

Cadaverous

*"My blood is working but my – my heart is dead." – Frank Black*

There is no rest for the bloodthirsty and the undead. There is a fundamental reason why the vampire broods, why the werewolf howls to the moon, why the succubus moans, and why the banshee shrieks. I know why this is now – what it's like to fall apart and try to put yourself back together again. It's nothing to be human until you aren't anymore.

But, really, it didn't hurt. At the most it just felt like I needed to down a protein shake afterward.

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A cacophony of jingling, wailing, buzzing, whirling lights and sound assaulted my senses even in the dark corner of the arcade, but my eyes didn't avert from my focus. I felt the mass around me, but it did not touch me. The rest of these hacks could keep their Whack-A-Mole and Skee Ball.

Pinball: that was my game.

That little metallic ball was relentless. Constantly it bounced off each obstruction, refusing to be contained. Avoiding the eye, slipping through the cracks. All to ultimately disappear down a hole – to fall into the void, to erase the score. With pinball you get to start over.

My gaze was attracted by one of the antiquated TV sets hanging in the corner of the place. I couldn't hear the narration, but I could tell it was the local news. The moment I looked up I was struck by an unforgettable image bearing the caption, "Gruesome Murder, Investigation Underway." The photo was of a human body, but one rendered unrecognizable. It was mangled and bloody, and what struck me was not the image itself (believe me, I've seen plenty of horror movies), it was the mere fact that the media was able to show it.

Each time the dirty double doors to the arcade were shoved open, my cave corner was flooded with a cool draft. A particularly large family filed excruciatingly slowly through the doors and I raised my black hood to cover my ears and continued to reap points from the machine.

At that moment, a particularly obnoxious child nearby nearly burst with exultation and the product of his joy spattered all over my already desensitized ear drum. My eyeball flashed upon the scene just in time to see a flow of reward tickets streaming from one of the games. My gaze flicked back and sought the tiny ball, but, a moment too late. I merely

watched it plummet between the holy clutches.

Dammit. I fished my pockets for more quarters but, alas, my life support was dried up. I swept ghost-like out the doors of the arcade out into the chill.

My usual shortcut through the alley— taken mainly to avoid the main road — was about a block from the arcade. I debated whether I should cut through tonight or not, considering the kind of cur that had taken to hanging around the area. I decided that possible encounters with murderers and thugs were more endurable than the onslaught of blank stares I had been receiving lately on the street.

My suspicions of criminal activity were correct, I presumed, when I crossed a massive, stinking dumpster shoved against the slimy, brick wall. Two hulking figures stood in the penumbra of the dumpster holding glowing embers between their lips. Passing, I noticed one of them slipping something into the other's pocket. Assuming it was a banned substance and as it was too late to retrace my steps without getting noticed, I quickened my pace and hung to the wall opposite — but to no avail.

“Hey, get the hell outta here,” I recognized him, the one on the receiving end of the transaction. Kayne Lynch, a year senior to me in my high school. Kayne was black. Well — his skin was white. But I was inclined to think that, if someone ever decided to open him up, they would find his organs dripping with black, tar-like ooze and his arteries bursting with motor oil.

I tilted my head slightly farther in the opposite direction so that my face would be swallowed by the shadow of my hood and he wouldn't recognize me, though I doubt he would anyway. I generally avoided attention, so the feeling of their crude eyes on my back as I steadily continued down the alley was, to say the least, uncomfortable.

When I got home, I shed my black jacket and slumped in the desk chair. Time to see what the virtual postman had dumped on my desktop doorstep. Sifting through the debris, removing the impurities, I stumbled over a message attached to the name Christy Anne. I knew opening her message would lead me to the same bull that littered the fliers she handed around at school. Christy Anne was a real Jesus Freak. The active kind. Actually, I don't know if either of those two adjectives could survive sans the other. To me, Christy seemed not unlike a politician -- spouting religious propaganda to the masses, bashing the opposing party. I guess I'm just Independent.

I was right — it seemed as though she had sent a blanket email to include any students that happened to be absent the two-hundred-thirty days out of the year she spent spreading the word of God, insisting that all things good that happened did by His Hand. Didn't she know that it was all just random? That the orchestrator of our actions are just little explosions in our brains and chemicals flowing through our arteries and that the consequences involved are just products of that — not the work of some omnipotent Geppetto?

I added Christy's email to my collection of undesirables, logged off, and was consumed by the dark.

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Next night I hit the arcade again. Being a jobless and nearly friendless teenager, I found the chaos inside the arcade reassuring. It was a place where I could be seemingly a part of the world and at the same time separate. I contributed to the noise and light within

but the entropy was also the instrument that caused me to be disconnected.

I was just pondering this profound thought when it was jerked from my bent head by the only excusable distraction I could think of – an obtrusive shout (unlike the one that had nearly deafened me the night before) sounded inexplicably softly on my earlobe. “Tobias!” This time I didn't mind the sensation of the metallic sphere descending into the depths of the pinball machine because it was replaced by one of familiarity and lucidity.

I looked up to see the face of Harmony, standing over my machine. Harmony is among the few people that don't make me want to slip into the nearest crack in the sidewalk when I see them.

“Hi,” I grinned.

Her hand with a bracelet of pearls reached towards me and slipped another quarter into the machine. “Play,” she said, beaming.

