



The Thing About...

Abraham

December 16, 2018

The thing about Destiny is that she's a bleeding heart.

Oh, you thought I meant destiny, as in fate? No, Destiny is my wife. Blame her mothers for your confusion. Hippies. Well. What do you call a couple of turn-of-the-century lesbian Wiccans, if not hippies? Perhaps I'm not up on the latest terminology, but in my experience, everything old becomes new again.

As I was saying, Destiny is a bleeding heart. She's a veterinarian, and she's forever bringing home sickly kittens for me to bottle-feed. Me, because I don't sleep. Sometimes I nap in a coffin in the basement, but really, as long as I stay out of the sun, I'm fine.

It's what Destiny calls "my little problem." She's as sympathetic about it as she is about elder cats in kidney failure, or orphan kittens, or dogs with cancer or broken legs. We've had dogs, cats, birds, rabbits, rats, and an iguana, but it's usually cats. I don't drink any of them; they're pets, and Destiny is a vegetarian.

Not that rats and iguanas are tasty. Especially iguanas. Do not recommend. Well, I hear there's one species on Saint Barthélemy, but... no. No, right now I subsist on "donations" from my wife—who gets regular iron testing on the excuse of vegetarianism—expired blood bank stock, and what I can scrounge up on the internet. I've drunk more than my share of rats in my time; they used to be plentiful, like fast food on every corner. They still are in New York. Honestly, the pet ones are so cute that I have some regret about how many I've drunk. The aggressively overabundant ones in the city, not so much.

So, Destiny is a bleeding heart, and every adorable fluffy-wuffy animal that dies destroys her.

I can relate, because eternity is boring without company, and yet company is not, for the most part, immortal. Cats are delightful, but their lives are the blink of an eye. I've loved many women, and even a few men, but it always ends the same way: old age, failing health, and death—with a few notable exceptions.

You might think that my kind doesn't know death. No, death and I are old friends, old enemies, the familiarity that breeds contempt. Death comes for everyone I love. Destiny says that the cycle of life and death is holy. Perhaps, but it's also cruel. We value things for the effort we put into them, and paradoxically value both youth and experience. If you

don't believe me, look at every job listing. So while you're becoming your best and wisest self, your body is slowly and inevitably betraying you to make room for the next generation. Yours is. Not mine. You might think that death becomes easier to cope with over time, but no. It's worse.

I've learned the hard way that I don't want the ones who clamor for immortality. No, no, the ones with sympathy for my "little problem" are more likely to be good and kind companions, and yet, all too soon, they're gone. I thought that perhaps things that are ephemeral are the things that are the most precious, but it's hard to be philosophical when I think about losing Destiny.

So I've offered, twice. She doesn't think it suits her vegetarian ideals. Too much being raised with "An it harm none do what thou wilt," the Wiccan creed.

What can I do? I love her. And so I continue our relationship as it is, knowing that it will devastate me in the end. I honestly don't know how I'll cope.



Destiny
December 16, 2018

THE THING ABOUT Abraham is that he has a little problem, and he thinks his little problem is a solution.

Well. That and he's *beautiful*. Like, girl-pretty. I don't

think he knows. I took one look into those huge dark eyes, and it was like I've known him forever.

Do you believe in reincarnation? I do. But I digress.

The cycle of death and life sucks balls, but it's also natural. Holy, even. The old have to die to make room for the new, no matter how much that hurts. Every foster kitten that I cry over adopting out is space for a new kitten. Abraham is adorable bottle-feeding kittens, by the way. Don't tell him I said so. But without death, there can be no room for new births.

Speaking of death and birth, I suppose, he wants to know if I want to be a vampire. I don't. It's not like I faint at the sight of blood or anything. I believe blood should stay in the body if possible, and that I should do my best to do no harm.

And there's Abraham, and the thought that he's guaranteed to outlive me is a selfish relief, to be honest.

I've asked Abraham how old he is. He says he doesn't remember. He plays violin like a God, though. Like someone who's practiced for a very long time.

A *very* long time.



Till Death Do Us Part

Abraham
Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey
December 28, 2018

We were watching television together in our pajamas, curled up under a blanket on my red Victorian horsehair sofa. Destiny was wearing a satin bathrobe and was sitting with her head on my shoulder, smelling like soap and lavender shampoo, warm and soft. Ivan sat on my lap, purring. Victoria sat pressed up against my thigh, with her sleek black fur and bright gold eyes. Our cat Inanna was sleeping on her back in the leather chair. Our home could get drafty in the winter, but it wasn't frigid. Well. Perhaps I was the wrong person to ask.

Destiny channel-surfed, looking for something interesting on the television. She settled on the news. They announced that independent presidential candidate and Internet Personality Thomas Hopkins had been “deplatformed,” and fortunately, they explained what that meant. Apparently, his web provider had decided that he was too offensive and refused to host his site any longer. There was some discourse about free speech and what content it covered.

They showed a blurred, censored version of his website—although I could still make out a swastika and a Confederate battle flag—with a voiceover of him. “Free speech must include discussion that I consider abhorrent, much like it must cover my speech. Otherwise, the term is meaningless.” There was something familiar about his voice, but I couldn’t place it...

...until they showed his photo. A serene olive-skinned face; high, dark eyebrows; and a balding pate, with a fringe of frizzy black hair. I knew him as Thomas—just Thomas; no one had told me a last name. I was reasonably certain due to the circumstances of the introduction that his surname wasn’t “Hopkins.” I froze, staring at the screen like the proverbial deer in the headlights modern Americans describe.

Ivan, agitated, jumped off my lap and left the room. I heartily agreed and resisted the urge to get up and pack my belongings. My hands were shaking, I realized, and I shoved them under the blanket to hide them. Victoria glanced up at me, looking worried.

“If you elect me president,” Thomas said on the television, “I’ll get rid of freedom of religion and the

clause about ‘cruel and unusual punishment.’ Torture is good! Torture works! And if it saves innocent lives, it’s completely justified. It’s been almost two decades since the brave soldiers at Abu Ghraib were prosecuted, but I haven’t forgotten them! God bless Guantánamo!”

Yes, Thomas *would* say that. I noted he wore what resembled red Inquisitor robes, which would surprise someone who’d never met him. Not me, though. I’d heard that he was an actual Inquisitor during the Spanish Inquisition, which might explain his pro-torture stance. Bastard.

The announcer pointed out that Thomas’s prior day job was prison warden, and I was so horrified that I missed most of the rest of the feature. I registered they were discussing whether his forums incited violence; and whether freedom of speech covered hate speech.

“It’s only a temporary setback,” he said. “I’ve already found another web host and am simply waiting for something called ‘DNS’ to reappear.” He smiled, beatific. “The internet has been such a blessing to my ministry.”

His “ministry.” Appalling.

I didn’t like being in the same country as him. To be honest, I didn’t enjoy being on the same planet. Thomas wasn’t the reason I’d moved to America, but I’d previously moved to London because of him. Perhaps it was time to return. I asked Destiny, “What would you think of moving to London?”

Destiny pulled away and turned to stare at me. “What? That’s random!”

No, it wasn’t. It was fight or flight. “Seriously.”

Her brow furrowed. “I’d need to get a vet license in England. We’d have to take health certificates for the pets. We’d be too far from my mothers.” She gazed

down at Inanna, who was now sitting at her feet, washing her paw. “No? I like my nice, normal life the way it is.”

Those things weren’t an issue. I had Dave for my trust fund—reliable Dave, who asked no questions—and I had an excellent source for fake identities. I’d never tried to find a connection for falsified vet credentials, but I supposed I hadn’t had a need for them. Things were harder to falsify nowadays, and getting more difficult all the time, but we could manage and bring her mothers with us if necessary. It wasn’t like Destiny needed to work at all, married to me, but she’d said she *wanted* a career.

I sighed. “I guess that goes for Germany, too.” Although, on second thought, the current climate in Europe made me reconsider. “Canada?”

Destiny turned to face me, expression and voice concerned. “What’s gotten into you?”

Honestly? Changing my name and moving was my standard response to legal problems or Thomas issues. Usually not as far as London, but... suffice it to say that I had a love/hate relationship with changing my name and moving. Sometimes metamorphosis was a refreshing change, and others it was an incredible nuisance. Preparation made all the difference.

I was *not* prepared. We had a wedding vow renewal scheduled in a couple of days!



Ludwig
Rosenheim, Bavaria
September 10, 1762

AFTER MASS, I PICKED UP the Bible and carried it into Father Thomas's office.

Father Thomas had a serene face and a deep speaking voice. He was balding, his hair forming a dark fringe around the sides of his head, and he had strong features and warm-toned skin that spoke of a southern climate. His sermon today had filled people with passion, although I suddenly realized I couldn't summarize it. So embarrassing! Clearly, I needed to be more attentive.

His prior sermons—the ones I could remember—scared me, but I suppose they *should* have frightened me: host desecration, deals with the devil to sicken entire cities... I had hoped I would enter a safe cloister and be alone with my lovely books, untouched by that sort of ugliness. Surely God was the creator of all that was beautiful, after all. Our church reflected that: all graceful, serene white and gold arches, bright and soaring, and the ceiling painted to depict heaven.

"Your piety is so beautiful and pure, Ludwig," Father Thomas said, as I set the Bible back on a shelf in his office, a place of honor. It was two hundred years old and was an object of art, each letter typeset by hand with the utmost care for beauty, with exquisite drawings in the margins and headers, beautifully bound. No one ever had to tell me to approach it with proper reverence, like they did with some of the

younger boys who would come to serve immediately after engaging in giggly jests with one another.

Father Thomas continued, "And your family's donation was much appreciated. We need that money to protect the church from Jewish machinations. I've posted a guard on our well, of course, to keep them from giving us all the plague, so their donation will help make us all safer."

I'd never actually met a Jew, so I didn't know how to respond to this.

"Do you think you would have trouble with a vow of poverty, coming from a noble house as you do?"

I considered this. "I love beautiful things... but I suppose I needn't own them." To be honest, I was more dismayed at the idea of shaving my head in a tonsure, as I was vain about my blond hair, but I believed this to be a character flaw. Besides, my brother, Friedrich, would get the barony. I'd briefly wanted to be a musician, but my family had made it plain that they wouldn't stand for such nonsense. I needed to do something with my life, after all, and the Church was the usual lot for second sons.

Father Thomas smiled at me, warm and indulgent, and patted my shoulder with a massive, fatherly hand. "And chastity?"

"That," I said, surprising myself with the passion in my voice, "is not an issue." The very idea repulsed me. It was all too intimate! Invasive. I found some people more aesthetically pleasing than others, but this never translated into wanting to touch them in an improper way.

Father Thomas raised an eyebrow at me, but all he said was, "Very good." He walked out of the room,

towards the confessionals, and left me in his office, staring out over the pews.

I realized later that he hadn't asked me about obedience.



Destiny

Eatontown, New Jersey

December 31, 2018

I HADN'T SLEPT THAT WELL the night before the vow renewal. Nightmares. I'd spent the night at my moms', so maybe it was the unfamiliar bed? They'd gotten rid of the one I'd slept in when I left for college, and replaced it with one that I'd never gotten used to.

I didn't know where it came from, but I'd always been afraid of fire. Do most people know where their phobias come from? I didn't remember any traumatic experiences, but even when I was a little girl, I'd sometimes dream that the house was on fire and I needed to get our pets out. Maybe the fear of fire was from stories of witches burned at the stake, because we were all Wiccans. Maybe it was a metaphor for one's safest place—one's *home*—not being safe after all. Who knows?

I'd had that dream again the night before. I was in a burning house trying to escape with my cat Inanna—who was currently at home. But in the dream,

I was holding Inanna in my arms and looking for an exit that wasn't blocked by fire, and when I woke up, I was still too afraid to go back to sleep. When that happened at home, I'd get Abraham to tell me a story about his past. I don't think he was offended that I sometimes fell asleep during them.

We always had pets when I was little. Mama Morgan was a dog person, and Mommy Bridget was a cat person. We had big mellow tomcats and less patient lady cats who would let me dress them up in doll clothes, and small dogs and medium-sized dogs I would put party hats on and have tea parties with. I've always loved animals; I had mice, rats, hamsters, birds, rabbits... That's probably why I became a vet, and is definitely why I don't eat animals.

So I was tired, and my mothers took me to a spa, where I fell asleep during the massage. I couldn't believe that I'd agreed to a midnight New Year's Eve vow renewal. Of course, I'd been well-rested at the time.

I mean. I wanted one, too. We'd gotten one of those generic justice of the peace things, and we both wanted something more... spiritual.

After the spa, there was the cosmetologist whom we'd hired to do my hair and makeup for the vow renewal. We set up in the living room, with the lavender sofa and the Indian pillows and all the Wiccan-themed posters and crystals, and my moms' wedding broom. I fell asleep again while she was working on me, and when I woke up, I was delighted that I looked like a fairy princess and not a drooling, shambling zombie. Wanting to be beautiful on your wedding day is patriarchal and buying into the idea that a woman's worth is in her looks—but I still wanted to be beautiful

at my vow renewal. That's societal pressures for you. I wore my red hair down to please my husband, but the cosmetologist curled it and put flowers in it.

I'd inherited my red hair, green eyes, upturned Celtic nose, and Scots/Irish pale skin color from my mother Morgan, who was my biological mother. I sometimes regretted that they hadn't chosen a donor who looked more like Bridget—chestnut-brown skin, thick curling hair, broad nose, full lips. Bridget had almost carried me, as there had been drama with Morgan's family—they disowned her. Morgan had left her parents' Catholic Church for Bridget's Wicca, and they'd raised me in the more queer-inclusive faith. Bridget's parents also reacted poorly, although there was now a somewhat chilly *détente*. They still weren't happy that Bridget was gay, but they made a big show out of not mentioning it.

I was proud to be a product of their love story. I'd always known there was someone out there for me as well—speaking of societal tropes, but whatever. I still knew. Abraham wasn't what I expected, but...

It was his eyes. Okay, no, we were a good match in that he loved classical music and cats as much as I did, and we both had kind of a philosophical bent? You know, common interests, similar goals—we both wanted kids and a quiet, normal life—all that. Sexually compatible. But... there was something about him. When I gazed into his eyes, it felt like we'd been friends all my life.

Okay, he also wanted me to turn into a vampire. I... no? I supposed I might change my mind over time, but it seemed unlikely. But he was willing to take no for an answer, so...

“Honey?” Bridget said, interrupting my reverie. “Do you need a cup of tea?”

“She needs *coffee*,” Morgan said. It was an old joke and an old play argument.

“I need caffeine in some form,” I admitted. “I’m not picky which.”

“Did you have the dream again?” Bridget asked.

I nodded, and Morgan left the room. There was clattering, and the sound and smell of coffee brewing in the kitchen made me smile.

Bridget bit her lip, but all she did was take my hand and squeeze it.

I’d always suspected I had died by fire in a previous life. I thought Bridget suspected, too, but she’d never said so. She often looked like she wasn’t saying something when we discussed it—biting her lip, pressing her lips together...

Morgan came back with the coffee, lots of cream and sugar—the way I liked it. I took a sip of the sweet, creamy, bitter goodness. The cosmetologist winced and pulled out the lipstick again.



Abraham

Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey

December 31, 2018

WE STOOD SIDE BY SIDE in our living room: Destiny in a long, sleek, strapless white dress, holding a

bouquet of white roses and calla lilies, and me in a black silk tuxedo, my shoulder-length brown hair pulled back. She had a little crown of white roses in her beautiful long red hair and wore understated makeup. She also wore flat-heeled shoes because she was two inches taller than me. I didn't mind—I liked tall women—but she also said it was more comfortable. Perhaps this was elaborate for a vow renewal, but we both craved something more meaningful than our first ceremony.

We lived in an old Victorian farmhouse, with wooden floors and a beautifully carved mantel, and our living room was in tones of red and gray, with warm wood, brown and black and white. The room had decorative columns on either side of the curving staircase, with lovely scrolling spandrels between them. There was wood paneling, with a bit of gray wallpaper across the top. I had a faux-antique ceiling light, made to resemble a candle chandelier with crystals that probably weren't crystal. An antique Persian carpet and a grand piano made in 1911 tied the room together.

