

THE VAMPIRE NEXT DOOR

SUBURBAN FANTASY I



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Suburban Fantasy

The Vampire Next Door

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SUBURBAN FANTASY

THE VAMPIRE NEXT DOOR

BY KATICA LOCKE

SUBURBAN FANTASY: THE VAMPIRE NEXT DOOR

Simon Walker set his breakfast dishes in the sink, filled his small, silver thermos with steaming coffee, and grabbed his jacket off the back of the sofa as he headed for the door. Cheery birdsong and thin, early spring sunlight greeted him as he stepped outside, stooping to pick up the paper before locking the house and descending the front steps. Paper tucked under one arm, he unlocked his Camry and tossed his jacket over into the passenger's seat, followed by the newspaper. Setting the thermos between the seats, he left the door standing open as he walked down the driveway to fetch the empty garbage can from beside the curb.

The rumble of a diesel engine drew his attention to the quiet, suburban street as a large, blue and white moving truck rolled toward him, overhanging tree branches scraping across the top and raining tattered new leaves onto the road in its wake. The truck slowed as it approached, finally stopping with a piercing squeal of brakes in front of the empty house next to Simon's. The place had been on the market for months, until a week ago.

Down from the cab of the truck climbed a

young woman around his own age, mid-twenties, with long, jet black hair and dark, piercing eyes. Simon had never seen eyes that dark before. Even so—and perhaps because of it—she was very pretty. He had seen her a few times before, talking with the realtor, looking around the house. He glanced at his watch and sighed. Time enough to be neighborly and introduce himself.

She had disappeared around behind the truck and he heard the rolling rattle of the large door being lifted as he strode down the sidewalk, followed by the mechanical hum of the lift being lowered. She was staring down at the ground as Simon neared the back of the truck, raking her fingers back through her hair and gathering it into a ponytail at the nape of her neck, and she jerked her head up as he stopped across the grass parking strip from her.

“Good morning,” he said, offering a friendly smile.

“Who are you?” she asked, her voice surprisingly harsh and raspy. “What do you want?” Taken aback, Simon opened his mouth, then closed it again.

“I— I’m your neighbor, Simon Walker,” he

said finally. "I just wanted to introduce myself and welcome you to the neighborhood." She stared at him for a moment, her dark eyes seeming to look right through him, and then she grunted and turned away, climbing up into the back of the truck and disappearing from view. Simon glanced back toward his house, unsure of what to do. It didn't feel polite to just walk away. That wasn't how *he* was raised.

Thumping, clanking, and dragging sounds issued from the back of the truck, and he took a hesitant step into the grass.

"I'd offer to give you a hand," he called, "but I'm on my way to work..."

"You're still here?" She leaned out the back of the truck and looked down at him. "I don't need a hand. My boyfriend will be here this evening with the rest of our stuff. Now go away." Simon backed off, returning to the sidewalk.

"All right, then," he said, tucking his hands in his pockets. "Nice to meet you; sorry to bother you." She didn't respond and he walked away, casting a glance over his shoulder at the truck as he began to drag his garbage can up the driveway. Would her boyfriend be just as charming, he

wondered. Probably. Still, he supposed there were worse things than neighbors who wanted to be left alone.

After parking the garbage can at the corner of the house, he climbed into his car and pulled out his cell phone, sending out a quick Tweet: *Met 1 of new neighbors. Hope I don't have to borrow sugar. Ever.* He grimaced and fastened his seatbelt before starting the car and pulling out of the driveway. The woman was climbing down from the truck as he drove past, and, always a glutton for punishment, he waved. She just stared and then turned away.



Squinting into the late afternoon sun, Simon turned down his street, raising his eyebrows as he neared the still half-full truck, the back end wide open and a wooden dining room chair lying in the street behind it, splintered into half a dozen pieces. After parking the car, he started over to see if everything was all right, but hesitated, a flashback of that morning running through his mind. Shaking it off, he hurried down the driveway and toward the front walk. She came

out of the house to meet him, a scowl shadowing her dark eyes.

“What?” she demanded, brushing a stray lock of hair back from her face. Simon stopped short.

“Is everything okay?” he asked, motioning over his shoulder to the truck. “Did you break that chair?”

“Everything’s fine,” she replied. “It came that way.” For a moment, he thought she was making a joke, and he almost smiled, but her sharp eyes held not one ounce of humor and after a moment he cleared his throat.

“Sorry to bother you, then,” he said. “I was just...”

“I have a boyfriend,” she said loudly, crossing her arms over her chest.

“Right, you said that,” Simon said, frowning at her strange and sudden outburst. Then it hit him. “Oh.” He took a backward step toward the sidewalk. “Look, I wasn’t trying to hit on you or anything, I was just being neighborly, since we do share a property line, you know? I’ll just go.” He turned and headed for the safety of his own

yard. He shook his head as he made his way up the driveway. Somebody had a high opinion of herself. He glanced over the low, scrubby juniper hedge growing between their properties and found her still scowling at him. “Anyway, you’re really not my type,” he added before returning to his after-work ritual.

Gathering up his jacket and empty thermos—the paper having long been recycled at work—he let himself into his small, two-story house. Tossing the jacket over the back of the couch, he put the thermos beside the coffeemaker and went upstairs to change. Returning to the kitchen in sweats and a T-shirt, he fixed himself dinner while the news was on, ate during *Wheel-of-Fortune*, and washed the day’s dishes as *Jeopardy* droned in the background.