Harmony is the reason I describe myself as “nearly friendless.” Who knew sandbox friendship endured? Elaine is her real first name but she insists that it's an “old lady name” and she prefers her middle name. Actually, it was me who suggested the change when we were younger.

Practically elated to have a Saturday night companion, I could hardly pay attention to my game so naturally, it wasn't long before my metallic pawn was swallowed by the abyss. To Harmony, that was nothing a few doughy carbs couldn't fix. Moments later, I was studying the interesting spatter design on one of the dining tables of the arcade when a huge, salty, warm pretzel was placed before me. It was difficult to converse over the bedlam, but that didn't make the time any less enjoyable.

“Let's go,” she said through her last mouthful of pretzel. “Mind if I walk you home?” She flashed pearly whites.

“I don't think it could do any harm, Harm.” Laughing at a person's puns is a definite sign of good friendship.

Outside the air was unseasonably warm and refreshing compared to the stale atmosphere of the arcade. We began to walk through the parking lot amongst the rows of cars when Harmony stopped me.

“Tobias,” she said softly, turning me around to face her, “...I want to tell you something.”

“Yeah?” I said, suddenly very uncomfortable.

“I've just been having this feeling,” she said steadily. “That I should be gaining control of my life – putting my ducks in a row – whatever – something. Like I'm running out of time or something,” her voice faltered and her head dropped. I reached out to touch her arm and she looked down at my hand. “Anyway, you are the nicest boy I know,” I actually blushed, luckily it was dark out, “and, in first grade, when I accidentally mixed the red and blue watercolor paints and I was so afraid someone was going to find out it was me who did it, you made me feel better and took the blame for it. And remember when you would get scrapes on your knees from jumping off the swing-set and I would pretend to be a paramedic and patch you up?” I nodded. A smile slowly spread across my face as she spoke and I felt both sad and enchanted. “Well – what I'm saying is ... I want you ... to be one of my ducks. Great Gaia, what *am* I saying!”

I could feel us getting closer during her little speech. Though I couldn't say which of

us was moving, which body exhibited the gravitational pull. As she continued to blubber in embarrassment, I became possessed. A spirit coursed through my veins momentarily and thrust my face forward and Harmony could no longer spout spastically. I won't go into details about our kiss, but it was very zen. Like everything was one thing, including me.

On the way home, I turned automatically down my alleyway when she grabbed my arm. Harmony, usually willing to take any danger that came her way said, "Do you think it's safe to pass here?"

I grinned and reached for her hand, "As long as we stay out of Harm's way."

She relaxed and we tread on, the moonlight gleaming on her white shirt.

The bars on either side of the alley seemed to be booming with rednecks and other stereotypes tonight so I didn't expect to meet my two friends from my previous crossing.

Once again my deductions were unmercifully deflated as we stumbled upon the two bodies in the same place. However, this time I stopped in my tracks. It seemed as though, instead of in the act of exchanging drugs, we had caught this couple in a weird, perverse, half-embrace. Stunned as we were, the duo stared back for eons before unlocking.

Then Harmony, recognizing one of them, burst with exultation. "Kayne?! Man, I must have a way of converting," to which I looked at her confusedly.

"Shut up," he spat, regaining composure.

Harmony just giggled. The other guy just stood with his palms facing us.

"If you tell anyone, I swear to --"

"Swear to what? What are you gonna do? Should I wait until you're done *bemirching* the pavement?"

"Okay," I interrupted Kayne and he shot me a seething look. "We'll just be going now."

That's when I heard the click and turned to find myself staring at the inside of a handgun. I froze. I gulped.

"Whoah, whoah, whoah," Kayne's companion said, still looking as though he was trying to prove his innocence.

Harmony spoke again, and despite the fear that she would say something to tick Lynch off even more, I put my faith in her. "He won't do it. He doesn't have the balls." Great. Thanks a lot, Harmony. That's when the gun swiveled from being aimed at the center of my forehead to the heart of my best friend.

"Hey man, just let us go, we won't tell anyone." So – the courage to speak does not always fail me.

"You're pathetic," for a moment I thought she was speaking to me. I glanced over to see her lucid, green eyes gleaming in the moonlight as she stared at Lynch, right into his core. "You've always been a miserable..." she said slowly, steadily, "inadequate..." she eyed the gun in his shaking hands, "... *coward*."

The sound echoed in the narrow alleyway and I stood stunned for a moment.

"Harm!" I yelled stupidly, and stooped to her side. "No!" I hardly heard the panicked voices of Kayne and his friend. Mostly I saw. I saw rivers of blood flowing from Harmony's nostrils where she hit the pavement. I saw the crimson stain, spreading like a flower in the dawn on her ivory shirt. I saw the green eyes, cloudy and dim. I saw the steel-toed boot flash in my vision and connect with my nose, the heel – jam into my spine. I saw

the coat of a murderer disappear around a brick wall...

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Blood was pounding in my head when I woke up. My body was surprised to feel the cradling of soft cushions rather than gravelly pavement. My eyes swam in their sockets and my nose struggled to allow air in. Dried blood cracked on my face as I tried to open my mouth and a metallic taste was thick in my throat. Suddenly the events that had transpired came flooding back to me, along with the fear, and a sense of dread. I sat up abruptly, only to be answered by an intense pain in my back. I gasped and fell prostrate again. Eyes clearing, I realized it wasn't a hospital room I was in. The light was soft and there was a dampness in the air. I seemed to be lying on the floor suspended by many cushions. My eyes roved the room from where I lay. I noticed jars on shelves, each containing a silvery substance that differed in viscosity from jar to jar. They reminded me of insects that had been caught in a spider's web and packaged away for later. Some contained a thick gooey material. Others were light, airy. Some had congealed to a gelatinous consistency.