I'd pushed our red Victorian horsehair sofa back against the wall to make room for the party. A table in the corner held a television, neither huge nor tiny, showing the New Year's Eve ball-drop countdown; the guests had been told that the ceremony would happen right after the start of the new year. The rest of the room had an antique wooden bar; a long wooden table with a white tablecloth and vases of roses at each end; a table with a wedding cake that I couldn't eat, of course. It smelled divine, however—sweet and creamy. I also had some wooden chairs with red velvet cushions and some brown leather armchairs. We could have

used more seating, to be honest. We rarely had a lot of company over.

We had set one corner of the room up as a photo area, with a backdrop depicting a snow scene and an immense quantity of flowers, with lights and a professional photographer. Destiny and I had already posed at length, but the photographer was planning on taking both still photos and video of the ceremony. At the moment, guests were posing, complete with silly faces and gestures.

Outside, it was all snow and distant ocean. I could pretend the world was dressed in white for the occasion. If we went upstairs, there were city lights across the water, but the party was downstairs.

I'd hired a bartender, and we had an open bar... but it was still a small party. Mostly Destiny's family, friends, coworkers... and my two guests: my lawyer and my accountant, Dave. To be honest, I was a bit of a recluse, or perhaps a crazy cat man. I've always been shy, and ever since... well. Let's say that I didn't like to attract a lot of attention. There was someone I didn't want to find me.

The guests were all wearing formal clothes. Dave appeared awkward, as he was much more comfortable with numbers than with people. He once told me he could see whole narratives, battles for power, etc., in numbers. I didn't ask him what he saw in mine; I was curious, but asking would raise more questions than I wanted to answer. He'd driven in from New York City, which struck me as a brave thing to do on New Year's Eve. Dave was about my height and had curly black hair, a tan skin similar to my own, thick glasses, and a hearing aid. He wore an expensive-looking suit that fit

him poorly, as if he minded the time shopping more than the cost of the clothing.

“Louis!” Dave called across the room, and my attorney turned around. He was very blond, *very* handsome, and very flashy, and I’d known him for about a hundred and eighty years. His suit probably cost as much as some people’s cars, and fit like it was tailored for him... which I suspect it was.

Ludwig—“Louis”—wandered over, a wineglass in his hand. “Is Abraham keeping you busy?”

Dave laughed. “He’s very laid-back. Just looks to see that the numbers are going the right way from time to time.”

Ludwig raised an eyebrow at me. I shrugged in response and went searching for my cats.

My darling black cat Victoria was hiding somewhere, as cats do, but friendly Ivan was trotting around the room with his tail in the air seeking pets, as cats usually don’t. But Ivan had been a bottle baby with an eye infection and had seen so many vets that he was unfazed by people and considered them his devoted subjects and instant best friends. I’d considered making him the ring bearer but decided he was just as likely to make the rings hockey pucks as to bring them to us on cue. He was a cream tabby, very handsome. I’d dressed him in a little black bow tie for the occasion, and Victoria in a pink collar encrusted with rhinestones. Ivan twined around my ankles and gazed up at me with adoring bronze eyes, and I scooped him up and kissed him on his furry golden head. Destiny’s tortoiseshell cat, Inanna, had immediately bolted into the kitchen cabinets and hissed at me when I checked on her, so I decided she could spend the party in her

Fortress of Solitude if she chose, and declined to dress her in party finery. After all, Inanna had a reputation for attacking landlords and repair people. I'd rather she not launch herself at our guests.

Victoria had been my primary source of emotional support when a previous relationship ended and my ex started referring to me online as *that Goth psycho who thinks he's a vampire*—no name, of course, but our mutual friends knew who she meant. Cats have always been my truest companions in times of isolation.

Lucy—Destiny's vet tech—walked over. She was wearing a violet gown that complemented her deep brown skin, and wore her hair in a series of braids. "Where's my favorite lady?" She meant Victoria.

I appreciated her asking. "Hiding. This is a lot of guests for her." Ivan fidgeted in my arms, so I put him down.

Lucy pouted and scooped up Ivan, who purred graciously at her. "Such a good boy! You should tell your sister to come out and see me. I'd hate to drive all this way and miss her." Ivan shifted his weight and tried to escape, so Lucy put him down. "Congratulations, by the way. I was delighted when you left your number for Destiny."

My cheeks warmed slightly, but I smiled. "Thank you."

The ball dropped on the television, and we all stood around and chanted the countdown. "Ten... Nine... Eight... Seven... Six... Five... Four... Three... Two... One... Happy New Year!" I leaned over and kissed Destiny, probably getting a light coating of lip gloss.

And then a couple of Destiny's coworkers—Alicia and Eric—started singing Wagner's *Lohengrin* wedding

march—off-key, with the lyrics “Dun dun dun dun!”—but that wasn’t the reason I winced. I held up both my hands and said, “Please. No Wagner, I beg of you.” I tried to keep my tone light, but Wagner was a noted antisemite who wrote offensive essays about the Jews, and his work—if Alicia and Eric even realized it *was* his work—had no place in my home, let alone at my vow renewal. Fuck Wagner!

Alicia and Eric blinked at me and swayed drunkenly, mouths slightly slack, but Destiny’s mother Bridget smiled at me and said, “I wouldn’t want Wagner if I were you, either. No Wagner, please, everyone! No Wagner!” I appreciated her understanding and support.

Destiny’s mother Morgan leaned over and murmured something to Bridget, and Bridget answered quietly, “I’ll explain later,” gesturing in a way that was probably meant to tell Morgan to drop it.

Bridget wore a long, flowing, hand-painted purple silk dress with elaborate glass beads sewn onto it, and a pretty beaded headdress. Morgan wore a tuxedo with her short red hair. Bridget was a cellist and I’m a violinist, so I felt a certain string player affinity for her.

As a preamble to the ceremony, I placed a hand-painted document on a table in front of Destiny’s mothers. It was written in Aramaic with the letters forming a tree. “Will everyone please sign the ketubah?”

“It’s pretty,” Morgan said. “What is it?”

“Um...” My cheeks were warm. “I promise to provide your daughter with food, clothing, and, um, conjugal relations...”

Destiny’s drunk coworkers hooted. Dave said, “Hey, it’s a mitzvah!” If you don’t know, a mitzvah is a commandment or good deed, and yes, it’s also a euphemism for Sabbath marital relations.

“...and if we divorce, she gets a portion of my assets.”

There was an awkward pause. Dave winced in my general direction. “Louis,” on the other hand, appeared unruffled.

All right, so I’ve heard a ketubah described as the least romantic document imaginable—basically a prenuptial agreement, and intended to protect the woman rather than the man. I wanted one. They’re usually beautiful, and I wanted to promise my wife those things. There wouldn’t be much in this ceremony that was Jewish, and... I wanted one.

People gathered around signing it. Dave gave me a sidelong glance over the rims of his glasses before signing it. Well. He was my accountant, and also Jewish, so he understood what he was signing. It’s traditional to have two adult male Jews sign it as witnesses. Dave was the only guest fitting that description, so I had everyone sign. It’s not like it was legally binding, after all.

Bridget said, “All right, we’re starting. Settle down, please. Please join hands in a circle.”

Everyone gathered in a circle surrounding us, holding hands. Ludwig, Dave, Morgan, and Lucy—still glancing around occasionally for Victoria—each held a ribbon-wrapped pole with a corner of a prayer shawl tied to each pole as a chuppah, or wedding canopy. Other than those four, only Bridget, Destiny, and I were inside the circle. They put the poles into the waiting vases on the floor, but stood by to make sure they were stable.

“Dearly beloved,” Bridget said. “We are gathered here today to witness the vows of Abraham Levy and Destiny

Andrews Levy. Brought together by pets, joined by love. We wish you joy. We wish you a long life together. We wish you children.”

“Give me grandbabies!” Morgan interjected. There was laughter, but it was a bit awkward on my part, as my first wife, Flora, had told me vampires can’t. Vampires are only made one way.

I picked up the ketubah and read it aloud. It was, as I said, in Aramaic, and had a melody. So it’s perhaps more accurate to say that I sang it—*B’ezrat Hashem Yitbarech... B’shlishi bashabat esrim v’chamesh yom l’chodesh Tevet sh’nat chameshet alafim ush’va me’ot...*, etc., etc.—and then I placed it on the table. One usually has the rabbi, or another expert, read the ketubah, but it’s hard to find a rabbi willing to do an interfaith ceremony. I didn’t even ask around, assuming that the Wiccan elements would shock them. Reading the ketubah myself was, as the modern Americans would say, a flex—a very subtle flex, as Dave was the only person in the room who might understand the significance.

I continued by picking up the cup of wine and saying, “*Barukh atah, Adonai, Eloheinu Melekh ha’olam, borei p’ri hagafen.*” Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the universe, Who creates the fruit of the vine. I took a sip, then offered the cup to Destiny, who took a sip. I placed the ring on her finger, and said, “With this ring, you are consecrated to me according to the law of Moses and Israel.”

Destiny picked up the ring and said, “Isis, Astarte, Diana, Hecate, Demeter, Kali, Inanna. With this ring I pledge myself to you, between the worlds, in all the worlds, so mote it be.” She placed the ring on my finger.

I caught sight of Dave, who stared wide-eyed and open-mouthed, perhaps shocked by the idolatry of Destiny's Wiccan vows. I stifled a smile, although it felt a little uncomfortable to me as well. But I'd adjusted to the idea of an interfaith marriage. My previous wife was Christian, after all.

Bridget smiled. "Please clasp hands."

Destiny and I clasped left hands. Bridget took a silk cord and tied our wrists together—a Wiccan element for my wife. "This knot expresses your eternal bond of love. Within this knot, I bind all the wishes, hopes, love, and happiness wished here for you." Her lips twitched in a quirky grin. "By the power vested in me by an ad in the back of *Rolling Stone* magazine, I pronounce you husband and wife. Blessed be!" Technically, she didn't have to say this because we were already married, but she had insisted.

"Blessed be!" Destiny and Morgan repeated. Everyone else kind of mumbled. Count of Wiccans in the room: three.

We slipped our hands out of the knot, and I drank half the wine—tart and delicious, but I was after the glass—and handed it to Destiny. She drank the other half. I wrapped the glass in a cloth napkin, put it on the floor, and stepped on it as is Jewish tradition. There are a lot of reasons given: it commemorates the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, makes a loud noise to frighten away demons, symbolizes the fragility of human relationships, symbolizes sexual release, and is a symbol of breaking down barriers. There's also a belief that each couple was once a single soul that was shattered like the glass—an idea I find distressing, since my first wife is dead, so it implies that either she

or Destiny is a second choice. The glass stomp is the mark of the end of the ceremony, which was much better than our previous wedding, but almost certainly not kosher. It would have to do.

“*Mazel Tov!*” Dave shouted, but he was the only one. Count of Jews in the room: two.

Jewish legend calls the person who once shared your soul your bashert, and says that before you were born, God chose you and your soul mate for each other. This person is your destiny, your fate. Was it possible to have more than one soul mate? Mainstream Judaism didn’t do reincarnation, but some of the mystical sects, like the Kabbalists, did. But it felt like an idea that I needed to approach cautiously, to avoid dishonoring one of my wives by mistake.

I kissed the bride and walked over to the table to put the ketubah into a matted frame I had ready next to it, then hung it over the wooden mantle. Now I had exchanged vows in front of our friends, and was proudly displaying our ketubah. *Now* the ceremony felt complete. I felt a swelling of almost complete joy, along with a distant pang that *till death do us part* wasn’t long enough.

Ludwig gathered up the four corners of the chuppah and carried it back to my guest room, presumably. He passed Lucy, who was trying to coax Victoria out from under a side table. Victoria allowed the petting, and even did her patented “sit up tall and look adoring,” but drew the line at being picked up, so Lucy petted her again and let her be.

When I came back, Dave was telling Destiny, “Congratulations! Apparently, your husband’s love

language is paying off your student loans.” He took a sip of his martini.

Destiny laughed and glanced over at me, smiling, her eyes gentle. “Yes, he’s very thoughtful.”

I kissed her on her soft, warm cheek. I know it’s cliché to say that one is lucky in love, but Destiny is unique. She’s what people like her mothers call “an old soul,” wise beyond her years. In my way, I’m both old and young; in her way, so is she.

“*Kol haKavod* on the Aramaic,” Dave said. “You speak it like a native.”

I smiled. “Hardly.”

Ludwig returned and stood on the sidelines, watching the discussion with a smile.

“Seriously,” Dave said, leaning closer. “Did you study to be a rabbi or something?”

I shrugged. “I did a year of Talmud study at a yeshiva about a million years ago.” I really did study for a year at a yeshiva in what is now Poland, back in 1839 or so. It was my mother’s condition for my going to the Berlin Academy of Music the following year.

Dave raised an eyebrow at me. “Were your parents, like, super frum or something?” He was asking if my parents were very observant.

I didn’t really want to get into it, so I shrugged and said, “You could say that. Long story.” No offense, Dave, but that’s above your pay grade.

Morgan did something with her phone and the speakers played the Dixie Cups’ “Chapel of Love.” Destiny sang along. Some of the other guests groaned, but, by all means, the Dixie Cups rather than Wagner. Not that I don’t love classical music—classical music is my life—but... fuck Wagner.

I pulled Destiny close, stretched out one arm in front of us in a silly pseudo-tango. Her dress whirled, as did her hair, and she laughed. I got the impression that she didn't know the tango, so we made it up, wandering the room cheek to cheek, followed by spinning. Our guests giggled, and so did we. Bridget and Morgan watched us side by side, swaying gently together.

After the dance, Destiny said, "I think we need a sectional sofa and a big screen TV in here. Our TV sucks—no offense."

The idea mildly appalled me, but marriage involves compromise, so I was almost certainly replacing my beloved antique horsehair sofa with a sectional. Oh, the humanity! I took another sip of beer. In the corner, Bridget and Lucy were chatting quietly. It looked like Bridget was reading Lucy's palm.

"Where are you going on your honeymoon?" Alicia asked.

Destiny waggled her eyebrows and said, "The bedroom."

My cheeks were warm, but I'd already announced to the room that I'd promised my wife *conjugal relations*, after all. Dave spat out his martini. So much for its being a mitzvah? Everyone laughed, including Dave, who wiped the martini off his chin. Everyone but Ludwig, who raised a bemused eyebrow.

"I don't do well on airplanes," I said, patting Dave on the shoulder.

"You can get Xanax for that!" someone suggested, and burst out laughing. My dismay must have shown on my face. My problem was vertigo and nausea, not anxiety, and the idea of being drugged and nauseated...

Eric held out his hand. He was tall and blond and had a boyish face, currently flushed pink with too much alcohol. “Congratulations! I work with your wife, but I don’t think Destiny has mentioned what you do...”

Ah, yes, the American obsession with *what one does*—also known as shorthand for being introduced by your class and income. The European in me was unamused.

I shook the proffered hand and told the truth. “I was born into a banking family and live off my investments.” I also used to be a famous musician under another name, and earned a lot of money from that, but I didn’t share that information. Basically, over a hundred years of compound interest. The tricky part was setting up a trust. You know. So people wouldn’t notice that I wasn’t dying. It used to be a lot easier to get a fake identity before computers, but one can still do it. That was part of what “Louis” was for.

The trust was what Dave was for. I could manage my own money. It’s just that Dave was better at it, and enjoyed it so much more than I did. I preferred to devote my life to the violin.

Eric blinked at me. “Ah. Um. You have a lovely home.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re not going to, I don’t know, go to college or whatever? What are you, twenty? Twenty-one?”

“Old enough to drink,” I said. In fact, Eric was driving me to drink, so I asked Dave if he wanted another martini and headed to the bar for a pastry stout. I should really have been more patient with Eric.

I returned and handed Dave his martini and took another sip of beer.

“What do *you* do?” Ludwig asked, eyeing Eric over a glass of wine.

“Oh, um, I’m a vet, you know,” Eric said. “What about you?”

“I’m a partner at Cooper, Richmond, and Strauss, but I prefer to think of myself as a patron of the arts.”

“Ah,” Eric said. “Um. Cool? You must be one of their youngest partners. Did you go to law school in your teens, or do you have a portrait in your attic?”

Ludwig just smiled.

“He’s older than he looks. He just has a baby face,” I said.

Ludwig gave me a withering glare, but Eric appeared satisfied.

Eventually, we had to kick all our guests out into the snow. We stood together, waving and repeating “Good night, good night,” until we finally had the house to ourselves... although I called Dave a cab. He was singing “Chapel of Love” off-key, and dancing like he was in a sixties girl band while he did it. I hoped he wouldn’t be too embarrassed in the morning.

I pulled Destiny into my arms. I kissed her and said, “Have you given any thought to...?”