“What is Argentina,” he muttered to himself as he dried a plate and set it in the cupboard. Drawn by a sudden brightening outside in the street, Simon turned his gaze to the kitchen window, leaning on the edge of the counter as he looked down the block toward his new neighbor’s house. A vehicle had turned into the driveway, something long and black. He caught

only a glimpse in the dark, but it reminded him of a hearse. Chuckling to himself, he went back to cleaning up. Honestly, after meeting the girlfriend, it would not have surprised him at all if the guy did pull up in a hearse.

Cracking open a beer, he flopped down on the sofa and grabbed the remote, punching through the channels as he sipped from the can, letting the hypnotizing wash of flickering blue-white light and intermittent bursts of random noise roll over him. He had just completed his second time through the eighty-six channels when he was startled by a sharp knock on the door. Glancing at the clock—it was nearly eight-thirty—he set his beer on the coffee table and went to the door.

As he turned the deadbolt and pulled the door open, he flipped on the porch light, which was usually the last thing he did before bed. The light fell across one of the most strikingly handsome men that Simon had ever seen. Black hair fell in loose, careless curls to his collar, framing a rugged, but startlingly pale face with high cheekbones and bright, deep-set green eyes. He was older than Simon, but not by much; early

thirties if Simon had to guess. The guy flashed a warm smile, but all Simon could do was stare.

“Sorry to interrupt your evening,” he said, his voice deep and mellow, bringing to mind the image of melting chocolate. “Are you Simon?” Simon blinked, startled to hear his name come from those lips, in that voice.

“Yes...yes, I am. Simon Walker. H- how do you...”

“My sister said you stopped in to welcome her to the neighborhood. I wanted to thank you, since I’m sure she didn’t.”

“I’m sorry,” Simon said with a confused shake of the head. “Your sister? *Who* are you?”

“Julian,” he said with another charming smile as he offered his hand. “Julian Marcellos. My sister is Raven. We bought the house next door.”

“Oh,” Simon said, finally reaching out to shake the new neighbor’s hand. “She’s your sister. She said something about a boyfriend—I must have misunderstood.” Julian’s grip was firm, his hand soft, but cold.

“No, you didn’t misunderstand,” Julian said,

taking his hand back and absently rubbing it against the other. "Sorry about the cold fingers; poor circulation. But you know what they say: cold hands, warm heart, right?" There it was again, that bright smile that made something in the middle of Simon's chest flutter. He nodded distractedly.

"Anyway," Julian continued, "Raven can be a little...blunt, and she likes to tell men that I'm her boyfriend so they'll leave her alone. I think you caught her in a bad mood this morning. This move was unexpected and has been very stressful."

"I can understand that," Simon said. "I really wasn't hitting on her though, if that's why you're here." Julian laughed.

"She told me you said she wasn't your type," he said. "I think she was a little insulted." Simon opened his mouth to apologize, but Julian didn't give him a chance. "It's good for her—she needs a dose of reality once in a while. Maybe she'll realize that every guy who speaks to her *isn't* just trying to get in her pants. Anyway," he motioned over his shoulder, toward the moving van, "I came over because Raven said you offered to help

her unload, and I was wondering if the offer still stands. There are a few things I could use a hand with. It won't take long." It wasn't even nine yet, so Simon nodded.

"Sure, no problem. Just let me grab some shoes and I'll meet you over there." He started to step back into the house and shut the door.

"So what is your type?" Julian asked, and Simon drew the door back partway.

"I'm sorry—What?" he asked, sure he had misheard. Julian grinned at him.

"I asked, what is your type? You said Raven wasn't, so I was just curious."

"Oh..." *It's standing on my front porch.* "I don't know," Simon said, feeling the heat creep up his neck and into his ears. "Not her. No offense."

"None taken," Julian replied, stepping backward down the porch steps without even looking where he was going. "She's a difficult young woman. I'll be in the truck. Thanks for the help." Simon nodded, watching him walk down the driveway before shutting the door and leaning heavily against it, his breath escaping him in a rush.

“Holy shit,” he whispered, closing his eyes and leaning his forehead against the cool, smooth wood. His heart was pounding. After a moment he pushed himself away from the door and went to find his sneakers. They were under the edge of the kitchen table. As he pulled them on and tied the laces, he couldn’t stop his conversation with Julian from playing through his mind. That smile, that laugh—was he flirting? It almost seemed like it, but Julian might just have been being friendly, trying to get some help with the truck. Simon knew he had a tendency to see things as he wanted to see them, and not as they really were.

As he headed toward the street, he glanced over at the long, black vehicle parked in Julian’s driveway, and a crooked grin tugged at the corner of his mouth. It wasn’t a hearse, it was a Dodge Magnum. That was what happened when he let his imagination run amok. He could hear thumping and scuffling noises coming from the truck as he hurried across the parking strip, and was startled to find Julian already pushing a gray-blue sofa toward the open end of the truck.

“Gee, I don’t know,” Simon said, eyeing the

contents of the truck. "Maybe I should see if Jim across the street is busy. This looks like more than a two person job."

"Don't be silly," Julian said, giving the couch another shove and sending it sliding across the scarred and pitted floor. "Raven and I loaded all this stuff ourselves. It's not as heavy as it looks, it's just bulky, unwieldy. Take this end; you'll see." Simon eyed the couch dubiously. All he needed was a hernia. But he grabbed the sofa behind the two blocky legs and lifted, glancing over his shoulder as he walked backward.

"Okay, hold up," Julian said, resting the other end on the edge of the raised lift. Simon couldn't help but notice the smooth grace of his handsome neighbor as Julian hopped down to the road. He moved like a cat. Shoving such thought aside, Simon adjusted his grip as Julian took the other end. "I'll lead," Julian offered, and started toward the house, glancing over his shoulder only once as they neared the small, cement porch.

They had to tip the couch on its back to get it through the door, but luckily the front door opened into the living room.