My senses seemed to clear, and I felt a presence in the room. I looked to my right and let out a startled noise. Harmony lay next to me, in a similar fashion, eyes closed.

"You're awake," a voice in the room caused me to jump even higher. I attempted to locate the source but it seemed to come from everywhere, bearing down on me. Then in sauntered a form from the darkness. She had a curious physique. A pinched waist but rather bulbous in the hips and long, nimble appendages. She spoke again in her cold voice, "How are you feeling?"

"Who the hell are you?" I grumbled, ruffling my hair.

"I – Tobias Faust – am your savior."

I didn't even bother to ask how she knew my name. They always know your name. At this point I should have been looking for a way out. However, this creepily shaped form cast a shadow over me that seemed to render me immobile. And, despite the grisly jars lining the grimy walls, the dim dirty light, and the sense of macabre that hung in the air – the place had an alluring, attractive quality. I *wanted* to be there, like an insect drawn to a light. I wanted to get caught up in it. Also, there was a feeling that I couldn't leave even if I had wanted to. If I got over the agonizing pain in my back and ambled toward the door, I was sure that Sasperella or whoever it was that stood over me would extend her arms as well as sprout several new ones to gather me back up.

"Let's get to the point," her clear, cold voice snapped my wandering eyes back to her large, black ones. "Your friend is dying."

"You mean, she's still-- aghh," I had tried to prop myself up again.

"Barely."

There was a moment of silence and I fixed my eyes upon Harmony to see shallow breaths forming.

"Shouldn't we get her to a hospital?"

"It's too late." Her voice was very persuasive. "By the time an ambulance comes, she will be, I fear, gone."

My eyes didn't leave my best friend's form and a puddle formed in the corner of my eye.

"However," her face loomed towards me in the darkness, pale as the moon, eyes swimming like black pools, "I can repair her. I can make her whole again. I can make her forget everything that happened tonight." Her long, sickly pale finger gently traced my jawline and mouth.

"Are you a doctor?" I asked, already knowing the answer before the words left my mouth. My eyes roved the shelves again.

"I can restore your friend...for a price."

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"How does this happen?"

"Well – most prefer an oral procedure. But," she snapped a rubber glove on her wrist. "if you prefer, an alternative method that can be arranged."

I gulped. "No – I mean – how does all this exist? God and mysticism and souls and occultism and Heaven and voodoo and Hell? Isn't it all just speculation?"

"Oh, it all exists," Azra (she finally had told me her name) said distractedly as she checked her reflection in the silver dagger she held. "Are you ready for your extraction?"

She didn't wait for an answer before she grabbed me and cut into my flesh. My blood leaked sickeningly into a bucket that had been placed strategically underneath my chair. I bit my dry, cracked lip until blood ran from a wound there, too. I knew it would be no use to scream for help for surely the walls of this necromancer's chambers were insulated with gossamer.

I felt my senses dim once more and the pouring of my blood reduced to a quick dripping, not unlike when I watched my dad change the oil in his car. I had never felt so weak in my entire existence, never so lifeless. My fragmented memory tells me that I was hovering on the line between life and death – playing tug-of-war. I remember seeing Azra's alabaster face floating in front of me. Something being connected to my mouth. Hearing the smiling, cold voice, "Time to pass..."

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I awoke abruptly, and instinctively slurped the drool that had formed at the corner of my mouth. It took a moment for my eyes to adjust before I realized the familiar situation. I was slumped at the same table I had been in mere hours before, staring down at a half-eaten, heart-shaped pretzel smothered in gory marinara sauce. I scanned the room, trying to come to my senses. Harmony was nowhere to be seen. I frantically checked my watch. Eight-thirty. Impossible! I stood up too quickly and sent the table and sodden pretzel flying. Too freaked to care, I dashed for the exit and flung open the double doors, making for my most theatrical egression yet.

The parking lot was a blur. My route to home was ingrained so deeply in my mind, I let my legs carry me. Which is why I was confused when they stopped. I was at the mouth of the long, damp, tomb-like alleyway. I leaned forward, hands on my knees and struggled to catch my breath. Instinct told me to follow the usual path, but reason disagreed. As I bypassed it, I glanced into the depths of the alley and was almost certain I saw the remnants of a pool of blood on the ground gleaming in the moonlight.

My legs carried me down my street. I bolted through the front door of my house and

took the steps two at a time. I slammed the bedroom door behind me and dove beneath the covers, hearing nothing but the constant yapping of the next-door-neighbor's dog and my own ragged breath.

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I awoke Easter morning to an unbearable cheeriness. "Tobias? Arise and shine!" my eyes snapped open and I saw sunlight filtering through the material of my bedspread. I peered out like a monster in a cave. The bright light forced me to squint but I knew it was my mother standing at the half-open door. "Tobias? Breakfast?"

My ears pricked up at the word. Normally I skipped Sunday morning breakfast, but today I said, "Oh, yeah. Starving." I rolled out of bed and tried to straighten my ruffled hair and clothes before going down to the kitchen.

Dad was reading the paper in between sips of orange juice. I poured myself milk and sat down at the table.

