

Innocence

How many centuries had it been since I had been in a hospital room? I wondered silently as I stood motionless in the corner. *Surely it could have been no more than two.* The smell had changed little, now death and urine lay buried in ammonia and disinfectant. I avoided passing any breath through my nose, my inhuman sense of smell far too acute for the chemical scent. It burned at even the slightest draw of breath, filling my mouth with a caustic taste. The room had pale pink satin finished walls and white tiles with veins of gray decorating the floors. The royal blue curtain that hung from the track on the ceiling lay open, leaving the closed hospital room door in plain sight from the bed.

I noted the nights' fog beyond the now closed window and heard the rhythmic drip of the IV but my attention lay fixated on the frail human girl on the lone bed. Kai lay undisturbed in bleached white linens creased over a royal blue wool blanket. The soft gentle glow of the night light at her head board shone down on her short, raven black hair, catching the unnatural paleness in her cheeks. She wore a tartan flannel night gown, composed of small blue and green thatch. It hid the feminine curved of her young body, its long sleeves buttoning at the wrist, leaving only her frail hands exposed. Her aura glowed a dim electric blue, almost a soft white, but remained free of any darkened spots. She was the purest creature I had ever known. She reminded me of home, not so much a place as a time. A time of friendship, of love, of honor. I tried to keep those memories away. The sharp enhanced details of my uncompromising memory saddened me still. The words of my immortal mentor seemed suddenly crisp in my mind. *'The true curse of immortality is the ability to watch helplessly as history repeats itself...knowing that time is the most vicious and cunning predator of all.'*

The first time I had seen her she had been fifteen, her hair long and black, her eyes like emerald fires. It was summer, and the days were long, leaving me little time to be among the living before the returning dawn. But despite the long days I liked the warmth of summer nights, reminding me what it was to be a creature of the sun. Sometimes I felt almost human. I found her in the park, laying in the warm grass looking up to the moon and heavens. She glowed like a luminescent piece of polished quartz as she tried to fathom the beauty of the celestial bodies that lay above her. Her aura burned the night like the stars above her and in and of itself it raised my curiosity.

I watched her intently from the roof of the recreation building. The dark wooden shingles helped to camouflage my black clothed form. I could hear her softly humming “When You Wish Upon a Star” and I could not help but smile. Didn’t she realize how dangerous this park was at night? As specially for a beautiful young girl. Drug pushers, gang members, and undesirables made the park a wonderful hunting ground but she was a lamb among wolves. I opened my mind to find the answer to my question, but there was no fear in her. I could feel only the tingle of fascination as she stared up toward the constellations. Sitting down on the angled pitch of the roof I watched her, looking at the world and the heavens through her mind. She would smile and her heart would race with excitement when she caught a glimpse of a shooting star or catch the tiny glimmer of a passing satellite. It was a euphoria unlike any I had ever seen in a mortal..

I shrouded her from the other mortals, filling their minds with images of the brutal death I would have given one of them had I not been so mystified by her. I was careful never to let those images bleed on to her. A few hours before dawn her eyes became heavy, and she rose slowly to make her way home. I followed her, shadowing myself from her senses, distracting her mind away from me. When she reached her parents gray,

teal trimmed house she climbed the lattice work outside her bedroom window. She disappeared into the darkened room beyond, closing the second story window behind her. Loneliness settled over me as I made my way back toward the park. I barely had time to feed before returning to my lair to slumber. I dreamt of her soft innocent face and the wonder that had possessed her mind.

I rose and hunted early every night thereafter, the sun barely below the horizon as I made my way into the world. I would wait for her near her home, and follow her down to the park to watch her gaze in wonder at the night. Seeing the world through her reminded me of the purity of things, the world how it should have been. She knew nothing of death, or jaded love. She only knew the wonder of life. She dreamt of marriage and of making love, but never separately, always together. They were the dreams of a virgin, her passion always soft and sweet, untainted by lust. Mostly she would think of the future and of marriage. Her fantasy prince was always the same. He was tall and slender, his blond hair cropped short, his eyes blue and affectionate. He was the total opposite of everything I was and in some ways everything I wished I could be.