"Just set it here," Julian said, stopping in the

middle of the room. "I'm sure where ever we put it, Raven will want it somewhere else."

"I heard that," the dark haired, dark eyed young woman said, coming out of the kitchen with a copper-bottomed saucepan in one hand. She stared at Simon as he set his end of the sofa down, her sharp eyes glittering, but she said nothing.

"Raven, you remember our new neighbor, Simon, don't you?" Julian said, stepping toward her. "Simon was nice enough to help us out. Now come on, let's find a place for that pot." He turned her back toward the kitchen and draped his arm around her shoulders, glancing back at Simon with a smile. "I'll be right back," he said with a wink.

Uncertain of what to do, Simon glanced around the room, at the boxes stacked against one wall, several open ones sitting on the floor with balls of crumpled newspaper scattered around. It reminded him of how much he hated moving. So much work, so much mess. At least it was a nice house. Newer than his own, with fresh paint on the walls and new carpet on the floor. Everything was varying shades of white and

beige, though—much too bland for his tastes. He liked dark greens and blues and golds...

“That’s just like you, Julian,” he heard Raven say from the kitchen. “Always thinking with your dick.” Which was followed by the hollow sound of a copper-bottomed saucepan striking flesh. Julian emerged from the kitchen rubbing his shoulder. He gave Simon a crooked grin.

“Sorry about that,” he said and gestured toward the door. “Shall we?” As they headed back out to the truck, Simon couldn’t stop himself from glancing over, his gaze falling to the crotch of Julian’s faded jeans. What was Raven talking about? Not him, surely. He couldn’t be so lucky.

“So, have you lived here long?” Julian asked, and Simon quickly looked away.

“I guess...it’ll be two years in August,” he answered, stopping at the back corner of the truck. Julian braced his hands against the wire mesh of the lift and vaulted up, landing lightly on his feet.

“Is it a nice neighborhood?” Julian asked, turning and glancing down at him, a small smile dancing at the corner of his mouth. “It is

quiet, peaceful?” Staring up those long, denim-wrapped legs, Simon felt his mouth go dry. He nodded. “Good, that’s exactly what we’re looking for.” Julian disappeared into the back of the truck and Simon turned away, running a hand back through his hair and biting the inside of his lip. This could not be happening; he had to be dreaming.

“So, um...where are you from?” Simon called into the vehicle, uncomfortable in the silence.

“Chicago, Illinois,” Julian replied, and further conversation was stalled as a horrible scraping sound issued from inside the truck. He reappeared dragging a tall bureau, masking tape wrapped around it to keep the drawers from sliding out.

“Chicago, really?” Simon asked, stepping forward to grab the bottom of the bureau as Julian rocked it back on two legs. “I never would have guessed. You don’t have an accent.” He nodded toward the bureau. “You know, these are a lot lighter if you take the drawers out.”

“It’s not that heavy,” Julian assured him. “We took all the stuff out. And we moved around a lot while I was growing up. I was born in Chicago,

but I've lived all across the United States of America." He jumped down and grabbed the upper end of the bureau, leading Simon back into the house.

It took a good hour to finish unloading the truck, and Simon was sweaty and out of breath by the time they carried the second full-size box springs into the house. The first, along with the mattress, they had taken into the master bedroom for Raven, which he had thought was very generous of Julian, and he was looking toward the smaller of the two bedrooms as they entered the house, but Julian had other plans.

"This might be a tight squeeze," Julian said, heading down the hall that led to the garage and utility room. Simon raised his eyebrows as Julian paused and opened the door that led down into the basement, letting a draught of cold, dry air into the hall.

"You're kidding, right?" Simon said, setting his end of the box springs down. "You're not really sleeping in the basement, are you?"

"Why not?" Julian asked. "It's finished—it's like its own little apartment." He glanced in the direction of the kitchen. "Besides, Raven needs

her space...and so do I. C'mon, you'll see. It's the perfect bachelor pad." Simon couldn't remember the last time he had heard the term 'bachelor pad', but he didn't dwell on it. It wasn't the first turn of phrase that had struck him as quirky. Quirky could be good. Wasn't he tired of meeting the same boring guys all the time?

It took a hell of a lot of lifting and pushing and sliding to get the rigid box springs down the steep stairs and over the handrail. At least it was lightweight. He was not looking forward to maneuvering the heavy mattress. At the bottom of the stairs, he motioned for Julian to set it down, and he leaned on the wooden framework as he glanced around and caught his breath.

"Okay, it's not bad," he admitted finally. The carpet was steel blue, the walls a pale blue-gray. It looked nothing like his own dark, dank cellar. "You should open some of these windows, though," he said, wrinkling his nose. "It smells like paint in here."

"Yes, I meant to do that," Julian said, picking up his end again. "Ready?" Simon followed him into the small room where the bed frame was

already set up, the non-standard head and foot boards forged from twisted wrought iron.

“Nice,” Simon commented as he helped Julian set the box springs in place. “These look old; are they family heirlooms?” Julian shook his head.

“I found them at a lawn sale.”

“Lucky find,” Simon said, frowning. He pressed the tips of his fingers against his temples. “That smell is giving me a headache. Do you mind?”

“Oh, don’t trouble yourself,” Julian said. “I’ll take care of it in a minute.”

Simon did mind, though. He walked to the nearest window, high in the basement wall, and reached up to open it, but drew back, for a moment simply staring.

“This window has been painted black,” he said, and glanced around. They all had. That’s where the fresh paint smell was coming from. He turned to Julian. “Why are the windows painted?”