Destiny shook her head. “No, I’m still a vegetarian.”

I tried not to wince. It was, to my mind, a romantic offer! Let’s make *till death do us part* meaningless and replace it with *forever*. Forever, and forever, and not a measly half-century or so of watching her body betray her, slowly and inevitably. Having been in this position before, I can assure you of the horror of arthritis and broken hips, of heart attacks and strokes. And yet I continue to do this to myself. Life without connection is meaningless.

She squeezed my arm; it must have shown on my face. “I don’t want to celebrate our vow renewal by becoming a vampire, Abraham. I want to have some nuptial TMI and then go to bed.”

I burst out laughing. Was she protecting the cats’ innocent ears? “I bought you a nicer bed... all the better to TMI you in...”

“Thank you.” She kissed me on the cheek. “You’re not going to carry me over the threshold?”

“You already live here.”

It was Destiny’s turn to laugh. “Fair enough. It just seemed like a kitschy 1950s movie thing, and sometimes you’re a little old-fashioned.”

“It’s... not our custom,” I said. Honestly, I thought it was Italian, I could have been mistaken. “So, about that TMI...”

She giggled, and I picked her up and carried her into the bedroom—white, with cream wallpaper and a new four-poster bed with a lacy white canopy—replacing the antique bed, which I’d sold. I had to help her undress. Women’s fashions of the day are much better in that regard than they were in the past, but wedding dresses are still... a thing.

I unzipped the back of the dress, and she let out a long sigh. “I can breathe! I can breathe again!” I helped her out of it and hung it up. She had elaborate “shaping” undergarments that she had to escape. The shaping garments were unnecessary; her shape was *perfect*. My clothing was much easier to remove. When I was finished, she looked lovely, yet exhausted. “Are you too tired?”

“Oh, shut up,” she said, and fell over backwards, pulling me onto the bed with her.

I *love* modern women. Tall, smart, spirited, sexually liberated... Sorry. I'm permanently nineteen. I also love women with really long hair, but that's the fashion of my youth speaking. Destiny had gorgeous waist-length red hair.

She'd also made her wishes known. In that case, I had a delightful duty that I had publicly promised to perform.



Ludwig
Rosenheim, Bavaria
October 13, 1762

“LUDWIG,” FATHER THOMAS SAID as I was preparing to change and leave. “Please come with me to my office and close the door. I have an important matter to discuss with you.”

Oh dear. I followed him, chewing on my lower lip, and closed the door behind me. I wondered if I had done something wrong, and if I was in trouble. I sat on a plain chair in front of his carved wooden desk.

“I’ve had my eye on you for some time.” He leaned forward, lowered his voice. “You must hold what I’m about to say in the strictest confidence.”

“Of course!”

“I’m a member of a secret order and think you would be a suitable candidate.” He smiled. “We’re defenders of holiness, and we fight to protect the true faith.”

I was astonished and flattered. “Me? Do I have to take my vows first?”

“You would make your vows directly to me.”

I blinked. This sounded... unorthodox. “These would be my novitiate vows? To you?”

“The order is not strictly monastic. We must be mobile to face threats at their source.”

I considered this. It was sounding like this might not be what I’d wanted. “You said ‘fight.’ Do you mean literally?”

“Yes.”

I was no sturdy farmhand, nor was I even an adequate fighter. I was, in fact, the despair of my instructor at arms. Despite being right-handed, I insisted on fencing with my left to protect my calligraphy hand from possible injury. Given any choice in the matter, I limited my exertion to lifting large, heavy books, or musical instruments. I bit my lip and stared at the plain brown carpet.

“It’s all right,” Father Thomas said. “The initiation process will make you strong, physically as well as spiritually.”

I continued staring at the floor. I’d really had my heart set on a nice, quiet monastery, not nasty, brutish physical fights. “I... I’m very flattered, but I...”

Father Thomas smiled at me. “Let me tell you more. You will receive a gift, a special magical ability unique to you.” He continued to speak, and as he did, I realized that I very much wanted to join his order. Unfortunately, I didn’t recall what he had said to convince me. It was almost as if I had dozed off and awakened with a new opinion. “Will you accept?”

“It would be my honor and my privilege,” I said, and I meant it with all my heart.

“Wonderful. Please kneel.”

I went to my knees on that plain brown carpet, being very careful to keep my cassock and surplice from getting dirty.

Father Thomas came and stood over me, imposing in his black and white vestments. “Repeat after me: I, Ludwig of Gravenreuth...”

“I, Ludwig of Gravenreuth...”

“Do of my own free will and accord, free of any coercion...”

There was something that sounded off in those words, but I said them anyway.

“Solemnly swear to protect the Catholic faith...”

This I repeated with more enthusiasm.

“And to obey Father Thomas in all things.”

I didn’t understand my trepidation, so I said the words.

“Close your eyes.”

I dutifully closed my eyes.

There was a pause, then he pressed a cup to my lips. I drank, even though it tasted wrong. My eyes fluttered open.

“You know how, through the miracle of transubstantiation, wine becomes the blood of our Savior?”

I nodded and gazed at the cup thoughtfully.

“You’re about to become closer to that miracle than you expected.” Father Thomas smiled, a not-very-comforting smile. “This is my blood, shed for you.”

I stared into the cup. It really resembled blood.

“There may be a little pain.” He held out a hand. I took it, and he helped me to my feet.

I was still staring at him, uncertain, when he suddenly lunged at me, faster than the eye could see, and bit me on the neck, a sharp pain. We sailed backwards into a stone wall, hard enough for me to see stars. My head throbbed. I whimpered and tried to escape, but he grabbed me by the hair and pulled hard, tilting my head to one side, presumably for better biting. My scalp stung.

“You’re hurting me!”

Father Thomas responded with a groan and yanked my hair more violently, clamping his other hand on my shoulder hard enough that I would have bruises. Surely, I only imagined an erect member under his vestments. Either way, I felt violated.

Tears sprang to my eyes, and my vision was swimming. “Please,” I whispered. “Stop.”

He was making loud slurping noises on my neck now. I tried to bat him off me, but I was feeling so weak, so very weak... The room spun slowly, and my vision blurred.

He pulled away and groaned again. “You’re delicious.” His teeth were sharp and long—how had I never noticed this before?

And I convulsed. Before my vision burst into a field of gray, followed by unconsciousness, I saw a malicious smile spread across Father Thomas’s face.



Abraham

Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey

January 2, 2019

WHEN I WOKE up in my coffin, Victoria was curled up on my feet... as usual.

The coffin was, admittedly, a bit of an affectation. I could sleep in a bed as long as the curtains were drawn—it's about avoiding sunlight. The problem was that I appeared dismayingly dead when I slept. No one wanted to sleep in a bed with me, trust me. The cats usually avoided me, too, and when I had a dog, the dog would try to wake me up... with his teeth. But Victoria knew that even though I *looked* dead, I would wake up in the evening, and she always wanted to sleep with me. The coffin was tucked into a small storage area in the basement, behind the wall with the washer and dryer.

I blinked, and stretched, and sat up, and she gazed up at me with her huge, attentive, intelligent golden eyes. I'd left the lid off for her, like I always did. She sat up so she could kiss me on the lips, then closed her eyes and kneaded her paws on my chest while I petted her. I glanced at the clock and realized that it was later than I'd thought. I swore, and Victoria gave me a disapproving stare.

I had a finished basement, but it was still dark... all the better to not wake up in a pool of sunlight. There were spiders, but I'm not arachnophobic. They eat things that are grosser than they are, and the cats think they're cat toys. I occasionally find dismembered spiders on the basement floor. I wonder if I have some

sympathy for spiders as fellow blood-drinkers, come to think of it. Not enough sympathy to deny the cats their toys...

I was only warm after I fed, but Victoria always wanted to sleep with me, or to be on my lap, anyway. She followed me from room to room unless we had company over. Most cats have a certain dignity to them, but if Victoria did something that made me laugh, like chew on a candle and then make a comical face of dismay, she'd try to do it again to make me laugh again.

I picked her up and kissed her on top of her soft, warm, fluffy black head, then put her down and went upstairs. Victoria trotted along behind me, my furry shadow.

I purchased this house in 1962 from a little old lady who was a bit of a Luddite. I'd renovated it gradually over the years, but I'd kept the wooden floors, the tin ceiling in the kitchen, the original wallpaper... and the kitchen was last updated by the aforementioned old lady in the 1920s. I'd been living in the city for decades and had a craving for the Queen Anne style and trees. I hadn't felt motivated to renovate the kitchen, so it appeared as it had when I bought it—complete with a blue gas stove and an icebox. You can't get appliances like that nowadays. They're practically indestructible.

Destiny was in the kitchen, wearing jeans and a t-shirt that read, "Life is great! Pets make it better!" She pulled a frozen vegetarian meal out of the microwave—a recent addition to my kitchen, which she had brought with her when she moved in. Unlike with sectional sofas, I didn't mind the microwave. I don't eat, so the kitchen should be functional for my wife. Ironically, I

cooked more frequently than she did. We did have to upgrade the wiring when she moved in.

I yawned and walked into the living room, sat in my favorite brown leather chair and picked up my book. Victoria hopped into my lap. I petted her.

Victoria shivered and shuddered. “Are you all right?” I asked her.

Victoria jumped down onto the floor, onto the Persian carpet, but her front leg crumpled under her. She stared at her paw curled back on itself, then gamely tried to walk away on her wrist. She stopped after a few steps, appearing confused.

“Destiny? Destiny!”

Destiny put her food on the coffee table and kneeled on the wooden floor and examined her for a moment. Victoria didn’t seem distressed, more disoriented. “She can’t unclench her paw. Did she injure herself?”

“No.”

“We need the emergency vet to confirm. I don’t have the equipment to be sure, but...”

I picked Victoria up, and she gazed up at me with her usual cheerful curiosity. It was after dark, so I ignored my sun gear and headed out in my shirtsleeves. Yes, I should have used a cat carrier, but I was in a rush, and it wasn’t like she could run away in that state. It was pouring down rain, and I was grateful that there *was* an emergency vet. A few short decades ago...

We left the house, locked the door. As we walked across the porch towards the car, Destiny said, “It’s either a neurological event or a blood clot, which...”

That was when Victoria went limp and peed all over me. Her eyes were open, but she wasn’t alert.

“Victoria?” I stared into her golden eyes, but despite her still being alive, I wasn’t sure anything was staring back. *I’m not ready, I’m not ready!* I glanced at Destiny, hoping she could fix it.

“Emergency vet,” Destiny said.

We rushed to the car—I drive a nondescript silver Toyota—in the freezing rain. I held Victoria while Destiny drove. We went to the same emergency vet where she’d had her \$6,000 emergency perforated ulcer surgery, the one with the feline oncologist and the feline cardiologist and the feline neurologist. She meowed mournfully from time to time, and I held her close. “Come on, baby, stay with me.” I gazed into her eyes again. “Can you hear me?”

She didn’t react at all. *Fuckity fuckity fuck fuck fuck.* If we could get to the clinic, maybe it would be okay. I’d pay anything. Six thousand for emergency surgery? Been there done that would do it again if only she would stay with me. Stay with me!

The rain was violent, and Destiny was grim, silent, driving faster than I would have dared. It sounded like buckets of ice water were being continuously thrown onto the windshield, complete with the ice. I smelled like cat pee.

“Hang in there, baby,” I said. “Hang in there. I’m here. Hang in there.” She felt so light and limp in my arms. “Stay with me.” It became a chant, a plea, a prayer: “Hang in there. Stay with me.”

As we pulled into the parking lot, she made some weird growly exhalations. “Victoria?” I was shaking now and trying to avoid shaking Victoria. *I can’t...*

We rushed over to the square concrete building and rang the bell. I did my best to shelter Victoria from the

rain with my body, hunching around her with my back to the torrential downpour. It *felt* like buckets of ice water, too. The door buzzed open, and we rushed in. Destiny said to the desk clerk, “We need a resuscitation.”

What? I glanced down at Victoria, limp in my arms. She wasn’t breathing anymore. Not my sweet angel girl, I wouldn’t accept it, they had to fix it!

The clerk called someone and a woman with tawny gold skin and sleek black hair, wearing blue scrubs, rushed out and looked at her eyes, touched her chest, and said, “Do you want us to resuscitate her?”

“Yes!”

The woman in the blue scrubs took her out of my arms and rushed her into the back, and the clerk said, “I need you to sign some forms before we can try.”

I signed everything, waved my credit card around, and resisted the urge to bare my fangs at her. She was only doing her job. And then I stood still off in the corner and silently freaked out. People compare pets to children, but Victoria was more like a mother. Sensitive to my moods, washing my hands like I was her kitten. If the food or water dish was empty, she’d ask me to fill it and let the other cats eat or drink first. Always there with a gentle purr or a comic antic when I was down. Twenty-five years isn’t a long time for my kind, but for a cat...

“Abraham?”

Destiny approached, but I shook my head and she backed off. I intentionally tuned out the painted cinder block walls, the television playing HGTV, and the other pet owners shifting uncomfortably on the fake leather benches and pacing the beige linoleum floor. The

whimpers of an injured dog, a cat yowling in a carrier... I hugged myself and shivered. I was drenched, but the rain hadn't washed away the smell of cat pee.

I don't know how long it was before the vet tech in the blue scrubs came back out, her face sad and grim, and said, "I'm so sorry. Do you want to see her?"

I gave the only possible answer. "Yes."

They ushered Destiny and me into an exam room—more beige cinder block and linoleum and metal and an industrial cleaner smell, and silence broken only by very faint muffled barks coming from farther inside the clinic—and a tech came in with a small bundle wrapped in a white towel. She laid the bundle gently on the stainless steel exam table and pulled the towel away from her face.

Victoria was clearly dead, but her eyes and mouth were wide open, like she was screaming, and suddenly I was making keening sobs and Destiny was holding me and the tech was crying. The tech quickly covered Victoria's face again. She appeared worried. I didn't care; I was in a place beyond dignity.

"It's okay," the tech said. "You can stay with her as long as you want. Do you... Do you want to be alone with her?"

I nodded.

The tech left, and Destiny pulled the towel back from Victoria's face and kissed her gently on top of her head. She was crying, too.

Destiny turned to me. "Do you want to say goodbye?"

"She looks like she's screaming," I said, but I also wanted to say that she wasn't even *in* there anymore, that she didn't even look like herself without the sweet expression in her eyes. I've been present for cat

euthanasia before, but those always end up in calm, sleepy cat faces, not... this. She was barely recognizable as being Victoria. I scooped her up in my arms. Fuck death, fuck mortality, fuck the short lives of our best and truest companions.

“She’s not screaming, sweetie,” Destiny said. “They intubated her, to resuscitate her.”

There was a timid knock on the door, and the tech came back with a box of tissues. She smelled of disinfectant soap. She handed them to me and said, “I’m so sorry. I know it’s hard.”

I went and stood in the corner with my back to them, clinging to Victoria. I couldn’t lose control... okay, more than I already had. I was fantasizing about going out in the sun. I couldn’t go out in the sun; I had a wife and it wouldn’t be fair.

Also, Victoria wouldn’t want me to.

When I finally calmed down enough to talk, the tech asked us about “aftercare”—meaning what we wanted to do with her corpse—and whether I wanted fur clippings or paw prints. Individual cremation, and fur clippings and paw prints felt undignified, so I said no. I didn’t want someone pressing my sweet girl’s dead paws into clay or ink or whatever they had in mind. The very idea of someone manipulating her body without me to supervise made me want to scream, or cry, or attack someone.

Destiny had to drive me home. I sat in the passenger seat of my car and shivered. I still smelled like cat pee. When we got home, I drank an entire bottle of Merlot and climbed into my coffin—alone—while Destiny did a poor job of pretending she wasn’t hovering. When I woke up, Destiny had placed a book of Mary Oliver

poetry on the table, right where I would see it when I got up... almost certainly for “In Blackwater Woods.”



Destiny
Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey
January 3, 2019

I WOKE UP AFTER NOON—alone, alas, except for the cats. Inanna was curled up next to my head, and Ivan had his head on my feet. I slid out from under them and wandered into the kitchen.

I supposed I could have had vow renewal leftovers for lunch, but I had Uber Eats bring me a veggie burger from Good Karma instead. It smelled amazing—grains and greens and mustard.

I was eating my veggie burger when Abraham wandered in, appearing groggy, and headed towards the icebox. “Good morning. Are you okay?”

