the horrendous stench of perfumes and hormones.

The young man's head ripped off with ease. Blood sprayed the nearest voyeurs.

And with a single act, my power over the human race had returned. Shrieks and screams filled the room. In front of me, the children scrambled to exit the room. Bodies were being pushed, trampled, broken—all in a vain attempt to save what little life they actually claimed as their own. Those lives would end soon. I would find each and every mouth that dared mock me.

"What the fuck are you doing dickwad?"

A young male, his chest puffed in a pathetic display of strength, approached me.

"Whatever I want." I laughed and punched my fist through the man's chest as if it were no more than a stomach of rotting haggis. My arm raised aloft, the man slid down so that I could sink my teeth into his neck and drain the remaining blood from his now-still heart.

The screams reached a new fevered pitch. I tossed off the dead body and sprayed blood over the scrambling rats. One of the elder females in the young group attempted to sneak out of the room. Her dress came off with nothing more than a thought. I could have her here and now, but that would give the others the false impression that there was any sort of pleasure to be found. There was none. Instead I tore the girl's arms from her body and then tossed the blood-spraying limbs over the crowd.

Another insolent whelp attempted to run by. I was growing bored of their childish fear. I grabbed the boy by the head and caved in his skull with a single squeeze. As I

licked the gray matter and other bits of gore from my fingers, the sounds of the vampire behind me begged for my attention.

Tyler, let's run away. We can be together forever.

Elizabeth, I don't want to be what I am any longer. I want to be like you. I want to be human.

I turned to meet the glowing, shimmering, sparkly vampire.

“And you, Tyler, I will find you; and when I do your suffering will be spoken of for ages. You have laid shame to the Vampire and you will atone for such treachery.”

Music began playing on the screen as Tyler and Elizabeth embraced. When I exited the room there were broken bodies on the floor and the distant echo of fearful screams making music in the night sky.

Alex was still waiting for me. I would keep him alive, to act as my servant, until I found this Tyler. I re-entered the metallic beast and demanded Alex drive onward. The youth's head snapped up, his hands grabbed the wheel, and his eyes opened.

“Where to master?”

“Take me to Tyler.” I spoke with the air of confidence I had been so accustomed to all throughout my undead life.

“Yes master.”

The metal monster tore off into the night, beams of sun shot from the front end of the beast. I would have my vengeance, not on the King's Mage, but on the entirety of humankind, the vile creature that gave birth to the man that put my fiery soul in the ground for centuries.

A smile graced my lips, lips that have once again tasted the tang of man.

I have returned.

* * *

Check out Jack's other work:

[I Zombie I](#)

[A Blade Away](#)

[Gothica](#)

[Shero](#)

Jack Wallen was born alongside the great pumpkin in a patch called Midian. He knew at that very moment he was destined to be the King of Zombies.

[Get Jack'd](#)

Ralphie, the 'Special' Werewolf

P.J. Jones

This story is dedicated to Scooby. I miss you, little buddy.

Also, I'd like to extend a big THANKS to my badass pack, Shéa, Heather, Alan, Jack, Michael, Talia, Lizzy and Julia for inviting me into their wolf-den.

Raphael circled his prey.

The victim, a soft and pliant, raven-haired beauty, lie motionless, her wantonly limbs spread out like a feast before him.

Earlier, she'd tried in vain to resist him, but she'd easily succumbed to Raphael's raw strength. He'd only used a fraction of his power to take her down. And now he prepared to make her feel the wrath of his awesome animal prowess.

He crossed the threshold of the chamber, and in once fluid motion, had the wench pinned beneath him. He laughed menacingly under his breath, as he smoothed one extended claw down the welcoming contour of her velvety smooth skin. He momentarily thought about shifting to human form.

But no.

She had called him a monster and a beast.

A mongrel.

Now he would teach the serpent-tongued wench a swift and brutal lesson.

Let her writhe and moan against the animal that he was until she begged for mercy... and release. For even when Raphael was in animal form, no woman could resist the reckless and wild abandon of his lovemaking.

Arching his neck, he let out a primal howl before he cocked his hips and slammed into her with a jarring thrust.

"Ralphie! Quit humping the sofa cushion and get over here!"

Ralphie looked up to see Alpha glaring at him through hooded eyes.

Damn. Couldn't a wolf get a moment to himself?

Whimpering, he snatched up the black velvet pillow with his teeth and tossed it on the couch. Growling under his breath, he warned the wench to wait for his return and make no attempt to flee or suffer his wrath.

He trotted over to his pack, ignoring the jeers and snickers as he sat on the outskirts of their small circle. Alpha had called together a secret meeting in their mystical wolf den, otherwise known as the split level basement of Alpha's parents' modest suburban home, located in the heart of the mysterious and ancient city of Tacoma, Washington.

"Good goin', Ralphie!" Buster, the number two dominant male of their pack, snarled from across the circle, before he paused to frantically gnaw a hot spot on his tailbone. He

turned his menacing glare back to Ralphie while spitting out a chunk of brown fur. "That's the third sofa cushion you've crusted this week."

"I didn't crust this one," Ralphie spat. Of all the wolves in his pack, he liked Buster the least. That mutt was always tormenting him. And unfortunately, he and Buster were both interning at the same discount shoe warehouse. More than once, he'd mocked him in front of their co-workers. He'd never get hired on full-time if one of his own pack members couldn't show him respect.

Buster flashed a sarcastic snarl before his malevolent gaze settled on the sofa. "Maybe later I'll have a go at her."

Heat infused Ralphie's face as the instinct to defend his prize surged red hot anger through his skull. He rose to all fours and growled. "She's mine!"

"Enough!" A hush fell about the room as Alpha's booming voice shook the air. He leveled each of the wolves a challenging glare before settling on his throne, his mom's hand-me-down, rattan rocking chair with thickly padded floral cushions.

Buster circled around the group until he was seated at Alpha's helm. He shot Ralphie a smug look, reminding the lesser dog that he was only one floral cushion away from becoming leader of the pack.

"Wolf brothers." Alpha straightened his spine and held his snowy white head in a regal manner while using his front paw to steadily rock his throne. "I've called this meeting tonight to discuss a few concerns."

Ralphie shifted, uncomfortably aware that every eye in the room had settled on him. He focused his gaze on his furry black paws, knowing if he pretended to play invisible, they'd lose interest and ignore him.

When Alpha cleared his throat, Ralphie, and thankfully, the others, quickly gave the top dog their undivided attention.

"You all remember," Alpha continued, "that last week my mom said we can't meet in her basement anymore if we keep pissing on her carpet." Alpha's gaze shot to the corner of the room. "Skippy!" he barked.

The rest of the pack turned their heads in time to see a scraggly tan wolf lowering his hind leg, a trail of piss clearly running down the side of the white wicker coffee table.

"Sorry, Alpha," Skippy whined. "I forgot."

Alpha rolled his pale eyes. "Go get some disinfectant and clean that up before my mom finds out." Then, Alpha turned his angry glare on a plump grey wolf sitting in front of Ralphie. "Patches, Dr. Baker called and said you bit him when he tried to give you a rabies vaccine."

Patches hung his head. "I hate needles."

"Don't. Do it. Again." Alpha's harsh, unwavering voice left no room for disobedience.

"Y-yes, Alpha," Patches whimpered.

"As you all know," Alpha said, "tomorrow night the moon will be full."

At the promise of a full moon, every wolf in the room howled in anticipation.

"You also know," Alpha lowered his voice, his tone becoming more somber, serious. "Tomorrow is Halloween night."

The wolves growled.

Though other immortals and ghouls celebrated Halloween as a night of demonic mayhem and depravity, werewolves loathed Halloween. That was the night they usually got their asses kicked.

“The vampires and zombies will be out in full force and up to their old tricks,” Alpha warned. “If they try to cause any trouble, you know the drill.”

“Snarl, bite, then run from the fight,” the wolves collectively chanted.

“That’s right,” Alpha nodded. “Zombies can crush us with one fatal blow. And vampires.” Alpha shuddered as all of the fur along his spine stood up on end. “They get laid way more often than us, so they must be pretty badass. Get away from them as fast as you can, and whatever you do, don’t lead them to our den! If they find out where we live, we’ll all be roadkill,” he ended on a shrill whine.

Alpha’s palpable fear jumped off his fur in erratic currents, startling Ralphie all the way down to the marrow in his bones. He hated Halloween. He didn’t know which was worse, the monsters or the mortals. Every year without fail, some little shithead mortal kid played a Trick-or-Treat prank on him. He couldn’t help it that he didn’t have the money for candy. He couldn’t even afford to buy sofa cushions, so he was forced to do all his humping at Alpha’s house. Even if he did have the money for candy, he’d be damned if was going to give it all away to stupid mortal brats.

“And for our last order of business,” Alpha groaned. “It seems a member of our pack has developed a taste for pillow fantasies.”

Once again, all eyes of the pack settled on Ralphie.

Ralphie bristled. “Why’s everyone staring at me?”

“Ralphie,” Alpha sighed while shaking his head. “This has become too serious to ignore.”

Ralphie puffed out his chest. “Those wenches needed to be taught a lesson!”

“I’m sorry, Ralphie,” Alpha shrugged. “We met without you earlier today and made a decision.”

“W-what?” Meeting without him? Ralphie was crushed. He’d never been left out of the pack meetings before. His gaze shot to Buster, who was smiling triumphantly beneath Alpha’s chair. Ralphie repressed the urge to attack the traitorous mutt. Buster was behind all this. He knew it.

“You need to get laid,” Alpha said.

“I was about to,” Ralphie growled, “before you interrupted us.”

“By a *real* girl.” Alpha grumbled, “not a sofa cushion.”

Ralphie’s jaw dropped. “A real girl? Girls don’t like werewolves, Alpha. Only vampires get laid. You know that.”

But Ralphie could tell by the hardened set of Alpha’s jaw and the rigid determination in his pale eyes, he and the pack were already set on a course of action.

“We’re giving you twenty-four hours to find a girl,” Alpha said in a stentorian tone. “If you don’t get laid by tomorrow night, you’re paying a visit to Dr. Baker.”

“Ralphie’s getting snipped!” Buster snickered.

Ralphie shot to all fours. Flattening his ears against the back of his skull, he growled. “You can’t do that!”

“Sorry, Ralphie,” Alpha winced. “My mom went to fluff the pillows yesterday and she was freaking out! I was freaking, too. Come on, dog, your spluge was all over my mom’s hand.”

Ralphie swallowed a knot which had formed in his throat. He didn't know how he could cope without his beloved nut sack. "I'll get my own pillows."

"Ralphie," Patches interjected, "you've got a problem."

"Yeah, dog," Buster laughed, "you're one sick pup."

"Come on, guys," Ralphie pleaded. "I'll change."

Alpha jumped down from his throne and slowly circled Ralphie while issuing a challenging growl. "I've already made the appointment with Dr. Baker. The only way I'm canceling it is if you fuck a real girl."