"Eggs?" Mom asked.

"Yeah, yeah," I replied, trying to push my way through grogginess. "Would it be too much to ask for steak?"

Mom laughed it off, oblivious to my complete sincerity. As I broke the yolk of my sunny-side-ups the events that occurred in my dream the previous night flooded my brain. I shook my head as I tore into a strip of bacon, cursing my subconscious for formulating such a fantastical series of events. I supposed that the most unrealistic portion was the time spent with Harmony. As much as I wished that it really had happened, I was relieved that what had followed the kiss hadn't really transpired.

"You came in in quite a hurry last night," my dad said, folding the newspaper. "Was something wrong?"

Eggs had fallen from my mouth when my father had spoken. I scooped them back up, trying to resume normalcy. "No," I swallowed. "Just tired."

I tried to act casual, but my blood ran cold. I swiped a fistful of bacon and retreated to the upstairs once again. With the bathroom door locked behind me, I removed my hoodie. There it was. The long gash on my arm had begun to heal but was undeniably fresh. I looked in the mirror and my nose was straight and clean as ever though, definitely not broken. No dried blood on my face or neck. I twisted my torso, testing my back. Not even a ghost of pain.

I thought I was going to be sick.

I was right.

After a few minutes necking with the toilet bowl, I stood to face myself again in the mirror. I was even paler than before and an awful notion rolled over me like a wave. After rinsing my mouth of sick, I prodded around inside it with my fingers, feeling the bottoms of my teeth. No fangs. Slightly reassuring. I almost laughed at my own absurdity.

The relatives arrived for Easter dinner later. The sounds of them arriving one by one drifted up to my room along with the fragrant aromas of supper. I was lying on my bed with my thumb held steadily over the "Send" key on my phone, Harmony's name highlighted on the screen, listening to Aunt Sarah banging down the entrance hallway with all of her Tupperware.

It rang once before there was a rustling sound and, "Hello?"

“Hey, what's up?”

“Ugh, at Pete's mother's now,” Pete was her step-father. “I stole into the bathroom when I saw it was you”

“Cool. Ugh.”

“Something wrong?”

“No. Just hungry. Uh, Harmony?”

“Yeah?”

“We had fun last night, right?”

There was a momentary silence. “Last night? Tobias, I didn't see you last night.”

“Oh. Oh, yeah. Must have been another night, like...” I trailed off, mumbling.

“You at the arcade last night?”

“Yep.”

“You spend so much time there; it's understandable that the concept of time eludes you.”

“Haha. Listen, I have to go.”

“Okay?”

“See you around.” *Click.*

It made no sense. Did someone at the arcade slip LSD into my marinara sauce? Harmony was never really there at all. It was a relief, I suppose. The dying and having my soul sucked out of my mouth part and all that, yeah. Harmony confessing her love to me, though, revealed an impulse in my subconscious that I didn't know existed. I was totally head over heels.

Food was the only thing that could keep my mind off of Harmony at this point, which was good because there was a lot of it. Ham, turkey, pigs in a blanket, beef casserole, chicken breast. And I devoured it all, conscious of the gawking stares of my relatives.

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That night I lay in bed, tossing and twisting with hunger. A cold sweat dampened my sheets and I jammed a pillow over my ears to drown out the yapping of the dog next door. After realizing that a cotton barrier wasn't going to help, I resigned from the effort and rose from the bed. I descended quietly into the kitchen, ears still conscious to the barking. The light from inside the refrigerator assaulted my weary and bloodshot eyes as I scanned the nearly bare shelves. My stomach rumbled audibly with animalistic hunger. I checked the freezer. Three whole steaks resided there. But they would take too long to thaw. I needed something that was warm and ready now. The thought of juicy, tender meat sliding down my throat made my mouth water and a groan come to my dry and cracked lips.

I shut the freezer door, put on my coat, and slipped out the back door quiet as a ghost. The cold, dewy grass folded beneath my bare feet as I padded toward the gate that opened into the next-door-neighbor's yard. The mice living in the ground couldn't have even heard me over the incessant baying of Mr. Carter's trusty hound. Rusty himself didn't hear me until I had crept right up on him like a big cat, stalking his quarry. He turned to look up at me with his big, sad eyes, continuing to bray in his deep, sad voice. I decided to put him out of his misery.

The first thing to go would be that wretched voice box. Along with, I decided, the jugular. I pounced and wrestled Rusty to the ground, grabbing his snout and holding it shut



with a fist. I pushed his head back and he continued to yelp and yip and yap through his clenched teeth. His short and disappointingly skinny body thrashed and twisted around in the wet grass and with surprising strength I kept him still with my free hand. I practically hissed with triumph when I opened my mouth – teeth bared – and descended upon old Rusty's exposed neck. I tore sloppily and not entirely methodically into the flesh, tearing off bits and pieces as I pleased. I felt his jaw crack between my fingers. The defeated canine let out one last faltering yowl as his hot, sticky blood poured over my face and greedy hands. Crouched in the blood-stained grass, I continued to pluck at Rusty's remains and fill my cupped hands with the still-warm blood, bringing it to my mouth and drinking the way a starving man would suck greasy water from a well. I had found satiation. The cure for the voracity, the craving ache to displace the absence within me.

