

An Alternate Essence: Of Blood and Sunlight Part II

It took only two rings for the phone to be picked up.

"Hello?"

"Danny, good morning," I said into the receiver, like the tragedy of last night had never happened.

"Is this...Serenity?" he asked unsurely.

"Yes, it is. I didn't wake you, did I?"

"No. No, I..." He blew out a sigh. *"I didn't sleep too well last night."*

Well, maybe he wasn't *totally* oblivious, then.

"Something keeping you up?"

"I mean, uh... Well...um..."

"It wouldn't happen to have been five feet, eight inches of a stringbean with long dark hair, would it?" I asked wryly. "Maybe a hundred ten pounds, with glasses?"

"You've seen Taylor?" he asked eagerly.

I turned to my bed, where I'd tucked her in after bringing her home. She looked kind of silly in one of my nightgowns, which was simultaneously too small and too large for her much lankier frame, such that it was almost sliding down over one of her shoulders.

I'd salvaged what I could of her costume, even though it had been a wreck — it had been quite some time since I'd seen silk of that quality woven that finely, and it seemed a pity to tear it to pieces — but I'd rather thought she would prefer not to wake up half naked in my bed, so I had figured it the least I could do to loan her one of my nightgowns.

"I'm looking at her right now."

"Is she okay? She's not hurt, is she?"

"I caught her sneaking out in the middle of the night," I told him. A half-truth, but it was nowhere near the only lie of its kind I'd ever told. "Said she was restless and couldn't sleep, so I invited her in. We talked for a few hours, had some tea, and she just nodded off about twenty minutes ago."

He let out long sigh of relief.

"Thank God."

Maybe I should've told him the truth, just then. This wasn't something we'd be able to hide forever, nor even for all that long, at least not from Danny. Eventually, inevitably, we'd have to tell him about what had happened, about what Taylor had become.

About what I'd turned her into.

But it wasn't a conversation to be had over the phone, and it seemed, at least to me, rather backwards to tell Danny before I'd even told Taylor.

"Listen," I went on, "she was pretty tired, and I figured it would be a better idea to just let her sleep it off instead of trying to carry her back to your house or drag her out of bed five minutes after she got in. Do you think you could call the school and let them know she won't be coming, today?"

"*Oh,*" he said. "*Oh, yeah, sure. Um, do you need anything? I could bring her some clothes, or if you need help, I could call off from work and —*"

"It's fine, Danny, I can handle taking care of a fifteen-year-old girl," I interrupted. "You go to work and I'll keep an eye on her for today. I'll bring her around this evening — say, seven-thirty, eight o'clock?"

"*If you're really sure it's okay...*"

I made sure to huff a short laugh. "I wouldn't have offered if it wasn't."

"*Okay. I'll see you both tonight. Tell Taylor?*"

"Of course."

"*Thank you, Serenity.*"

"It's no trouble, Danny."

With a *click*, the line went dead. I set the phone back in its cradle.

"No trouble at all," I muttered.

I let out a sigh and flexed my hand, curling and unfurling my fingers. A thin, pink line slashed across my palm, the only sign of the cut I'd made a few hours ago and the blood and stockpiled life force I'd spent to save a girl's life. It would disappear entirely by tonight. If I hadn't given Taylor so much, that line would have been gone already.

Did I regret it? Yes. No. Both and neither. No, I didn't regret spending that much. I had no use for all of that power anymore to begin with, and it had been far too long since I'd made serious use of it. I didn't have any reason to miss it, really, except that it might mean feeding more often for the foreseeable future.

But *God*, did I regret what I'd done. To inflict this curse on another human being — on a *fifteen-year-old girl*, even younger than *I* was, back when this all started — to force another person to bear this burden for the rest of eternity, when I *knew* the horrors of it so intimately, when I had *promised* myself I would *never*...

I let out another sigh and let my hand drop.