"Yeah," Buster sneered, "and bring her here so we know you ain't lying."

Ralphie hung his head in shame. Turning, he fled through the doggie door that led to Alpha's backyard. He whimpered, needing to be alone, not only so he could drag his ass across the brittle lawn in hopes of wiping the crusted turd nuggets off his matted indigo fur, but so he could absorb the sting of his Alpha's words.

He loved his balls. He loved licking them. He couldn't imagine a life without them. And worse, he couldn't live a shell of his previous existence, devoid of humping his beloved sofa cushions. Ralphie was in trouble deep.

Releasing a slow exhale, he thought up a plan. All he needed to do was prove he got laid and then they'd leave his balls alone. Maybe, after a few weeks, they'd forget their grudge and he could resume making sweet love to his beautiful stuffed, velvety concubines.

In the meantime, all he had to do was the impossible.

Find a girl desperate and pathetic enough to have sex with him.

Great, he thought. This should be easy.

At least he knew where to start. Tomorrow night he'd cruise the bars on the shitty end of town.

There was bound to be a fat or old chick who'd sleep with him. For the love of his cushions, he had to try.

* * *

Today is the shittiest day of my life.

Ralphie heaved a sigh while he continued to feel sorry for himself.

Other than waking with the nagging fear that tomorrow he was going to have his manhood forcibly ripped from his body, the day didn't start out too badly.

That was, until he'd spent the morning dodging the neighbor kid's projectile loogies on the way to the bus stop. The little brat had made him late, and he'd missed the bus to work and had to walk the three miles on two human feet.

He hated being a human. He hated the coarse, unruly black scalp hair that never seemed to be tamed, even with the best bargain-brand hair gels. He hated his wiry frame and big clumsy feet, but most of all, he hated the many acne scars that made his face look the remnants of a war zone. Nobody could see his scars underneath his wolf fur, but Alpha strictly enforced the rules—no shifting outside the wolf den. Since his entire pack lived near Ralphie's mom's house, he knew if he shifted to his wolf form, he risked the chance of getting caught. Too bad, because he could have made the trip to work in less than half the time on four legs. But what would the pack do to him if they caught him shifting? He shuddered at the thought.

After all, the pack had already decided they'd rather see him emotionally and physically scarred for life than take the chance of losing a few pillows.

Ralphie returned to his task of stacking boxes in the stockroom. By day's end, he would have the biggest fortress of shoe boxes ever built, complete with a master bedroom and a den. And nobody was allowed inside. Not even Buster, no matter how much he begged.

"Hey, Ralphie."

Ralphie looked through the window of his box fortress when he recognized Raven's cool, serpentine voice. She sipped on an iced mocha latte while leaning on a perfectly even stack of discounted imitation snake skin boots.

Ralphie swore under his breath. One wrong move and his fake snake window-sill would be toast.

"Hey," he answered flatly.

He really wasn't in the mood to be harassed by the head of the women's shoe department, AKA, Queen Bitch. Even though she was the hottest chick he'd ever worked with, especially when she wore tight leather pants that framed her perfectly round and cushiony ass, he was definitely not interested in making small talk with Raven. She was as heartless as she was hot. Besides, he wasn't into the wanna-be-vamp pale-faced goth look. She tried way too hard to look like an immortal—always wearing leather and huge old people sunglasses, refusing to walk outside without SPF 100 sunblock and a hooded, baby seal coat.

"Need any help?" Raven still hadn't taken the hint that he wanted to be alone. She was actually eyeing his edifice with mock interest.

"Nope," he answered tersely.

"Word around the store is that you're getting snipped."

Ralphie's gaze shot to her cold, pointed stare. *Damn Buster*. He made a mental note to piss in Buster's juice box when he wasn't looking.

"I don't want to talk about it," he whimpered.

"How about we go someplace quiet after work?" she rasped while running one long, pale finger across the edge of the window-sill. "I can take your mind off your troubles."

"Nah," he shrugged. "I got to go to a bar and troll for sluts."

She quirked a brow while playfully biting on her bottom lip. "Mind if I tag along?"

For some strange reason, all the hairs on Ralphie's neck stood on end, and his animal instincts told him to beware. But not many hot chicks, actually no hot chicks, had ever asked to hang out with him at bars before. Having her around might actually make him look more desirable and help him get lucky with a real girl.

"Sure, I guess you can come," he answered.

"Great." She flashed a dazzling, pearly white smile. "I know this really cool bar called Immortals. Have you heard of it?"

"Nah." He shook his head. "I'm sticking to The Pit. Too many vamps go to Immortals."

"You don't like vamps?" she asked in a petulant voice.

"They're my mortal enemies, Raven."

"Oh." Her jaw dropped and her eyes bugged, as she made a big show of demonstrating her surprise. "I didn't know that."

He nodded while fashioning a pretend rocking chair for himself out of overstocked flip-flops. “That and they’re the bloodsucking spawns of Satan.”

“Whatever,” she hissed, before snapping the paper coffee cup in her crushing grip.

Iced mocha latte splattered everywhere, including all over his brown corduroy dress jacket.

“Damn,” he cried. “This is my only good jacket.”

“I’m sorry. Sometimes I don’t know my own strength.” She ducked behind the window and stepped around the fortress before slipping inside the narrow doorway. “Let me clean that.” She held out her hand.

“No.” He shrieked back, acting as if one touch from her cold, pale fingers would scald his skin. “I’ll take it to the dry cleaners on my lunch break. I wanted to wear this tonight.”

“Okay.” She stepped back out of his fortress and walked toward the exit, the sway of her hips more exaggerated than ever as she called over her shoulder. “I’ll meet you at The Pit around eight?”

“Fine.”

He blew out a pent-up and shaky breath after she’d closed the door behind her. He had no idea why he was acting so skittish around Raven. Sure, she was evil. She’d proven that on plenty of different occasions. Like the time she fed silica gel to an infant when his mom was trying on shoes. Or the many other times she’d tried to bite off his fingers when he’d forgotten to stack the shoe boxes in order from smallest size to largest.

But, damn, she looked good in leather. Ralphie surmised the only way Raven could look any hotter was if she’d changed her pants to crushed velvet, like the kind of fabric used on really classy and fluffy pillow cushions.

Ralphie licked his lips and rubbed his hands together in anticipation. He had a good feeling Raven would help him get laid tonight.

* * *

Ralphie hated going to the dry cleaners. He hated the rancid smell of freshly pressed polyester. He hated the stupid little needles they stuck inside his garments. They were always pricking his fingers when he tried to take his clothes off the hangers.

But most of all, Ralphie hated the zombies that worked at the dry cleaners.

He walked up to the drooling, glossy-eyed clerk and set his jacket on the counter. The waist high barrier was the only thing separating Ralphie from this pallor-skinned, decomposing giant, but he wasn’t afraid. Zombies were slow and stupid and no match for his superior animalistic speed.

“Can you have this cleaned by five?” he asked.

“Brains,” the clerk answered.

“No, not brains,” Ralphie groaned while simultaneously scratching an itch on the back of his neck. “It’s a jacket with a coffee stain.”

He itched harder and hoped he wasn’t getting another case of the fleas. But with the way his luck was running lately, he wouldn’t doubt he’d picked up some parasites. Ralphie only prayed he hadn’t infected his lady pillow friend, too. Crotch fleas were a bitch to get rid of.

“Brains.” The clerk stretched out both hands and made a feeble lunge for Ralphie.

Ralphie backed up a few steps while the clerk continuously rammed the counter separating them.

“Look,” he growled, “do you want my dry cleaning or not?”

“Dry cleaning.” The clerk dropped his hands and scooped the jacket off the counter.

“That’s more like it,” Ralphie huffed. “I’ll be by after work to pick it up.”

“Brains.”

“Whatever.” Ralphie rolled his eyes as he headed for the door. He turned back to see the clerk still staring at him with a glazed-over expression. “And try not to touch it too much. I’m wearing that jacket tonight, and I’ll have a hard enough time getting laid without the smell of rotting flesh all over my clothes.”

* * *

Ralphie had sat at his bar stool for over an hour waiting for Raven to show up. Witches, fairies and French maids squealed past him, completely oblivious to his presence. He thought that maybe it was because he’d refused to wear a costume, but deep down inside he knew that wasn’t the reason the girls ignored him.

They’d ignored him because he was a mutt. With the exception of zombies, werewolves were at the bottom of the immortal totem pole. Most mortal girls didn’t want to take the chance they’d get Parvo, or worse, strapped down with a litter of bastard werebabies.

Ralphie sighed into his empty beer mug. The one thing that could make him feel even more inferior would be to have Dr. Baker rip out his manhood.

“Hey.”

He looked up, momentarily stunned to see Raven smiling at him. Strange, but his keen animal senses hadn’t noticed her enter the club. Yet, here she was, dazzling him with a tight black velvet witch costume that accentuated her large breasts and curvaceous hips.

“Wow! You look...amazing.”

He angled his head as his gaze roamed her backside, or more importantly, her perfect ass. It looked so pillowy soft and tempting. Ralphie shook his head, trying to clear his mind of lustful thoughts .

Besides, Raven wasn’t here to screw him. He’d thought a lot about it on the way over here and it was all starting to make perfect sense. Buster had paid her to distract him from girls more on his level so he wouldn’t get laid.

He wished it wasn’t so, but girls like Raven didn’t fuck dogs. They were more interested in chasing after pasty-faced vamp cock. Too bad, because all he wanted to do was get behind her and pound the heck out of that soft velvet.

“Thanks.” She batted her thick black lashes while playfully chewing on her lower lip. “Sorry I’m late.”

“That’s okay.” He patted the vacant stool beside him. “Wanna drink?”

She shook her head. “No.”

“You don’t drink?”

One black brow arched. “Not alcohol.”

“Okay.” He shrugged. “Wanna dance?”

“I’d rather fuck.”

Ralphie nearly choked on his own spit. He scratched the back of his head while eyeing her warily. “Well, there’s plenty of guys here I’m sure would be happy to...”

He gasped as Raven yanked him off the stool. In the next instant, she pressed her lips against his while rubbing her generous bosom against his chest.

Ralphie’s erection sprang to life, and he moaned as she thrust her tongue inside his mouth, the coppery scent of her saliva blending with his leftover beer residue in an erotic dance of pleasure. When she reached a slender hand down to stroke his bulge, he thought he’d died and gone to doggie heaven.

She pulled back and eyed him with a feral hunger.

“Wanna go to my den?” he rasped.

She tilted her head, as her blood-red lips broke into a sly smile. “I thought you’d never ask.”

* * *

Ralphie was so horny, he couldn’t get Raven home fast enough. Unfortunately, the transit bus was especially slow, and it took over an hour for them to be dropped off, and they still had to walk five blocks to Alpha’s parents’ house.