“No,” he said, his voice wistful. He pulled a wineglass out of the cupboard and opened the icebox. He poured blood from the carafe into his glass. He sat opposite me and took a sip from the wineglass.

Perhaps I should deliberately change the subject. “Will you play for me after lunch?” I knew he’d played violin in the Victorian era. He owned a Stradivarius.

He smiled, but the smile was subdued. “If you like.”

“I like,” I said. I adore classical music.

I ate, and he drank, but he finished before me. He rinsed his glass out thoroughly, set it to dry on a dish

towel, and vanished into the other room. He returned with the violin.

He placed the case on the kitchen table and opened it. From the first note, as always, I was mesmerized. I sat there, veggie burger forgotten. I had an odd sense—probably my imagination—of an old-fashioned Victorian stage, an audience’s adulation. And sadness; it was as if I felt his grief for Victoria myself.

I don’t know how long he played, but my delicious veggie burger was noticeably cooler. “You play like a god.”

“Hear, o Israel, the Lord is your God, the Lord is one,” he murmured as he put the violin back in the case and closed it.

Was that a rebuke? It didn’t sound aggressive, more a statement of modesty. Still, it felt appropriate to change the subject, perhaps to a related topic. What was it about death that always led to religion? “Are we going to have a funeral for Victoria?” I took a bite of the veggie burger. “What’s Jewish tradition on that?”

He sat in a chair and stared at his violin. “If she were human, I would say a special prayer, the Kaddish, every day for thirty days with a minyan of ten Jews, but I’m not supposed to say Kaddish for an animal.”

I chewed, swallowed. “No offense, but I kind of hate that.”

“So do I,” he admitted. “You and the cats are my family, my only community.”

“You could break the rules,” I suggested.

He shook his head, but I thought I saw tears in his eyes. “I’m not supposed to say Kaddish alone, either.”

I hated to see it, but of course it was a healthy reaction. “One thing that makes mourning an animal

hard is that people dismiss your grief. If it would bring you comfort, I don't think God would mind."

He let out a shuddery breath. "I know, but there are already so many Jewish things I can no longer do. I hate to add another way I'm missing the mark to the list."

I took his hands in mine and squeezed them. He gazed down at my hands, lifted one, and kissed it. His lips were soft and warmer than his hands.

"Thank you," he said.

"Will you tell me another story?" I asked. "I know it's not bedtime, but tell me about your first cat."



Abraham

Wreschen, Prussia

2 Av 5593 (July 18, 1833)

THE KITTENS WERE a variety of colors. I expected them to all look like their mother—black, orange, and white—but there was a brown striped one, a couple of orange and white ones, and one that had colors like her mother but stripes like the brown one. They were all under a bush in our garden. I reached down and touched the tiny babies. The mother watched me, wary, but I petted her as well. I decided her name was Malkah, meaning “queen.”

“Avraham!” my mother called. “It’s time for dinner!”

“Mamme, can we keep them?” I asked.

My mother stepped outside and fanned herself in the July heat—and, of course, she'd come from a hot kitchen. "We don't keep animals in the house."

"But, Mammel!"

My father stepped outside. "I think she performs a valuable service, keeping rats and mice away, and, as such, we should let her stay."

My mother shot him a sour glance, but I rushed to my father and hugged him. "Thank you, Tatti!" I ran to get a crate and a blanket.

As I passed my parents, my mother was glaring at my father, and my father shrugged. "He's a sensitive boy, Rivka. It's a good thing. We want him to be refined, cultured, polite..."

My mother made a face but didn't argue with him as I put the mother and her kittens in the crate. I carried them into the house and up to my room.

"Avraham!" she called. "Dinner!"

I came back downstairs and said, "But, Mamme, the Torah says I'm supposed to feed my animals before I feed myself!"

My parents exchanged a proud smile, and my mother gave me a cat-sized serving of fish to feed the cats. "Don't forget to wash your hands!"



Metamorphosis

Abraham

Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey

January 14, 2019

The two a.m. alarm went off on my cellphone. I put my book—*On Wings of Song: a Biography of Felix Mendelssohn*—down on the nightstand. I stood and walked over to the nest box of two-week-old kittens on the guest room dresser, with a heating pad cord peeking out from under an old faded towel. I lifted the towel and peered inside. Three kittens, two black and one brown tabby. They were in a sleepy, peeping heap. I replaced the towel. Destiny works with a rescue organization named “Furkids” and sometimes brings home “bottle babies.” Furkids had resources for kittens

of adoption age, or older adoptable cats, but it's hard to find someone to care for neonates. They'd all go back to the rescue once they were adoptable age, which was both happy and sad at the same time. I wondered if Destiny had taken them home and assigned me the task of feeding them to help me cope with Victoria. It helped a little. It had been twelve days since Victoria died... not that I was counting.

I padded down the hall in my bare feet and pajama bottoms to the kitchen in the dark—trying not to clatter or creak on the wooden floorboards and thereby wake up my wife—and poured kitten formula into a coffee mug from a vet conference and put it in the microwave for ten seconds.

I tested the formula temperature on my wrist. I generate little body heat, but I've done this enough times that I can tell whether the formula is too hot.

I tiptoed back to the kitten nursery—"guest room," but we should really call it what it was—and picked up one of the black kittens. I lifted the tail and peered underneath. It was the male; the other black kitten was female. It's almost impossible for most people to tell at that age, but I've had cats for over almost two hundred years, and most of that was before the era of spay/neuter, so I've had a lot of practice. I weighed the kitten on a digital kitchen scale and wrote the weight in the black spiral-bound notebook Destiny had provided. I carried the kitten back to the blue armchair next to the window. There was a towel draped over the foot of the bed, blue, contrasting with the white and pink floral bedspread. I put the towel on my lap, then placed the kitten on top of the towel. I picked up a needle-less syringe from the side table, drew some formula into it,

and slowly, so slowly, allowed the formula to dribble out into the kitten's mouth.

It's important to be careful with kittens that young. It's easy to choke them. Fortunately, I had heightened senses. I could feel the kitten's heartbeat, smell the scent of vulnerable young animal and milk. I knew exactly the amount of pressure to apply to the syringe.

I repeated the weighing and feeding procedure with the kitten's sisters. They didn't have names yet. I found it easier to wait until either names suggested themselves to me, or they passed an age where I felt confident that they would survive. I put the towel on the bed and padded silently to the kitchen. I stored the rest of the formula back in the refrigerator and returned to the guest room. As I passed the master bedroom, Destiny snorted and rolled over. I wondered what she was dreaming about. I didn't have to look to know that her long red braid would be flung across the bed.

Victoria had had the cutest black-on-black stripes as a kitten—she grew out of them—and would trot up to any vet or vet tech and charm them completely. On one occasion, I heard an entire exam room full of loud squeals and cooing, followed by a tech coming out and asking me, "Do you just love on this kitten all the time?" Well, *of course* I did; isn't that what cats are for?

I tucked my hair behind my ear, sat back down in the brown armchair, and picked up my book. Sometimes I wished I could cut my hair. It had been this length since I was nineteen years old. But I couldn't alter my body. My hair and fingernails didn't grow. They didn't break off from normal wear and tear, either. I once tried to give myself a trim, and the hair

slid right out of the scissors, and eventually the screw holding the blades together broke. No, I'd just have to keep what Destiny called my Romantic Poet hair.

It was absolutely not Romantic Poet hair. I was familiar with men's hairstyles of the period, and this was not that. Instead, I had plain shoulder-length brown hair that I sometimes wore in what modern people called a ponytail, and what the Prussian army called a soldier's queue. I was so *grateful* when the 1960s came around and made it socially acceptable for men to wear their hair long again. There had been an unfortunate incident in which I drank some would-be queer-bashers. One can't be leaving evidence like that around. It's bad for anonymity. I'd started wearing a wig whenever I left the house.

Government IDs aside, I was thin and androgynous. I could pass for anything between a young adult man and a tomboyish teenage girl based on clothing and attitude, but I only really used the girl thing as a disguise if I was desperate.

I read until the five a.m. alarm went off and repeated the kitten feeding.

I finished my book and checked the time. Six thirty a.m. I walked to the kitchen and cooked breakfast for one—eggs and toast with coffee with cream and two teaspoons of sugar. I'd replaced the icebox with a modern stainless steel refrigerator for Destiny—I turned a tidy profit on it by selling it to my antiques dealer—but I was pleasantly relieved that she didn't mind my not replacing the 1920s blue gas stove. The model I learned to cook on was similar. Destiny's rice cooker, the vegetable steamer, and the microwave suited her needs—she didn't really cook. I enjoyed

cooking more than she did, and I also didn't work and barely slept, so why not?

The kitchen faced north, thank goodness, so I didn't worry about stray sunbeams. And the entire first floor had a wrap-around porch, so sunbeams were rare even on the east and west sides downstairs. I could see the Jersey shore, the city, and the lower New York harbor from the second floor, so it seemed a shame to block off such a view with blackout curtains... not that it was always safe. I was very aware of the way the sun moved through the house.

Destiny shuffled blearily into the kitchen wearing a blue bathrobe and bunny slippers, and grabbed a cup of coffee. "You're an angel." She slurped noisily, sniffled a little and grabbed the plate of food. Adorable. I washed the pan, but could hear the sounds of eating behind me.

"Sit with me, silly," she said, so I did.

We sat in companionable silence at the small, square kitchen table with the white lace tablecloth for a while, and then she said, "How are the babies?"

"Gaining weight," I said. "You should check in on them before you leave for work."

"Good, I will," she said, and took another sip of coffee. "I'm such an addict."

I smirked at her and took that as a compliment to my coffee-making skills. Victoria wouldn't be offended for me to note that even without her, there were good things in life and Destiny was one of them. Outside, a bird chirped.

"They're supposed to deliver Victoria's ashes to the clinic today."

I closed my eyes, turned my head away, and pressed my lips together hard. My chest was heavy.

Destiny reached across the table and took my hand in her warmer one. "In the faith I was raised in, it's left as an exercise for the individual to decide whether you believe Victoria has gone to a better place, or is going to be reborn on this earth, or whether she just returned to some over-arching soul pool. Whatever you find most comforting, I suppose."

I glanced over at Destiny. Her green eyes were full of tears. For Victoria? For me? For both of us? Either way, I appreciated it. I tried to smile and failed. "Just as long as no one sends me any more of those accursed Rainbow Bridge cards."

If you're not familiar with the Rainbow Bridge, it's all the rage in pet death circles nowadays. People send you cards about how your pet is now young and healthy and happy again and waiting in a sunny field outside heaven for you, and when you die, you'll both go to heaven together. It sounds sweet! But what about the homeless pets? What about *my* pets?

Destiny blinked. "I... kind of find those comforting."

I tried to smile again and failed again. "You can. It's just that... I don't want Victoria to wait for me. It'll be a *very* long wait."

Destiny sniffled, but she smiled. "You're very kind."

I shrugged and looked away. Victoria deserved the better place now, not after waiting for an accident to befall me.

"What happens after death in the belief system you were raised in?"

"You go to remedial life lessons. They take about a year, depending on how much you have to learn. Then

you move on to the better place.” Victoria was already a perfect soul, in my opinion, and deserved to be in the better place now.

“I like that,” Destiny said. “Would you mind if I adopted that?”

“Not at all,” I said. We held hands for a moment. I reached across the white lace tablecloth and took her other hand. She was soft and warm and here, and it made me feel better. I wondered whether I should ask her to take the day off from work.

Ivan chose that moment to come in and meow for his breakfast. “How are you handling things?” I asked Ivan.

Ivan didn’t answer, of course. So I stood up and opened some Fancy Feast for him.

“The good stuff?” Destiny asked. We fed them some of Destiny’s holistic kitty health food, but whenever their appetites flagged, it was Fancy Feast time.

“They’ve had a rough week.” Neither of them were eating well without Victoria. They missed her, too.

Inanna rushed into the room to take Ivan’s dish—she must have heard the can—so I rolled my eyes and opened a second can for Ivan.

“So much tortietude,” Destiny said. She cocked her head at me and said, “I imagine you want your breakfast, too.”

I smiled. “I won’t say no.”

Destiny extended her wrist across the table, so I sat back down, took her arm in both my hands, and bent over to bite. I heard the sharp intake of breath...

No one tasted as good as Destiny. Vegetarian diet? Clean living? I didn’t know, but with the steak-like iron taste, Destiny had... almost a floral note, like jasmine.

I'd miss it if I turned her, but I was willing to make that sacrifice if it meant she wouldn't die.

I only took a little. I didn't want to make her sick, or weak, or anemic. She used her vegetarianism as an excuse to be tested for anemia regularly, and my saliva had vein-closing and healing properties, or so Flora told me.

"Is that enough?" Destiny asked. She pressed a paper napkin to her wrist, hard.

"I'm expecting a delivery today," I said.

"Okay," she said, and stood up. "I'll check the babies before I go." She paused in the doorway. "I'll bring your girl home tonight."

You'll bring home a little tin, but she won't be in there. Not really. "Thank you."

The thing about Victoria that made her Victoria wasn't her leftover calcium. It was the sweet, clever expression in her bright, attentive golden eyes. Her sense of humor. Her compassion. The way she would stand between me and the front door and meow plaintively to ask me not to take Ivan to the vet. But that's all I would have: her leftover calcium in a little tin with flowers painted on it. That and memories.

"I'm still not convinced that she was a cat and not some kind of fae," Destiny said. It was an inside joke that Victoria was a fairy or pixie or some similar creature masquerading as a cat for her own mysterious purposes. Destiny sniffled. "Smartest cat I ever met, and I swear she understood English fluently." She moved her chair closer to mine, sat in it, and put her arm around me. "Are you all right?"

I didn't answer. I don't enjoy lying to my wife, and I wasn't all right.

Destiny squeezed my hand. “I’m so sorry. I’ll see you tonight.”



Destiny
Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey
January 14, 2019

WHEN CONFRONTED WITH DEATH, what you really need is life. The answer to death is babies.

I stood next to the box of bottle babies and picked up Abraham’s black notebook. I read his notes in his meticulous hand. Sometimes his handwriting resembled a Victorian lettering guide, but sometimes, when taking notes for himself, he did it in Yiddish cursive letters. He hadn’t done that because he knew I’d be reading his notes.

I approved of the kittens’ weight gain, but I picked up each individual kitten, one by one, and examined them—their little white baby fangs, their little blue eyes, their unfurling little ears. I gently palpated their soft, round little bellies while they peeped in protest. They all smelled like milk, although perhaps that was partly because Abraham had wiped them clean and tossed the tissues in a wastebasket. They were looking like normal, healthy kittens, although kittens at their age sometimes “fail to thrive,” as we vets say. I hoped that wouldn’t happen here; I’d brought them home to distract poor Abraham, not to rub salt in the wound! I

knew how much it hurt; Victoria was my cat, too, and I saw people going through the same thing all the time at work.

I replaced the stained, faded towel over the top of the cardboard box. Kittens that age can't regulate their body temperatures and need a heat source. I left the guest room, carefully closing the door behind me. I didn't think Ivan or Inanna would bother the kittens, but they were too little to vaccinate.

I walked down the hall and heard running water in the kitchen. Abraham was doing the dishes. I kissed him on the cheek, and turned and walked out the door.

I missed Victoria, too. I supposed Queen Titania needed to go back to the fae realm to check on her subjects. I'd keep an eye out in six weeks or so for her return. Okay, okay, Victoria probably wasn't Queen Titania, but she seemed like something... more than a cat, like one of the Fair Folk pretending to be a cat for her own mysterious purposes.

If Victoria was indeed one of the Good Neighbors, would she come back to my darling husband?



Abraham
Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey
January 14, 2019

I STOOD IN THE living room that evening, wearing jeans, sneakers, and a plain black T-shirt. I was

warming myself in front of the fire when Destiny came in and handed me the little tin of Victoria with flowers painted on it, then hugged me. “I’m so sorry.”

“I hate death.” The carved wooden mantel framed the fire as I stared into it. My grief hurt, physically; my chest ached, and I fought back tears.

“I know, sweetie, but it’s a normal part of life.” She hugged me again. I could smell the health-food-store shampoo she used—lavender—and hear her breathing. She was so warm and soft. She was wearing her vet scrubs with the violet paw print pattern.

I pulled back a little—the full body contact was comforting, but I wanted her to understand—and gazed into her beautiful green eyes. “Not for my kind, it’s not.”