Even so, it was my bleeding heart that I could blame for this. Sentiment, more than logic. How pathetic I was, that a promise I'd held myself to for so long could be broken simply because a little girl once showed me a kind smile.

"Nothing for it, I suppose," I mumbled.

With nothing better to do, I fetched my copy of *Dracula* from where I'd put it last night and sat down to wait. If she was anything like me, Taylor would probably spend all day in bed, but hopefully, she'd be up after a few hours for her body to settle in with the changes.

It was almost two in the afternoon before she actually *did* start to stir, groaning and twisting under the sheets. I marked my page and set my book down, waiting.

The possibility I'd been dreading most materialized when she blearily opened her eyes and glittering gold looked back at me in the place of her natural green. Damn it. Of course, with how much blood and how much lifeforce I'd forced down her throat, it had always been more of an inevitability, but I'd clung onto the hope that if there was *one* thing she wouldn't inherit, if there was *one* part of me that wouldn't get passed on...

But no. *By bite and by blood...* The parallels couldn't have been more complete if the universe had conspired to make it so.

"You're awake," I said flatly.

"Ah...huh...?" she replied lamely.

"Is there anything you need?"

She swallowed, and her tongue darted out to wet her lips. "Th-thirsty."

Of course. She was a newborn, after all. Everything I'd given her had undoubtedly gone solely to healing those wounds she'd had.

I let out a breath through my nostrils. "I'll be right back."

True to my word, it only took me about a minute to head to my stores, pour her a glass, and make my way back to her side. When I had, she was struggling to sit up, arms wobbling, and I put a hand to her back to help her, muttering, "Careful, now."

She eyed the blue glass in my hand as I propped up the pillows behind her, and her gaze followed it unerringly, even when I set it down on the nightstand so I could use both hands, and I saw her nostrils flare and heard her sniffing for it — I doubted she even realized she was doing it.

It made my insides twist, though many years of practice let me keep my face blank. Was it worth it? The question bounced around in my head over and over. Was it worth it, to do this to her? Was it worth it, to lay this curse upon an already tortured soul, merely because I hadn't been able to let her go?

But the choice was already made, wasn't it?

“Here,” I murmured as I carefully brought the glass over. She tried to crane her neck over and gulp down the contents, but I held her back with my other hand. “Slowly. Don’t spill.”

Her hands came up to cup the glass, and carefully, I tilted it so she could sip. She tried immediately to tilt it higher and drink it all in one go, but I kept an iron grip and didn’t let her.

“Slowly,” I admonished her sternly. Like I was her mother.

In a way, I suppose I was, wasn’t I?

She didn’t really listen, but she was still weak, still new to the changes her body was undergoing, and I had control.

When at last the glass was drained, I pulled it away, but she tried to pull it back and leaned forward to suck out *just one more drop* — I caught a flash of the elongated incisor that marked her as surely as those eyes.

“That... That was really good,” she remarked, sounding surprised.

My insides twisted again. I arched an eyebrow. “Oh? What did you think of it?”

“It was... kind of tangy and sweet,” she said. “Like lemonade or orange juice. Um. And it had kind of a... I don’t know how to describe it...”

“A smooth undertone that seemed to slide down your throat.”

Like a fine wine, really. Every one of us had a different kind of reaction to it, a different palate and a different interpretation of the flavor. We weren’t exactly social creatures who got together for parties or conventions, so there wasn’t any way to know for sure, but I thought that those of the same lineage probably had similar tastes.

God. It was really a thing, wasn’t it? I’d... I’d never been a mother, before, and now...

“Yeah,” said Taylor. “Yeah, that sounds right.”

She eyed the glass again hungrily.

“What was that, anyway? Some kind of juice?”

I took a steadying breath.

“No,” I told her. “It was blood.”

She jerked and looked to me, and those golden eyes staring into mine only made me feel *worse*.

“Wh-what?”