“Sorry I can’t afford a car,” he’d said to Raven for at least the tenth time over the past hour.

“That’s okay.” She squeezed his hand and smiled.

He briefly wondered what had happened to the evil demonic bitch he used to work with, but then he shrugged it off. All that mattered was that he was going to get laid by a girl, not a pillow.

He frowned while thinking of his special wench, and he hoped she wouldn’t be too distraught when she saw him with a new mate.

Ralphie increased his strides while pulling on Raven’s rock solid, yet petite hand. He shivered as the numbing cold radiating off her skin permeated his flesh and chilled him to the bone. He wondered why she was so cold on this unusually balmy night, but he knew exactly how to warm her up once they got to the den.

“Hey Ralphie, going trick or treating?”

Ralphie jerked his head at the familiar nasally taunt of the grade-school mortal. He stopped and turned to see fat little Loogie Boy dressed as a pirate and sporting a heavy sack of candy. He knew it was well past the youth’s bed-time, and he silently prayed some bloodsucking demon would find Loogie Boy before he made it home.

“No,” Ralphie sneered. “Trick or treating is for little bratty mortals.”

“What’s the matter?” the kid laughed. “They don’t give out sofa cushions?”

A low growl broke from Ralphie’s throat. *Damn Buster is telling everyone.*

Raven tugged his hand. “Forget about him, Ralphie.”

Just as Ralphie was about to turn his back, the brat bent over and picked up a stick.

He swung his arm and tossed the stick across the street. “Hey, Ralphie. Fetch the stick, boy.”

Ralphie’s focus was suddenly drawn to the projectile that was flying through the air. It was long and pointy and it was getting away!

He salivated. Must! Get! Stick!

Using his superior animal speed, he ran after the stick and caught it mid-air with his teeth. He happily trotted back across the street, but the kid who'd thrown the stick had vanished.

Damn.

His chest deflated when he realized Loogie Boy had tricked him. His face flushed as he looked over at Raven. At the heavy and horrified frown that marred her brow.

He whimpered while removing the stick from his mouth and slipping it inside his pocket.

Finally, she straightened her features while heaving a sigh. "Mortals are so annoying."

He cocked his head. "But you're a mortal."

"Oh, yeah," she shrugged. "Right."

* * *

Raven walked a slow circle around the den while Ralphie scrolled through Alpha's parents' CD collection. After he'd found the CD he'd been looking for, he slipped Rush's Hemisphere's into the disk player. Even though he usually preferred Heavy Metal, he wanted something more soothing to set the mood. The Trees was his favorite classic rock song ever. Though he didn't understand the cryptic message within the lyrics, he really liked the banging of the drums and the singer's high-pitched tenor.

The song went perfectly with a big fat doobie, but Ralphie hadn't contributed to the pot fund in over two weeks. He knew Alpha would find out if he ripped some weed from the stash. Thankfully, the pack was probably still trick-or-treating. He hoped he could at least make it to second base with Raven without them watching and salivating all over the carpet.

Grinning, he looked over at Raven. She was sitting on the sofa with her hands over her ears.

His chest deflated. "Don't you like the music?"

Her features contorted into one massive scowl, making her look like she'd just eaten a lemon or maybe gone down on another girl who needed a good douching.

"Not really," she griped. "Don't you have any Donna Summer?"

"Disco?" he gasped. "Hell no, that's vamp music."

"Oh, yeah." She pulled her hands from her ears and slowly straightened her face. "I forgot."

He sat down beside her, and deciding he didn't want to waste any more time he reached over and squeezed one soft velvety thigh. She scowled, then grabbed the black sofa cushion and clutched it to her chest.

"Where's the rest of your pack?" she hissed.

"Trick-or-treating, I guess," he responded breathlessly, unable to pull his gaze from the defenseless cushion caught in Raven's grasp. Images of a threesome swirled in his brain and he began salivating.

Both black brows dipped beneath her bangs, and the maniacal heat that darkened her eyes only heightened the starkness of her porcelain skin. "So we're alone?"

"Yeah, baby," he growled while leaning toward her.

She smiled while eyeing his throat. "Take off your jacket, so I can get better access to your neck."

"You like kink, baby?" he teased while pulling one arm free from the jacket. "Ouch!" he yelped. "Damn zombies!" he groaned, as a small needle prick in his thumb began to bleed.

Her eyes bulged. "Here, let me." She shoved his thumb into her mouth with one fluid thrust.

Ralphie thought he'd crème his thrift store jeans at the erotic ministrations of her tongue swirling and darting across his sore thumb. He threw his head back and moaned.

In the next instant, she pushed him to the floor.

He landed with a thud, moaning at the pain in his side. "Go easy, Raven," he griped. "We've got all night."

"You mean I've got all night. Your night is about to end, dog breath." She straddled him as her lips curled back in a snarl.

That's when Ralphie noticed the two long and very pointy fangs that extended nearly to her chin.

"Holy shit! You're a vampire!"

She laughed. "And they say werewolves are stupid."

Panic gripped his chest. "So does this mean we're not having sex?"

She grabbed the collar of his shirt and tore it off. "Roll over, dog, while I rip out your throat."

He bucked under her unusually heavy weight as she exposed his chest, and he worried that she'd laugh at the glaringly lack of hair surrounding his dark nipples.

"What did I ever do to you?" he asked as he struggled to conceal himself with his corduroy jacket.

"We're mortal enemies, remember?" she sneered while baring her fangs. "And when I'm finished with you, I'm going to feast on the rest of your mutt friends."

He swallowed hard. Getting his nut sack chopped off seemed like a much better option. Besides, Raven was looking a lot less sexy by the minute, and he didn't know if he'd have the desire to fuck a demonic spawn of Satan, who also wanted to suck the life-blood out of his body.

He yelped when she lunged on top of him, pressing her stone-hard body on top of his feeble frame. In the next moment, she was rolling onto the floor, screeching as she clutched at a stick which was protruding from her chest. Ralphie wondered how Raven had accidentally stuck herself with a stick that looked very similar to the one he'd fetched earlier.

He sat up, eyeing Raven with morbid curiosity while scratching an itch on the back of his neck. "Damn fleas," he muttered.

Her screeching intensified as her body seized and convulsed. Ralphie only hoped she wouldn't excrete any bodily fluids, because Alpha's mom would not be happy about vampire piss on the carpet.

Raven's demonic screams of terror finally subsided. Her stone cold body went limp as her head lolled to one side.

Ralphie sighed. Not only did he lose a really good fetching stick, but as the upstairs clock chimed the stroke of midnight, he knew it was too late for him to get laid. By morning, he'd have to say goodbye to his beloved nut-sack, and worst of all, he feared his

loss of manhood would cause him to lose interest in his one true love. His gaze longingly swept to the lonely cushion sitting on the sofa.

The back door slid open and his pack sauntered in. Each wolf was in human form and each had his face painted as a member of the classic rock KISS band. They were all clutching pillowcases filled to the brim with candy.

Their eyes bugged when they looked at the dead vamp on the floor.

Alpha was the first to speak. "Ralphie killed a vampire!"

"No shit?" Buster came up beside him, eyeing the vamp, then Ralphie, with skepticism.

"Yeah." Ralphie shook his head. "But I didn't have sex with her."

An enormous grin split Alpha's face, and the black flames painted around his eyes seemed to twinkle. "You know what? There's no way we can neuter you now."

Ralphie perked. "Really?"

Alpha tossed his bag to the floor and crossed his arms over his chest. "You gotta have some pretty big gonads to take down a vampire. No way I'm letting Dr. Baker cut those off. I'm making you my new number two dog."

Buster turned to their leader with a pout, and the lone star over his eye began to smear as tears ran down his face. "Alpha!"

Alpha rolled his eyes. "Can it, Buster."

Their leader walked over to the mini-fridge in the corner of the room. "This calls for a celebration. I've got a jar of week-old bacon grease I've been saving."

"Thanks, Alpha, but I don't want any bacon grease." Ralphie slowly stood on wobbly legs, hardly believing his stroke of good luck. He got to keep his nuts and get the number two dog spot!

Alpha dipped his index finger into a jar of grease and sucked his finger clean. "You name it, Ralphie. Whatever you want, we'll get it."

Ralphie's heart pounded in his chest as hope surged inside him. There was only one thing in the world that could fill the ache in his soul. "I want my damned pillow cushion."

* * *

Dear readers, thanks so much for reading this story to the end without burning out your eye-sockets. Sincerely, PJ Jones.

* * *

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Prior to becoming a full-time chair warmer, PJ Jones not-so-enjoyed a short stint as a journalist and then seven agonizing...eh blissful years as a high school English teacher.

Rest assured that none of her sentences will end with prepositions cuz she studied grammars in that there college and she ain't stoopid.

<http://pjjonesramblings.blogspot.com/>

Sunwalker's Kiss

Shéa MacLeod

Had they seen her?

Amara's heart thudded in her chest as she tugged the hood of her cloak further down over her eyes. Protection not just against the twilight rain, but from the eyes of the hunters. She pressed closer to the cold stone of the blacksmith's shop, praying they'd keep going.

They didn't.

"Did you see that?" The strident voice carried halfway across the village.

"See what, my lord?"

"The witch? Did you see the witch?" Sir Reginald's eyes filled with fury as he wheeled the bay around, sharp eyes searching the street. The horse protested the rough treatment, but Sir Reginald was not a man who cared for the pain of dumb animals.

She melted further into the shadows, whispering an incantation under her breath. "Hide me from my enemies." The amulet lying between her breasts warmed at the small use of power.

"She is near. I can feel her unholy magic."

Though he refused to admit it, Sir Reginald was born of witch blood just as she had been. Even her small use of power had alerted him. Something no ordinary human could ever sense. A fact which made him all the more dangerous.

His underlings began the search on horseback, riding the length of the street, peering into alleyways. If Sir Reginald said a witch was near, then they believed him.

She took another step back. Her foot sent a stone skittering across cobbles. Almost as one, the men's heads turned in her direction. The look on Sir Reginald's face was unmistakable. If he caught her, she was dead.

She ran.

Dashing around the corner of the smith's, she ran as though the hounds of hell were nipping at her heels. Not far from the truth.

Her cloak billowed behind her, the hem weighted down with rain and mud. Fingers numb with cold fumbled at the ties to no avail. The muddy ground sucked at her feet. Her breath burned in her lungs. The clatter of hooves over stone was loud in her ears.

She darted around a corner, and down another alley, but she was no match for mounted men. She sensed the displacement of air and ducked just as Sir Reginald's sword sliced within a hair's breath of her nape. The men surrounded her, weapons drawn. She drew to a halt, panting. The other men were just doing their duty, but the look on Sir Reginald's face told her he was enjoying every minute. This was it, then.

"Well, if it isn't the witch of Denham Forest," he taunted.

