

THE LADY DUSK CHRONICLES

lady dusk: A ghouls tale

by charles ashe



STORYTELLERS
VAULT 
FICTION

LADY DUSK: A GHOUL'S TALE

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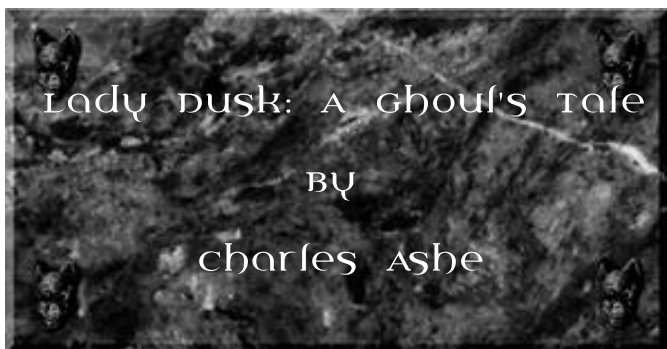
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“Tear them all down! Everything!”

She stormed across the polished wood floor of her personal gallery, pulling artwork off the walls and flinging them into the center of the room. She was heedless of the furniture in the way, sending splinters cracking through the air from both.

She spun to face him. Her mane of brown hair was feral around her wide-eyed glare, her hands clenched into fists inside her blue cloth gloves. “Why aren’t you moving? Remove it! Now!”

Her pale skin never dampened with sweat, but his did. He scurried into the center of the room, stacking the broken frames and torn canvas in his arms. He rushed them outside, listening to the normally velvet voice of his great love escalating into a screech.

“It’s all garbage! It’s all garbage! It’s a void! It’s a cancer on my walls!”

He threw them down by the swimming pool. The light within sent a shimmering golden net across the side of the house as they landed on the deck. He rushed back in for more. He could not keep the goddess waiting.

She was sprawled out on a recliner now, one leg offset to the other, staring at the chandelier. Even now, she was more beautiful than anything he’d ever imagined. To stroke that skin, whisper in that ear, kiss those pale lips. If he could just soothe her flaring eyes with a calm word or two...

“Stop staring at me like a wounded dog and get the rest out,” she said. She motioned with her hand and he reacted in kind. She was so still, staring at the chandelier like that. For once, she looked as dead as she actually was.

He threw the rest of the broken frames outside and went back to the gallery. He stood nearby, head hung, shoulders slumped.

She went by the name Lady Dusk now. Vampires, he had learned by accident, were known to disown their mortal lives to some degree and almost none of them

went by their mortal names after a time. That gave too much away, he learned, and a vampire was the sum of the secrets it kept. Not all names were created equal, he knew; he personally found Lady Dusk to be a bit operatic. She was the mistress, however, and her blood quickened him like no amount of sex ever could. Her decisions ruled the house.

He tried to imagine who she was when she was alive. To imagine that pale angel on the recliner as a laughing, playing woman with a human flush to her skin energized him everywhere. She once walked in the sun. She ate Thanksgiving dinner. Men admired her in the streets for her impossible beauty, that seemingly once-in-a-generation physical character that weighed on many women both as a blessing and a curse all its own.

Then, one night, she was killed. Her humanity bled into the maw of a ravening corpse, who poisoned her with his own undead blood. She was locked forever in the state of her death, a legendary beauty preserved throughout time. All it cost her was any trace of a soul.

“Stop pouting,” she said. “At least that disgrace is out of the house.”

He shuffled on his feet. He wasn’t aware he was pouting at all, which made finding a way to stop a little

more difficult. He caught a glimpse of himself in a gold framed mirror on the far wall and thought that he, too, was chosen for his looks. He was a beautiful man, clean shaven with a mess of dark hair, and a two hour a day fitness regime had sculpted his body well. She controlled all of this, of course, and dictated how he was to brush every strand of his hair. She dictated what he would wear and how. It was often open jackets with nothing underneath and tight, ripped jeans. He was never allowed to wear anything else. She had a thing for this nineties underwear model look, maybe. He obeyed. What else could he do?

“I’m calling you Andros this week,” she told him, standing up and smoothing out the fine blue dress she wore. “You are Andros until further notice. Indicate you understand.”

“I am Andros now, until further notice. What can I do to help you, my lady?”

“I’ve told you before to mind your choice of words,” she said, and her eyes were two ice cubes as she stared at him. “Your kind cannot ‘help’ my kind. I am not weak enough to need ‘help.’ You will provide the services I command. Mind your wit. You slip on that too often.”

Lady Dusk looked at the empty spaces on the walls, far calmer now. The outlines were slightly paler than the plaster that had laid beyond the frames. “Caine take Gavalon’s blood. One subtle insult and my credibility as an art critic is in doubt. Do you know what pains me, Andros? He was right. I was blind to a flaw in the artist’s work. I forbid the name of that artist ever to be spoken in my presence again, Andros. Note that.”