I sat on the sofa, still holding the little tin. We now had one of those ubiquitous sectional sofas in front of a gigantic television, in red, because I don’t like sectional sofas but do like red. They’re comfortable, but I don’t think they’ll age well, if you know what I mean. I could be wrong; antiques dealers a century from now might do a brisk trade in sectionals, but some instinct of mine insists they’ll be kitsch. Perhaps that’s harsh; sometimes it feels like everything kitsch becomes classic again... unless it’s forgotten.

Destiny sat next to me. “Do you want to do anything with them?” She curled her legs up under herself. “I don’t know. Turn them into jewelry, sew them into a little pillow...”

“Ugh!” I shuddered. After I’d refused fur clippings and paw prints at the vet, the pet crematory had called to offer them to me. No. Those types of morbid souvenirs were common in the Victorian era, but I’ve never liked them. They felt disrespectful. Perhaps this

was a Jewish thing, as there's a strong emphasis on treating a corpse with respect, as it used to be the vessel for a soul.

I suddenly felt very guilty for cremating Victoria and not saying Kaddish for her. I knew that was illogical, but the Talmud tells us that the dead mourn their own bodies for seven days. We're not allowed to eat or pray in front of a corpse, as the dead can no longer do those things and that makes it feel like we're taunting them. Of course, Maharsha explains that the soul mourns the body because it learned Torah and did mitzvot with it, and Victoria was a cat. That said, if she had still been here in a form I couldn't see, I could still have offered her some comfort or kind words.

"Well," she said, still talking about the souvenirs, "people do."

"No, thank you. Yuck." I stared at the tin some more. It was black, and shiny, and covered with tiny pictures of flowers spaced geometrically, and mass-produced. Victoria deserved better.

There was a pause before Destiny said, "We could get her a prettier urn, if you like."

I took a deep breath. "Please don't take this the wrong way. I'm not angry with you. But what I want is my fucking cat back, and since I can't have that, I don't know what I want yet."

"That's okay. You have time to decide."

For some reason, that struck me as funny, the kind of funny where you're crying and something sets you off and makes you laugh as well. Yes. Yes, I had time. Lots and lots of time. All the time. What I didn't have was Victoria. Or Flora. Or Samuel. Or Miriam. Or John and

Eliza. Or Shayna. Or Rebekah, Jacob, Rachel, and Reuben. Or, someday, Destiny.

I hate death.

What I ended up doing with her ashes: as a temporary solution, I placed the tin at the bottom of my coffin and added a pillow to simulate her weight on my feet.

It didn't help.



Abraham

Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey

January 29, 2019

MORNING. THE SUN SHONE on the snow outside the window. Icicles hung from the porch roof, sparkling. It was lovely, but I was ready for spring... not that I could enjoy the light and the color of spring except from behind a pane of glass. I should have preferred the shorter days and longer nights, but winter always felt gloomy to me. All the dead, bare trees, and all the plants dead and buried under a layer of snow.

I made oatmeal for Destiny. And coffee, of course. I served the oatmeal in the blue stoneware bowl she'd bought at a college art sale, and the coffee in the mug from the local Ren Faire with little flowers painted on it. She shuffled in wearing her bathrobe and bunny slippers, and smiled when I placed them on the lace tablecloth, next to a vase full of roses. I walked over to the boombox on the kitchen counter and turned on

Handel's *Israel in Egypt*, very low volume. I'd promised my wife food in the ketubah, and I enjoyed making good on that promise.

As she sipped her coffee, she said, "I googled Wreschen."

I shrugged and sat across the table from her, pushing the vase of flowers to the side. I wanted to see *her*, not the flowers.

She took another sip of her coffee. "Wreschen, not Września?"

"It was Wreschen when I lived there."

Destiny appeared to consider that. She took another deep sip of coffee. "Tell me about your children again. Were they from Wreschen, too?"

"No. Flora and I took in some orphans."

She raised her eyebrows at me.

"It was a long time ago. They're all dead."

"I'm sorry," she said, and started on her oatmeal. "But presumably they had children. Why haven't I met their descendants?"

"They... didn't."

She tilted her head at me, but I didn't offer an explanation and she didn't ask. For which I was grateful. It wasn't a cheerful topic.

After a moment, she added, "Flora?"

"I told you I've been married before," I said. After a moment of silent eating, I added, "She... was indiscreet."

"Does that mean she told people you were a vampire, or that she cheated on you?"

I laughed a little. "She didn't cheat on me." It wasn't funny, though. "She decided that the best disguise would be a vampire-obsessed actress who specialized in

playing vampires in trashy stage plays. Imagine if Elvira was a vampire. People would laugh at you if you suggested she really was one.”

“Clever,” Destiny said. She looked like she meant it, like she was wondering why I didn’t do it myself.

“It only takes one lunatic with kerosene and some matches.”

“Oh.” She appeared appropriately appalled. In fact, she was pale, ashen, and her hands trembled. I hadn’t intended to upset her...

There was an awkward pause, and I was done volunteering information for the day. Sometimes I can still smell the smoke and hear the screams. I listened to the spoon scraping the bowl, the coffee being slurped, but I didn’t look up.

“Does it ever stop hurting?”

I gazed up into Destiny’s soft green eyes. They looked like Flora’s, I realized. “You get to where you’re fine most days, and then it hits you again. Those days just start coming farther and farther apart.” After a pause, I added, “It takes longer if you don’t engage with it, but some days you just... can’t.” On those days, there’s the full bottle of Merlot, or beer, or similarly unhealthy non-coping, but... see above about *can’t*.

It hadn’t stopped hurting in the twenty-seven days since Victoria died... not that I was counting. I was taking this poorly... but, of course, it was the cumulative effect of losses combined with isolation. Knowing that didn’t make it hurt less, though.

Destiny squeezed my hand, and I stared at the blue gas stove, but I squeezed her hand back. “I don’t want you to die.” I’ve had enough death in my life, too much.

"I'm hardly decrepit," she said, and laughed. "You'd be bored after the first hundred years."

"I doubt it," I said, and squeezed her hand again. I took both her hands and stared at them. But I would never tire of Destiny, just like I'd never tired of Flora. I wondered if the Kabbalists were right, if sometimes souls did return to earth.

"You don't enjoy talking about your past."

I looked Destiny in the eye. She deserved the truth. "I've been lying for a long time. I don't want to lie to you."

"Lying?"

"Pretending to not be what I am."

There was a comfortable silence, with Destiny holding my hands, and then she said, "What was the first lie?"

"To study music at the Berlin academy," I said. I squeezed her hands again and said, "They didn't allow people like me to attend."

Her brow furrowed. "Vampires?"

"No." Destiny's brow failed to unfurrow, so I specified, "Jews."

"Oh!" She blinked and gazed at our hands again and bit her lip. "I'm sorry."

"Thank you." I considered the matter, and added, "I told you before: There's someone I don't want to find me. That's why I don't perform publicly anymore."

"Oh!" she said. "Are you... are you safe?"

I shrugged. "He hasn't found me yet."

There was another silence, and she stood up, and I was grateful that she didn't press the subject. "I'll

check the babies on my way out.” She paused in the doorway. “You can’t hide forever, you know.”

I could try.



Ludwig
Rosenheim, Bavaria
October 13, 1762

WHEN I WOKE, I was lying on the floor, and Father Thomas was gazing down at me. “Are you all right, my child?”

I sat up and crab-walked backwards away from him. “You hurt me!” My blond hair flopped over my face, and I shoved it back and glared at him. I wasn’t certain what he’d done to me, but it wasn’t spiritual. He’d enjoyed it, in a way that felt vulgar.

Father Thomas appeared wounded. “My dearest boy, I would never do such a thing! I should have warned you that hallucinations were common during the initiation.”

I opened my mouth to protest—I had not hallucinated!—but he interrupted me.

“Satan doesn’t want you to join us, you see. He must have been very upset. I hope the visions weren’t too disturbing.”

This was rubbish! I frowned and reached up to touch my savaged neck.

It felt smooth and unblemished. I lifted the shoulder of my vestments to peer at the unbruised skin beneath. I blinked a few times, then examined myself visually

and found blood near my clavicle, where it might have fallen during the attack. I gazed up at him, awaiting an explanation.

“Your nose bled during the initiation. Not to worry, I cleaned you up.” He sat next to me and daubed at my vestments with the clean side of a bloody rag.

“But—”

“Don’t worry, you’re all right. You have some different dietary needs now, but I’ll see to those.”

“Different? But—”

“Don’t worry, child. Just go back to your room and get some rest. Tomorrow is a special day; someone important is coming, someone I’d like you to meet.”

“But—”

“You’re very fortunate! The initiation has given you eternal life. You will never age or die.”

Eternal life? Beyond the spiritual metaphor? I wasn’t certain how I felt about that. It would become an issue if, God forbid, something happened to my elder brother, Friedrich. “What? I didn’t agree to—”

Thomas went on at length about my good fortune. Soothed by his words, I went upstairs and lay down on my cot.



Destiny
Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey
February 1, 2019

I HAD THE DREAM AGAIN, but this time I was wearing massive, heavy, old-fashioned skirts and was trying to escape a burning house with children. I couldn't see the details of the house, just... flames everywhere, and crying children.

I woke up with a start. Inanna gazed up at me, concern on her sweet face, so I kissed her on her soft, furry head and padded off to the kitchen to make some hot cocoa, hoping the warm milk would put me back to sleep.

Abraham was reading a book and didn't appear to have noticed that I was awake.

I eyed the stove warily. It was possible that I'd played too much *Sims*, wherein it's common to set your house on fire cooking. I could make hot cocoa in the microwave, but the stuff from the stove turned out better. I took a deep breath, squared my shoulders, pulled out a pan, and filled it with milk, cocoa, vanilla, sugar... I placed it on the burner and cautiously turned the dial. A giant gout of blue flame shot out and licked up the side of the pan.

"Trouble sleeping?"

I jumped and dropped the spoon on the floor.

He came over and wrapped his arms around me. "Hey, hey..."

I put my head on his shoulder and tried to relax. "Bad dream. It happens." After a moment, I admitted, with some embarrassment, "I've always had a phobia about house fires."

"Oh!" He squeezed me closer, petted my hair, kissed my cheek.

"Sorry," I mumbled.

“Don’t be,” he said. “Would you like me to finish the cocoa?”

I nodded, and he pulled out the chair for me to sit at the kitchen table. I watched him pick up the spoon and drop it into the sink, then get a new one to stir with and add the cocoa, and finally he poured it into a mug. He put some marshmallows and a stick of cinnamon in it and brought it to me. He sat across the table.

We sat in companionable silence while I drank the cocoa. He said, “Would you like me to sit with you while you sleep?”

I nodded, and he got up and grabbed his book, then led me down the hall to the master bedroom. One of the few ways Abraham isn’t perfect is that he doesn’t sleep in my bed. I’ve always found sharing a bed comforting. But he sat on the bed with his back against the headboard, and I climbed in and curled up in a ball with my pillow, and that was enough for me to sleep.



Abraham
Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey
February 17, 2019

I WAS SITTING on the red sectional sofa in front of the big screen television watching the movie version of *Interview with the Vampire*—I couldn’t help it; two of my weaknesses are classical music and vampire

media—when Inanna hissed at Ivan and backed away. That was unusual; she was tolerant in a bored sort of way, or, on rare occasions, growling and swaggering. “Ivan?”

Ivan stared up at me. His eyes were worried and his nose was twitching, but he walked away as there was crashing and shouting on the television. I assumed Ivan’s odd behavior was a reaction to the interpersonal conflict.

He started meeping—little abbreviated meows.

I turned off the television and walked over to where he was—next to the fireplace. He was lying on his side, and only his upper body was moving. Inanna was staring at him with a horrified expression, hissed again, and backed away. He tried to stand up and ended up dragging his lower body behind him before flopping down again. *Not Ivan, not now. Not Ivan!*

“Ivan? Ivan!”

Destiny called from somewhere down the hall, “Abraham?”

“Ivan collapsed!” I rushed over and scooped him up.

“Let me see.” She arrived in a towel, with her hair wrapped in a second towel.

We rushed Ivan over to the kitchen table, and I laid him on the lace tablecloth. Destiny looked at his eyes, his breathing, touched his feet.

“Okay,” Destiny said, but her voice wasn’t okay. It was grim. “I think he’s thrown a blood clot, and it’s blocking all blood flow to his lower body. It’s called a saddle thrombus.”

“Are you sure?” My chest ached, and my voice was high, almost hysterical. It couldn’t be; I wouldn’t accept it. Ivan was lying on the table, nose twitching. He

reached out a paw towards me, and I gave him my hand and petted him with the other.

Destiny tilted her head, then she rushed out of the room and came back with a needle and some glucose testing strips. "I was going to teach Marsha how to do this at home. I hope she doesn't mind if they're used."

I had no idea who Marsha was, nor did I care. Ivan remained bravely silent, but his nose continued to twitch and his eyes were anxious and pleading. Destiny pricked his ear. He flinched but tolerated it. She tested the droplet with the strip and the glucose meter and wrote the number on her hand with a pen she spotted on top of the microwave. She pricked one of his paw pads on his hind foot and squeezed, then tested that drop of blood. She compared the number on the meter to the number she'd written on her hand. "I'm sure." Blood from Ivan's ear dripped onto the lace tablecloth. "Look, not only is his blood sugar radically different on opposite sides of his body, but his foot isn't bleeding." She picked up a cotton ball and pressed it to his ear.

"How do we fix it?"

Destiny sighed. "I'm going to be straight with you, Abraham. He has about a thirty-three percent chance of surviving. He may or may not regain the use of his legs. If he survives, he probably has six months before it happens again. Right now there are toxins building up on the other side of the clot and if it loosens up, they'll flood his body and might kill him. The clot might break loose and lodge in his heart, or his lungs, or his brain. We can test to see if he's also in active heart failure, which is common—that'll be bloodwork and imaging at the clinic—but either way... it's not good." She examined Ivan again. "He's not struggling to

breathe, at least. But this is a very painful condition, like a permanent muscle cramp.”

I said nothing. I knew what she was going to suggest, and the answer was no. I knew he wanted to try—or was I projecting?

“We need to put him down. He’s not complaining, because he’s incredibly brave, but he’s suffering.”

“I’ll take the thirty-three percent,” I said. I’d pay any amount of money.

“You need to think about what’s right for Ivan,” Destiny said. She took in a sharp breath, sniffled, and wiped under her eyes with the back of her arm.

I leaned over and kissed him on the head.

“Abraham.” Her voice was a gentle rebuke, but also compassionate. “At the very least, he needs pain medication, but... we need to let him go, Abraham.” She reached out a hand to stroke his head. “Victoria almost certainly threw a clot, too.”

Victoria. I could see, in my mind’s eye, another little black tin with flowers painted on it, another series of Rainbow Bridge cards. It was one month, two weeks since Victoria died, and *yes*, I was *fucking counting*. Too soon.

No. “I can’t do this again.”

Destiny made a sympathetic face and left the room.

I glanced away for a moment, at the black and white checked floor tiles. I looked Ivan in the eye. “Do you want to try something radical?”

Ivan didn’t answer, of course, but from his body language, his twitching nose, his pleading eyes... he wanted me to fix it.

“Trust me,” I said, and kissed Ivan on the head... and bit him, on the back of the neck, near the scruff.

He peeped in surprise, and Destiny gasped—she'd returned with a cat carrier and wet hair, wearing her robe. Ivan's blood was revolting. It wasn't actively lumpy or anything like that, but I could taste disease. I couldn't tell you how I would define the taste of disease, but... I knew. It was almost tinny, is the best description I can come up with. I swallowed and grabbed one of the kitten feeding syringes from the kitchen drawer where we kept spares.

"...Abraham?"

"I'm trying something radical," I said, and bit my wrist. I suctioned my blood into the feeding syringe and squirted it into Ivan's mouth. I didn't know that it would work, and never would have tried it on a healthy cat, but... Ivan clearly didn't have anything to lose.

Ivan drank.

There was a moment where I wondered if anything would happen, and then Ivan convulsed. I braced his back against my arm and used my other hand to soothe him. "It's all right."

Ivan yowled, and his hind legs jerked. I supposed that the change was breaking down that clot. I gave him some more of my blood. Destiny gasped again, and there was the clatter of the cat carrier falling to the floor, but I couldn't spare her my attention at the moment.

It took about half an hour, and then his bite wounds and blood-test needle pricks closed up, and his fur became sleek and glossy. He opened his eyes and gazed up at me with the same adoring look he'd given me when I opened his infected eyes as a baby. He sat up and glanced around the kitchen, then stood.