She knew running was futile, so she drew herself to her full height and stood proud as generations of her kind had done before her. “What do you want, Sir Reginald?” She tilted her chin up and hardened her jaw. He’d never see her beg.

“You know what I want, witch.”

He wanted her dead. Everyone knew it. He’d have hunted her down and killed her long ago if not for the fact that she lived deep with the woods, surrounded by wards.

“I’m no witch.”

“So you say, the truth is clear to any willing to see. You are a witch and a murderess.”

“I did not kill her, Sir Reginald. There was nothing I could do. Sometimes the Goddess decides these things.”

“There is only one God,” he snarled. “He demands your blood, witch.” He raised his sword.

She braced herself for the blow.

* * *

Andre de Montbard watched from the shadows as the armed men on horseback surrounded the woman.

Not Andre. Jack. His name was Jack. Andre had been a lifetime ago. A lifetime in which he had been a Templar Knight. A lifetime best forgotten.

The woman’s hood had fallen back, revealing a mass of thick hair the color of chestnuts. She was small and fragile looking, no match for the half dozen grim faced men.

It was obvious she was defenseless. It was equally obvious what was about to happen. He’d seen it happen again and again the length and breadth of the country. Weak, small minded men torturing and murdering women in order to keep their own power. It disgusted him and he’d had enough. He’d been trained to protect the defenseless and it was time to put that training to use once again.

The overly elaborate clothing gave the leader of the mob away immediately. Yes, he was exactly the sort of man who would enjoy murdering a woman and claiming it an act of righteousness.

Jack slid from his hiding place, silent as the grave. The men were too busy to notice him, completely focused on their self-important leader. He waited for just the right moment, then as the man’s sword came down, he stepped in and thrust his own sword up to meet it.

The clash of steel against steel rang through the clearing.

* * *

Amara’s eyes snapped open at the sound of clashing swords still ringing in her ears. It took her a moment to register what she saw.

A large, powerful man dressed in ragged clothing and wielding a falchion sword was fighting Sir Reginald. He fought with the fierceness of a dozen men and the expertise of a trained knight .

For a moment she stood gaping like an idiot before she remembered Sir Reginald's henchmen. Fortunately they had been likewise occupied, staring with slackened jaws at their lord and the stranger.

She knew she had little time, so she began to mutter an incantation in a language no other human could speak. Quickly she wove a spell around herself and the two men. The ancient words spilled off her tongue like liquid silver, spinning through the air in a shimmering circle.

"Careful lads, the witch is weaving one of her spells. She'll have us all dead." It was Brack, Sir Reginald's right-hand man and greatest convert to the cause. His booming voice rallied the others and they raised their weapons.

Amara cast a glance behind her at the two men still locked in battle. She did not know the stranger with the broad shoulders and the sun streaked hair, his powerful body wielding the heavy sword with ease. Nor did she know why he was helping her.

What she did know was that she must help him however she could. And the one way she could help was by keeping Sir Reginald's men at bay.

Brack charged at her, but the instant his horse's nose touched the magical barrier, it reared back, sending Brack tumbling to the ground. Unhurt save his pride, he snarled as he staggered to his feet. Brandishing a pair of wicked looking knives, he charged on foot this time. Once again he crashed into the barrier. He was thrown halfway across the clearing.

Amara was the only human being alive who could wield these impenetrable wards.

The other men stopped in their tracks, faces ashen. Amara well knew that despite their years witch hunting with Sir Reginald Jones, they had never once seen real magic. The truth of it spread fear through their ranks and sent them fleeing back to the village. Only Brack was left.

Satisfied they were once again safe from Sir Reginald's men, she turned back to the fight. A fight that was nearly over.

While Sir Reginald dripped with sweat, face red and muscles trembling, the stranger wasn't even breathing heavily. His movements were as swift and fluid as they had been in the beginning.

With a final thrust of his sword, he sent Sir Reginald's weapon spinning across the clearing. Sir Reginald lay huddled on the ground, a pathetic excuse of a man.

"Go ahead." His voice was tired, none of the bravado left.

The stranger raised his sword for the death blow.

"No!"

Both the stranger and Sir Reginald turned to stare at her, equal measures of shock written across their faces. Part of her made note that the stranger was incredibly handsome.

"My lady," his voice was low and rough and sent shivers running through her body. "If he lives, he will never stop hunting you."

She glanced down at Sir Reginald. Even huddled on the ground with his life in her hands there was still hatred in his eyes. She knew the stranger was right, yet this life was not hers to take.

"I know," her voice was soft. "But I have vowed never to take a life."

"The life taken shall be by my hand, not yours."

“And yet it shall be done in my name,” she said. “The stain on my soul shall be just as great.”

“Very well.” Somewhat reluctantly he sheathed his sword.

Amara knelt in the mud next to Sir Reginald. “Remember this moment, Sir Reginald. Remember the day I let you live.”

He spat at her, but she flicked it away with a snap of her wrist. His lack of graciousness was only to be expected.

She stood and turned to her savior. “Have you a place to stay?”

“No, my lady.”

“Then I invite you to stay with me.” It was not something a decent woman did if she wanted to keep her reputation intact, but she had never been one to play by the rules. Besides which, she didn’t have much of a reputation to ruin.

With a nod the stranger fell in beside her. They disappeared into the woods, Sir Reginald cursing behind them.

* * *

Amara cast a glance at the warrior. She’d poured him a bath and taken his clothes to clean and mend. Though, frankly, she wasn’t convinced they were worth cleaning and mending.

What she didn’t tell him was that she could see him plain as day through the gap between the curtain and the wall. Every naked inch of him.

Her cheeks flushed hot as she watched muscles shift and bunch under golden skin. His broad shoulders were the stuff a woman dreamed about. His wide back tapered into a narrow waist before flaring into the most amazing backside.

“Like what you see?” His gravelly voice broke into her reverie.

If possible, her cheeks flamed hotter. Not one to lie, especially about the obvious, she changed the subject.

“I want to thank you for saving my life.”

“It was nothing.”

She snuck another peek. He was wrapping a blanket around his hips, leaving his torso bare.

She swallowed. “It was something to me.”

He stepped out from behind the curtain. For the first time she was able to get a good look at his face without the grime.

Her breath caught in her throat. If beautiful could be used to describe a man, it would be used for him. He’d the face of a fallen angel and a body that would make those angels weep with envy.

But what truly took her breath away wasn’t his face or his physique. It was his magic.

He was steeped in it. Every portion of his being nearly drowning in magic as though he were made of it. And all that power centered on the amulet he wore on a leather strip around his throat.

“What are you?” she blurted.

His blue eyes narrowed. “What are you?”

Tit for tat, then. It was only fair. Still, she hesitated. “What do you mean?”

“Sir Reginald named you witch.”

“You don’t think I’m a witch?”

“I know you are not a witch.” His tone left no room for doubt. “But you are something.”

He would think her mad if she told the truth. Utterly mad.

“I will not think you mad. I have seen more things than you can possibly imagine. Nothing you can say would shock me.”

“My name is Amara. I am a Dragon Child.”

He frowned. “A Dragon Child?”

She nodded. “The last of my kind. I was born with the magic of dragons, though I am human.”

Her admission seemed neither to shock nor surprise him. He merely nodded.

“And your name?” she prompted.

“I am...Jack.” His hesitation told her he had another name. She let him have his secrets. “I am...was...a knight.”

“What are you now if not a knight?”

He gave her a long look as though trying to decide if she were worthy to carry his secret. Finally he spoke. “I am a Sunwalker.”

Amara blinked. She’d heard tales of the creatures. Immortals who fed from the sun as vampires fed from human blood. Her heart pounded in her chest, fear warring against her attraction. “A Sunwalker? But I thought they were all destroyed a century ago.”

That was certainly what The Church had claimed. That the immortal Sunwalkers who filled out the ranks of the Templar Knights were demons from the pit of hell who needed to be purged. Granted, Amara had never had much use for the Church. As far as she was concerned, it had little to do with spirituality and much to do with domination.

“Three of us escaped. We are the last.”

“But where have you been hiding all this time? How did the French king’s hunters not find you?”

He smiled. “We haven’t lived centuries for nothing. We hid far to the north, beyond Hadrian’s wall.”

Her hand went to her throat. “Dragon land?”

He nodded. “We have a pact with them. We keep their secrets and they ours. It has been most beneficial.”

“You would not betray them?” It seemed astonishing that it would be so. He was a warrior trained, a natural enemy of dragon kind.

His frown was fierce. “I know what it is to be betrayed. I will not do it to another.” He gave her a very long look. “And certainly not to a Dragon Child.”

“You know what it is I am?”

“The dragons speak of such as you. The Drago says he has not seen one of your kind since he was a child. How could you possibly know what you are? There are no dragons south of the Wall.”

His question was reasonable. After all, without a dragon to help her harness her abilities, she might have thought she was the witch Sir Reginald believed her to be. Instead she knew exactly what she was and could harness the magics within her for the sake of peace. The way of a Dragon Child was not the way of violence.

She smiled at the warrior. “I have someone I would like you to meet.”

* * *

Amara carefully picked her way along the narrow path. Well, not so much a path. More a deer trail. Barely discernable beneath the shadows of towering oaks and half buried under swaths of greenery, it rambled through the wood before ascending up the side of Denham Reach, a small hillside deep within the forest.

Halfway up the side of the Reach, she stepped off the trail and made her way carefully between the brambles and briars until she came to the cliff face. Jack stepped up beside her.

“Now what?”

She smiled. “Have faith.”

She approached the side of the cliff and lay her palm flat against the cool stone. She could feel the damp grittiness against her skin. But beyond lay something else. She closed her eyes and let her mind latch onto that something. It sparked in recognition.

Amara stepped back from the cliff and waited, Jack at her side. He fidgeted a bit, which surprised her. For an immortal warrior he was awfully impatient. Then again she supposed he was a man of action, not used to waiting around.

Then it came; the grinding sound that told her the portal was about to open. Slowly the entire rock face slid back, revealing the dark cavern beyond.

She nearly laughed at the expression on Jack’s face. She grabbed his arm and dragged him toward the cavern. “Come on, Sunwalker. Welcome to my world.”

* * *

“Welcome, Sunwalker.”

The low voice rumbled through his chest. Jack opened his mouth, closed it, then opened it again. He tried to speak, but nothing came out. Beside him, Amara laughed.

“I think he’s speechless, Mavryn.” She tilted her head and gave him a curious look. “I though you said you lived in Dragon land?”

Jack finally found his voice. “I do. I’ve just...ah, never seen a dragon in dragon form.”

“Would it be more comfortable for you if I appeared in my human form?” The deep voice held a touch of laughter.

“Only if you wish it,” he said politely.

A little puff of smoke accompanied uproarious laughter. Then in a shimmer of color, the great winged beast disappeared and in its place was a woman, bent with age. Her snow white hair reached nearly to the floor and milky eyes gave away her blindness. She was very old indeed.