“I understand, my lady.”

She sighed. It wasn’t a familiar thing. Her lungs hadn’t sighed of their own accord in at nearly a century. Andros had seen enough to know that it was a feigned humanity, a deliberate show of emotion meant to mimic her lost life. He wondered if the theater was for his benefit or her own.

“Do you understand the crisis at hand, Andros? Among my kind, you show no weakness. You cannot let an insult pass. You cannot let a challenge go unanswered, even if you want to. If someone can deride you without consequence, they show that you are weak. To show the slightest weakness means the rest of them turn on you. In mere nights, you can be cut apart to feed their own appetites. You could become as low and uninteresting as any given sewer rat. To be successfully called out on your flaws is to risk losing everything.”

“Surely no one would dare raise a hand to you, my lady.” His heart quickened and his fists clenched. Oh, if anyone tried, they would have to go through...Andros, yes. He was Andros now. They would have to go through Andros.

“Vampires have few friends. The more brightly one smiles, the more cutting the blade behind their back.” She approached him and peeled off a glove, running her chilled palm over his chest and stomach. “I’m going to have to find a way to salvage this insult. The first step is burning the unnamed artist’s work. It can only be spoken of in the most dismissive of terms from now on. Let no one anywhere praise it without questioning their taste.”

She passed her palm over his silk smooth cheeks, her fingers tracing the firmness of his jawbone. He was immediately aroused, the tight jeans holding his interest prisoner. He leaned his cheek into her hand and closed his eyes.

“I am already set to meet Diego this evening. He is mere nights from openly declaring himself Prince. I need to ensure that I’ve lost no standing with him as a result of this cruelty.”

“Isn’t he of your blood, my lady?”

“He is. Which will make deflecting the disaster that much harder.” She turned away suddenly and walked toward the main hall. “I’m going to go get ready. Go burn those frames. I want them to be cinders by the time I’m ready to leave. Make sure you’re clean, too.”

“Do we expect this Gavalon to be there this evening? Are there any special preparations I should make?”

She stopped for a moment and turned to him with a hand on her hip. “Gavalon wasn’t the source of the critique. A sewer rat was. Gavalon merely agreed with him, and that made the sewer rat’s opinion legitimate in the eyes of many. No one would believe a monster would know about beauty, but when one of our own to accept his word? That’s what damns me. Lacking Gavalon’s word, the rat was just a rat. Now, he’s a critic! Of me!”

She pivoted on one foot, clenching her fists again. She stomped down the hallway. “That is a thing which cannot stand.”

Andros went outside to work on the paintings, piling them up on a concrete section of the deck. He doused them lighter fluid and threw a match. He stood close enough for the heat to redden his skin. His sexual interest was powerful and would not ebb. He took a

moment to resolve that himself, unzipping and working himself over at the fire.

He imagined her treating him kindly, showering him with kisses, letting him take her addictive blood from wherever he will it.

The result launched into the flames. He stood spent, feeling the blood calling him to her side. He never wanted to be anywhere else. How wounded and empty he felt when he wasn't near her, even when she was in moods like tonight's.

His tears flickered in the firelight. They streamed down his face, but he smiled. His smile trembled.

"I am yours, my love. I am always yours."

*

Andros stepped into a dark room. Every surface was covered with mirrors, but the only light came from countless strips of cord that hung from the ceiling. Each cord had multiple tiny light bulbs or blue, pink or green. The mirrors stretched the lights out into an entire universe. He could see a black human shape walking between the hanging lights from one side to the other, a moving absence of light. It was simply a

galaxy of glowing colors, except where human forms passed between them.

Andros felt a hand nudge him forward from behind. He took a few steps further in. He wandered around for a bit, noting the shapes here and there. Six people in the room total, he figured.

One of them leaned against a wall that was all but invisible in the galaxy. He had a pair of glowing bands around his neck, like Andros would see at a rave. He saw gold chains in the stolen light, a chin with a close cropped black beard. That was it.

“Come on over, new guy. I haven’t seen your outline before.” It was a deeper voice, full of intelligence. The way he rounded off his words hinted at sophistication.

Andros looked over his shoulder toward where he thought the exit might be. Nothing but stars. He shuffled forward with leaden feet, his skin smarting from where Lady Dusk’s vampire friends had explored him.

As soon as he had entered the Phoenix Art Museum with Lady Dusk, they were on him. Three of them, two women and a man, each dressed to the height of fashion in clothes that probably cost more than any car he owned. Their eyes were fierce and their faces

somehow mannequin-like as they caressed him, pinched him, smelled him, licked him. Nothing was inviolate. If he backed away, they restrained him in vise-tight hands and held him fast, with a warning snarl from their throats. For fifteen minutes he was abused, groped and shamed, the three of them giggling and comparing notes like he was simply meat at a marketplace.

One of them had proposed that they stick him with a special needle she had brought; she wanted to see how his wounds formed and what his scream was like. He was saved only by the fact that she'd misplaced the needle.