In late August I became aware through her thoughts that her return to school would soon halt her nightly escapades. I began to miss her even before she had gone. As Fall set in I would hide in the oak tree in front of her house and close my eyes and listen to her thoughts. She was reading *Cyrano De Bergerac* for her English class, and I watched the images that filled her mind. As the tale unfolded I felt the swelling sympathy in her. For several nights I returned to the tree to listen to her mind as she read. When she finished, she set the book down gently and made her way to the window. I opened my eyes to see her leaning against the wooden casing through the tree's foliage. Her arms lay folded across her chest as if to keep away the cold radiating through the

glass. She scanned the night for comfort as a tear slid from her eye and cascaded down her cheek. My heart ached with her sorrow as I sat motionless in the dark foliage. She cried selflessly for him in silence, he who had not really lived that story, he who was not so different from I. I think it was in that moment that I realized the depth of her innocence. In a world of violence and chaos she remained unscathed and pure. It was in that moment that I became the guardian of her innocence.

Years passed and her beauty blossomed into womanhood while her heart remained pure. I protected her from those who tried to deceive her, young boys whose intentions were less than honorable. I would see them in her thoughts and then seek them out and probe their intentions while they slept. Most wanted her for bedding, and those I left subconscious messages that disassociated her from sex in their puberty fevered minds. I intended them no ill will, they were merely young men hungry for the knowledge of a woman. There were a few whose intents were sincere and I left them to their pursuit of her. She was not hard to love, I could hardly hold them back from that, being guilty of it myself.

There was one however whose mind held intentions for her that were dark. I caught him watching her bedroom window at night, stalking her not unlike myself. He was not unlike in appearance to her fantasy love, blond hair with blue eyes, muscular. He smelt of expensive cologne and ill intent and I being the better hunter watched him carefully. Every year, as the summers grew close she would sneak out to the park. This bold predator was quick to learn this, and he would wait for her to arrive each night. Lacking my ability to shadow himself, he hid behind the large dumpsters, stroking himself as he watched her lie on the grass. I tried to fill his mind with images to frighten him off, but they only seemed to excite him.

His mind flooded mine with images of her screaming and crying beneath him as he ripped her clothes from her. She struggled beneath him to escape but he worked himself between her legs, ramming himself into her as she screamed for him to stop. *Tell me how much you love it you little whore.* He would say over and over as she cried in pain and violation. I could see the face of other girls in his mind, other victims. I clamped my mind closed, reeling back in horror and rage, my immortal blood pulsing through my muscles. My finger nails extended like claws, the ridged muscles forcing them out were like steel cables. I could feel my fangs extend behind my lips and knew I would end this tonight. For the first time in three years I willed Kai to go. My suggestion in her mind was subtle and she thought it to be her own. She rose up from the grass and brushed it from her body as she began making her way home.

He watched her go, his fantasy increasing as his orgasm neared. I lowered myself to the ground from atop the Recreation Center. I was merely five feet from him when I unshadowed myself. I felt the sudden fear fall over him, his instincts taking the place of his twisted mind. I could see myself through his mind, a pale six foot vampire with long flowing brown hair and violet eyes. Brows arched in anger and shrouded in black clothing and a long black leather trench coat. He stood frozen, his erection dwindling in his hand, as his mind caught between surprise and terror. Before he could cry out I wrapped my taloned hand around his neck and lifted him from the ground. He grabbed at my hand, trying to pry my fingers from his wind pipe.

“Now you will know what it is to play a victim.”