“Come closer, Sunwalker.”

He moved closer and the dragon reached unerringly for his hand. She turned his hand over until it was palm up and drew a symbol in the center.

“An interesting path you have taken and still have yet to take.” Her blind eyes peered at him as though she could see his face. “The Bloodline you seek is not here. Not in this time. Not in this place.”

Her answer took him by surprise. He had told no one of the vision which had sent him south, searching for the descendent of a long dead race. “How did you know?”

“I know many things.”

He'd heard there were those of dragon-kind who had the power of soothsaying, but he'd never met one. “Are you certain?”

She cackled at that. “Yes, quite certain. You have been brought here for another purpose. It will soon make itself known.” She turned to Amara. “Come, child.”

Amara and the old dragon embraced. Jack felt a pang of sorrow for Amara. It was clear the old one didn't have much time left on this earth. Her body was fading as surely as her sight had done.

“Listen well, Dragon Child. I have taught you all I can. The time has come for you to take a different path. This is the last time we will see one another.”

“But Mavryn...”

“Hush, child. This is the way of things.”

Tears trickled down Amara's face. It was obvious she knew the dragon was speaking of her own death. Some idiocy had him reaching over to take Amara's hand.

She clung to it like a lifeline.

“Mavryn, you are my family,” she pleaded.

“As you are mine. But life is life and there is no stopping its transition. You bear my amulet, and so all dragon kind will know you as my kin.” She turned to Jack.

“You have met Sir Reginald?”

“Unfortunately.”

Her expression was grim. “He is an evil man with a dark purpose. He is not the first of his kind you will meet, nor will he be the last. He blames my Amara for the death of his wife.”

He turned to Amara. “This is true?”

She nodded, sorrow etched on her beautiful face. “She died in childbirth. I tried to help, but there was nothing I could do. He blames me and claims I used black magic to steal her soul.”

Jack barely refrained from rolling his eyes. It was sheer ridiculous superstition, and more than likely it had been just the excuse Sir Reginald needed to hunt her down.

Mavryn turned to Jack. “You will protect her, Sunwalker.” It was not a request.

“With my life.”

She nodded. “Then my work here is done.” She kissed Amara's cheek. “Now go and leave me in peace.”

Jack dragged a sobbing Amara from the cavern. It shut behind them with the finality of a tomb.

* * *

Jack lay staring at the ceiling. He didn't dare move lest he wake Amara. And more than anything she needed the healing power of sleep.

By the time they'd returned to her cottage she'd been exhausted from sorrow and tears, but she had refused to let him go. So, he'd curled up in the bed with her. It was not proper, but then nothing much in his life or hers was proper.

She stirred in his arms. “Jack.”

“Yes.”

“Did you mean what you said about protecting me?”

“Yes.” He meant every word. She was a Dragon Child. A being of peace, meant to bring unity and healing to the world and to dragon kin. It was up to men like him to protect her kind.

“Thank you, Jack.” Her soft lips pressed against his.

Caught off guard, he froze for a moment, then a wave of want hit him so strong it would have knocked him off his feet had he been standing. Instead, he kissed her back with everything he had, everything he was.

* * *

Hours later Jack woke. He frowned. Something had woken him, he just wasn't sure what.

Amara was still asleep, her naked body cuddled into his. He smiled, remembering their lovemaking. Her body was probably sore, but he had a hard time feeling bad about that. He hoped she felt the same.

There was a strange orange glow outside the window, though it was still night. He frowned and untangled himself from Amara, stalking to the window.

Fire. The cottage was on fire.

Men swarmed about the little house, torches held aloft. One man sat proudly on a bay horse, surveying the destruction.

Sir Reginald.

Somehow he'd not only found Amara's cottage, but he'd gotten through her wards. Wards in dragon tongue, nearly unbreakable. It was obvious he planned to burn them alive.

He ran back to the bed and shook Amara awake. “Amara, wake up. We have to leave.”

She stirred sleepily. “What?”

“Amara, the cabin is on fire. Sir Reginald found us. We have to leave now!”

She came awake then, shock and horror written across her face. “How did he find us?”

“It doesn't matter. Get dressed quickly. We must leave.”

Without a moment's hesitation she jumped out of bed and threw on her clothes. He also dressed quickly, then grabbed his sword and sheath.

“I have to get something.” She ran from the room, returning a moment later with a leather bound book which she quickly wrapped up in a shawl. “I'm ready.”

He nodded his approval. She was so incredibly strong.

He peered out the back. They were completely surrounded. Sir Reginald wouldn't hesitate to slaughter them. There were at least thirty of them. He couldn't fight all of them and still protect Amara. “There's no way we can get to the woods without being seen.”

She smiled. “I think I can help with that.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Have at it.”

Clutching the mysterious book to her chest with one arm, she wrapped her free hand around her pendant. The pendant which had once belonged to Mavryn. Closing her eyes, Amara began chanting softly. He recognized the sound of it. Dragon tongue.

Within minutes a heavy fog descended. Jack literally couldn't see two feet in front of his face.

"Come," she whispered, "but keep quiet. They can't see us, but then can still hear."

She led him across her garden and between two of Sir Reginald's men. She moved as though she could see perfectly, yet both he and the men surrounding the cottage were nearly blind from fog.

He could hear their panicked shouts and Sir Reginald bellowing orders. No one saw them slip past and into the woods.

They did not speak for nearly an hour as she led them, swiftly slipping in and out of deep thickets and groves until Sir Reginald, his men and the burning cottage were far behind them. Finally they stopped to catch their breath.

Her eyes looked haunted. "Where shall I go? Sir Reginald will never stop hunting me. Anywhere I go on this earth he will follow."

"There is one place he dare not go."

She frowned. "Where? Where can I go that will be safe?"

He smiled. "Beyond the Wall."

* * *

Check out Shéa's Sunwalker saga:

[Kissed by Darkness](#)

[Kissed by Fire](#)

Shéa MacLeod lives in London near a cemetery. Which explains a lot. Fortunately the neighbours are quiet.

<http://sheamacleod.wordpress.com/>

Magickal Vendetta

Heather Marie Adkins

I let the dried dragon's blood trickle through my fingers and into my cauldron. Well, the bright pink "Emeril" saucepan that pretends to be my cauldron, at any rate. The red particles separated and spread across my potion, forming curlicues around the bubbles. The liquid inside was the nasty green color of boiled toads, but that meant I was doing something right, so I wasn't going to complain.

Fall air seeped through the small opening under the kitchen window. It was refreshing on my skin against the heat coming off the stovetop. Outside, the late afternoon sunshine illuminated my garden where it still clung to a semi-state of life. The first frost would destroy it, but until then, it gave me something to watch as my potion boiled.

I grabbed a wooden spoon—the one with the carved owl—and gave the pot a stir, whistling.

Aura sat on the bookcase above my head in her position of power, eyeballing the proceedings with narrowed yellow eyes. "You look ridiculous. Where is your ritual robe?"

Frowning, I pulled the spoon out of the pot and glanced down at my clothes. Okay, so I was still in the tiny purple tank top and red plaid sweatpants I had slept in, and maybe I had Scooby-Doo slippers on my feet, but there wasn't a dress code for magick.

"What's wrong with what I'm wearing?" I sat the spoon on the plate in the center of the stove, lifting my eyes to my fluffy, black cat.

She cocked her head. "Hmm."

"Whatever." I opened the pantry above the sink and shuffled through the mason jars until I found what I needed. Unscrewing the lid, I pinched out an eyeball and turned back to the stove.

"Don't add that. You're going to ruin the formula."

I shot her a glare with the eye of newt dangling above the boiling pot from between my thumb and forefinger. "Why?"

"It calls for eye of iguana."

Rolling my eyes, I answered, "I don't have eye of iguana, I have eye of newt. They're both lizards."

"Gretchen," Aura sighed. "The newt is an amphibian while the iguana is a reptile. Different entirely."

I pursed my lips. "Who here has opposable thumbs?"

"The brute with half the brain of her cat," Aura answered smoothly, before licking the pads of one paw to show how much she was ignoring me.

I sighed and added the eye anyway.

Of course, the explosion rocked the foundations of the neighborhood.

“You know Tibbett is going to call the cops again,” Aura murmured as I opened my eyes to the smoke settling around us. She flicked her tail, dropping the force field she had thrown up like a giant protective bubble. The cat had reflexes that were, well, cat-like. She had saved my ass more than once.

I could care less about my nosy neighbor, Old Man Tibbett, and his penchant for dialing the authorities. My once-green concoction dripped in black, burnt clumps down the stove. And the walls. And my cookie jar. “Damn it.”

“Why can’t you just go after him with a bespelled sword like a normal, vengeful witch?” Aura leapt gracefully from the bookcase to the kitchen counter and jumped the rest of the way to the floor, narrowly missing a potion crater.

“Not enough,” I muttered, reaching for a dish towel and recoiling when I realized it was covered in goo. “I want his balls to fall off or his eyeballs to shrivel...”

“You are infinitely twisted,” Aura sighed, wagging her fluffy butt as she picked her way carefully across the floor, headed for the living room.

“You could help me clean this up, you know,” I called, still looking for a clean rag. I couldn’t remember where I had last seen the paper towel roll.

Aura turned just enough to narrow her eyes at me over her shoulder. “Who here has opposable thumbs?”

Shot down by a cat.

* * *

I met Elery at The Coffee Shack a couple hours later still reeking of lavender scented bleach.

“You stink, Gretchen,” she greeted me, wrinkling her small, pert nose. “Did you blow something up again?”

I sank wearily into the chair across from her, letting my brown canvas satchel fall to the floor. “I don’t want to talk about it. It’s still on the ceiling. If I don’t think about it, it’s not there.”

Elery had been my mentor since I first began exhibiting magickal powers. She was a beautiful woman, with ethereal blonde hair that reached her lower back and a pixie-like face harboring ice blue eyes. She was also immortal, which was a sore point for me. Every minute I spent with her, I could feel the age lines battling over my face.

“I taught you better than this,” she sighed, shifting in her seat and letting her palms rest gently on the table. The woman had the best damn posture of anyone I’d ever met. If there hadn’t been a fluffy white puppy on the front of her crimson sweater, you would have thought she was some kind of regal princess.

“I can’t help it.” I pouted, crossing my arms over my black long sleeve t-shirt. Twenty-eight-years old or not, when she berates me, I revert to nine once more.

“Is this about Slane?”

“Don’t you dare say his name!” I snarled, scaring the tiny waitress who had sidled up to the table. With her dark chestnut eyes wide as saucers, the teen took my order for a white chocolate mochaccino before hurrying away as if demons were at her heels.

“Your behavior has already gotten us banned from Starbucks. Could you tone it down?” Elery asked wryly, taking a dainty sip of her steaming Chai. “Did you bother to brush your hair before you left the house?”

My hands shot up to where my mass of curly, bright red hair was tugged into a messy ponytail. “Um, no.”