Then, as she went off to meet with her peers without so much as a look over her shoulder his way, he was led to this room.

Andros leaned against the wall carefully. He wasn't even sure it was there at first. Still, he found the mirror and became a black hole in the galaxy.

"Lovely place, isn't it? They love sticking us in here when they go off and do their big boy business. This is the playroom for us not-quite-them types." He felt the figure elbow him and he saw the outline of an extended hand. "Call me Chains. I'm like you. I...serve them."

Andros shook the offered hand with a weak grip. "I'd just like to get out of here and back to my master," he said.

"And miss this exhibit? This is called *You who are getting obliterated by the dancing swarm of fireflies*. It's Yayoi Kusama. I find it pretty relaxing in here, myself."

"All the same, you never know. My master could be in trouble. What if -"

The voice cut him off. "Jesus, man. Don't assume for two seconds you mean a goddamned thing to them. Not one of them. That's me doing you a favor. It's the blood, man. It's the blood they put in you. It wants to go back home, so it makes you think that person is the center of the entire goddamned universe. It's the worst drug I can imagine."

"You don't want to get to your...master's side? You don't want to run over to them right now?"

"I do. More than anything. More than anything I can name. My knees shake just thinking about it. Difference between us? Let me guess. You're new to this whole thing, aren't you? Under a year?"

"What if I am?"

“I’ve been a servant in the blood for thirty-nine years. Let’s just say I have some experience handling it all day to day, the kind you haven’t mastered yet.”

*

Lady Dusk entered a narrow room filled with dummies. The dummies were all dressed in authentic clothes from the last century, from 1900 to 2000. Diego’s ghouls manned the doors at both ends of the room.

She could see him inspecting a 1920’s flapper ensemble near the middle of the room. A walkway bisected the sea of dummies, and he stood there in all of his handsome glory. He was a Mexican man who was taken in his early thirties, still strong and beautiful in this arrested youth. He wore a deep blue suit with a red rose pinned to his left lapel. His hair was swept back from a Rudolph Valentino face, a closely trimmed goatee framing his sensual lips.

He studied her, as well. Her hair was down, her make-up subtle enough to accentuate without being layered in clownish swaths. She wore a red dress with a wide, low plunging V-neck, flattering her in a way that would lead the most humble man to thoughts of sin. Yet, if

there was any appreciation to offer for her elegance, Diego showed none.

“Lady Dusk,” he said. “Welcome. I was told you wanted to meet with me.”

“Thank you for your time,” she said, smiling at his Spanish accent. “I’ve heard that your ambitions are about to come to fruition. I’m not sure how far to congratulate you, however. This city has a very troubled history with Princes, especially over the last thirty years.”

“I admit, the burden seems daunting, but there are few willing to step into the responsibility,” he said. He turned to face her fully, hands clasped behind his back. “The Sabbat seethes just on the other side of the Mexican border, which is much too close to Phoenix. The resulting chaos in these streets and shadows has been traumatic to the Kindred community. I am going to lead them back to greatness as we consolidate ourselves against the remaining Sabbat presence. We will regain this city as a stronghold of the Camarilla.”

She gently clapped her hands. “Such speechmaking. How many of those have you memorized so far? That one is sure to be a crowd pleaser with someone. I do agree that Phoenix must be held for the strategic value it has, but the deaths of many Princes and a Sabbat

occupation in the recent past doesn't entice anyone to the position. So far, we've had a parade of pretenders. Let's be honest, shall we? Most wouldn't look to a Toreador for martial leadership."

"My assets shall do nicely, worry nothing for that. I wanted to ask you, purely of my own deep concern, however. Did Gavalon really agree with a sewer rat's questioning of your artistic measure? I've heard the beast said something nasty about your tastes in art, and Gavalon dared to openly agree with him."

Lady Dusk felt a tingling behind her ears. Her fingers clutched, but she hid this by pretending to wring her hands. "Poor Gavalon. I'm afraid he doesn't understand my approach to appreciation. Sometimes, I make a point to surround myself with the less talented so I can drown in the mediocrity. It means I have a much more powerful reaction to the masters when I encounter them. My breath is taken away twice over and the revelation is much more powerful. They serve as palette cleansers. Like crackers in between wine tastings."

Diego studied her for a moment and smirked. Lady Dusk chilled inside, but smiled back, waiting for his judgment on those words.

*

Andros heard Chains unwrap a candy bar. He heard the crunches as he started to eat it. “We’re so much nothing to them, you know. I’m sorry to tell you that. She doesn’t love you any more than you love any given ingrown hair. You serve. To most of them, you’re not even worth looking at. They certainly don’t look at you as human. Try to keep that in mind.”

Andros massaged the sides of his head. A headache was forming around his words. Every cell of him loved her, passionately. Accepted her. Dreamed of her. Craved her. Yes, she could be cruel, even savage, but he was forgiving and loyal. More than he’d ever been to any woman before. He belonged with her and her with him. This was a mistake. Chains just hadn’t met her. Maybe he shouldn’t. Just in case.