My ears pricked at the sound of a door opening. Mr. Carter had come outside, perhaps to investigate why his hound had ceased to practice the nightly yodel. That's when I realized a feral snarling was issuing from my own mouth. Carter probably had come out to see what kind of vicious wild animal had invaded the sanctity of his backyard. I bolted for the gate just as the man's blue bathrobe became visible in the safety of the porch light. I flattened myself against the back side of the gate, hearing Mr. Carter's concerned voice call for his dog and I smirked. I licked my lips clean, relishing the taste. Speaking of, relish would have been a good topping for the hot dog I had just devoured. I almost laughed, but remembering that I mustn't get caught, I clapped a hand to my mouth. There I stood leaning up against my neighbor's gate, picking dog hair out of my teeth, and not feeling a bit ashamed.

I retained the memories, the associations of Tobias Faust. But all that was left was a shell – an empty casing. The hormones, the emotions, the humanity were all boiled from the shriveling viscera. All feeling extinguished...All except for the constant hunger that stabbed at me. The desire to be whole again, to satiate the void. The human spark, the essence, the substance, the psyche, the core...the *self*. Gone. But I had just had one hell of a meal and I felt like I could take on the world – do anything. 'And,' I thought to myself, smiling. 'Alpha Street will be sleeping well tonight.'

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Tuesday night, the streetlights were popping on one by one as I strolled down the main road to the arcade. My stomach growled audibly as each pedestrian's scent drifted to my nostrils. I picked at a scab that lay festering on my arm and licked my chapped lips. A man stood at the corner, though I had heard him from a block away. As I approached, I watched his puffy lips open and close as if in slow motion. His Adam's apple bounced in his throat, and he clutched a Bible to his chest. There was a big, wooden sign hanging over his shoulders that said in big letters "The blood of Jesus Christ cleanses from all sin". As I passed, he said something and I heard his words for the first time.

He turned his big, dark face towards me and I stared into the whites of his wide unblinking, unseeing eyes.

"Soul searching, my friend?"

I smirked. "Something like that."

That's when I spotted the tall, broad frame of Kayne standing outside of a bar about a block away and stopped in my tracks. He was holding a cigarette between his lips, talking

with a group of similar creeps. He kept straightening his leather jacket like some kind of tough bastard. I would see how tough he really was when his little buddies weren't around. My stomach growled pressingly. But this would be worth waiting for. Kayne tossed his cigarette aside and swagged back into the bar. I lurched forward as to follow him in, but realized that the bouncer wasn't going to let a seventeen-year-old into the bar. Even an undead one. I could have just ripped his throat out but that would have caused a scene and would have caused me to stray from my objective.

So I was skulking around the streets, watching the entrance to the bar, waiting for take-out when I started getting existential. During my whole mature life I had denied the existence of God and Providence and Heaven and Hell. But since I had died, I pondered my purpose more than I ever had in life. And man, I was hungry.

I pulled my hood over my head and sunk into the shadow of the building directly across from the bar. My mouth hung open and drool pooled at the corners of my lips at each pair of calves that crossed my periphery. I spent ages watching the buffet of humanity pass before Kayne finally emerged between glowing neon signs. Not alone.

“Shit,” I muttered as I leaped up. I would follow him until he parted with his friend. I kept pace with him and his cohort and when they turned down an alley I followed suit. Their scents hung heavily in the air behind them.

In my eagerness, I accidentally kicked a tin can and sent it flying against the brick wall. The sound echoed in the narrow alleyway. I stopped. Kayne stopped. He whipped around and ambled towards me.

“You following us, little man?”

I realized as he stood looking down into my hooded face that if Azra's magic had gone right, Kayne didn't even remember what he had done to Harmony. Kayne's crony (a different guy from before) staggered over to me as well and I could smell the alcohol on both of their breaths. I had to make a decision fast. Walk away?

Or attack both of them.

I didn't respond and Kayne blew smoke into my face.

“Cause that's what it looks like to me. What do you think, Randy?”

“Yeah, I think the little faggot was watching us. I saw him outside the bar.”

Kayne took another long draw on his cigarette. The cigarette had barely left his lips when I pounced. His throat collapsed under the strength of my jaw. When I pulled my mouth away, a cloud of smoke passed from between my bloody lips. Kayne – gasping and clutching his throat – fell to the ground and with him down I turned for his companion. I was answered by the feeling of something sinking into my back. I looked down at my stomach and saw the tip of a blade sticking out right next to my navel. Pissed off, I roared and clutched the the blade tip. I pulled the knife the rest of the way through my abdomen and turned to face the guy. My hood had slipped off and he was staring right at me, eyes wide. He bolted – suddenly sober – down the alley and I didn't bother to chase him. I slipped the bloody knife into my pocket and turned back around. I was still hungry.

I crouched next to Kayne, who was still writhing on the concrete, trying to suck in a breath. I looked down into his black, terrified eyes.

“This is for being a piece of shit,” and I spat on his cheek before tearing open his chest and chewing on his gristly muscle and chewy fat. He squirmed and yelped just like

Rusty had. I made haste to finish him off in case Randy had decided to report me to the authorities. I washed down the liver with what blood hadn't yet spilled onto the pavement before tossing him into the dumpster.

“Jesus, Kayne, you stink.”

Not exactly the most impeccable cleanup but whatever. His cigarette lighter had fallen onto the pavement. I pocketed it.

I strolled down the alley, whistling all the way home and licking blood that was like rich wine from my lips.