Elery pursed her lips but let the hair slide—unusual for her nature. She loved to preach about how a woman should “always look her best!” She went on. “So, what did you blow up this time?”

I fiddled with the napkin on the table, tracing the name of the shop with one finger and searching for a way out of her question. No exit signs in sight. “A potion.”

“What *kind* of potion?” Elery prompted, raising a perfectly arched eyebrow.

Sighing, I gave in. She always won, anyway. “A hex.”

“For Slane?”

“Quit saying his name!” I hissed, reaching across the table to pinch her arm. Glancing around fervently, I whispered, “He’s going to hear you.”

“Dear goddess, Gretchen, he’s a witch, not omnipotent.” She smiled at a young, long-haired busboy as he placed a plate of crumb cake in front of her. I never saw her order it, so either she had him completely under her power or she was telepathic and had never told me. Turning her brilliant eyes back to me, she went on. “Gretch, we need to address this Sla—”

I glared at her, clearing my throat.

“This *man* issue.” She raised her eyebrow again, which provoked the sullen teenager in me.

“There’s nothing to address.” I might have slumped in my seat and crossed my eyes. I probably stuck my tongue out at her. Maybe I even stomped my big black boots on the floor.

Elery reached down to where her gigantic leather purse sat next to her chair and shuffled through it. Her hand emerged from it with a book which she laid on the table between us.

“No.” I shook my head vehemently, scooting my chair away from the table as if it were diseased. “Not happening.”

She gave me a harassed sigh, one hand pushing the book closer to me as the waitress ran by, depositing my mocha. I reached for the coffee, ignoring the book.

“It’s time, Gretchen. Just buck up and do it.”

* * *

Aura turned her head nearly upside-down to stare at the book on the kitchen table, her nose wrinkling. “So, this is it? It’s rather small.”

“I’m NOT doing it.” I had seated myself a good four feet away from it, my chair jutting out into the walkway between the stove and table. No matter how much I willed the book to disappear, no luck.

“You knew it was a matter of time. Elery gave you all the years you needed to prepare for it.”

Pouting, I muttered, “But, I hate him.”

“You barely know him. It’s unethical to hate someone you barely know.”

“It’s unethical to build potions with the intent to shrivel someone’s testicles, but I do it anyway,” I responded cheerfully.

She managed a pinched and irritated look that closely resembled Elery. “Gretchen, you’re missing the point. Open the book and get it over with.”

“I don’t want to. It’s stupid.”

“I understand that, but sometimes you just have to do things the way the Universe has planned for you.”

“The Universe can shove this book up its ass.”

“That’s going to come back on you three-fold, missy. You better shape up and just do it.” On that note, my supposed best friend and familiar slipped from the table and left me alone.

With my destiny.

I leaned forward in my seat, reaching tentatively for the book. Using a single finger, I angled it to better see the cover and shivered. Just a nonchalant black leather book with my mother’s name printed on it in gold.

I’m a blood witch. 7th daughter of a 7th daughter. My magick is supposed to surpass that of any witch who isn’t a 7&7, though because of the rate at which I blow things up, I guess maybe I’m just a dunce. As a 7&7, my destiny is pretty much laid out like a well-drawn map—I will marry, I will have 7 daughters, and I will die young as my power ultimately consumes me.

It’s just the way things are.

The most important thing, however, was *who* I was meant to marry.

We’re betrothed, you see, Slane and I. But, not in the “my father pledged me to your father” type way. No, in a “the universe planned it and sealed it by magick” type way.

Every 7&7 is magickally sealed to her mate, but the magick isn’t complete without the final spell—a spell her mother writes.

The book beneath my finger was my mother’s Book of Shadows.

* * *

The sound of machinery woke me up. I shoved a hand under my pillow to make sure Mom’s book had survived the night beneath my rampant tossing and turning, and let out a breath I hadn’t realized I was holding when I found it. Another clang from outside my window made me groan. “I’m going to kill that old man.”

“You are not,” Aura said, yawning. “His wife makes you cookies.”

“How much work can one house need?” I pushed myself to my elbows, glaring out the open window next to my bed. The chill breeze was cold, even with four blankets on top of me, but I loved sleeping next to the window where I could see the sky.

A bulldozer was raking its way across Tibbett’s backyard, digging up a deep furrow of dying grass. I thanked the stars for my privacy fence, conveniently protecting my garden from giant mechanical monsters, and flopped back onto the bed. I buried my face in the pillow, fully intending to fall back into dreams.

“So. How did you sleep?” Aura asked smoothly, both of her paws snaking across the space between my pillow and hers so she could knead her claws in my hair.

So much for more rest.

“Yes, Aura, I gave it some thought,” I said into the pillow. “And no, I’m not going to read it.”

Ten razor sharp talons pierced my skull and I yelped, jerking away and swatting at her. “You’re not my mother!”

“Somebody should be.” She stalked out of the bedroom, her fluffy tail swaying.

Aura met me at the coffee pot an hour later, rubbing her body on my arms as I filled the pot with water and loaded the filter. It was her way of apologizing and it always worked.

“Have you purchased candy yet?” she asked me, turning circles around my coffee mug. She was way too energized. She had probably hit the catnip while I was in the shower.

I tossed my mop of wet, red curls over my shoulder and said, “What? Why?”

Sighing, she spun around one last time, like a dog, and sat on my hand. “Tomorrow is Samhain, Gretchen. You are the worst witch in the world.”

“Oh.” I took a deep sniff of the brewing coffee and closed my eyes in ecstasy as I slumped over the counter. It was like a narcotic. “Yeah, I’ll get some today...”

I stood up quickly, banging my head on the cabinet. “Oww.”

“What is it?” Aura asked, scooting away from my hand as I lifted it to my head, gingerly touching the point of impact. “Something excited you.”

I raised an eyebrow at her. “It really weirds me out when you do that.”

“I cannot help that my senses are twenty times that of your own and I can smell your disgusting emotions.”

I swear my cat smirked at me.

“We aren’t gonna need candy this year, Aur.” I smacked my hands together, rubbing gleefully and aiming for the Mad Scientist look.

“You look mentally handicapped, Gretchen, do quit and tell me what has you in a dither.”

I smacked her on the bottom playfully and she hissed at me. “I’m going to be a little busy for Samhain this year.”

She froze on the tips of her toes, her back rising in a fair imitation of a Halloween cat, only fluffier. “Please, tell me you’re not considering...”

I smiled, skipping out of the kitchen and down the hallway towards my ritual closet. “Oh, you better believe it!” I crowed. “I’m harnessing the power of Samhain and getting rid of that man once and for all!”

* * *

Halloween dawned bitter cold and spitting rain. I spent all morning under the covers, flipping through spellbooks and ignoring the one under my pillow.

Aura wouldn’t come near me. I could hear her mumbling as she paced the den, catching words like “asinine” and “foolish”. I think she might have gone for a walk at some point because I heard the jingle bells over the kitty door a couple times, but I was too absorbed in my reading. I barely noticed the passage of dim daylight from my window as it traveled across the floor.

By the time the sun had set, I had a notebook full of information and a hastily scribbled spell thumb tacked to the wall above my altar in the living room.

“I will ask you once more, please reconsider,” Aura begged, rubbing against my bare ankles. “This will only end badly.”

“I’m wearing my robe,” I told her, ignoring her pleas. “No Scooby-Doo this time. Are you proud?”

“Gretchen.” She drew out my name like a whine and it chilled me.

“Aura, go play in the litterbox if you don’t want to hang around for this, ‘kay?”

She huffed, flicking her tail in the air like a middle finger before stalking from the room. I was equal parts exasperated and terrified as I watched her leave the room.

Doing magick without Aura was a lot like attempting suicide on accident.

The den was nicely atmospheric. I had lined the walls with candles on every available surface so that the room felt like a cave. With the lights off and the curtains over the French doors closed, it could have passed for one of my ancestors’ old wooden huts.

Except for the twenty inch flatscreen. They didn’t really have that liberty.

I struck a match, watching it flare into existence and settle into a steady flame before I lit the black pillar candle on my altar. Lifting the charcoal from the censor, I held it over the candle until it caught. Sparks fizzed across the surface of the coal like bubbles in a soda. I placed it back in the bronze censor then dropped a pinch of mixed herbs on top of it. The smoke curled through the air.

I rather liked simplicity in my spells. A candle, some incense, and intent were all a girl really needed to get what she wanted. On a normal day, my intent wasn’t worth crap, but at Samhain—with the veil thin and magick hanging heavy in the air—my intent was epic.

My wand was already humming with power when I picked it up. I felt it connect to the energy inside me when my palm wrapped around the wooden surface—like two interlocking puzzle pieces. I inscribed a pentagram over the altar with its pointed quartz crystal tip and intoned,

*Kitty cat tails and bat wings dark
Eyes of the wolf and yellow duck’s beak,
Ogre’s fingers and a pirate’s heart,
Bring to me the one I seek!*

I was so accustomed to disaster that I expected some kind of explosion. Instead, nothing but a slight *pop* heralded his kidnap—er, entrance.

He looked exactly as I remembered him, but it had only been three years so that wasn’t abnormal. What *was* abnormal was the way my heart pounded at the sight of him. The way my palms grew moist and the bottom dropped out of my abdomen. The way every fiber of me wanted to wrap myself up in his arms and stay there.

Slane’s hair was the color of sunshine and it grazed his jaw bone with each movement of his head. One side was always tucked behind an ear, and the other fell into his incredibly blue eyes. The hoops in his ears were new—I liked them—and his skin was much more tanned than usual. His tall, muscular form was draped in a monk’s robes and he held a big pumpkin-shaped bowl of sweets between his hands.

“Buddhist monks don’t have hair,” I pointed out to him, waving my wand in his face.

“Gretchen?” he blinked at me, dropping the bowl of sweets so that they scattered across the floor. My mouth watered as I saw several chocolate kisses go sliding under the futon. “What’s going on?”

“Welcome to my home,” I said sweetly, while sweeping one arm out in a dramatic flourish. I used my other hand to level my wand at him. “It’s going to be the first and last time you ever see it.”

Slane rolled his eyes. “Gretchen, what for the love of Hades are you talking about?”

“I’m going to break the bond,” I told him coolly, poking him in the chest with my wand as he stepped forward, too close for comfort.

“Are you still going on about this?” He rubbed his brow with one hand, wrinkling his nose. “Gretchen, it was a car.”

“It was my 1968 Shelby Cobra! And you totaled it!” I yelled, maybe a little too hysterically.

“Yes, Slane,” Aura called from the dark recesses of the house. “That is the only reason she hates you. She’s utterly irrational.”

“Thanks, Aura. Nice to see you again!” he answered. I wasn’t sure who I felt was more traitorous for the exchange, my familiar or him. He cocked a half-assed grin that sent fire across my face. “What are you going to do with that thing? Hit me?” He laughed—the asshole laughed!—and knocked my wand hand away.