“I know you’re having a hard time with this. I can see you withering even in the dark. Got a headache? That’s the blood. It won’t let you feel anything but passion of the worst kind for your master. Do you fantasize about her? Do you study her and think, ‘Damn, I can’t wait ‘till I do good enough that I get to grind that ass for a bit?’”

“How do you know my master’s a her?” Andros had hoped he didn’t give it away.

“You keep muttering, ‘I need her, I have to get back to her.’”

Andros pressed his lips shut and stayed silent.

“Let me put to you this way. Ever have a dog? C’mon, answer. Ever have a family dog?”

“Yeah, so?”

“You fed the dog. Gave it a place to go to the bathroom. Walked it. Groomed it how you like. Dog always came running to you, right? Like joy was going to bust it open from the inside out every time it saw you again. It cried and sulked when you weren’t around but jumped into your arms every time you came home, right?”

Crunch, crunch. The death of more candy bar in the silence.

“Tell me then, did you fuck your dog?”

Andros stood straight and stared into the place he thought Chains’ eyes might be.

“Tell me. Did. You. Fuck. Your. Dog?”

“No! No, who the fuck...what the fuck dude?”

“You don’t get it?” Crunch, crunch. “Okay, suit yourself.”

*

“That’s a convoluted excuse for your case,” Diego said at last. “I wonder how many of our blood would believe it?”

Her eyes turned fierce. “We all have our own approach to appreciating art. I’ve been around long enough to realize certain extremes are necessary to keep *feeling*. I must know the good and the bad, the foul and the fair, if I’m to succeed at being a patron of the arts. Training my eye for discernment like this is no different than striking a knife to a whetstone. The knife may not enjoy it, but it will come away cutting to the quick.”

“If you insist. As it is, I considered arguing Gavalon’s observation. I almost voiced it to the Harpy before meeting with you. I wouldn’t stand for a Toreador of your prestige to be undercut by a vampire of lesser standing like Gavalon.”

She raised her chin with a blink. “Indeed, Gavalon’s disrespect to me shouldn’t be ignored. My status is greater. I shouldn’t have someone who has no talent under his name questioning my aesthetic at all.”

Diego shook his finger. “I did recall that he has almost the same station as you, however. Almost. Close enough that I reconsidered getting between you. Is this a matter that the domain should work out for itself?”

“They’ll see a Nosferatu was reinforced against a Toreador by a Toreador, which doesn’t suggest the unity of vision you want for your ends. It does not do for your clan to seem snide toward itself with the tasks we have ahead of us in Phoenix.”

“True, but is it not wise to avoid spending my energy on other people’s petty squabbles? If I am to declare myself Prince, it would do well that I not get invested in a feud over your tastes. I would look wasteful.”

Lady Dusk pursed her lips, and then folded her hands in front of her. “I can imagine that a man of your importance in these nights would find such a triviality to be burdensome. Still, my reputation is at stake, and people jumping to simple conclusions about complex things should be discouraged, don’t you agree? That abandons the notion of critical thinking, and we’ll need to be so much better than that with the wolves at our door. We should politely discourage such criticisms when it’s clear that little thought was put into them.”

Diego sighed. It was a theatrical gesture and she knew it. The social dueling was wearing thin on her; she was eager to drive home and smash something from the way he was cornering her. It was going to come down to Gavalon and herself for Primogeniture. She knew that was the reason for Gavalon's move - a calculated attack designed to diminish her importance before a Prince who shared their blood.

"I suppose I could be moved to doing a favor for you," Diego finally said. "You are cruel and competent, and I do favor that over Gavalon's hedonism. To a point. Perhaps if I found a boon in play?"

Lady Dusk laced her fingers together tightly. "Perhaps, my lord. Perhaps."

*

"My master forgets I'm in the room sometimes," Chains said. "He's gone up to an hour not realizing I'm standing right where he commanded me to stand. I've listened in on things I shouldn't know. I'll tell you this, Andros. We're swimming in a very small pool with some very hungry sharks. They knew how to take our will away. They knew how to make us slaves. And they knew how to make us love it. Don't think you're in anything but a cage, kid. The bars are gold to you right now, but they're still bars."

"I think I've heard enough of you questioning my lady." But he didn't move. His arms and legs shook. He wanted to leave, run, fight. But he willed himself to stay. He kept listening.

"They should all be questioned. There's only one way this is likely to end for us, kid, and it's not in the bedroom, I promise you that. It isn't as lovers and equals. They don't think that way. Forget that pansy-ass fairy tale they give us growing up about vampires and sex and love. Those things are dead bodies. They're cannibals that eat the living to survive. You are nothing but a dog they've taught tricks, and they aren't kind owners."

"You don't know anything about my owner!"