When I got to the house, I groped the doorknob. Locked. 'Parents must be gone,' I thought sluggishly. I patted myself down. No keys on me.

I staggered down my deserted street, weaving in and out of the shadows of the streetlights like a pinball bouncing from light-pole to light-pole until I reached Omega Street. I knocked on green door of the brown house situated right in the middle of Omega.

The door opened. “Jus' the pretty girl I wanted to see,” I slurred at the girl standing in the doorway.

“Tobias?” Harmony flicked the porch light on. “Tobias, are you drunk?”

That wiped the stupid grin off my face. “No, I jus' feel good.”

She laughed. “You're drunk.”

“Maybe,” I replied. “But I totally saved you.”

She shook her head. “Come in.”

I plopped down on the couch and she tried to give me a glass of water.

“No thanks, I'm off that stuff.” I waved the glass away.

“Hey!” she exclaimed, grabbing my hand. “You've got blood on your hands – what happened?” It was dark in the living room so she couldn't see that my clothes were also covered in blood.

I stood up. “I just got cut lil bit.” I lifted my shirt and looked down. The wound had sealed and healed but dried blood covered my abdomen. She studied me with a shocked expression.

“But I totally saved you from the big bad,” I boasted.

“Tobias, what's going on?” She demanded. “First, you completely blow me off at school and tell me that you can't hang out, and then you show up at my doorstep drunk and covered in blood! Where did you even get the alcohol?”

I didn't want to tell her that I was drunk from drinking her murderer's blood.

“You know you can tell me if you're having problems --”

“I didn't come here to play guidance counselor!” I stood up and the glass of water crashed to the floor.

“Why *did* you come here, then!” she shouted back.

I opened my mouth to retort, but the words stopped in my throat. My head was suddenly clearing. I turned on my heel and stormed out the door.

I marched away from Harmony's house and away from my home as well. It seemed as if I had sobered up, but the intoxication from the kill remained. It was as though a dam had burst in my body and released a river inside my bones.

As I stalked through the town, I realized my purpose. In some way it seemed I had achieved a higher state of being. Capable of objectivity. Without earthly restraints. If I

wasn't bound by the nonsense of human feelings, emotions, or relationships; I possessed the authority to judge the sinful. Even if my efforts weren't appreciated, it was my job to rid the world of taint like Kayne Lynch.

Still engrossed in contemplation, I realized I had reached a destination. I looked up from the ground to see before me a shabby, graffiti-mottled door belonging to a gray, lifeless building. There were no lights on and the roof sagged as though it might cave at a pin drop. It was the arcade.

I plucked a half-empty brown glass bottle from the gravel and took a swig of the bitter stuff before heading for the back door. I gripped the handle and pulled. The frame crumpled and the door dropped to the ground. I sauntered in and wandered through the still wasteland. The life-size mechanical puppets that put on the same show every night looked like ghosts haunting their place of rest. This whole little world's existence had halted the moment no one was watching.

I retrieved a hand towel from behind the counter before finally reaching the pinball machine. I stared down at it for a moment before raising my arms and with all the rage I could muster I smashed my fists through the glass and tore that little pinball's world apart. Then I stuffed the hand towel halfway down the glass bottle and lit it on fire. The flames spread quickly after I hurled the bottle across to the opposite wall, and I fled the scene. The smell of burning dust was still thick in my nostrils as I crunched through the gravel away from the inferno and away from mortality.

I heard the blasting of the fire trucks before I reached my residence. Shadows passed under the quiet stairs as I ascended to my room. And stinking of blood, smoke, and alcohol, I fell face down on my pillow.

Invincible.

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I woke up with a fence post sticking out from my chest.

The following is how I came to be in this state:

Randy's scent blew around the rotting dumpsters and ventilation fans and past my attentive nostrils.

I could smell the blood pumping in his veins.

“You're not as quiet as you think, dude.”

I halted.

“You stalk people down alleyways *every* night? What are you – some kind of monster?” He turned slowly to face me as he spoke. There was a grin on his shrewd face, as well as fresh, dripping crimson stains. I had a feeling that he hadn't been eating pomegranates.

“What did she do for you?”

“What?”

“Esmerelda – or whatever. Azra.”

“What are you talking about?” I don't know why I was playing dumb. He knew her name, what I was.

“She came to me that night. The night you killed Kayne.” He was slowly getting closer, taking a step with every sentence. “She offered me something. Wanted something in return though, didn't she? She knew I couldn't live with what I did. Running away like that,

leaving someone to die. Well, I don't have to anymore, right?"

I stood rooted to the spot, bracing myself. With each syllable his voice got more dangerous and he got closer.

"I don't have to feel guilty about leaving the guy I met at a bar to die in an alleyway. But who knew?" He was a mere three feet away, "You know, I bet. You know how it is to feel so..." he looked as if he was searching for the right word, "so fucking *empty*."

I lunged at him, and had a moment to see the fleeting shock on his face before we were both tumbling down the alley. Having just fed and therefore stronger, he flung me away from him and my head hit the nearest dumpster with a resounding *clang*.

"But it's ok!" he shouted, rising from the pavement. "Because now Kayne is back! And I," he kicked me in the jaw, "don't have to feel so goddamn guilty!"

He turned to walk away, but I jumped up and grabbed his head, snapping his neck. It cracked back into place. He shrugged his shoulders, pushed me back, and strode down the alley, yelling over his shoulder, "What's wrong with you? We're the same species now, man."