Destiny had backed all the way up against the farthest kitchen counter and was holding her hands over her mouth, her eyes wide. Her wet hair hung loose. “What did you do?”

“It’s okay,” I told her. “I know what he needs.”

I had some chicken livers in the bottom drawer of the refrigerator, where Destiny never put her food. My emergency stash. I grabbed my blender—not Destiny’s new blender, the one I’d purchased in 1972 and barely used—and dumped the livers in. I plugged it in and pressed pulse. There was a grinding sound and an explosion of red in the blender. It smelled *delicious*.

Destiny made a sound of disgust. She was still backed up against the kitchen counter, watching with wide eyes, but now she was clinging to the counter with both hands.

I grabbed Ivan’s food dish and placed it on the table, pouring the raw bloody liquid into it. He lapped it up enthusiastically. He spilled a little, but it was hardly the first bit of blood on the tablecloth tonight. It was ruined.

Destiny walked over slowly and touched Ivan’s tail, his hind feet. “They’re warmer, but they’re still cold.”

Ivan flicked his tail at her and kept lapping up his treat.

“He’ll only be warm after he feeds, like me,” I said.

We watched him finish his meal. Destiny tapped the edge of the table. “Ivan?”

Ivan walked over to her like nothing had happened. He sniffed her and gazed up at her, expectant, until she petted him. “It’s a miracle. At the very least, scientifically improbable to the point of... Abraham?”

My eyes filled with tears, blurring the vision of my newly healthy, newly immortal golden cat.

“Abraham?”

“Victoria deserved a miracle, too. I should have... I should have...”

I should have thought of that.



Destiny

Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey

February 17, 2019

OKAY, SHIT JUST got real.

Intellectually, I knew Abraham was a vampire. I'd even seen him drink blood out of the fridge and let him drink from my wrist. I wore long sleeves to hide the bite marks. Well. Usually it was just light bruising.

I'd never seen him make another vampire. Nor had I thought this was something that he could do to a pet. I mean, there was a movie called *Dracula's Daughter*, but there wasn't a movie called *Dracula's Dog* or *Dracula's Cat*. I think they'd go with the alliteration...

Bunnacula?

I... should I worry?

I ran myself a bath with a lavender bath bomb in the clawfoot Victorian tub, with the white tile everywhere. I got in with a nice cup of green tea. It was warm, and smelled wonderful, and I *love* the grassy taste of green

tea... Clawfoot tubs don't have a convenient place to set down mugs, so I put it on top of the closed toilet lid, which was kind of gross when I thought about it but I had more important things on my mind. For a moment, I missed the bathtub at my old apartment, which had space for a mini altar. I'd decorated it with sea shells, rose quartz, and a little statue of Aphrodite.

I suspected a nice Jewish boy wouldn't want to bathe with Aphrodite.

Once I was in the tub, it was calm and quiet, with only the occasional bath-related splash or drip from the tap.

On the one hand, Abraham had cured saddle thrombus, a painful condition that left cats maimed or dead, the vet's worst nightmare condition. On the other hand... what was Ivan now? Was this *Pet Sematary* or *The Monkey's Paw*? How did I end up in a horror movie?

I'd married a vampire. That's how. I was even doing the horror movie bathtub scene, I realized, and smiled. I didn't quite have a laugh in me.

Abraham wasn't a demon, nor a shambling undead monster. As near as I could tell, he was the person he'd always been, only without the ability to eat normal food or go out in the sunlight. Abraham had human reason, however. Ivan, as adorable as he was, was a cat. Abraham couldn't explain to the cat what he'd done to him.

Was this fair? And what would happen if a bus hit me tomorrow? Should I run?

I thought of those vast, deep, soulful brown eyes. I had to believe that he'd done what was best for Ivan.



Abraham
Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey
February 24, 2019

WE WERE CURLED UP together on the red sectional sofa. Very well, I admitted to myself that it was more comfortable than my beloved horsehair loveseat, or even a chaise longue. I stretched out my legs under a blanket and leaned my head against Destiny's.

Sweet Ivan had been clingy since the change and watched conversations closely... and also television. It was almost as if he understood English fluently now. He was sitting on my lap facing the television and purring.

Inanna had threatened the sofa delivery people, much to my amusement. I'd had to lock her in the bathroom while she growled at me, sounding like a Doberman. She was still angry that I'd allowed the intrusion and sat on the other side of the room, giving me the occasional dirty look.

Sadly, our bottle baby kittens were now six weeks old and almost prime adoption age. I was preemptively devastated. They were wrestling and pouncing on each other, while Ivan was determined to wash them. Perhaps Destiny would bring home more bottle babies at some point. Destiny had named them Aral, Alys, and Cordelia after Bujold's Vorkosigan Saga.

Destiny was flipping channels again—why could moderns not select a channel and watch it? Attention spans really weren't what they used to be! She settled on, alas, the news again. There was some Academy Award speculation, and then...

"Internet personality and independent presidential candidate Thomas Hopkins was thrown off the crowdfunding platform IndieCause today for violating their terms of service."

The balding head with a fringe of frizzy hair and serene face of the man I knew as simply "Thomas" were back on my screen. "This is outrageous," he said. "The terms of use are simply that one may not impersonate others, use copyrighted material without permission, or be 'vulgar, offensive, or inappropriate.' My fundraising is none of those things. It's simply that IndieCause doesn't care about free speech!"

They showed a solemn-faced black man in a suit—DeShon Roberts, the president of IndieCause. "The terms of service says that it's up to the platform to decide what is vulgar, offensive, or inappropriate. IndieCause finds Mr. Hopkins's material offensive and inappropriate and chooses not to host him any longer. I have no further comment."

I had further comments, but most of them were profane. "Can we change the channel?"

Destiny gave me a concerned sidelong look—eyebrows drawn together, lips pursed—and changed the channel to a rerun of *I Love Lucy*.



Abraham
Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey
February 25, 2019

I SAT IN MY wood-paneled study and did some research on the internet—I'd purchased a new PC when my wife moved in. She had a MacBook Pro, and I'd replaced an aging Dell with a newer model after she gave me a quick speech about computer security and out-of-date software. This was fair; the older Dell ran Windows Vista and the new one, Windows 10. Lucy, Destiny's tech, was dating an IT guy.

I hadn't discarded the elderly machine; I intended to find a different purpose for my faithful friend. My kind can be sentimental about familiar objects and outmoded technology. Computers were a new skill for me, but a person needed something to do when stuck indoors all day, after all. I made a mental note to research "best use for an old computer" after I finished my current search.

My study was a small, warm, brown space with a desk, a desktop computer, and a guitar and piano. Despite being "a Mac person," Destiny would often use my PC for quick tasks rather than pull her laptop out of its case. My Stradivarius traveled from room to room with me in case I had a sudden urge to play it—which I often did. I'd had my Stradivarius for over a hundred and... twenty? thirty? years, and it was a priceless instrument that I should have kept locked in a vault. Well. Not *priceless*; similar violins sold at auction for twenty million dollars. Each Stradivarius is unique,

and not even modern science can figure out how to create a new violin like it.

That said, locking a musical instrument in a vault felt wrong. Musical instruments want to be played!

I researched Thomas. The usual suspects: Google, Wikipedia, news sites... It wasn't like him to be a political candidate. He preferred to act in the shadows, sending others to do his dirty work. Then again, it was unlikely that an independent candidate would win.

Thomas Hopkins was called things like "the most dangerous man in the US." His "church," the Foundation for a Safe America, was at the top of the Southern Poverty Law Center's list of booming hate groups and received regular scrutiny from the Anti-Defamation League. His "church" had lost its nonprofit status for endorsing political candidates. Good. A string of prisons had fired him for his views, and he was currently making his living running the "church," as an internet personality, and as a political candidate.

I had what modern Americans call "dirt" on Thomas Hopkins. Unfortunately, I didn't think I could share it without sharing "dirt" on myself. No, outing Thomas wasn't my job. Besides, would his followers even care?

I'd spent all night on my research. Destiny wandered over in her bathrobe and peered over my shoulder. "Why are you torturing yourself reading about that loser? Who cares what he thinks?"

"I know him." I glanced up into her surprised eyes. "He's a vampire. And I don't want him to find me."



Ludwig
Rosenheim, Bavaria
October 14, 1762

I WOKE UP ravenous and desperately thirsty. The only food in my room was a dry crust of bread on a plate next to my ink and quills and scraps of calligraphy practice. I devoured the bread and promptly had to rush to a chamber pot to vomit it back up. Was I ill? I clearly needed more guidance on those “dietary requirements” Father Thomas had mentioned. I did successfully swallow a cup of water, but it didn’t satisfy my thirst. How odd.

There was a knock at my door. One of the younger boys told me that Father Thomas wanted to see me, so I followed him downstairs.

There was a disturbance in Father Thomas’s office. I went in and glanced around.

A tall, thin, pale, sandy-haired priest was staring angrily at Father Thomas. “Imposter! Boy, did you know this man was an imposter?”

“What?”

“He’s not Father Carl from Bern!”

I was confused. *Of course* he wasn’t Father Carl, he was Father Thomas!

“You must be mistaken,” Father Thomas said, serene as always. “This has been my flock for years.”

“I am not mistaken! The Vatican sent me here! To check on Carl, who hasn’t reported back since being stationed here two and a half years ago!”

“How do you know I’m not Father Carl?”

“Carl and I attended seminary together,” the priest said through gritted teeth. “Are you even a priest?”

“They betrayed me!” Thomas thundered. “In 1505, they defrocked me, solely because I refused to obey a political order to release a prominent Jew in exchange for money! I, who had discovered entire covens of witches, who had found nearly a hundred Jews who had claimed to convert, only to practice their filthy ways in secret! And when I refused, when I defended my important work, they dared to excommunicate me! They dared! And you dare to question me?”

I was horrified. Torture was no longer considered enlightened, although it had not been abolished. And he was an imposter? All our sacraments for the last two and a half years! Had our dead all died unshriven? Were our babies all unbaptized? Were our weddings invalid? All our confessions...

Had he truly said 1505?

The sandy-haired priest stared at Thomas, open-mouthed. “You’re mad.”

Father Thomas tilted his head at the priest for a moment, then lunged and bit him. He shoved him up against the wall, just like—I was certain of it—he’d done with me.

“What are you doing?” I squeaked. “You can’t... he’s a priest!” *And you’re not!*

Thomas glanced at me, holding the priest against the wall with one hand pressed across his mouth. “So, dear boy, about your new dietary requirements...”

I made an impatient sound in my throat. This was not the time to discuss that. “Please, Father, don’t hurt him.”

Thomas smiled at me. “I won’t hurt him.”

I breathed out a sigh of relief.

“You will.” He smiled again, a malicious smile. “Feel your teeth.”

I poked my teeth with my tongue. They felt oddly sharp. I tilted my head in confusion.

“You’re a vampire.”

I... what? Vampires were supposed to be oversexed undead things that killed indiscriminately. I stared at my hands. They appeared normal, if pale. I felt my face, and it felt like my own. I didn’t feel dead, or undead. Nor did I feel lewd or violent.

What had he done to me? I hadn’t agreed to this!

“Bite him,” Thomas ordered.

I crossed my arms and backed away. “He’s a priest!”

“And you promised to obey me,” Thomas said.

“I also promised to defend the Catholic faith! I will not harm a priest.” I backed all the way to the opposite side of the room.

Thomas rolled his eyes and muttered under his breath, and made a gesture at me—thumb and fifth finger extended out, others curled like claws, almost like he was controlling a marionette—then beckoned. Suddenly, I felt more like the shambling undead of legend. As if asleep, I walked over. I stood next to him, frozen, trapped in a nightmare.

“Bite him,” Thomas ordered.

My body obeyed the order, but tears sprang to my eyes. I bit the priest’s neck, and blood poured into my mouth. To my horror, I found it delicious.

“Swallow,” Thomas said, sounding exasperated.

I drank, and I drank, and I kept drinking until the poor priest fainted, and still I drank, following his body

down to the floor. I drank until there was nothing left to drink. Finally, Thomas released me.

I curled up in the fetal position on the floor next to the body of the priest, put both hands over my mouth, and moaned, "I'm going to hell..." I cried for the poor slain priest.

"Now that you've murdered a priest," Thomas said, his tone dark and malicious, "I think you need to ask your parents for some money so we can move to another city."

I stopped crying—shocked out of my grief by anger—and sat up to glare at him. Had he done this to me merely to gain access to my family's money? I hadn't killed the priest; he had used me as a weapon. "You made me do it! Perhaps I will get money from my parents, but I'll leave without you!"

"I admit," he said, sounding grudgingly impressed, "you have more spine than I initially credited you with." Then he explained I knew nothing of vampire life and still needed him, and that he'd only done it for my own good, so I would fully understand my new nature and its darker side. I was still angry, but he did somehow convince me to take him with me when I left. Not that I remember how he did it.



Where I Began

Ludwig
Berlin, Prussia
October 31, 1762

My new rooms were adequate, if plain. I lived over a bakery, so it was always warm in the winter and smelled divine. Sadly, I couldn't eat their products. I patronized a local butcher—I love the early sunsets of the darker months of the year—saying that the blood was for my cook to make blood sausage. It occurred to me that perhaps I could eat blood sausage myself, but this wasn't the case. I tried it raw and cooked, both with unpleasant consequences. It both lessened my thirst and made me vomit up the parts that weren't

blood, concentrated into small balls like owl pellets. Revolting.

What had Thomas done to me? All my plans for my life, gone. All the people I knew would grow old and die without me. Would I ever see my parents or brother again?

I supposed that the only bright spot was that my hair was safe, though it no longer grew. I collected rings, but I only had so many fingers on which to wear them. I supposed I needn't dress humbly anymore, either. I indulged my vanity, thinking that if this was my worst sin, I was doing quite well under the circumstances.

I invested in and collected art. It turned out that I had a knack for it, even if it was distressingly like trade. I prospered, and Thomas eventually came around to visit, discuss theology, and, occasionally, borrow money.

He also taught me the ins and outs of being a vampire, although he laughed at me when I asked if there were any books on the subject. He impressed upon me at length the importance of only giving the gift of eternal life to the best and most worthy individuals. This was flattering, but he didn't have my devotion to the arts. "Imagine," I said, "if one were a painter, or a composer, or a performer with centuries available for practice!"

Thomas merely smiled, indulgent. "I fear that's your passion, not mine. But keep an eye out for those you consider worthy."

I didn't *like* Thomas, but I felt like he knew things I needed to know. Sometimes we would fall into our old

patterns of him being a teacher and an authority. I wasn't certain how to change that.



Abraham
Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey
February 27, 2019

WE FELL INTO A ROUTINE where I would feed Ivan things like cow's blood or raw bloody chicken livers liquefied in "the cat's blender" for every meal. Inanna sniffed his dish a few times, appeared confused, and went back to her own. Mmm, the scent of iron.

By the way, it was almost two months since Victoria had died. I still cried every time I saw a picture of her. I didn't want to forget, but remembering hurt so much...

"I'm sorry," Destiny said one morning as Ivan lapped up blood enthusiastically, "but that's... yucktastic." She winced and poked at her scrambled eggs, her lip curled. I tried not to find this comical.

I'd replaced the lace tablecloth with one with a floral pattern. She was wearing the cozy blue bathrobe and bunny slippers again. Well, I supposed the bathrobe was warm; the house could be a little on the drafty side with the high ceilings and aging windows. I was wearing the same jeans and T-shirt I'd worn the day before, and thought I should change, on principle.

I smirked at her. "We all have our dietary restrictions, it seems."

She snorted out an almost-laugh. “So, what made you want to be a vampire?”

She’d asked me this before, and I’d given her a glib answer with a hand wave. Destiny was my wife now and deserved a proper answer. I sat down at the table next to her, and Ivan finished his breakfast and climbed into my lap. “It wasn’t my choice.”

She glanced up at me, surprised, fork suspended in midair. Her head tilted, making her long red braid visible between head and shoulder. A car that needed muffler work drove past the house. Destiny took a sip of coffee, ate another bite of eggs. “What happened?”

“What do you know about kashrut?” I asked, looking up at her.

“I’m not sure I know what that is.”

“Kosher.”

“Oh.” Destiny bit her lip. “No bacon double cheeseburgers?”

I laughed at that and reached over to squeeze her hand again. “Good start. How detailed do you want me to get?”

She shrugged. “As much as you want to tell me, but at least enough for me to understand the point you’re trying to make.”