"I know mine, and I know what I've seen. When my owner shows up, I'm going to cry with joy. I'll hump his leg if he lets me. I'll beg him for the blood, even if it means taking it from his dick up my ass. I'll do every horrible thing he tells me to, with joy, because we're together. It's just I've been at it so long, when I'm alone, I normalize just a little bit I know how fucked up it gets." Chains finished the candy bar and stuffed the wrapper in his pocket. "Thing is, kid, I don't know if I envy you or not. Right now, you think it's the greatest thing ever whether she's around or not. I'm

not sure if I want that naivete again, but I wonder if I'd be happier for it if I did."

A servant leaned into the room. "Andros. Your master awaits."

Andros marched away from Chains on numb legs that felt like stilts of ice. "Nice meeting you, Andros," Chains called. "God help you. God help us all."

Lady Dusk was silent on the ride home. Andros tried to broach a number of topics with her, voice shaking, but stopped when she snapped, "Be quiet, already."

They pulled into the garage and entered the house in similar silence. She punched a wall and put a hole in it. "You'll fix that tomorrow," she said. "You'll do it perfectly or I'll break your hands."

"I will, my lady. With love. For you." He stopped following her and hugged himself. "I'm so cold tonight. Would you...? May I have some, my lady? Haven't I been wonderful lately?"

She stopped and turned, staring at him with furious eyes that softened slightly. "Fine. You at least do your job with me. I'll show proper appreciation. Get it ready in the garage."

Andros smiled ear to ear. He ran into the garage and found a toilet lying against the wall. He placed it in the empty space that would hold another car in the garage, and got down on his knees in front of it.

She appeared behind him and he heard a slice. Blood poured past his face into the toilet, dancing all over the porcelain. It was a good amount, too, filling some of the hole.

“Feed,” she commanded, and he lapped away at the blood, giggling, crying, shaking and moaning.

She was so kind.

*

Lady Dusk had a room in her home that Andros was never allowed to enter.

It was on the second floor and looked out over the pool. It was filled with every little antique she could find. Some of these things were keepsakes from her long ago mortal life, falling to rust and decay even as she rose pristine every night from death. Others were facsimiles of lost things, stolen away by circumstance, but replaced with perfect imitations.

Heavy purple curtains hung over the windows. Sandalwood incense burned. An ancient phonograph in the corner ground out John McCormack's *All Alone* in all of its crackling glory.

1924 was within her grasp again. She danced to the music, slow turns, hand outstretched, eyes closed.

She pictured him again, as she had for decades. He was beautiful. Smooth shaven, movie star handsome, sparkling blue eyes and hair parted down the center. She remembered the brown suspenders, the button-down shirt that framed such a masculine chest with that cotton tank top beneath. The black pants, the black jacket. The warm feeling of his face against her cheek as they danced. The bass of his voice breathing life in her ear as they danced, reciting the poetry of Kipling.

Conundrum of the Workshops was her favorite. He'd breathe the words into her ears as they danced and she'd forget all the music around her in favor of the poetry riding his breath. Oh, the sensual way he'd lower his voice into a sinful timber to speak as the Devil. "It's pretty, but is it art?"

She'd step back at the end of the song, blushing fiercely, scared to meet the intensity of his eyes. Her heart thumped. A wire-tight tension bound them

together, dressed in uncertainty and promise alike. Those delicious flirting moments where a couple telegraphs their interest in one another without first announcing it. Was there anything like it?

That was 1924. They were both alive. They had a lifetime together. That was the plan, wasn't it? His courtship was flawless and his magnetism second to none.

The daydream always ended the same. She wasn't sure why. It ended before a golden mirror floating beside them, reflecting the entire hall but not the two of them. Why did that always find a way into her daydream? The harder she tried to avoid it, the more it intruded in the end. She'd have to stop, restart the music, and dance again.

Hardly torture, that, to be honest.

She lowered her arms, eyes opening on a room decades removed from his gentle poetry. Far from his warm cheek, far from the cologne he enchanted her with. There was sandalwood. There were artifacts.

There was a corpse whose eyes grew scarlet with misery when she thought about her loss.

She sat down at a table near the window. There was a wooden box there that had been hand carved for weeks under her direction some decades ago. It had angels playing on the outside of the box, with the devil's horned, goateed face on the top. It was ten inches to a side and a deep red color in the dim light she favored tonight.

She opened the front of the box, flicking down the latches with her thumbs. She took a deep breath. Something she usually only did when she practiced this ritual; her lungs often forgot to breathe otherwise, but for this, it came naturally.

She reached inside the box, gently. A mummified hand met her fingertips, resting knuckles down on a blue pillow. She clasped it softly, stroking the leathery skin as gently as one would touch a newborn. She rested the weight of her hand in the palm for a few moments, then pulled it out and closed it back up.

Red streams carved down the white cheeks beneath her eyes. She wiped the blood away with a washcloth. She sat with her head hung, hands folded in her lap, weeping large red tears in spite of herself.