At this my blood boiled and I ran full throttle at him. He shoved me aside and I saw the wooden post explode out of my chest before losing consciousness.

I gazed at the rooftops for a few moments, recollecting the encounter. *The same* species. Clearly Randy didn't understand my intention to only use my new abilities for good. I struggled for a moment to slide off of the post; I was weak. Brushing myself off, I thought, *Well, at least this proves I'm not a vampire*. I didn't know how much time had passed, but the sun had fallen. It couldn't have been that long, I'm sure a teenage boy impaled by a fence would have attracted some attention. Speaking of, I saw movement in my periphery. A fat man in a soiled apron was some yards away, in the middle of pushing a trash barrel to the dumpster. By the open-mouthed expression on his face I could tell he had seen me come off the post, unscathed. Time for a very greasy supper...

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I was so hungry. I traipsed all through town but the streets were deserted. Not even the ghost of human scent lingered anywhere. The buildings looked like tombs scattered in a graveyard. Suddenly, the ground and sky opened up before me. A black void was growing from the origin, swallowing everything in the town. There were no screams because nothing human lived there.

Suddenly, I was standing in the hallway of my house, looking at the grain in the hardwood floor. I drifted towards the kitchen and there was a white light spilling out onto the floor. A pair of big feet stuck out from beneath the refrigerator door and a fleshy neck bent over into the depths of the fridge. My stomach roared and thrashed and the dream felt incredibly real. I wanted to pop him open like a Capri Sun. I needed to eat – to be whole again. I approached quietly, but the surrounding silence did not do much to conceal my presence. The figure standing at the ice box turned to face me, a dining fork pressed tightly between his lips. I saw his sleepy eyes widen a moment before I thrust my palm forward and shoved the fork through the back of my father's throat.

He wailed a hoarse and gurgling incoherency as I wrestled him to the ground. Several jars smashed on the linoleum. It wasn't until I tasted and saw the hot blood flowing out of the neck wound that I became aware that I wasn't in a dream. I fled. Shards of broken glass imbedded into the soles of my bare feet and my bloody footprints littered the stair steps.

Dressed, I catapulted myself out of my bedroom window and rolled onto the grass below. I ran and ran, almost as if on a predestined route. Like a moth to a light, I had no sense of the journey there, nor the space surrounding me – only the destination.

The room was as I remembered it, only dark. Moonlight shone in the windows and the jars hovered like trapped ghosts

“I’ve come back for it.”

My voice was swallowed by the silence of the vault. I began to search the shelves, examining the jars. None of them seemed to be labeled in any way.

“Didn’t your mother ever teach you not to take things that don’t belong to you?”

I swallowed. My mother was probably still sobbing over my father’s body.

A shadow grew in the darkness, cradling a container that was very similar to the ones that lined the walls. However, its silvery contents seemed to pulse like a little heart.

“What do you mean? It *is* mine. It’s me!”

Azra only laughed. “No. We made a deal. There was bargaining – as well as denial and anger – and we made a trade. I believe that makes me the rightful owner.” Her smile widened. “Oh, don’t tell me you’re *depressed* about the loss.”

I merely seethed and shook, rooted to the spot.

“Don’t tell me that you did not want this. To have power, control – to be almighty. Before, you were insignificant and weak. Now your actions cause ripples in the universe. You can decide the fate of Earth’s natural creatures. You’re striving for a better world.”

“Killing people does not make the world a better place,” I snarled. “I know that.”

Intoxicated with my father’s blood, I surged at her. She dodged too quickly, and I ran headlong into the wall behind her, cracking my skull on the concrete and smashing two jars.

“Now, there will be none of that!” she shrieked. Harsh, rigid lines appeared on her pale visage and her eyes bulged near to the point of popping. She grasped my throat with the long, nimble fingers of her free hand and raised me to her eye level. My toes barely scraped the floor.

“Why are you struggling so badly for it? You wouldn’t even know what to do with it if you managed to steal it from me. It’s time to accept what is done is just that.”

“No!” I choked and spat blood into her eye – she gripped tighter.

“Now,” she said softly. I could see her eyelashes, gummy with spit and blood.

“Don’t play with Mommy like that.” Her tongue caressed my lips as she lapped the blood from around my mouth.

I clamped down on her tongue as hard as I could. Blood spurt into my throat and Azra dropped the jar she was holding. I watched it as it fell, in slow-motion, and smashed into a thousand pieces. Its contents evaporated.

The next thing I knew, I was sailing through space. Time seemed to come to a near-complete stop. I didn’t even feel it when I hit the slab of bare wall.

“I’m gone,” I whispered. I lay against the wall, heaving and near stasis.

Azra sauntered towards me and crouched to my level. She brushed hair from my eyes tenderly and scooped me up into her arms. I did not resist. She held me to her bosom like a hungry newborn and said to me, “The time for such anger is over, little Tobi. You’ve stood up for what you believe. You’ve sacrificed. Now, it’s time for you to have what you want.”

“You gave me that. I wanted Harmony to live.”

“That little bitch won't be yours. She'll tread and pass with the rest of the world.”

“Don't call Harmony a bitch,” I snarled.

“Now, now, little one. Always talking back. You give them the world, and they take all they can get and leave you nothing,” she looked towards the smashed jar. “And then they blame you for their existence. All children are alike. Now, your soul --”

“Is gone.”