He tried to scream in terror as I slammed my free hand into his chest and ripped out his heart. I showed him the pulsing organ and his eyes seemed to widen as I held it above my head squeezing the blood from it into my open mouth. The hot liquid was

sweet with adrenaline. Some of it spilled onto my chin and as the flow stopped. I shoved the crushed organ back among the splintered bone and flesh that had once been rib cage and diaphragm. I watched the life in him fade as his oxygen deprived brain began to tingle with unconsciousness and death. As the last glimpse of life faded from him I threw his corpse into the dumpster and removed some matches from my pocket. Lighting one I threw it in with him, the stinking hot dog wrappers and dry garbage catching quickly. I left the park with my hunger sustained but not satisfied and I could smell the remaining blood boiling in his flaming corpse on the night air all the way back to her house. I made sure Kai had reached the safety of her bedroom and then returned to my lair, shocked at the brutality of my killing. It reminded me painfully of how different from her I was and how I could never allow for her to learn of my existence. I could not risk tainting her innocence by condemning her to know the possible horrors of what I and my kind were capable of.

The next six months had gone on as they had the months before, and then one night I returned to her home to find her gone. The house was empty and a panic lingered in the air. I entered through Kai's window to find her bed stained with blood. There was a trail of crimson stains from her room to where it had pooled on the bathroom floor. It was not blood from a wound, it was dead blood. It smelt spoiled, its color dark, hemorrhaged.

Four frantic phone calls and hours later I found her here in this sterile world, dying.

"I was wondering when you'd come, Ian." The male voice came warm and smooth from the other side of the room.

My immortal heart skipped in my chest as I snapped my attention from Kai. Standing beside the window stood a familiar nemesis of mine shrouded in his black robe.

“What are you doing here, Arcesilaus?”

“It’s her time Ian. Did you think I would not come to deliver her myself? That is unless you have other plans.”

I stepped toward him from the corner with rage in my violet eyes. He had read my thoughts as easily as I had read hers.

“And taint the very thing that makes me love her! You know I won’t give her this dark curse!”

“But still you entertain the idea. It is swirling in you mind like a great thrashing serpent.”

I made my way to the side of the bed and knelt on the floor, staring at the soft color of her face.

“I could give her eternal life, Arcesilaus! But at what cost? Her innocence? Her soul?”

“She has eternal life,” Arcesilaus began. “She has it with her God.”

I took her warm frail hand gently. Tears prised my vision as one leaked from my eye.

“Her God.” I spat. “What divine being would be so cruel as to rip such a rose from the world?”

“He who made this lamb made thee, Ian. You yourself are both deadly and divine by nature, why should He not be?”

I rolled my eyes toward the ceiling fighting the tears, cursing my immortality.

“If I believe the legends, Arcesilaus, then the Devil made me, not your heavy handed God!”

“You and I know each other too well for you to think I would lie to you my friend. What creature, if not under God, could stand here and know me, Death?”

I looked back to Kai, still sleeping silently, oblivious to us both. Arcesilaus loomed closer to my side.

“And if I were killed by sunlight, where would your God have you deliver me?”

“You above all your kind, Ian, are destined to be delivered to him for final reckoning. Rest easy my friend, you are not as immortal as you think.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“Perhaps we can discuss that later, Ian. It is time.” Arcesilaus said, raising his hand to take her.

“Arcesilaus, wait!”

“You know I cannot.”

I stared at her neck, knowing I could stop him, knowing I could save her. His hand reached out toward her shoulder, her hand still in mine.

“Arcesilaus not here, please!”

His hand only loomed closer, ignoring my plea. I felt my fangs protrude. My urgency shortening my breath. My heart thundering in my ears. His hand closer still. I released her hand. Lunged away from her toward the window. I braced myself on the wooden frame. I heard the heart monitor scream out in flat line and I turned back to see her spirit stand from her body and embrace him. She turned to me smiled and then they were gone, faded into the air. I heard the cry of agony that came from my throat, but I could not remember making it. The window exploded outward in a thousand crystalline

shards and I jumped into the night air as the nurses and doctors came crashing into the room to save a life that was already gone.

-Phillip Richard Olsen