“Oh, Raven did it,” he said with a dismissive wave of his hand, as if that answered Simon’s

question, and he quickly propped open the two windows on his side of the bed, letting in a cool, earthy breeze. “Just the mattress left, right?” And he headed for the stairs. Simon followed, but suddenly quirky didn’t seem so good. One might call serial killers quirky. *They were nice people*, his neighbors would say. *We can’t believe they dismembered Simon and buried him in the back yard.*

“So, this is it?” Simon asked as they pulled the mattress out. There were still boxes stacked to one side of the truck, but nothing Julian and Raven couldn’t handle on their own. “I mean, it’s getting late and I have work in the morning—” He *really* did not want to go back into that basement.

“Oh, I’m sorry to keep you so long,” Julian said, looking over the edge of the mattress at him. “Yes, we can get the rest of it.” Despite the greater weight, the mattress was actually easier to take around the corners, since it had a bit of give to it. They placed it atop the box springs and Simon wiped the back of his hand across his sweaty brow, casting an uneasy glance at the painted windows as he backed toward the door.

"All right, well, I guess I'll just..."

"Of course," Julian said. "Thank you so much for your help. It would have taken us all night to bring this stuff in." He seemed to hesitate, his gaze moving down Simon's body. "I know I've already imposed upon you terribly, but I wonder if I could get your help with one more little thing." Without waiting for an answer, he turned and began digging through one of the boxes stacked in the corner.

Gun? Knife? Axe? Simon took another backward step toward the bedroom door, his muscles tensing as he prepared to run, but he relaxed again as Julian pulled a set of dark blue satin sheets out of the box. He glanced over at Simon, standing in the doorway, and then tossed the sheets down on the end of the bed.

"Never mind," he said. "I can manage. Thanks again. I wish I could give you something for your help, but I spent the last of our cash on gas and..."

"No, no—that's all right," Simon said quickly. "I'm more than happy to help. That's what neighbors are for, right?" He drew a slow breath. What were the odds of Julian actually being a

serial killer anyway? “So...why are the windows painted?” There was probably a perfectly reasonable explanation.

“It was cheaper than buying curtains,” Julian said with a slight shrug. Simon stared at him and after a moment Julian laughed. “I’m joking. It’s...Well, it’s not something I really like to talk about. You see how pale I am?” He pushed up the sleeves of his shirt, exposing smooth, white skin. “I can’t go into the sun. I’m photophobic. I have to work nights, sleep in the basement, paint the windows—it’s a bitch.”

“My God,” Simon said. “I’m sorry; that would be awful. What happens if you...”

“Imagine the worst sunburn you’ve ever had, tenfold. It could even kill me. But I try to not let it interfere with my life. It’s just what it is.”

“That’s a good attitude to have,” Simon said, and glanced at the sheets. “I’ve got time to help make the bed, if you like.” He was rewarded by a warm smile.

“I would be eternally grateful,” Julian said. As they spread the sheets, the satin cool against Simon’s skin, there was a heaviness in the silence,

and Simon found himself holding his breath, waiting for Julian to speak. “So, are you dating anyone right now?” Julian asked finally and Simon felt his heart start to pound. It didn’t feel like small talk; it didn’t feel like friendly curiosity.

“Not at the moment,” he answered, trying to sound casual. “Not for a while, actually. It’s been about seven months since...um...since my boyfriend and I broke up.” There it was, he said it. His eyes never left Julian’s face as he waited for a reaction.

“Seven months,” Julian repeated, his attention on the bed as he ran a hand across the sheet, smoothing the satin. “That’s quite a while.” He paused. “So...would I be out of line to offer you a drink? I have some nice wines.” He looked up from the bed, a hopeful smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

All concerns of being murdered and buried in the backyard suddenly vacated Simon’s mind as he pictured the two of them tangled in the satin sheets. He tried to swallow and couldn’t, his mouth suddenly dry.

"I can't," he said. "I have work in the morning, and I need to shower before bed..."

"I have a shower," Julian said, his voice low and dark. He moved around the end of the bed, each step slow, one hand rising up to unbutton the top three buttons on his shirt, revealing pale, smooth skin. "You can wash up while I look for the box that I packed the wine in, and then we can drink and relax and..." He trailed off, the silence filled with all kinds of dark promises as he stopped in front of Simon. "C'mon, Simon, it's just a drink."

"All- all right," Simon stammered. "But just one drink." Julian smiled at him and turned away.

"The shower's right there," he said as he left the room, leaving a breathless Simon in his wake. "I'll find you some clean towels."

"Thanks," Simon said, glancing around the room as he ran a hand back through his hair. What the hell was he doing? He never had casual sex with near-strangers—he was more responsible than that. And this was a neighbor, for Christ's sake. He'd have to live next to the guy for God only knew how long. How awkward would that

be? Simon could hear Julian rummaging through boxes in the other room, and he drew a bracing breath before stepping out of the bedroom. He'd just tell him that he changed his mind, that he had to go...

Julian had taken his shirt off. He was startlingly pale, but not in a sickly way. He looked very healthy, his upper body lean and muscular, his hair as dark as night against the back of his neck. *Just leave, just walk away, just—oh, hell.* Julian straightened up, pulling a stack of white towels out of a box.

"Here you go," he said, and tossed one of them to Simon, who almost missed catching it.

"Thanks," he said, holding it awkwardly against his chest. "I'll- I'll just be a minute."

"Take your time," Julian called after him as he fled into the bathroom and shut the door. He stood a moment, leaning back against the wood, listening to his heart pound in his ears. He *never* did things like this. What was he thinking? He wasn't, obviously. But was this really so bad? There was a difference between being reckless and being spontaneous. He didn't like being reckless, but a bit of spontaneity could be good for him.

He'd heard that old men always regretted the chances they didn't take. This could be one of those.