“Nuh-uh,” she said wagging a twig of a finger in my face. “Remember that little talk we had about heaven and hell? A soul is never – as you so eloquently put it – gone. It always goes someplace. Yours, I believe,” her eyes flicked upwards and around, “is meandering in the ether. Which,” she giggled, “is n-ether here nor there!”

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I lurked in the periphery of the bonfire – my eyes on Christy Anne – fondling the hilt of the dagger poking out of my belt. She was walking around, joining different conversations as she went. She finally got around to me, and she was at me before I could withdraw into the shadows.

“Tobias! I'm so glad you came! I'm so sorry to hear about your dad.”

I peered out at her from under my hood.

“So they really tried to get you, too? I heard they went into your room and then jumped out your window! I mean, it was really lucky that you weren't home when it happened. Oh!” It was dark, but I could tell she was blushing. “I didn't mean that! I didn't --”

“It's okay,” I forced myself to say, “I know what you mean.”

“Well, anyway, I *am* really glad you came. I've never seen you at one of my little get-togethers. I think it might be because people have been known to see mountain lions in these woods. So, have you decided to accept Jesus Christ into your heart?”

“Uh, yeah.”

“Oh, I knew it! Sometimes it takes a great shock in someone's life before they see His light.”

I squeezed the knife restlessly. I peered around the gathering again. A glowing ember blazed in the darkness, illuminating the face of Kayne Lynch. Dead man walking. This time I could kill him and there'd be no one there to wish him back. My logic told me to leave it alone. After tonight, everything could go back to normal. Well, as normal as it could be now.... I couldn't ever kill again, not after tonight.

“Tobias?”

I snapped back into reality. Kayne was walking towards the woods behind Christy's house, presumably to piss. I turned from Christy, leaving her in mid-sentence. The land dipped and the grass got soggy the further I tread, and it muffled my already spectral steps. There Kayne was, back to me. I saw a still-burning cigarette drop between his legs.

“Shit!” he said and bent down to pick it up.

I launched forward and kicked him square in the back, catapulting him headfirst into the tree. He landed face first in his still-warm piss. He recovered, reeling, yelling, “What the fuck, man?” I kicked him in the mouth.

“I don't fucken know you!” He spat blood. He charged at me, fists curled. Despite

his considerable size, I blocked his punch and twisted his arm behind his back.

“What did I ever do to you?”

“It's not about you,” I snarled. “It's about power. Some people have it, some don't. And some,” I shoved the blade into his kidney and twisted, “have a little more than others.”

He collapsed onto the ground, spread-eagle, writhing in what I expected was excruciating pain.

“Don't kill me please,” black blood gurgled out of his mouth, and it looked like what happens when you make a smoothie and don't put the lid on the blender. “Please. . . please. . . .”

One of his arms was broken from the fall; I had heard it crack against a tree root. The other I pinned to the ground by sinking my dagger through his palm.

I crouched, ready to feed when I heard a piercing voice in the darkness.

“Tobias? Is that you? What happened? I heard screams and what I think might be a cougar! Oh,” she saw me leaning over Kayne's body, “you must be doing CPR.”

I stood up slowly, holding the dagger.

“Tobias?” Her voice got more mouse-like every time she said my name, I swear.

My hand was clapped over her mouth before she could even scream. She was trembling, and when I was sure she wouldn't scream, I brought my hand down to get the talisman Azra gave me out of my pocket. She whimpered, and said in a quavering whisper, “It's not too late, Tobias. If you just accept Jesus Christ's love, you can still get into the Kingdom of Heaven.”

“You can't go to heaven,” I panted, “if you don't have a soul, honey.” I brought the blade to her jugular, the talisman clutched in my left hand.

She swallowed, “God will forgive you, Tobias. He will. Don't do this. God forgives everyone. Even sinners.”

“I am God.”

And with the words, “The blood of Jesus Christ cleanses from all sin” resounding in my head, I swiped the blade across her throat, sending a spatter of blood onto the trees. Rain droplets started to fall on my head and raised an orchestra in the wood. I dropped Christy on to the ground to let her blood soak the earth.

The words that Azra told me came to my lips without effort. First in English, then in a language I did not recognize. They poured from me as the rain poured in rivers down my face. The talisman in my hand disappeared, and as the demon had told me, a face swam before me in the darkness, ethereal, androgynous, and blue.

Police sirens sounded in the distance as the face spoke to me: “You have performed the ritual meaning to restore your soul, Tobias Faust --”

“Yes!”

-- however, I cannot retrieve your soul from the ether. There is mixed blood on this ground. The ritual is only effective when executed with the blood of a pure being.”

“Bullshit!” I screamed. “Bullshit, bullshit, bullshit!” The sirens grew louder.

“I can, however, grant you one wish. Choose quickly and wisely, Tobias Faust.”

“I – I wish....” I stammered, thinking of Robin Williams as the genie in Aladdin. “I wish....”

I could hear movement nearby and shouting voices.



“I wish I had never met Azra!”

“Done.”

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The sound echoed in the narrow alleyway and I stood stunned for a moment. I knelt to where Harmony lay on the pavement, a crimson stain spreading on her shirt. I felt Kayne's boot jam into my spine and then break my nose before I lost consciousness.

And when I awoke, I was still lying across Harmony's body, feeling the meager swelling and contracting rhythm of the world.