Her eyes went fierce when she heard a knock on the door. "I am not to be disturbed, Andros!" She barked. "This is my quiet time!"

“My lady, when will we be done with this visitor in the living room? She keeps asking for you. We should send her home.”

“I decide who belongs here and who does not.” She rose and went to the door, undoing the two locks that sealed it from the inside. She opened it to face Andros. “I told you to make her comfortable and feed her food while I was resting. I will come down and see her presently.”

“I have fed her, my lady. I went and got food for her from O’Tolley’s. She’s eaten and she keeps trying to talk to me.”

“I bring a pretty girl home and you’re the first to complain.”

He hung his head for a moment, then looked back up at her with a shrug. “She’s not who I love.”

“Oh, by Caine’s twitching left nipple.” She stepped passed him and closed the door behind him, moving down the hall toward the stairs. “Do you even understand why I took you under my wing, Andros? Do you remember why you’re here?”

“I know only your needs, my lady, and my own. And I know they are one.”

“Oh, what grotesque poetry.” She turned to face him at the head of the stairs. “I own a modeling agency and a strip club. Does that ring a bell? No?”

Andros simply stared at her, wounded and silent.

“Maybe it doesn’t at this point. That’s half the point. You didn’t care. I take care of my girls in both places, Andros. You dated one and made a point not to take care of anything but yourself. You demeaned her. You abused her. You showed her off like a cheap trophy but that’s all the concern you had for her. You gaslit her. You made sure she was addicted to your attentions and then you broke her, just to show that you could. She was so wrecked she tried to open her wrists with a razor.”

He remembered some of that. Yes, some of that may be true. It was hard to imagine past the veil of blood that painted Lady Dusk’s face over everything.

“I saw to her recovery and then I came for you. You had four different girls you were dating at once, none of them knowing a damned thing about the others. You hit on me and put on all of your crass, sloppy

moves, a dumb barnyard animal looking to rut with any poor girl stupid enough to believe in him.”

She took his face in one hand, fingers clenched around his cheeks, and pulled him to within an inch of her eyes. “I come from a time when courtship meant something. I come from a time when romance bloomed with fireflies and music and poetry recited in your ear by magnificent, well dressed men who knew the role of proper gentlemen. I come from a time when love letters were twenty pages long and filled with verse and promises and the joy of attraction springing eternal between every word. You are no more to me than a low, brain damaged animal who ended up here because your wit was borne more to doing harm than any good. You are a bad dog and that’s the end of you.”

She pushed him away a few steps. He hugged himself and cried as quietly as he could.

“You can go ahead and dream of me in any way you want. All you’ll ever know is vapor. You drink my blood from a toilet and I show you off as cheap flesh for a reason. I want you to know what it felt like to be her. Do you understand?”

“I understand,” he whispered. “I understand but I hope. I hope you’ll see my worth.”

“You don’t have any. Can you even name any of the big bands that played in the Twenties? Thirties? Forties? No. I had the grace to bring a girl home that I intend to muse to, and as pretty as she is, all you do is pound on my door when I’m not to be disturbed, complaining that she’s in the house. Maybe I’ve broken you too far.”

She turned and walked down the stairs. Andros followed her down in silence.

“I found this girl at First Friday last night, downtown,” Lady Dusk told him. “She had a couple of pieces on display and I liked what I saw. There are empty spaces around the house. I intend to muse her into creating new works. If she’s truly good, I’ll take her on full time. You could have a sister in this bondage, think of it! Though I imagine I’ll lavish my attentions on her while you simply maintain my house. What a happy family we’d make.”

She turned a corner into the living room. As she did, she willed the Blood into her cold flesh, giving it the semblance of warmth and life. “Tracy!” she said, and walked toward the girl rising from the couch with her hand extended.

Tracy was pretty, a Mexican girl of perhaps twenty, Andros would guess. She wore a longsleeved beige shirt and loose blue jeans. He saw her painted toenails thanks to her flip flops, and she hid her identically painted fingernails with her arms crossed until Lady Dusk reached her.

“I hope you’ve found my hospitality in good form,” Lady Dusk began. “If you’ve been put off in any way, by all means, let me know and I’ll have a word with the help.” She shot a cold look over her shoulder at Andros, even while her smile never faded.

“You’ve been great, so great,” she said. She had a Spanish accent but her words quivered. Andros saw her shifting her weight from one foot to the other, her eyes somewhat glassy. She crossed her arms again. “You’ve been so generous. Buying both of my paintings, that’s, wow, that clears my rent for this month and even gives me a better fridge than usual. I only hope I can please you with the commissions you want.”

“You have every opportunity to try,” Lady Dusk purred. “If nothing else, you’ll have a springboard toward future endeavors. You’ll find that doing me work makes a name for you, regardless.”

“I can’t wait to start, then! When can I start? I have all of my things at home but I can lock myself down and...”