Stepping away from the door, he dropped the towel on the counter and pushed back the shower curtain. No soap, no shampoo, just bleached white tile and porcelain, but he just needed to rinse off the dust and sweat. He'd take a real shower in the morning before work. He'd need one, if this evening continued in the direction that it was heading.

Simon shed his clothes, wishing he had something clean to put on as he lay them beside the towel on the counter. He raised his eyes to the mirror hanging on the wall opposite the shower, grinning at himself as he struck a provocative pose. Maybe he wouldn't put his sweaty T-shirt and sweat pants back on. Maybe he'd walk out there stark naked. He bet Julian wouldn't be expecting that.

He turned on the water, fiddling with the knobs until it was just the right temperature—hot. He groaned in delight as he stepped into the near-scalding spray and pulled the shower curtain closed behind him. The water beat

against his skin, a delicious stinging that sent a shudder through his body. God, he loved a good shower.

A knock at the door made him jump, and before he could respond, he heard the door open.

"It's just me," Julian said, his shadow sliding across the curtain as he walked into the small bathroom.

"What is it?" Simon asked. "Is something wrong?"

"No, nothing's wrong," Julian said, and Simon took a startled step backward as the shower curtain slid aside and Julian stepped into the shower. "Oh, that's hot," he said, stiffening as the water poured over his shoulders and ran down his body, but he didn't turn the heat down. Simon stared, his mouth hanging open, as Julian turned a slow circle in the spray, wetting every inch of that alabaster skin until he gleamed like polished marble. As he turned to face Simon again, he ran his hands back over his hair and grinned.

"What's the matter?" he asked. "You look like you've never showered with a guy before."

“No, I— I just—You surprised me,” Simon stammered.

“A good surprised, I hope,” Julian said, taking a step toward him. Simon had to fight against the urge to back away. He didn’t understand that. Julian wasn’t threatening, not in word or deed. He was warm and charming—a little odd, perhaps, but nothing that justified Simon’s strong and sudden desire to run. It didn’t make any sense. He licked his dry lips and pushed it aside, trying to ignore the way his stomach fluttered as he took a step forward to meet Julian.

“Very good,” he murmured, finally allowing his gaze to slide down Julian’s body and appreciate his cock. It was as pale and finely formed as the rest of him, the head a barely blushing rose, and Simon daringly reached out and wrapped his hand around the shaft, giving it a slow stroke as he raised his eyes back to Julian’s. Julian made a sound low in his throat and the hair on the back of Simon’s neck stood on end, but he paid it no mind, his own cock stiffening as he felt Julian harden in his hand.

“Simon...” Julian growled, and Simon could almost feel the sound of his name rumbling in

his bones. God, what was wrong with him? One would think he had never been seduced before. He raised his chin, tilting his head back slightly as the taller man lunged at him, their lips meeting in a hard, desperate kiss. Hands gripped his shoulders, sliding up his neck to cup his cheek, to wind into his hair. He opened his mouth, groaning as Julian's tongue slipped past his own, claiming his mouth with a skill and ferocity that Simon had never encountered. When Julian pulled back, Simon was dizzy and breathless, and wondering what else the man could do with his mouth.

He literally got weak in the knees when Julian smiled at him. He had thought that only happened in bad romance novels.

"Turn around," Julian said, his voice husky, and Simon's cock twitched as Julian slid a finger into his own mouth and began to suck on it. As Simon turned and braced his hands against the damp tiles, he glanced over his shoulder, his lips parting as he started to tell Julian to take it easy, that it had been a long time, but he closed his mouth again. It had been such a long time, a long time since he'd had a hard cock buried inside

him, and he didn't want some sweet, hesitant sex, he wanted raw, hard fucking, he wanted to be sore in the morning and he wanted to enjoy getting that way.

"You are going to use more than spit, I hope," he said instead as Julian withdrew his finger from his mouth. That wasn't the type of sore he had in mind. Julian chuckled and stepped closer, one hand sliding up Simon's back to rest between his shoulder blades.

"Trust me," Julian said, leaning down to kiss the side of Simon's neck. Simon gasped as he felt the spit-slicked finger slip between his cheeks and rub across his opening.

"Julian..." he moaned, and drew a deep, slow breath as Julian eased inside of him, sliding in clear to the third knuckle without a twinge of discomfort. Surprising, after seven months. Then again, he supposed his body wouldn't forget that quickly. While he was dating Brad, it was a rare twelve hours that passed without Simon bent over some piece of furniture. Ah, the good old days.

Simon groaned as Julian stretched him, adding a second finger, and then a third, still

without the customary ache as he adjusted. He must really need this. Julian's lips played across his skin, kissing and sucking from his shoulder to the base of his ear, sending shivers of pleasure down to his cock every time Julian's teeth scraped across his skin.

"Please..." he heard himself whisper, his voice tight and strained. "Please, Julian—just fuck me." Julian didn't need a second invitation. Simon arched his back, drawing a shuddering gasp as Julian traded fingers for cock, thrusting into Simon in one swift, hard stroke. Simon cried out, the sound echoing off the tiled walls, as Julian filled him, the pleasure sweet and sharp, untainted by the usual dull ache and burn. Had he been doing it wrong all this time?

Julian leaned against him, wrapping his arms around Simon's body, one hand stroking Simon's cock as the other explored his stomach and chest. He began to rock his hips, sliding in and out of Simon in long, slow strokes, and Simon pushed back to meet him, his breath catching as Julian's cock bumped against his prostate, filling his body with a dark, smoldering pleasure. Now, if only he could see what was happening.