“Not the most satisfying, I’m afraid,” I went on. “The longer you store blood, the more it loses potency. Flavor, too. You can get *some* nourishment from it, but when it comes down to it, the fresher it is, the better. It’s best if you get it straight from the source.”

Taylor looked faintly ill, and she eyed the glass now as though it was a venomous snake that would bite her at the slightest provocation.

“That’s not funny.”

“No, it’s not,” I said flatly. “There’s nothing about this that anyone should be laughing about. In fact, you might wind up thinking that you’d rather I never saved you, and I can’t say I’d blame you if you did.”

She looked back to me, eyes wide. “Wh-what? *Saved* me? What are you talking about?”

I sighed, then stepped back and dropped into the chair I’d been using. The wood creaked a little.

“What do you remember about last night?”

“I-I... I went out and towards the Docks, and I...” She trailed off for a moment and her brow furrowed as her lips pulled into a frown. “I found Lung. He was talking about killing kids, and I didn’t have a cellphone or any money to make a call from a payphone, so I...”

Her eyes glazed over and her expression became distant. She was remembering.

“You...” I prompted.

“I fought him,” she responded dully. “I threw everything I had at him, every bug that bites and every poisonous spider or wasp I had in my swarm, and no matter what I did, he just kept getting bigger and stronger, and then he came up on the roof and I hit him with pepper spray in the eyes and he...”

She stopped and turned towards me, something I couldn’t quite name on her face.

“H-he killed me,” she said. She swallowed, and tears were gathering at the corners of her eyes. “I-I remember *fire*, and there was *so much* of it, and I was burning and...”

Her hand came up and ghosted over the skin of her cheek — smooth skin, where there had once been the horrific burns that almost killed her.

“I was so sure I was dead,” Taylor whispered. “I... I remember thinking... a-at least I could see Mom again...”

I closed my eyes and took another steadying breath.

“He was about to finish you off,” I picked up for her. My voice was calmer than I honestly felt. “He was standing over you, getting ready for the final blow. I killed him before he could.”

Taylor jerked again and blinked up at me. “Wh-what?”

“It was a little harder than I’m used to, if I’m honest,” I said wryly. “Most things stabbed through the heart actually die from it. I had to actually take off his head before he finally got the hint.”

“Y-you killed *Lung*?” She started. “Wait. Harder than you’re — you’ve killed *before*?”

I offered her a half-smile, absent of humor. “I’m over three-hundred years old, Taylor. I’ve seen more war and death than you can probably imagine. Are you really surprised that this ‘Lung’ wasn’t the first person I’ve had to put down?”

Taylor gaped at me. “Th-three-hundred...”

“June twelfth, sixteen-eighty-one,” I confirmed. I pulled down on my shirt to expose the scar where my shoulder and neck met. “I was nineteen when...”

When my life ended.

“There weren’t many options left when I found you,” I went on solemnly. “Healing magic... was never something I really needed to learn, not anything more than what was necessary to heal my victims, at least. Either I could let you die or —”

“Wait,” she interrupted. “Wait, wait, wait. You just... You just said *magic*.”

I frowned. “Yes?”

“Like it’s a real thing.”

I rolled my eyes. “We’re *vampires*, Taylor. Written about in fantasy books and trashy romance novels for centuries. You *become* one because of a curse carried in your teeth and in your blood. You’re hung up on the idea that *magic* is real?”

She flushed. “Well, I-I mean, uh, but powers —”

“If I understand it right, these ‘powers’ are only about thirty years old,” I cut across her. “*Thirty*. I assure you, although I may look a youthful nineteen, I am *far* older than that, Taylor. I have been around long enough to see the French Revolution, to have met the likes of Napoleon Bonaparte and Rembrandt and Ludwig van Beethoven —”

My teeth clicked as my mouth snapped shut. I took another steadying breath as I told my heart to calm. Now was not the time to tear up over old memories.