“No, sweetie, I have everything you need here in storage. I have a room that’s nothing but canvases, paints, everything you would need. Unless you feel you’d work better from home, but I do delight in watching art crafted in front of me. There’s nothing about the task that doesn’t fascinate me.”

“Whatever you want. We can try it that way.”

“Marvelous. Andros, take her to the storage room. She can get anything she wants in any quantity, and she has full run of the property to do her work as she pleases, save my private room upstairs. Can you handle that?”

Andros paused but nodded.

Tracy smiled and nodded to Andros, but he didn’t meet her eyes. “Thank you,” Tracy said.

“I’ll be upstairs in my private room. Let me know if you need anything. Andros, a quick word in the hallway?”

He joined her in the hallway just out of Tracy's earshot.

"We still have plenty of drugs on hand. She's no stranger to them, for the record. That's why the long sleeves. Her friends call her 'Tracks.' If it seems she lacks conviction in her work, you are to offer her any drugs she wishes. If she has some sort of reaction to the drugs, and you know what I mean, you may shout for me. I'll respond promptly to see she isn't damaged. If she makes a good quality work tonight, I'll give her my blood before morning."

She cut off any conversation by pivoting on one foot and walking away, back upstairs to her distraction.

Andros watched her walk away with his fists clenched and trembling, tears spilling of his eyes, face red with shame.

"See to it," Lady Dusk told him as she reached the top of the stairs. "I can hear you not moving."

He composed himself, wiped his tears away, and went to his task.

*

Andros' bedroom was a dirty pair of mattresses stacked together in one corner, his clothes strewn on the floor,

and a dresser with the things he was required to fold up and put away nicely. There was an old lamp on the dresser that didn't work, two dirty pillows, and an old blanket. These were his luxuries.

However, a servant in his position was often called upon to defend their master at times. To this end, he had a gun in his top dresser drawer he was never allowed to use unless a threat was present.

A threat was present, he reasoned. That Tracks girl came between them. She was a threat. She would take attention away from Andros. She would be showered with affection while Andros drank blood from a toilet. She would be exalted while he was tormented and isolated, or pushed toward her vampire friends for any torture they wanted to put to his fine skin. She was a free soul, not to be trusted; he was loyal, steadfast, forgiving, and dedicated. So dedicated. Devoted with the conviction of a priest.

No. She did not belong here. She did not. She could not fall under Lady Dusk's influence...

Did he just think that? Was that right? No. She could not come between his love and himself. She was a threat. Their duality was good, scared, hellish.

Hellish? Oh, but didn't that word fit?

She was so cruel, so attentive, so cruel. She was everything. She was the universe. She was Hell. His Hell. His Hell was full. No vacancy.

He pulled the gun from the drawer. His heart beat faster. He savored the weight in his hands. He checked the clip. Full. He snapped it back into place and cocked it. Snap-snap.

Yes. There was only one thing to do, for her own good. Lady Dusk's, that is. Yes, Lady Dusk's own good, that's what he meant. Yes. For her own good, Lady Dusk's, that girl had to die. It was just. It was the only freedom she could have now. Yes, a gift.

No. No. Not a gift. Lady Dusk would not want that. Lady Dusk would be furious.

Yes, furious, but didn't she know their love was true? She just needed to open herself to Andros. Stop playing games. Stop denying what he knew they both felt.

She had to run. Couldn't he tell her to run?

No, she should die. Easier for everyone.

He made it as far as the doorway before his limbs fought him. The Blood in him was slave to Lady Dusk's every whim, he knew, and he knew that as she would not want this to happen, he was violating her by doing it. He was opposing the Blood. He was against her will.

He paused, breathing heavily. No, no. Must. Must.

He swung one leg out, and then the other. He pulled himself along with one hand. His body shook. He felt sick.

No. No! Push forward. Push forward. She's a liability. She's come between them. She must die. She has to die. There's no way around it!

He took three more steps. He felt a pull on his limbs, telling him to go back, telling him to stow the gun away. He'd be free. His limbs would help him. He didn't have to feel this dread tension. He didn't have to do this. Serve her will. That was his job.

Serve her terrifying and sadistic will.

He swayed for a moment, bracing himself with a hand to the wall. He did remember. He remembered the women he'd hurt. He'd delighted in stringing them along. All of his guy friends envied him. It was never

the point to have one, just one, that love and believed in you for who you were. You had to have more. They had to be hotter than your friends' bitches, and they had to worship you. That was the point. That was the game. All in good fun, and girls cry all the time anyway, so no harm done, right?

Tears streamed down his face. He sobbed where he stood, swaying against the force that pushed him forward and the force that pulled him backward.

Maybe it *was* wrong. Erica had tried to kill herself. Everyone blamed him. She went into therapy. She said her heart was too broken to feel anymore.

That had gone right over his head at the time. He just hoped no one filed charges on him somehow. He worried about being sued for something.

Now he knew. The Devil was real. She was beautiful. She was wrathful. She made you want damnation more than any piece of ass you ever went hard for. She made you like it.