I looked her in the eye. “Blood is not kosher. The process of kashering meat starts with it coming from a kosher animal and being killed in a kosher way, but you have to remove all blood from the meat, by rinsing and soaking in water, then salting, then rinsing several times. Also, if an egg contains blood, you’re not allowed to eat it. You don’t just crack an egg into a bowl of ingredients; you crack it into a different container first so you can check it for blood. No blood. Not even fish

blood, which isn't considered actual blood, so it's not technically *treif*, but you don't want to give the appearance that you're consuming blood." I bit my lip and petted Ivan some more. This was a bit, as the modern Americans say, "heavy," but I remembered Destiny's question and smiled. "Also, no bacon double cheeseburgers. Or cheeseburgers."

"Okay," she said, sounding thoughtful.

I hugged Ivan, who was looking back and forth between us, almost as if he could understand the conversation. "I considered going to a rabbi and asking if it was covered under *pikuach nefesh*, but I was too afraid he'd say no."

"Peh... what?"

"*Pikuach nefesh*. The principle that preserving human life overrides any other commandment. I was afraid that he'd say that no, I was no longer human and that if I really wanted to uphold *pikuach nefesh*, the least I could do is never feed off a human." I avoided biting the innocent, for what it was worth. If I got a little snack in the course of self-defense, however... "I was probably being dramatic. It's allowed to eat non-kosher food if it's necessary to sustain life or cure an illness. But blood is extremely taboo." I sighed. "And then there's blood libel."

"I'm sorry." Destiny smiled, looking sheepish. "I don't know what that is, either."

I loved her innocence. It almost felt wrong to explain, but I did.

"People believed Jews made Passover matzohs with the blood of Christian children. It was used to justify violence, often around Easter, since Easter and Passover are so close together." One year, they even

burned my neighbors' house to the ground. I could hear them screaming. My brother Samuel played with their son...

"That's stupid," Destiny said. "How could people believe anything so dumb?"

"People believe an astonishing array of dumb things." I scowled at the table, then petted Ivan again when he glanced up at me. I didn't want to upset Ivan, but it felt like every antisemitic stereotype was either a role they forced us into—moneylending had been considered "usury" until recently and a sin for Christians—or the exact opposite of the truth—see above.

"You don't talk about this very much," she said. She sounded surprised.

No. No, I don't. I was conflicted. For what are obvious reasons. I couldn't walk to synagogue in the daylight—short distances only, like from the house to the car in an emergency, and then only if I completely covered my skin with SPF-rated fabric and if I didn't stay out too long. I wore gloves, a scarf, an enormous hat, sunglasses. I looked like a cross between a beekeeper and the Invisible Man, and sometimes told people I suffered from porphyria, if they asked. With those items, I couldn't stroll around the block, but I could drive. Without, I needed to run indoors at vampiric speed. In other words, I couldn't participate in religious services any more.

And even if I could walk to synagogue, Kohanim are forbidden to have contact with a corpse in Leviticus 21:1, so would my presence force them to pray somewhere I wasn't? Do I need to explain what a Kohen is? A Kohen is a descendant of the sons of Aaron who still have specific honors and restrictions, including

blessing the congregation at some services. They wouldn't know unless I told them, but *I* would know.

I hadn't davened—prayed—Shacharit or Mincha, the morning and afternoon prayers, with a minyan of ten Jews in over a century because I would burst into flames walking to the synagogue on Shabbat. It felt like another life ago. I suppose it was. I could have joined a Reform or Conservative congregation, which allows driving on Shabbat, but I was old. The Reform movement started during my lifetime. Before the Reform movement, people were just plain Jewish. I didn't identify with any of the modern movements. And frankly? I could accept reformed liturgy, but drew the line at organ music. Also, I would need to park very close to the building, and suspected that if I called a rabbi and asked for his halachic position on vampires joining, I might find myself having an awkward conversation with a mental health professional. Also, there was the matter that the dead are released from all obligations, including keeping kosher. Was I dead?

Animal blood is treif—not fish blood, but fish blood is *disgusting* and also doesn't quench my thirst; I tried!—and it's also not very tasty, but it was better than attracting the attention of modern law enforcement. Bullets hurt, and you had to fake your death, assume a new identity, move... No, best to avoid the whole thing. I'd managed some actual human blood with a forged doctor's prescription to treat a blood disorder—I supposed I did have a blood disorder of sorts—and claimed I had a private nurse to administer it. I had an in with a sympathetic blood bank employee, as blood is only good for transfusion for three to six weeks, but I could still drink it after that. I'd told the

blood bank employee it was for my dissertation research. I also felt like anyone who physically assaulted me was fair game—for a small snack, nothing too serious—but people were so law-abiding these days. Placing myself in harm's way felt like entrapment.

That said, the United States was absolutely the best place for a vampire to live. All Castle Doctrine this and Stand Your Ground that and self-defense. But again, best not to attract the wrong sort of attention. Shoot an attacker with a gun, yes, but bite him with your fangs? Too much explaining to do.

I scratched Ivan's ears, and he gazed up at me with bright, sweet, attentive bronze eyes and purred.

"So you understand," Destiny said.

I glanced up.

"My vegetarian thing."

Destiny's vegetarianism isn't religious, but... "It was... an adjustment," I admitted. I spent a lot of time under bridges starving, subsisting on rats, only drinking people who attacked me. I wouldn't wish that on my wife, but it wouldn't *be* like that for her if she became a vampire. She would have me.

"You can admit it without undermining your case," Destiny said, smiling.

I smiled back. "All right. Yes, I understand. It was an adjustment for me, too, but I still don't want you to die."

"I know, sweetie," she said. "The cycle of birth and death is holy in Wicca, but it also sucks balls."

I laughed. I couldn't help myself.

"At least, the death part does, and you can't have birth without death. You have to have death to make room for new births." She tilted her head. "If it's true

that vampires are infertile, is that why the world isn't overrun with them?"

Well. It was true that vampires are only created one way, and that way wasn't birth, but we're not indestructible and I don't consider vampire overpopulation to be an argument against turning. In fact, Flora told me most of us don't make it past two hundred.

There are arguments for turning sooner rather than later that I won't use because they're, as the expression goes, hitting below the belt. My previous girlfriend broke up with me after a date where I swore spectacularly when the waiter spilled my drink on me and he answered, "Dude, don't talk like that in front of *your mom!*" We'd been together for twenty years. I still remember the way her face went into a slow fall. I don't want Destiny to even imagine how that would feel. No. These days, if I like it, I put a ring on it, as the modern Americans say.

In fact, the idea of Destiny dying of old age made me want to go sunbathing, but that's *not* a fair argument and I refused to use it. I try to be an ethical person, despite my condition.

"So," Destiny said, "tell me about it. How were you turned?"



Abraham
Berlin, Prussia
February 10, 1841

AS THE LAST LINGERING, sweet note from my violin echoed through the dark room, my patron clapped. Baron von Dunn dressed in an ostentatious, old-fashioned style and refused to go out during the day, citing the need to keep his complexion pale. He wore expensive rings on all of his fingers, including his thumbs. His golden hair was pulled back into a soldier's queue and tied with a ribbon. His apartment over a bakery was well appointed, if not to the latest style, and he lived alone (aside from a servant, of course) despite the occasional efforts by matrons on behalf of giggling young women who found him attractive. Sometimes I thought, from the way he looked at me, that those young women had the wrong idea entirely, but it wasn't my place to judge.

Especially because I was a liar. The academy wouldn't accept Jewish students. I'd stammered out the lie that I was a convert when I stumbled over my new name—my teacher had been standing right next to us—and I felt guilty about this, and also had no idea how the baron would react if he learned the truth.

I'd probably imagined those looks, anyway. I knew that I had classmates who were rumored to be romantically involved, but we'd never actually discussed the matter. In other words, what did I know? I still remembered the scarlet cheeks of the older man I was studying with at the Yeshiva. "Young Avraham, you are both very innocent and quite the radical!" Oh, sure, the passage in Leviticus is usually translated as *You shall not lie with a man as you do with a woman, it is an abomination*, but the original Hebrew is ambiguous, in

my opinion. Loosely *Not underage male woman's lying-down*. I believe it's a reference to our ancient Greek neighbors.

He wasn't the wealthiest or most sought-after patron in Berlin—in fact, many thought him very odd indeed—but he liked my playing and I didn't mind if he was odd, as long as he paid. To be honest, I was too sick to play, but I needed the money.

This night, he had a friend over: a tall, balding man with a fringe of frizzy dark hair whom the baron introduced simply as Thomas. Thomas watched me gravely, with something in the position of his eyebrows and the wideness of his eyes implying I'd unwillingly impressed him.

My hair, unfashionably long, flopped over my face. But my father had died. You're not allowed to cut your hair during the shloshim—the thirty days after the funeral—which I'd missed, of course, because of travel. I received word that my father would die and rushed home. I'd arrived on the last day of the Shiva, the seven days after the burial where you wear torn clothes and weep, and your friends come by to feed and comfort you and say the Mourner's Kaddish with you. I stayed for the shloshim with my mother and my brother, Samuel, before returning to Berlin. Berlin felt cold and unwelcoming after visiting home. I loved Berlin—the hustle, the music—but it's hard to pretend to be someone you're not, and mortality reminds you of who you are.

“That was lovely,” Baron von Dunn said. “You're very gifted.” He had the faintest hint of Bavaria in his vowels. I wondered how long he'd lived in Berlin, and if he had tried to moderate his accent like I had. Of

course, I was a native Yiddish speaker, which was a bit more... *fraught*... than Bavarian.

I bowed. "I'm glad I pleased you, Baron."

He stepped forward and pressed a bag of coins into my palm, which I pocketed without counting, and I thanked him again. "Don't you think he's gifted, Thomas?"

"He plays beautifully," Thomas said, sounding reluctant, "but you know that, unlike you, music isn't my passion." His voice was soft, quiet. The rooms were over a bakery, so it was warm and everything smelled of bread and cake. Despite being rented rooms, they were still luxurious, with dark-paneled wood walls and rich red carpets and sofas and heavy draperies, and a glittering chandelier. Thomas stood in the shadows, as if he didn't want to be noticed.

I coughed, filling my handkerchief with blood. My hand was full of wet, red cloth. I kept enough self-control to put my violin in its case rather than dropping it. My chest ached, and I was tired and dizzy.

When I looked up, the baron was watching me, blue eyes glittering. "Are you well, Abraham?"

I was most definitely not well. On the way back from Wreschen, I had caught consumption. I mumbled something about how I would be fine and straightened up... and had another coughing fit. A bit of blood escaped the handkerchief and dripped down my wrist. I thought I might faint and placed my clean hand on a table to steady myself.

The Baron watched the blood drip down my arm and land on the thick, red Persian carpet with an expression I couldn't parse. He licked his lips, swallowed, with his eyes locked on my bloody hand.

Was he angry? “Forgive me,” I said.

He lunged at me, almost faster than my eyes could make out... or was that my dizziness? Either way, quicker than I could react. I had a strange hallucinatory vision of long, pointed teeth rushing at me, followed by a sharp pain in my neck and the press of his body against mine as he held me up. The room spun, darkened, and I reached up to cling to him in a desperate attempt to stay on my feet. I was cold, and the room was getting darker and darker. My last impression was of a lock of blond hair brushing my cheek.

When I awoke, I was lying on the floor with blood in my mouth—had I coughed up more blood? bitten my tongue?—and Baron von Dunn was kneeling beside me. I was tired, disoriented, and thirsty. Colors appeared more vivid, noises louder, and the room brighter, but I thought that was from passing out. The room spun, majestic, slowed, stopped. I found myself staring at a gold and crystal chandelier, about four feet tall and three feet in diameter, crystals glittering in the gold and rainbow candlelight. I’d never seen anything so lovely. How had I not noticed it before?

Thomas stepped out of the shadows and eyed me, one eyebrow raised.

Had I fainted? Why was I lying on the floor? How embarrassing! I moved to sit up, but I was still dizzy.

“I’m afraid you’re going to need to forgive me, Abraham,” the baron said. “I couldn’t bear the thought of the world losing your talent.”

“What?” Clearly the most brilliant thing I could have said. I rubbed my face with my hand—the one that wasn’t bloody—and glanced around. The room was still

colorful, bright. Baron von Dunn's clothing had a subtle pattern in it I hadn't noticed. I could hear voices outside, almost well enough to make out the words. I'd never fainted before; perhaps imagining that I had heightened senses was a result.

"Well," he said. "It was presumptuous of me, but I've cured your consumption."

I sat up and felt my neck, which was smooth and dry. Had I imagined him attacking me? "I don't understand."

"Of course you don't," the baron said, and smiled. Had his teeth always been so sharp-looking? Had I ever seen him in so bright a room? "It's all right, my dear boy. You know how, through transubstantiation, wine becomes the literal blood of our Lord Jesus?"

I nodded, although as a nice Jewish boy, I didn't believe a word of it.

He smiled. "The cost of the cure is that you need to drink more literal blood."

This was a cure I wasn't aware of, but of course I'd thought there was no cure. "How much blood do I have to drink?"

The baron laughed at me. "I've made you a vampire, you silly boy."

Like the Polidori novel? Was this a joke?

I stood up to leave, but staggered to the rich blood-red couch instead. I was so thirsty, thirstier than at hour twenty-five of the Yom Kippur fast. "Can you have someone bring me a glass of water?"

Thomas made a sort of irritated grunt and rolled his eyes.

The baron laughed again, but he rang the bell. A frightened-looking maid came in, a young woman with

frizzy blonde hair, and he said, “Greta, offer your wrist to Abraham.”

What?

The maid walked over, timid and thin and sad, and rolled up her sleeve. Pale bruises covered her wrists, with a single set of puncture wounds near her hand. I could see the pulse point in her wrist under the faint light green and lavender bruising. She held out her wrist to me and watched me, her eyes expectant. She smelled like fresh-baked bread—or perhaps that was the bakery downstairs.

“I don’t understand,” I repeated.

“You’re being obtuse,” the baron said.

“With respect, Baron,” I said, “I don’t understand this joke and think that I should go.” I tried to stand, but I was so tired and so thirsty...

“You don’t believe in vampires,” he said.

“I don’t,” I answered. They were a Christian cultural concept, mostly familiar to me from my Christian neighbors, or from literature translated from English. Our custom is to sit with a body, never leaving it unattended until it’s safe in the ground, and to put them in the ground as soon as possible. We would know if one got back up and walked around. Okay, there was the *alukah*, but I was clearly not one. They’re described in the *Sefer Chasidim* as a living human being that drinks blood and can shapeshift into a wolf. Also, they’re usually female. And not undead, whatever that is.

“I would pick a rationalist,” he muttered, and moved with inhuman speed to stand next to Greta and bite her wrist. He offered it to me.

I recoiled in disgust.

Baron von Dunn grabbed her bloody wrist in one hand and held my shoulder down with the other, and shoved the wrist at my mouth. I fought. Blood is not kosher, and human blood... revolting. But some of it got in my mouth, and to my horror it was as delicious as Shabbat dinner. I thought of home, of my mother's fish with raisin sauce, followed by soup, followed by a meat course, all with wine and challah bread... Would I ever be able to share Shabbat with my family again?

"It's all right," he said. "It's just like taking communion. Feel your teeth, boy!"

I put my fingers in my mouth, and yes, my teeth were longer and pointier than they'd been. I stared at him.

Thomas stepped closer, and the maid recoiled visibly at the sight of him.

"Go on, boy," the baron said. "It's all right. I pay her well for this. Just like communion."

I drank a little because I was so thirsty, but I cried a little too. I didn't want to harm the girl, and it also appalled me to be drinking something so unbelievably treif. I was nineteen and had never broken kashrut before. Not even as a poor student; I always had an excuse where I claimed I had food at home, or would only eat a whole fruit or vegetable.

"It's all right, silly boy," the baron said. "See? She's fine, and so are you. Blood is a constant presence in our faith, not only in communion but also in our art. The more pious, the more bloody, it seems. It's what binds us together as Christians. The Eucharist, and Christ's blood, is our connection to our neighbors, our fellow parishioners, and all of humanity. Please tell me you're not a reformer."

"I'm a Jew," I blurted out. "We don't drink blood."

The Baron drew back. Thomas hissed and crossed himself. Even Greta appeared shocked, the shock driving the sadness from her eyes.

"You told me you converted," the baron said, his voice wary. Thomas glared at him; I don't think he noticed. His eyes were locked on me.