Simon liked to watch. He liked watching himself fucking or being fucked, it didn't matter which. He tried looking back over his shoulder, but that took his neck away from Julian's soft lips, which he didn't want. What he needed was a mirror...Shifting his weight to one hand, he reached out with the other and shoved the shower curtain back, groaning low in his throat as he stared at his own reflection, naked body arched in ecstasy, his cock hard and stiff...

What the fuck? He blinked hard, rubbing the back of his hand across his eyes before frowning at the mirror once more. Something was wrong with the mirror. He could see himself clearly enough, but Julian's reflection was all fogged over. When he looked at himself, he could see a blurry, faded figure behind him, an indistinct motion out of the corner of his eye, but when he tried to focus on Julian, it was like he wasn't even there.

"Let's not get water on the floor, okay," Julian said, reaching out and sliding the curtain closed again. Simon turned, twisting his upper body as far as it would go, and opened his mouth to ask what the hell just happened, but Julian caught

him by the chin, his hand sliding up to cup the side of Simon's face, and Julian's lips stole the breath from his body, silencing the question before he could speak it. Simon kissed back, his eyes sliding closed, and he moaned into Julian's mouth as Julian tightened his grip on Simon's cock, stroking him harder.

Letting go of Simon's face, Julian wrapped both arms back around his waist, and Simon braced both hands against the wall as Julian began to pound into him, hitting his prostate again and again.

"Oh, God, Julian!" Simon cried, his muscles clenching as he came hard, his body jerking as he splattered the wall with semen. Julian's rhythm didn't falter until Simon had finished and stood, legs trembling as he leaned against the wall and gasped for breath. "So good," Simon whispered. "So damn good."

"Glad you enjoyed it," Julian said, a hint of amusement in his voice. And then, to Simon's surprise, he pulled out.

"What are you doing?" Simon asked, turning halfway around as Julian began to stroke himself. "You can come in me; I don't mind." Honestly, he

liked it, liked the way it felt, liked the intimacy, the acceptance, the trust it implied. He was the same when it came to swallowing. Julian just shook his head and pumped himself harder.

“I didn’t think to grab a condom,” he said, his jaw tight. He drew a sharp breath and spilled himself, semen running down the back of his hand and dripping to the bottom of the tub. Simon watched as it swirled down the drain, his mouth going dry as he raised his eyes back to Julian’s face.

“Do you- Do you have something?” he asked, his heart beginning to pound.

“No,” Julian said, shaking his head, and Simon breathed an audible sigh of relief. “And I’m not worried about catching anything from you. I just...I’ve known guys who didn’t like the mess.” He turned into the shower spray, washing off his hands and cock before pulling the curtain back and stepping out of the tub. Simon stood a moment, staring after him, and then stepped forward into the spray, quickly rinsing off before he shut off the water. He pushed the curtain out of his way and stepped out onto the bathmat beside Julian.

“Well, I’m not one of those guys,” he said, glancing over at Julian as he grabbed his towel and began to dry off. Julian smiled at him.

“I’ll keep that in mind for the next time,” he said, but there was a sadness in his eyes as he looked away. What was wrong? Was he afraid there would be no next time? Simon considered the situation, and while it was unusual for him to develop any kind of relationship, let alone a sexual one, so quickly, he didn’t feel awkward or uncomfortable. Aside from those few moments of inexplicable near-panic, Julian was very easy to be around. Simon didn’t see why there couldn’t be a next time.

Simon glanced up from his musings, his gaze falling upon the large wall mirror, and he suddenly remembered Julian’s strange reflection. The mirror was completely misted over now, obscuring both of them. Was that what it was, condensation blurring Julian’s reflection? It had to be. There was no other explanation.

But even as he tried to accept the only rational answer, something nagged at the back of his mind, a collection of tiny, insignificant details coalescing into the impossible. Julian’s cold

hands, his pale skin, his odd manner of speaking, his hypersensitivity to the sun, his lack of a reflection—Simon wanted to laugh at himself, but he nearly choked on the cold knot in his throat. It couldn't be.

Simon reached out, raising his towel and wiping it across the face of the mirror. He stepped back, the towel slipping from his hands as he looked from the mirror to Julian and back again. This couldn't be.

"Simon," Julian said quietly as he wrapped his towel around his waist, "I can explain."

"Explain?" Simon repeated, his voice abnormally high. "Explain? Julian, you don't have a reflection!"

"I know," Julian said, glancing at the mirror out of the corner of his eye. "I don't have a tan or a pulse, either. It's...it's not a big deal."

"Not a big deal!" Simon shouted at him. "Julian, you're a fucking vampire!"

"So?"

That one word stopped Simon dead. He had expected Julian to laugh, to argue, to deny it,

but Julian just looked at him for a moment, and then sighed and left the bathroom. With water still dripping from his body, Simon grabbed his sweats and pulled them on, his hands shaking as he gathered up the rest of his clothes. This couldn't be happening. This had to be a dream. Julian was standing across the room, still wearing nothing but a towel, his arms folded across his chest, as Simon cautiously emerged from the bathroom.

"You're not a vampire," Simon said, slinking along the wall as he crept toward the stairs, his shoes clutched against his chest. "You can't be. It's impossible."

"It's not impossible," Julian said. "Now, why don't you just calm down, have a drink, and we can talk about this."

"What's to talk about?" Simon asked. "You're either a vampire, or you're wacko, and either way, I'm getting the hell out of here." He turned away from Julian and made a dash for the stairs. There was a blur of motion and he felt the wind of something passing close to him, and suddenly Julian was standing at the bottom of the stairs,

his wet hair tangled and his towel about to slip down off his hips.

“You know, I really thought you’d take it better than this,” Julian said, fixing the towel. “Back home, finding out that someone is a vampire is like...finding out they’re allergic to cats. It’s not a big deal.”

