

Amelie's Story

Outside, nightfall had truly come, and it was a glorious darkness.

Amelie stood, one hand holding back the heavy velvet of the draperies, and watched the streetlights of her town blink on, one after another. A faint circle of safety for the humans to cling to, an important illusion without which they could not long survive. She had learned a great deal about living with humans, over the past few hundred years.

More than about living with her own kind, she supposed.

"Yes?" She had heard the tiny whisper of movement behind her, and knew one of her servants had appeared in the doorway. They never spoke unless spoken to. A benefit to having servants so long-lived; one could reasonably expect them to understand manners. Not like the children of today, sparking as bright as fireflies, and gone as quickly. No manners. No sense of place and time.

"Oliver," the servant said. It was Vallery; she knew all their voices, of course. "He's at the gates. He requests a conversation."

Did he. How interesting. She'd thought he'd slink off into the dark and lick his wounds for a year or two, until he was ready to play games with her again. He'd come very near to succeeding this time, thanks to her own carelessness. She could ill afford another occurrence.

"Show him in," she said. It was not the safest course, but she found herself growing tired of the safe road. There were so rarely any surprises, or strangers to meet.

Like the surprise of the children living in her house on Lot Street. The angelic blond boy, with his passion and bitterness, woven into the fabric of the house and trapped there. Or the strange girl, with her odd makeup and odder clothing. Or the other boy, the strong one, quick and intelligent and wishing not to seem so.

And the youngest, oh, the youngest girl, with her diamond-sharp mind. Fierce and small and courageous, although she would not know the depths of it for years yet.

Interesting, all of them, and that was a rarity in Amelie's long, long eternity. She had been kind to them, out of not better reason than that. She could afford to be kind, so long as it risked her nothing in return.

Oliver deliberately made noise as he approached her study, a gesture of politeness she appreciated. Amelie turned from the window and sat down in the velvet-covered chair beside it, arranging her skirts with effortless grace and folding her hands in her lap. Oliver looked less harassed than he had; he'd taken time to bathe, change, compose himself. He'd tied his gray curling hair back in the old style, a subtle sign to her that he was willing to accommodate her preferences, and he was perfectly correct in his manners as he bowed to her and waited for her to gesture him to take a seat.

"I am grateful to you for the opportunity to speak," Oliver said as he settled himself in the chair. Vallery appeared in the doorway with a tray and two silver cups; she gave him a slight nod, and he delivered them refreshment. Oliver drank without taking his eyes from her. She sipped. "I thought we had an agreement, Amelie. Regarding the book."

"We did," she said, and sipped again. Fresh, warm, red blood. Life itself, salty and thick in her mouth. She had long learned how to feast neatly on it. "I agreed not to interfere with your ... searches. But I never agreed to forego the opportunity to retrieve it myself, if the chance presented. As it did."

"I was cheated."

"Yes," she agreed softly, and smiled. "But not by me, Oliver. Not by me. And if you should consider taking your petty revenge on the children, please remember that they are in my house, under my sign of Protection. Don't make this cause for complaint."

He nodded stiffly, eyes sparking anger. He put his cup back on Vallery's tray. It rang empty. "What do you know of the boy?"

"Which boy?"

"Not Glass. The other one. Shane Collins."

She raised one hand in a tiny, weary gesture. "What is there to know? He is barely a child."

"His mother was resistant to conditioning."

Amelie searched her memory. Ah, yes. Collins. There had been an incident, unfortunate as such things were, and she had dispatched operatives to see to the end of it when the elder Collins had taken his wife and son and left Morganville. "She should be dead by now," she said.

"She is. But her husband isn't." Oliver smiled slowly, and she did not care for the triumph in his expression. Not at all. "I have a report that he returned to town only an hour ago, and went straight to the house where his son is staying. Your house, Amelie. You are now sheltering a potential killer." She said nothing, did nothing. After a long moment, Oliver sighed. "You cannot pretend that this is not a problem."

"I don't," she said. "But we shall see what develops. After all, this town is a sanctuary."

"And the children?" he asked. "Are you extending your Protection to them even if they come after vampires?"

Amelie sipped the last of her blood, and smiled. "I might," she said.

"Then you want a war."

"No, Oliver, I want the right to make my own decisions in my own town." She stood, and Oliver stood too as if drawn on the same string. "You may go."

She went back to the window, dismissing him from her thoughts. If he was inclined to dispute it, he thought better - possibly because Vallery was not the only servant she had within a whisper's call -- and he withdrew from the field without surrender.

Amelie folded her hands on the warm wood of the window ledge and stared at the faint glow of moonrise on the horizon.

"Oh, children," she sighed. "What ever shall I do with you?"

She was not in the habit of risking her life or position. Especially not for mere humans, whose lives blinked on and off as quickly as the streetlights below.

If Oliver was right, she would have little choice.