"I lied," I admitted. "I just wanted to attend the academy..." I knew it was a mistake as soon as I said it, but it was a relief to not lie anymore.

"I'm going to ask you to leave and never return," Baron von Dunn said, his voice quiet. "Still, I'm glad that the world didn't lose your gift with the violin."

Yes. There was no point in explaining anything. I was sad but also felt a lot less guilty about my lie. Clearly, the truth had been a mistake.

I stood. "Thank you for your past patronage." I nodded to Greta. "Thank you for..." I picked up my violin and headed towards the door.

"You're just going to let him leave?" Thomas asked. His eyes glittered malevolently, but his voice stayed almost serene, which somehow was more threatening than shouting would have been.

The baron closed his eyes for a moment, exhaled slowly, and said, "Yes." Then he stared at me with eyes that were both sad and worried, and that frightened me even more.

Thomas growled, and I gathered up my things and left quickly. I didn't know what the alternative was to their letting me leave, and I didn't want to know.

As I descended the stairs, I heard Thomas say, "The gift of eternal life is only for those who believe. 'And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die.'"

The baron responded, “That’s a spiritual reference, not a reference to our kind,” as I passed out the door and beyond the point where I could hear them... which was much farther than it had been before.

When I got back to my lodging, I counted the money the baron had given me. A gold mark, three silver thalers, and a handful of groschen. Enough to go home and ask Rabbi Mendel what to do about this conundrum.

On the other hand, one should never ask a rabbi a question if one doesn’t want to hear the answer. The rabbi is there to offer his scholarly opinion, not to tell you what you want to hear. Did I want to go to the rabbi who’d trained me for my bar mitzvah and tell him I’d become some kind of monster and wanted his halachic opinion on the most observant way to be a monster?

Yes! But also no, because I thought I wouldn’t like the answer. The answer being, of course, that drinking blood is wrong, if possibly covered under pikuach nefesh, and drinking human blood is worse than wrong, and that drinking human blood until someone dies is murder.

Perhaps I could merely ask him if I was an alukah, but I didn’t want the answer to that question, either. I wondered if I could turn into a wolf. I closed my eyes and concentrated, but if I had that ability, I had no idea how to use it.

I was exhausted, so I slept.



Abraham
Berlin, Prussia
February 11, 1841

SLEEPING WAS A MISTAKE. I woke up ravenous, and when I peered out the curtain, I burned my fingers on the drapes. I couldn't leave my boardinghouse, and I was hyperaware of the other tenants. I had a loaf of bread on my dresser, so I tore off pieces and devoured them... and promptly vomited them back up, violently enough that I felt motivated to not try again.

I knew the cellar had rats, so I went downstairs. It had previously been cold and dark and damp, but I no longer felt the chill like I used to, and saw better in the dark. Was I dead? I didn't want to be dead!

There were indeed rats, and there was also a quiet peeping noise in a remote corner. I grabbed and drank a rat. I couldn't bring myself to say the blessing for a meal over rat blood. Still starving, I went to investigate the soft sounds in the corner.

A brown striped tabby cat was nursing three very tiny kittens. She hissed as I approached, but I offered her the rat remains and she accepted the gift, gnawing hungrily at the carcass. Her kittens were so slight and helpless, little blind fluffy things.

The landlady—a sallow, sour-faced older woman with graying hair—came downstairs. “What are you doing?”

“I was looking for some charcoal to draw with,” I lied.

“Oh no, you didn't! Again?” I thought she was talking to me, but she headed towards the cat.

The cat hissed and drew itself up, hackles raised.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“I can’t believe she had kittens again,” the landlady said. “She’s here to eat rats, not to populate the cellar with cats. I’ll have to drown them.”

“What?” Judaism forbids cruelty towards animals. We’re allowed to eat meat, but kosher slaughter is intended to be humane. We’re not supposed to take eggs while the hen is sitting on them, and if you ask twenty Jews to explain the prohibition against mixing milk and meat seventeen will say “Because the Torah says so,” one will say it was a pagan ritual, one will explain that it’s insensitive to mix symbols of life and death so cavalierly, and one will suggest that you should think about how the poor mother goat would feel to know that not only had you killed her baby to eat it, but that you were cooking it in the milk she produced to feed it. Drown kittens?

“Drown them. I’ve drowned dozens of them. What, do rich music students’ families not drown unwanted kittens?” She curled her lip at me and reached towards the nest of kittens. The mother cat snarled and slapped her hand away with her claws. Rich red blood bloomed under the scratch marks, smelling deliciously of iron. She swore.

“I’ll be leaving this evening, and taking the cat and her kittens with me,” I said with as much dignity as I could, even though the smell of her blood was making me salivate.

She laughed at me. “Such a ridiculous soft thing you are! Take the cat, if she’ll let you. Good riddance! But you’re paid through the end of the week and I won’t be giving a refund.” She reached a hand towards the nest. “Let me drown just one, as payment for the scratch...”

I grabbed her hand and glared at her face, very aware of the delicious smell of her and the blood dripping onto the floor. My stomach growled. We stared at each other for a moment, and her expression changed—eyes wide with the whites showing around the edges, pale cheeks. I didn't want to hurt her, and hated frightening her, but I wouldn't let her hurt the kittens.

"You'll leave now," she said.

"I'll leave tonight."

"Let go of my hand! I'll call the authorities and have you removed."

I'm not proud of it, but it was the desperate hunger and the threat of the authorities, along with the smell of blood, that did it. I bit her. I didn't kill her, but I left her lying unconscious and bleeding on the cold floor and suspected death would come for her soon enough. I hid her behind some boxes.

I needed to leave, to hide. If I was arrested, well. Jews had only been citizens since 1812.

I walked over and kneeled in front of the mother cat. "Trust me?" I reached out slowly and stroked her head. I think she understood that I'd defended her and her babies, because she let me pick them and her up and put them all in an old crate. I draped a blanket over it and took them upstairs.

I packed rapidly, watching the light under the window fade, and after sunset I headed out with everything I owned. We moved into a dark place under a bridge. I named the cat Rebekah, and I hunted for her and her babies until they were old enough for her to teach them to catch their own food, a hilarious process involving Rebekah doing little pantomime ballets with

dead or mostly dead rats and mice for her kittens. I named her children Jacob, Rachel, and Reuben. I slept in a pile of crates during the day and kept blankets for Rebekah and her kittens.

It was a far cry from my life in Wreschen. Despite what the landlady had said, I wasn't rich. I had a small inheritance from my grandfather that wouldn't last long. Part of me thought that life under a bridge was what a monster deserved. I thought about my mother and my brother, Samuel, often, thinking of evenings at home by the fire, comfortable chairs, delicious food, and unconditional love. Well. I supposed I had unconditional love from Rebekah and her kittens, but I longed for human companionship.

I was desperately hungry, but I was never tempted to drink my only friends. I drank from rats, and from bandits far from my bridge, and longed for home, but what if I lost control like I had with the landlady and bit a relative? I wanted the company of humans but felt as if, as a monster, I didn't deserve it.

One night, a man followed me under the bridge, slow and stealthy. I thought he was a thief, although something felt familiar about him. I was going to attack him, but as he stepped closer, I realized he was wearing ostentatious, old-fashioned clothes under his cloak, and was extremely pale. Rings glittered on all ten fingers.

Baron von Dunn and I stared at each other for a moment, awkward.

He burst out laughing. "Abraham! I can't drink you, can I?"

"No," I said, "I suppose you can't." I was smiling, though. I was having so many emotions, including

anger that he'd done this to me and abandoned me, but I was so lonely that I was also relieved to see a familiar face... and it *was* funny.

"Ah, Abraham," he said. "You have no idea how hard this has been for me. No one has your talent with the violin, no one!"

Oh yes, it had been hard for *him*.

"I even broke ties with Thomas over it. He thought we should kill you, but destroying your gift would be the greatest sin imaginable in my eyes. God gifted you for a reason!"

Lovely. I supposed I should be grateful that he thought I should live, but I was having trouble feeling gratitude here under my bridge. Besides, I didn't know who Thomas was, besides the baron's friend.

"And then poor Greta died unexpectedly."

Had she really died unexpectedly? I supposed he didn't seem the sort to waste his favorite food source.

He shook his head. "Play for me one last time. Like you used to. Please, Abraham."

I was so desperate for human companionship—even his—that I pulled out my violin and played. The most difficult pieces were simple, natural, although the violin felt brittle under my fingers. I put the sorrow of being separated from my people, the death of my father, my longing to go home, into the music. Even Rebekah and her kittens couldn't resist and sat at my feet, enchanted.

Baron von Dunn wept, tears flowing down his face, silent sobs shaking his body.

The last note faded away.

Baron von Dunn stood transfixed, still weeping. Then he blinked, as if waking up from a nap.

“Scheherazade,” he breathed, “you could tempt me to stay here until dawn.”

“Why would I want to do that?”

He laughed and pulled out his coin pouch. Instead of removing money, he removed all his rings and his pocket watch and put them in the purse and handed it to me. “Don’t live under a bridge. You’re destined for greater than this.”

I took the money and said nothing.

He stared at me, tears drying on his face. Things were awkward again. He adjusted his collar. “Take care.”

I bowed with a flourish that might have had a sarcastic edge. When I straightened up, he smiled at me, tipped his hat, and left. When I thought he was out of earshot, I muttered, “*Heng dikh oyf a tsikershtrikl vestu hobn a zisn toyt.*” Hang yourself from a sugar rope and you’ll have a sweet death. I opened the coin purse. It was full of marks and thalers. The rings were even more valuable.

I invested the lot in my brother’s bank’s new Berlin branch.



Abraham
Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey
June 11, 2019

OVER BREAKFAST—DESTINY was eating eggs and toast this morning, from the Ren Faire dishes, as it was

getting to be Ren Faire season, while Inanna ate her kitty health food and Ivan ate a dish of pureed chicken liver—Inanna glanced up from her dish and gave Ivan a long, appraising look.

I tensed, ready to stand.

“Abraham?” Destiny was wearing an oversized T-shirt advertising the Indigo Girls this morning.

Inanna swaggered towards Ivan.

“No,” I said. “Inanna, no.”

Inanna looked me in the eye with an irritated expression and butted Ivan away from his dish, maintaining eye contact with me.

Of *course* she did. Of *course*. If only cats understood rude gestures. It was probably inevitable, based on their previous relationship, and I suppose we were fortunate that it had taken four months for her to try it. Fortunately, Ivan was such a sweet boy that it seemed unlikely that he would do anything about it...

I stood. There was a tense moment while Ivan watched Inanna eat his breakfast, and then, with preternatural speed, he slapped her with his claws out.

Inanna sailed across the room at high speed, leaving a bloody spray behind her and hitting the blue stove with a wet thud and the scent of iron. Blood pooled on the black-and-white checkered floor and sprayed up towards the ceiling.

Destiny screamed and rushed to her cat, grabbing a dish towel to press into the wound. Ivan appeared confused and distressed. He stared down at his bloody paw, then at me.

“I can fix it,” I said.

“I think you’ve done enough,” Destiny sobbed. She picked up Inanna, still applying pressure to the wound,

and glanced around. “Carrier. Oh, gods, it hit the jugular...”

“He didn’t realize his own strength.” I stepped closer. “I can fix it.”

“I’m sorry,” Destiny said, holding Inanna in a towel and pressing the wound. “Ivan is a monster.” I felt a moment of hurt, protective rage, but she continued, “He might violate dangerous-dog ordinances. If the county knew...”

In a flash, I was standing between Ivan and Destiny. Behind me, Ivan meowed plaintively. “I’m a monster,” I reminded her. A scary monster who used to lurk under bridges and creep out at night to hunt criminals and vermin in the dark. Was that really what she thought of me—*her husband?*

“Abraham...” She was uncertain now, her voice rising as if in a question, as if she understood the insult she’d given.

Some of my anger bled away at her uncertainty, leaving exasperation. “Let me help!”

She laid Inanna on the table, moaning, “This is a mistake. This is a mistake!” I don’t know whether she wanted to atone for her faux pas, or if it was a moment of weakness because she didn’t want her cat to die, but... time was of the essence.

I bit my wrist and used the feeding syringe to drip my blood into her mouth. I could have bitten her, but I thought she had already bled enough for it to take. The transformation is more likely if there is an injury or ill health involved.

This was a calmer transformation, as these things went. She shuddered rather than thrashed. Well, there

was no blood clot to dissolve. Where Ivan took about half an hour, she took about ten minutes.

She stood and gazed up at me, and glanced at Ivan, and then sat and started washing her bloody fur energetically while her wounds closed.

“It’s a mistake,” Destiny said. “If the county finds out, they might try to put them down.”

“That would be a bad idea. They can’t just give them an overdose of anesthesia,” I said. “They’d sleep it off. The only way would be to cut off their heads.”

Destiny stared at me in shock.

“And I remind you,” I added, my voice sounding uncharacteristically cold even to my ears, “that Ivan is *my* cat and I will not allow that.” *God help Animal Control if they try to take my cat. My wife has never seen me kill, but if anyone tries to harm Ivan...* I’d have to change my name and move, of course, to avoid Thomas, but I’d risk that for Ivan.

“I love Ivan, too.” She stared down at Inanna. “And I love Inanna, but this is a mistake. She’s a *bitch*, Abraham. The sweetest cat in the world, but she won’t do what she’s told and attacks landlords and delivery people, and you gave her super strength and a taste for blood.”

“Well,” I said, “on the upside, since they now eat the same thing and she might have a newfound respect for Ivan, at least I don’t expect cat fights.”

“Oh gods,” Destiny said.

“Yeah, don’t break those up,” I said. “Leave them to me.”

I stared down at Inanna, who gazed back at me with a shocking deficit of sass in her bronze eyes. “From now on,” I told her, “you do as I tell you, young lady.”

From Destiny's expression, she was thinking something like it was a good thing that cats don't speak English. What she didn't know—and what I didn't tell her because I didn't think it would further my cause of turning her—is that I have some sway over my fledglings. I don't know the exact depths because my maker never explained it, and I'm not an asshole, but... it's enough. Inanna attacking people from this point on would no longer be cute, and I wouldn't allow it, so it would only happen if I weren't at home.

I loved Inanna, but if I were to choose my forever companion, it would have been Victoria. Victoria and Ivan. It had been five months and nine days since she died, and true to what I told Destiny, I had gotten to where some days I was fine and then it would hit me out of the blue that my sweet, precious girl was gone, that she had died in my arms when I was too stupid to notice, that no amount of money could bring her back...

Ivan started lapping Inanna's blood off the floor.



Destiny
Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey
June 11, 2019

I'd put my foot in it this time.

I carried Inanna into the bedroom and shut the door. She wriggled loose and glanced around the room,

curious, like she didn't understand why we were in there.

It was clear from his expression—the compressed lips, the flash of hurt in his eyes—that Abraham considered my calling Ivan a monster the same thing as calling *him* a monster. I don't think of Abraham as a monster! He's a person with human reason who understands his condition.

Ivan is a cat. *A cat*. He's adorable, but he hurt my sweet girl, Inanna, because he's *an animal* and *doesn't* understand his situation.

And my apology for calling Abraham a monster was to let him do the same thing to my darling Inanna as well. Turn her into... whatever Ivan was.

By the way, Inanna was a precious angel baby with me. She hadn't warmed up to Abraham yet, but lots of cats are one-person cats and I thought Inanna was one of them. She's such a sweetheart that when my landlord said she'd lunged at him, I assumed he had a cat phobia! But multiple people had said the same thing. When I was home, she calmly watched the repair people or whatever. She was a darling at the vet. My cat was only aggressive if I wasn't there to tell her it was okay.

I... I needed to commit. I mean, I was committed to Abraham. We were *married*, but I needed to fully commit to having a vampire husband. Like, he wasn't an unusually soulful Goth with a medical condition; he was a *vampire*. He was an immortal being who'd come to terms with his state, more or less. A vampire who seemed to hate being a vampire in some ways and consider it a nifty cure for disease in others, rather

than seeing it as a disease. If Abraham didn't see it as a disability, neither should I.

I lay down on the bed, on top of the white comforter, and Inanna curled up on my chest and purred like nothing had happened. I kissed her on her soft head and told her she was a good girl.... even though she'd left bloody paw prints on the bed.

If Inanna was going to outlive me now, I hoped she planned to warm up to Abraham, eventually. I even envied her eternal life with him for a moment. Unfortunately, the cost was still more than I wanted to pay.



End of Excerpt

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