“Well, this isn’t ‘back home,’” Simon informed him. “Around here, it’s a huge fucking deal.”

“It shouldn’t be,” Julian said, a hint of anger in his voice for the first time. “I didn’t hurt you. I’m not going to hurt you. I’m not that kind of a person.”

“The hell you aren’t,” Simon said. “If I hadn’t discovered your little secret, you would have killed me and drank my blood.” He raised a hand to the side of his neck, feeling queasy as he remembered the feel of Julian’s lips upon his skin, kissing and sucking.

“Discovered?” Julian said with a harsh laugh. “I stood in front of a mirror. If I was trying to keep it a secret, do you really think I would have been that stupid? I’m eighty-four years old, Simon—I know how to keep what I am a secret. I wanted

you to know, but I wanted you to see *who* I was before you found out *what* I was.” He took a step forward and Simon scrambled away from him, drawing back one of his shoes in preparation to throw.

“Oh, Simon,” Julian whispered, the hurt on his handsome face enough to make Simon’s chest ache. Julian slowly shook his head and then stepped aside, making a half-hearted gesture toward the stairs. “Go on, then, if you must. I won’t stop you.” Simon hesitated, sure that it was some kind of trick, and then he ran, his bare feet thumping up the steps.

He burst through the basement door, into the hall, and slammed the door shut behind him. As he ran into the living room, Raven glanced up from moving the couch, a scowl shadowing her dark eyes as she dropped the end of the couch and took a step toward him. Was she one, too? No, he had seen her that morning, standing in the sun. So that made her his mortal puppet-servant-thing, right? He didn’t hang around to ask. He ran out the door and across the lawn.

“Julian!” he heard Raven shout as he hurdled

the junipers and almost smashed into the side of his car.

“Let him go, Raven,” Julian said, and it sounded like he was standing in the doorway of his house, though Simon didn’t spare a glance to find out. He had to get inside, where it was safe. Vampires couldn’t enter a house unless invited, right? It was a rule, or something.

He scrambled inside and slammed the door, throwing down his armful of clothes, his fingers fumbling with the locks as he gasped for breath. The deadbolt slid home with a thud and Simon froze, the silence settling around him, broken only by the sound of his own breathing. He stood, leaning against the door, listening and waiting.

Several minutes passed, and he finally straightened up, stepping back from the door and glancing around. There had to be something he could do, someone he could call...The police. He dashed into the living room and scooped his cell up off the coffee table, almost knocking over the half a can of warm beer. He dialed 9 and 1, but hesitated, his thumb poised over the last button. What the hell was he going to say? *Hello, my*

neighbor is a vampire... They'd hang up on him, or worse, cite him for making a prank call. He threw the phone down on the couch and ran his hands back through his wet hair. He had to tell somebody. When he turned up dead, his throat torn out and all his blood missing, he wanted a record. He picked up the cell again.

I'm in danger. New neighbor is a vampire. I may not survive the night. He pressed send, wondering if anyone would believe him. Probably not. He wandered back over to the front door and checked the locks again. Maybe Julian couldn't enter uninvited, but that wouldn't stop Raven from breaking in and slitting his throat in his sleep. Cheery thought.

Simon checked every window downstairs, and then headed upstairs. With the house secure, he sat down at his desk and opened his laptop, quickly logging into his blog. Feeling a bit like he was reporting on his own imminent murder, he detailed as much of his interaction with the new neighbors as he could remember, leaving out the part where he had sex in the shower with a bloodsucking fiend. As he read back over his own words, he realized how ridiculous it all sounded,

and he almost deleted the entry. No one would believe him. Not until it was too late, anyway. He sighed and hit submit.

“Why don’t I have a gun?” he muttered, rising from the desk. Not that a gun would do much good. Well, against Raven, it would, but not Julian. What killed vampires? Sunlight, but it was midnight, so that was out. Fire? That sounded right, but would make him an arsonist. There had to be something. Suddenly, he wished he didn’t hate horror movies as much as he did.

Dropping back down into his desk chair, he did a quick Google search on how to kill vampires. How insane was that? It was the twenty-first century, and he was searching the internet for information on vampires. His search turned up more than five and a half million results, so maybe it wasn’t as insane as he first thought. It almost made him wonder if he wasn’t the only one with a vampire living next door.

Clicking the first link, he waited a moment for the page to load, and scrolled down until he found what he was looking for. A wooden stake through the heart, sunlight, fire, or decapitation seemed to be the surest ways to dispatch a

vampire. No sun, not real enthusiastic about fire, and hadn't thought to buy a sword the last time he was at the store—he buried his face in his hands and took a slow breath. He was feeling a bit hysterical.

After a moment, Simon got up and headed downstairs, into the garage. It was so full of stuff, he couldn't get his car inside anymore, and he had to squeeze between stacks of boxes to find what he wanted—a bundle of cedar plant stakes collecting dust on a shelf. When he moved in, he had intended to plant a garden in the back yard, but he hadn't gotten any farther than buying stakes and some packets of seeds, which were also somewhere in the garage.

Returning to the house, he spread a sheet of newspaper in front of one of the kitchen chairs and began to whittle on the stakes, sharpening half a dozen into deadly points. It was almost one o'clock before he set his pocket knife aside. He had the start of a blister on the side of his index finger and a big mess on his kitchen floor. The wood chips had landed everywhere *except* the newspaper, it seemed. Clean up could wait, though.

Assuming he lived, he had work in the morning, so, even though he felt like was about to jump out of his skin, every creak and groan of the old house making his heart race, he went back upstairs to get ready for bed. He felt almost normal as he brushed his teeth and slipped into a clean T-shirt and pair of boxers. He was just turning down the bed when he heard a car door slam out on the street in front of his house.