“Don’t taunt me, Slane. I’m your worst nightmare,” I snapped, jerking my hand back up to jab him in the arm with the wand. Closing my eyes, I sent thoughts of fire into the wood, hoping to burn him.

It just made my wand flare hot, burning my own hand. I screeched, letting it fall to the ground and put my palm to my mouth, sucking on the offending area.

Slane leaned to scoop my wand from the hardwood, turning it so that he offered me the handle with a gentle smile. “Or, you’re an incredibly inept witch who needs someone to take care of you.”

“I do not. Jerk.” I turned my back to him, studying my red palm in the candlelight.

“You’re the most exasperating woman,” Slane growled, closing the space between us. His long fingers wrapped around both my biceps as he jerked me to his body, swiveling me so that his lips could fall to mine.

He tasted like magick. It was electric between us, the pull of it moving me closer to him. I yielded to his kiss and rubbed on him like a cat scenting its property. His back was hard beneath my hands; his own palms pushed aside my robe, spanning the skin beneath my tank top.

Between kisses, he murmured, “I’ve missed you, Gretch.”

His confession struck me like a wall at sixty miles an hour. It gave me presence of mind enough to get my wand between us. With a push of energy through it, I sent him flying across the room. He hit the wall hard, crumpling to the floor like a rag doll.

“Oh my goddess, Slane, are you okay?” I babbled, dropping my wand to the altar and rushing after him.

He groaned as I slid my hands under his arms and helped him stumble to his feet. Brushing me off, he rubbed the back of his head and muttered, “What is this really about, Gretchen? Because it’s not about the car anymore. Forget the damned car. Freedom?” He finally turned wounded eyes to me, his hand dropping to his side. “Or do you really just not like me?”

“I could never not like you. I love you,” I burst out, biting my lip as his eyes widened. “Damn it, Slane, you’re my mate. I’m meant to love you.”

“Then what’s wrong with being together, Gretchen?” He traced a path down my cheek with one thumb.

“My entire life has been ruled by my magick,” I murmured, unconsciously leaning into his hand with my cheek. “Learning it, doing it, trying to get it right. I never asked to be a 7&7. It just happened. I don’t want to be a baby-maker, pushing out seven kids and then dying young simply because the Universe deems it so.” I felt the tears coming and tried to stop them—unsuccessfully. “It’s about not giving in.”

Slane lifted his other hand so that he cradled my face between both palms, forcing me to look into his steady blue eyes. “Gretchen, I will walk away right now. I would stay away from you forever, no matter how much I want you, no matter how badly I would miss you, just to make you happy. Is that what you want? Just say the word, Gretch, and I’ll leave.”

It was the tear. The single, crystalline drop from the corner of his eye as it worked its way down his cheek. It dripped from his jaw and splashed on to my hand resting against his chest. When it broke upon my skin, I felt the depth of his love for me and I knew without a doubt that magick had nothing to do with it.

“No,” I whispered. He leaned closer, his breath held. I shook my head harder. “No, Slane, that’s not what I want. I want you. Forever.”

His strong arms wrapped around me, lifting me against him as he kissed me again. That kiss was even better than the last, a vicious, soul-searching kiss that led us to the futon. We landed in a tangle of arms and legs, devouring one another with a hunger born of three years apart.

The doorbell rang and I froze beneath him, one hand full of his luscious bum and the other tangled in his hair.

“You forgot to turn off the porchlight, didn’t you, Gretchen?” His voice hummed against my neck. I could feel the chuckle building up in his chest.

“For the sake of all things holy,” I groaned, shoving him away. I fell to my knees, shoving his wayward candy back into the bowl. “Help me gather up these sweets. We have trick or treaters.”

* * *

I married Slane after all. We eloped to Hawaii where a shirtless Hawaiian dude with long black hair and a red flowered skirt married us as we stood waist deep in the ocean. That night, on a moonless beach, we read aloud my mother’s spell by candlelight to cement our magickal bond.

We made love beneath the stars and, of course, I got pregnant.

I guess I’ll have my seven girls so he can spoil them rotten, just like he does with me. He bought me a new Shelby—I drive it *everywhere*.

Maybe I’ll die young, maybe I won’t.

Some rules are just meant to be broken.

* * *

Check out Heather’s other work:

[The Temple](#)

Abigail

Heather Adkins is a long-time practicing witch living in the wilds of the American South.
Make her angry and she just may turn you into a newt and boil your eyeballs in her
(admittedly not Emeril) saucepan.

<http://heather.bishoffs.com/>

The Rhyn Trilogy: Origins

Lizzy Ford

The demons came with the night, sweeping across the hills with fiery swords that tore through darkness and the bodies of the villagers they left in their wake. Gabriel gripped and released the hilt of his broad sword as he watched the flames of Hell envelope hill after hill, each one closer than the last. At seventeen, he was bigger than any other man in his village, and still he feared the fanged creatures.

“Is this all there is?” his father, the village elder, hissed as three more men joined their small army overlooking the valley.

“Aye, ‘tis everyone.”

Gabriel turned to see the restless shadows that were his family and friends. There were only forty men from their village in any shape to fight, and several more who had not lifted a sword in years. The rest of their village fled for the caves in the cliff, where they hoped the demons would not follow.

“We only need to stay alive long enough for our women to make it to the cliffs,” his father said. Several men murmured in agreement. Gabriel’s gaze returned to the demons. Fear chilled his insides and adrenaline made him fidget.

“We’ll ambush ‘em in the valley, then run for the cliffs,” his father went on. “Son, you’ll stay here.”

“No, Papa,” Gabriel said. “I’m the biggest man in the village. I’ll fight.”

“You’re no warrior, boy. You’ll stay here. Hide yourselves, men!”

The villagers—only a few armed with swords and the rest armed with iron tools or wood—hurried past him to take up their positions hidden in the tall grasses of the valley’s sloping walls. He started forward, determined to fight the beasts that threatened his mother and younger brother.

“No, boy,” his father said and pulled him back. “Listen to me.”

“Papa, I—”

“I swore to your mother you’d come home, even if I didn’t. Listen to me, boy.”

“I am, Papa!” he said, eyes going to the demons again. His father gripped his chin and forced his attention back to him. The dim light from stars made the creases appear deeper in his father’s leathery face, and Gabriel gazed into eyes as dark as his.

“If Death comes for you, you tell her she can’t have your spirit. You hear me?”

“Papa, I’m not going to die! I’m going to kill all the demons and go home to mama!”

“Boy, you tell her, she can’t have your spirit.”

“Papa, enough!” Gabriel snapped. “They’re coming!”

His father looked towards the demons, resignation crossing his features before he darted down the hill. Gabriel followed as far as he dared before the first of the demons crested the hill on the other side of the valley.

Their flaming swords were longer than he was tall and clutched by hands with talons the length of his forearm. Moonlight glinted off fangs and the scales that lined their bodies beneath tufts of black fur. Even their horses were twice the size of any horse he'd ever seen with eyes that glowed like the harvest moon. His mouth dropped open and for a long moment, he forgot to breathe.

"Now, men!" his father shouted and charged out of the grass towards the low point in the valley.

A demon launched itself off its horse, snapped his father's arm with one bite of its powerful jaws, and broke his body in half. Horrified, Gabriel watched the demon rip the flesh off his father's bones before tossing the carcass aside. The fiery swords of the demons mowed through his uncles and cousins while several more tackled his friends. Blood soaked the earth.

Paralyzed by fear, he saw the demons ride towards him, but it was as if he watched someone else. He screamed at the youth on the hilltop to raise his sword, to fight for his family, to die with honor, but the fool did not move. He stood there with the sword at his feet and his jaw slack as the demons thundered up the hill to claim his head. As the sword descended, he moved his lips in a scream that echoed into the night.

"You cannot have my spirit!"

Fire, darkness, silence.

* * *

Sweet smelling grass tickled his cheeks and rustled in the ocean breeze. Gabriel swatted it out of his face and opened his eyes, squinting at the bright midmorning sun. He rolled onto his back. Smoke billowed into the sky from the direction of his village.

Demons!

He scrambled to his feet, his stomach turning at the sight of the carnage in the valley. Memories of his father being cut down were fresh in his mind. He remembered the demon charging him as well, the sword descending then...nothing. He ran his hands over his body to make sure all his parts were there and stopped to stare at his palms. They were covered in blood. So was his clothing and the grass around him. It looked as if he'd died last night, yet he was alive.

His thoughts flew to his mother and the caves. His pulse loud in his ears, Gabriel ran down then up the hill separating the village from the valley of death to the hill overlooking the home he'd meant to defend. Everything was burnt to the ground or still burning, from the dwelling he'd shared with his family to the horses in the smithy's corral. His eyes followed the path the demons took, marked by a swath of scorched ground that snaked through the grass from the village towards the cliffs—the same path his mother would have taken.

He ran until he reached the scorched earth then slowed to take in the bodies lining the demons' path. His panicked gaze flew from body to body as he made his way to the cliff's edge. He caught a blur of white from the corner of his eye but dismissed the fleeting image as nothing more than a lucky sheep, until a sweet, sing song voice penetrated his maddened search.

"Come with me, my darling."

He faced the small woman with white robes and hair that shifted in the wind without disturbing the grass. His hands clenched and released, but he'd left his sword on the hill. She knelt beside the lifeless body of a woman, and he drew a sharp breath.

"Mama," he whispered.

The woman in white turned. One moment her eyes were white then black then every color in between. In her hand she held green gems. His gaze went from her to his mother, and he dropped to his knees, tears blurring his vision.

"Mama."

"I fear she's dead-dead," the small woman in white said. "I've harvested her spirit already." She held out the gems and pointed at one. "This one is hers."

He reached for it numbly and held the transparent emerald in his hand.

"She's so small," he said in a choked voice. Tears streamed down his face, and he wiped snot from his nose. His chest was so tight, he thought he'd suffocate.

"Your brother is over there."

He followed her pointing finger with his gaze. His little brother lay spread-eagled on his belly, his back torn open down the middle. Gabriel wiped his face again and went to his brother. He squatted to run his fingers through his brother's hair just as he had done yesterday morning.

"They're never really gone forever," the woman said. She held out a hand to the boy's ear. A tiny whirlwind of green dust swirled free of his brother, danced around her hand like smoke, and crystallized in her palm. She held it out to him.

"Where do they go?" he asked.

"To the underworld, where I keep all the souls. Your family will be together down there. There's no more pain once I take them from their weak mortal bodies," she answered. "One day, I'll teach you."

"Teach me what?" he asked and took his brother's soul. He closed his fist around what remained of his mother and brother, protecting them as he had not been able to the night before.

"How to gather a human soul once one is dead-dead." Her voice was cheerful, as if she plucked daisies in the field and not the spirits of his family.

"What are you?"

"You spoke to me last night, Gabriel."