"I'm sorry," he hissed out. "I'm s-sorry. I'm sorry."

That gave him a burst. He took four more steps forward before his limbs locked down again. He fell to his knees and clutched the hand holding the gun. He

felt himself wanting to do everything but what he was doing. The power she had over him was fighting back. Fighting to satisfy her will, fighting to resist disappointing her in the smallest way.

He crawled forward on three limbs, gun at the ready in an unsteady limb. Sweat poured down his face. He made only a few feet at a time before breathing heavily.

“I’m not going back. I’m not going back,” he said under his breath. “You can’t have her. You can’t.”

Tracks had popped a couple of buds into her ears and was listening to music from her phone while she worked in the living room. She’d have her back to the doorway he’d come through. One clean shot. That’s all it took. She’d never know it was coming.

Lady Dusk could move with inhuman speed, he knew. She could cross great distances in a blink. He knew. He knew. He knew he’d have only a couple of moments to slide that barrel in his mouth and follow Tracks out of the slavery that awaited her. Lady Dusk would have to undo both locks on her door first. He’d have just enough time, if he was quick.

His hand refused him. His hand was going to beat against the wall, to try to beat the gun out of his hand. Lady Dusk would surely hear that. He gripped his

hand tightly over the gun and squeezed it for dear life with the other.

He threw his back against it and slide another few feet, nearly to the doorway. He could brace his back against the doorway and force his way up. Level off the gun and pull. Swallow the barrel and pull. Pop pop. That fast.

He crawled into the doorway and pushed his spine against the door jam. He pushed up with his rebellious legs. He watched her come into view over the chair she sat in. She was humming to herself while she painted.

Well, she was about to paint that canvas another way, he thought. A work of art by Andros...

No. William. His name was William Price.

“My name...my name...” he raised the gun to point at the back of her head, holding his arm as steady as he could. “My name is William Price.”

His finger tightened on the trigger but failed. He squinted. He grunted. He clenched his teeth. He pulled again.

Lady Dusk crushed his fingers around the gun with one hand and had him in the air by his throat with the other. The gun crumpled inside his wrecked palm. He swallowed the agony; he couldn't scream with the choke hold she had on him.

"I didn't light my incense this time," she told him. "I could smell your sweat."

She brought her fingers together around his throat. It compacted with the pressure. There was the sound of tearing, cracking, snapping. She could hear every mote of damage she did as she killed him.

She felt his pulse stop as his eyes rolled back. She felt the death tremors of shocked nerve endings. She saw the sheen of sweat on his paling skin and admired it. She was lost in the moment. Lost in this brutal execution and the sculpture she had just created.

Slowly, Lady Dusk became aware that there was music nearby. Tracy was working away without a care in the world, oblivious to how close she'd come to being a casualty of a ghoul's jealousy.

Lady Dusk dragged the body into the garage and tossed it aside. There was a Kindred in town who offered a quick cleanup service in exchange for minor boons. She stared down at Andros' body, still twitching, with

a hand against her cheek. Yet another boon. Still, there was need. The cleaner was efficient. Many vampires used the service and the vampire was rich in minor boons.

Cleaners! She'd have to deal with them too, eventually.

She walked out of the garage, locking it behind her. She came up beside Tracy and allowed the artist to see her. Tracy popped the earbuds out as Lady Dusk surveyed the painting in progress.

"You do have a flair, don't you?" she said. "Look at all that color. You make it look so easy. What a wonderful contrast. Is this a picture of someone you know?"

"Just an angel. It's a long way from complete but I can see it in mind so clearly. I can do this. I believe in it."

"That's the spirit," Lady Dusk gushed. "I'll leave you to your work for now. I'll be busy upstairs but I'll be happy to look at your work just before dawn. I can pay a commission to you then. I'm pulling an all-nighter of my own accord, it seems."

"I haven't seen your guy since I started painting. I was going to ask him if he could get me some water. I didn't want to get up and risk losing the vibe."

“Oh, I’m afraid I just terminated Andros’ employment here. I found his negativity unbearable.” She sighed and rolled her eyes. “I tell you, good help is so hard to find.”

Lady Dusk will return...

special thanks

My special thanks and good will to Aurora O'Brien, who modeled and shot the beautiful picture of Lady Dusk that opened the story. Aurora has an Instagram at [aurora_obrien](#), and a fan page at [adventuring_muse](#). Both are worth checking out if you enjoyed her work here.

The exhibit mentioned in the book, “You who are getting obliterated in the dancing swarm of fireflies,” is an actual exhibit at the Phoenix Art Museum. Aurora and I stumbled upon it on our adventures and found it one of the most amazing experiences we had there. Here’s what it’s like in real life:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qX_uV3hKsuc

The song mentioned in the story, John McCormack’s “All Alone,” is on Youtube at the link below. It was a good song, I felt, but it wasn’t until I sank into the lyrics that I realized how appropriate it was for Lady Dusk.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XCraWNt_Mpg