“Maybe magic has fallen out of use, now,” I allowed. If I was honest, I didn’t know if there had ever been a practitioner in this world at all. “I couldn’t tell you when, why, how. What I *can* tell you is that it *is* real and that it *does* exist, and you will have ample time to learn it, if that’s what you want.”

Her hand went to her neck, to the place where her own scar, nearly identical to mine only on the opposite side, rested. She frowned and looked down at her lap. “Ample time, huh? Does that mean... Well, does that make me immortal, now?”

Don’t let it get to your head, girl.

“In the broadest of senses, yes. As long as you feed regularly enough to sustain yourself, you can keep going until somebody kills you.”

“Feed?” She looked over to the empty glass, drying now so that the blood was crusted to the sides, and seemed to hate how much she wanted more. “And what if... what if I don’t? Feed, that is?”

“Then you’ll starve,” I answered bluntly.

“To death?”

“If you go long enough, then yes.”

“Then —”

“But long before you reach that point,” I went on, “you’ll go mad with the hunger. You can already feel it now, can’t you? Gnawing at your stomach? Like there’s a ravenous beast inside of you, trying to chew its way out of your body? That will stay with you forever. It’ll never truly be sated. But if you don’t feed, it’ll get worse and worse and worse, until...”

She swallowed thickly. “Until?”

“Until all you can think about is feeding,” I said. “Until you can’t stop yourself. Until you go out into the night and find the nearest person — or the nearest dozen, or even more — and feed and feed and feed until you’ve had your fill. Uncaring of what happens to them, of whether they live or die, you’ll drain them dry to slake your thirst. Person after person, body after body, you won’t care, as long as the hunger is blunted. You won’t even care if your father is one of your victims.”

Already pale, her face had gone even whiter, and the horrified look was made all the starker by the pearly white of her fangs and the glimmering gold of her eyes.

“Do you think you’re the first to refuse to feed?” I asked harshly. “Many, many others have had the same thought. ‘I’ll just refuse to drink blood.’ They all found out the hard way that you can’t just *not*. It’s not that simple. Do you know what happened to them afterwards?”

“No,” she whispered.

“They broke. They broke and shattered, and those who didn’t immediately find a way to end their lives became the very thing that cursed them. They became monsters, prowling the night, cursing others to live as they do, half alive and half dead.”

“A-and you?”

I pulled up short. “Me?”

“What did you do?” she asked quietly. “Did you become one of them?”

I looked away, closed my eyes, took a deep breath.

...Not today, I decided. I wasn’t going to tell her that today.

“I found something to focus on,” I said at length. “Something to keep me sane, give me purpose. If you give up, if you can’t find a reason to keep going, then you’ll just become another one of them.”

“What kind of purpose?”

I felt one side of my mouth curl. “The best kind. Revenge.”

She opened her mouth, no doubt to ask me against *who*, but then her eyes traveled down to the scar, and I watched understanding dawn over her face. Of course. Who else would a vampire want to get revenge against, but the person who made her into one? The person who cursed her to live such a miserable existence, shunned by the sun, welcomed only by the moon, able to nourish themselves only on the life’s essence of another human being?

And if Taylor decided she wanted revenge against me... Well. Maybe I’d even let her have it.

“What now, then?” she asked me. “Are you just going to...to keep me here, until you know I won’t become one of those monsters?”

“Now?” I echoed. “Now, I have to figure out how we’re going to explain to Danny tonight what I’ve done to his daughter.”

Taylor looked stricken, and her eyes went very wide indeed.

I grinned. “Exactly.”

“Wait,” she said, “you’re not going to tell him...tell him about last night, are you? About me being a cape?”

I arched an eyebrow. “Do you have a better idea how to explain this entire thing *without* bringing it up?”

She opened her mouth, stopped, closed it, and grimaced. “Can’t we keep it a secret?”

I snorted.

“From the world? Sure. But I’m afraid it’s not *quite* that easy to keep a secret like this from family.”