"You know my name."

"You knocked on my door and refused to come in. I'm not accustomed to that, Gabriel," she chided him gently.

He stared at her and stood, ready to flee the madwoman and take his mother and brother with him. She drew nearer, and he caught her scent, like sunshine and grass. Her rainbow eyes seemed to see right through him. At half his size, she seemed delicate and small, but he felt the warm power that made the air around her shimmer. He'd spoken to no one last night except...

"Death," he said at last, his voice barely a whisper. "My father warned me about you."

"And see where that got you?"

"Dead?"

"Yes and no. Because you refused to give me your soul, I had to turn you into an Immortal. I don't like leaving mortals in the shadow world. Nothing good ever comes of

that. I can always make you dead-dead..." She raised her eyebrow in inquiry, but he shook his head. "Very well. Come on."

"Where are we going?"

"You're mine now, Gabriel, and we have more souls to gather."

He looked down at the gems in his hand. Pain and loss crippled him, and he doubled over to retch. Death placed a cool hand on the back of his neck. His stomach settled.

"Come, young one," she said, not unkindly. "I have great plans for you."

He watched her walk away and forced himself to his feet. He faced the bodies of his mother and brother one last time. Cold desolation lingered within him like a thick fog.

"I want to bury them," he said.

"We have to gather the souls before nightfall, or the demons will return for them."

Such creatures would kill the innocent then harvest their souls? He never knew such evil existed.

"I will kill them if they come!" he vowed.

"Not this day. I saw you on the hill last night. You did not even lift your sword," Death said, bemused. "You must learn to fight, and you must learn to bury your human emotions. They make you weak, Gabriel, and I cannot have that."

"I cannot help what I am!" he said, his face hot with shame and anger at the reminder that he'd done nothing when the demons attacked.

"You can, and you will. You will be known by many names. Death dealer. Assassin." She stooped to coax another stream of green sand free from a fallen villager. "You will join the others who bring me the souls of mortals and immortals."

"I want to kill demons."

"You will. Come with me, Gabriel. We're going home."

What looked like the mouth of a cave materialized in the air before her, and she stepped into it. He gazed around once more while hot tears burned down his cheeks. He wiped them away and squared his shoulders. His family died because he was too afraid to act.

I will become the strongest and fastest and bravest. I will avenge you mama, papa, I swear it.

His heart pounding, he followed Death to the underworld.

* * *

1,000 years later

Gabriel lopped the head off the last demon and stood ready to take on more. The demons, however, were done playing his game, and those remaining disappeared. He stood knee deep in demon body parts and straightened. He'd happened upon the demons on his way to kill those on his list of souls to claim this cold night.

He cleaned his sword methodically and replaced it at his back. While he never passed up a chance to behead a demon, he no longer burned to kill them or felt any sense of satisfaction afterwards. He'd all but lost his human emotions after a millennium, much to Death's delight.

"I'll take your head, assassin!"

He whipped around and saw the small form dart from behind a tree nearby. The sword was larger than the boy bearing it. The boy's first strike came nowhere near him,

and the second almost reached him. He stepped away from three more strikes. The boy paused, puffing with effort.

“Wait there, assassin. I must kill you,” he ordered. Gabriel watched him run behind a tree. He normally killed witnesses, human or otherwise, but hesitated, reminded of his youngest brother, who was near the same age when he was killed.

Suddenly, the tree behind him exploded into flames. He spun, sword in his hand. Another one exploded then a third. Soon, all the trees nearby crackled with flames. Magic hummed in the air around him.

“Boy, you should leave before the fire gets you,” he called.

“I will not!” the boy shouted, poking his head out from behind his tree.

“If you’re foolish enough to attack a full-grown assassin, you’re foolish enough to burn yourself to death.”

“I’m a demon. I can eat a full-grown assassin!”

“I don’t know who told you this, but Death has domain over mortals, Immortals, and all the Hell-beasts,” he said and approached the child, whose arms were crossed and whose grubby expression was fierce. The boy’s eyes were silver like a wolf’s. Gabriel knelt in front of him. The raw, wild magic that made the hair on his arms stand on end emanated from the boy. The child was a half-breed demon, though Gabriel hadn’t met many full-blooded demons with such raw power.

“Where is your mother?” he asked.

“I have none.”

“And your father?”

“I have none.”

“What are you doing here? Setting trees on fire?” Gabriel studied him, his curiosity piqued by the little demon boy.

The half-breed hesitated before saying, “I was aiming for you.”

“I’ve killed men for less.”

“I’ve never killed anyone, but I’ll keep trying.”

“You shouldn’t be out here alone,” Gabriel said. He rose to leave. “Go home, boy, before I change my mind and take your head.”

“I have no home, assassin.” Though the words were brave, the tortured look that crossed the demon boy’s face bade Gabriel linger. “Do you go to kill someone?”

“I do. I have three on my list,” Gabriel replied.

“What list?”

“The list of souls Death has ordered me to take to the underworld.”

“I can help you,” the demon boy offered. “I can burn their houses down.”

Gabriel wasn’t sure what to do with the demon boy who was clearly a menace to the mortal world. The more he thought, the more he wondered how the boy had gotten out of the Immortal world in the first place. Demons were known for killing half-breeds or tossing them into one of the bottomless seas in the underworld. He’d never heard of a half-breed being stranded among the humans.

Something about the brave, unkempt boy glaring up at him disturbed him more than he liked. After years of Death’s brutal efforts to banish his human weaknesses, he couldn’t explain the instinct that urged him to take care of the boy.

“You can come with me,” he said at last.

“To hunt souls?”

“Yes, then to the Immortal world, where you belong.”

“I came from there,” the boy said with a frown. His eyes welled with tears.

“You cannot stay here in the mortal world. They’ll kill you.”

The boy looked torn. Gabriel sheathed his sword and walked away, puzzled as to why such a young creature with so much power had been abandoned in the human world. Another tree exploded, and he tensed without turning. He remembered his own brother’s willful tantrums and refused to respond to the half-breed.

“Wait!” the half breed said, running to catch up to him. “What are you called, assassin?”

“Gabriel.”

“Gabriel, I’m going with you.”

“Keep up. I do not have all night to fetch the souls,” Gabriel said with a glance down at the boy whose head barely reached above his waist. At close to seven feet tall and wider than most trees, Gabriel was accustomed to seeing most full grown men run when they saw him. Even demons hesitated before attacking. The boy hadn’t been intimidated in the least by his size. Occupied by the little demon, he didn’t notice his enemies massing in the forest around them.

“What does Death—” The demon boy was interrupted by shouts from the forest and a fiery volley of arrows. Gabriel dropped to the ground, snatched the boy and rolled his small body beneath his. He grunted as arrows pierced his back and legs. He expected the boy to cry out in fear or pain at any moment and heard the half-breed mumbling in agitation.

A sudden shockwave made Gabriel’s teeth chatter as a burst of demon power rolled through him. Demons roared, and more arrows fell. Gabriel hunched his shoulders, expecting to feel the demons’ swords pierce his body. Quiet fell instead. He waited a long moment then unfolded his body with some difficulty. The number of arrows lodged in his back and legs made it impossible for him to stand. The demon boy rose and surveyed the damage.

“I did it,” he breathed, silver eyes glowing like the moon. “Gabriel, I did it!”

Gabriel craned his neck to look around. As far as he could see on either side of the road, the forest had disintegrated. Piles of ashes were all that remained of demons and trees alike. Proud, the half-breed faced him, his smile fading.

“There are so many arrows.”

To his surprise, the demon boy carefully gripped the shaft of an arrow in Gabriel’s calf and jerked it free. It hurt worse coming out than it had going in, and Gabriel hissed at the pain.

“Be still, assassin,” the boy said with a level of self-command beyond his years.

“I thought you wanted me dead-dead,” Gabriel grunted. “You prefer to kill me yourself?”

“No, Gabriel,” the boy said. “I don’t want to kill you now.”

Gabriel gritted his teeth as another arrow was pulled free. He didn’t understand the demon boy. One minute, he was the enemy. The next, the half breed tried to help him.

“You saved me. No one else cares if I live, Gabriel.” The soft words were filled with unshed tears. Gabriel twisted to see the boy, whose face was stormy with emotions. The child met his gaze, and he felt the connection again. For reasons he couldn’t explain, he wouldn’t leave the demon boy behind.

“Hurry, boy,” he said. “We have souls to claim and demons to hunt.”

“You won’t die-dead?”

“Not this night.”

“I’ll protect you if they come back.”

Gabriel raised an eyebrow as Death did when he said something foolish to her. The half-breed was powerful yet showed no capacity for control. He suspected the boy could kill him accidentally with another of those bursts. The half breed was quiet, concentrating on the arrows. Gabriel bore the pain in silence.

“Done, Gabriel,” the half-breed said and sat back, a frown on his face. Gabriel rolled with a grimace. His body worked, but he hurt and was weaker than he preferred.

“What are you called?” he asked as he pushed himself up.

“Rhyn.”

“Rhyn,” he echoed. “Is that not demon for flower?”

The boy’s eyes narrowed in response. Gabriel snorted and limped onto the road.

“C’mon, boy. We have souls to fetch.”

“Do you think we’ll be friends for all time?” Rhyn asked and fell into step beside him.

“Eternity’s a long time, Rhyn,” he said.

“Yes, but there are a lot of souls we can hunt.”

“You’ll have to learn to fight like I do. Rhyn,” he said suddenly and stopped to look down at the demon boy. “You can’t come with me to the underworld. Death won’t allow that.”

Rhyn gazed up at him, hurt in his eyes. The boy belonged in the Immortal world. Gabriel’s thoughts went to the Immortals he’d met when they bought death warrants from Death that he carried out. Soon after taking him to the underworld, Death had pushed him into a brutal series of assassinations to harden him against human emotion. He’d wiped out entire cities at her command, and killed children as young as Rhyn when paid by Immortals to do so. He didn’t care for most of the Immortals, but there was one who’d gone so far as to thank him for his service and buy him a new dagger.

The air around Rhyn shimmered as his hurt turned to anger. The demon boy gathered his power to strike. Gabriel ruffled his hair as he had his brother’s, amused by his companion.

“I might know someone who can help,” he said and began walking again. “First, we’ll hunt.”

Rhyn released the breath he’d been holding. “I trust you, Gabriel.”

“You ever take a soul from a human?”

“No.”

“I’ll teach you how.”

As they walked in silence down the road, Gabriel had the uncanny sense his fate was now tied to that of the creature he’d saved.

* * *

The Rhyn Trilogy by Lizzy Ford

Book One: [Katie’s Hellion](#)

Book Two: [Katie’s Hope](#)

Book Three: Rhyn's Redemption, Coming March 2012

Lizzy Ford is the author of the paranormal romance Damian/War of Gods series and the Rhyn Trilogy. She writes to keep the people in her head from killing her.

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