No, not his house, he discovered when he walked to the window and peered out between the curtains. The taxi pulled away from Julian's house. Simon hurried to the side window—the one that looked out over the roof as well as the front and back yards next door—and his mouth grew dry as he watched a young woman in a short red dress and high stiletto heels strut up the front walk, her hips swinging and breasts threatening to spill out over the top of the dress. She looked like a hooker, and unless Raven swung that way, Simon could think of only one reason for her to be there.

"Stop!" he shouted, slapping his hand against the window pane as hard as he dared, making it rattle in its casing. "Stop—Don't go in there!"

He's a vampire!" He saw her pause and glance around, but she didn't look upward, and a moment later, a rectangle of golden light spilled out onto the lawn as Julian's front door opened. "No!" he shouted as the woman hurried forward and was lost to sight.

"Oh my God, he's going to kill her," Simon whispered, turning from the window. He grabbed his cell off the foot of the bed and raced downstairs, dialing as he went.

"911, what is your emergency?" the dispatcher asked.

"I just saw a man attack a woman in a house at 3283 Harris Street. He's killing her. Please hurry." Simon hung up before they had a chance to triangulate his position, or whatever the hell they called it on TV. Pacing back and forth in front of the door, Simon tapped his phone against the side of his leg. What was happening over there? Where the hell were the police? Finally, he couldn't take it anymore. He couldn't just stand there and do nothing; it was driving him crazy!

Simon unlocked the front door and peeked out, turning off his porch light before slipping

out into the darkness. It was chilly, barefoot in just boxers and a T-shirt, but he barely noticed. Creeping up the driveway to where the junipers didn't quite grow against the high cedar fence that separated their backyards, he slipped onto Julian's property, crouching low as he scuttled over to the side of their house. Licking dry lips, he peeked in through the window, but it was just Raven's bedroom, and no one was in there.

What was he doing? Julian would have taken her down to the basement, and those windows were painted over. There was nothing for him to see. When the cops showed up, he was going to get arrested for peeping or indecent exposure or something. But he still didn't go home. Part of him needed to see, to confirm what he had barely convinced himself to believe.

Crawling behind a large rhododendron, Simon moved around to the front of the house, rising up just enough to see over the sill. Raven was standing near the kitchen doorway, folding tea towels and stacking them in a drawer that was sitting on the small dining table, an absurdly domestic sight compared to the vampire and prostitute sitting on the sofa on the far side of

the room. Simon let out a small sigh of relief—she was still alive—for the moment, anyway.

As Simon watched, Julian handed her a stack of bills, which she tucked into her golden, faux-snakeskin purse. Simon expected them to leave then, to take their business to a more private location, but she proceeded to remove one of the wide, silver bracelets that she wore on either arm, exposing a pale, slender wrist. Simon's eyes grew wide as she held out her hand to Julian and he took it, bringing her wrist up to his mouth. She didn't say anything or try to pull away as Julian ran his tongue over her skin.

It happened so fast, all Simon saw was a flash of pointed white teeth, and then Julian's mouth was covering the woman's wrist. Simon could see his throat working, swallowing as he drank the hooker's blood. Simon's gaze shifted to her, reclined against the back of the sofa, her eyes closed. Was she under some sort of spell? Vampires could hypnotize with a stare, couldn't they? He seemed to remember reading something like that on the website.

He glanced down at his cell, clutched in his fist, and then out through the branches of the

rhododendron at the street. Where were the police? Should he call again? He turned back to the window and gasped. Julian was staring right at him, green eyes burning from beneath lowered brows. Simon flung himself away from the window, falling against the rhododendron and causing the branches to rattle against the windowpane. He glanced back and caught a glimpse of Raven rushing toward the door, and then he was running, across the grass and back over the junipers, the well-pruned bushes scratching at his bare legs.

Safe inside his house, he rushed from one window to the next, trying to get a view of Julian's house. The best he could do was the front yard, and he stood, breath fogging up the glass, watching. Where were the police? Did they not believe him? He started to dial again, but a noise outside drew his attention back to the window. His heart climbed up into his throat as he watched Raven rush out of the house and over to Julian's Magnum, opening up the back door on the driver's side. Julian followed, carrying the limp, lifeless body of the young woman.

"Oh my God, this can't be happening," Simon

whispered. Julian paused halfway to the car and turned, looking directly at the window where Simon was standing. Simon ducked behind the curtain, all the hair on the back of his neck standing on end. Over at the car, Raven said something and Julian turned away, hurrying over and loading the body into the back seat. As Raven ran around the front of the vehicle and jumped into the passenger's seat, Simon realized that he was just standing there, letting them get away. They'd find a place to dump the body, probably in a river or out in the woods, and no one would ever know.

Well, Simon knew. And they knew he knew. Which made him a loose end that needed tying up. He swallowed hard and finished dialing 911 again.

"911, what is your emergency?" the dispatcher asked, a different one than before, judging from her voice.

"I just watched a man and woman load a dead body into their car at 3283 Harris Street. It's a black Dodge Magnum. They're pulling out of the driveway now, heading east on Harris."

“Sir, the police are on their way. Now, I need you to stay on the line...”

“I can’t,” Simon said and hung up. As if Julian wouldn’t know exactly who called the cops on him. He was a dead man, that was all there was to it.

Finally, the police arrived, pulling up across the street, lights flashing. Two uniformed officers climbed out and approached the house. Too little, too late. Simon stepped out on the front porch, wrapping his arms around himself as the cool, moist air ate right through his thin T-shirt. He watched the cops knock on the front door, but of course, there was no answer. One of them noticed him and started over.

“Are you the one who called 911?” he asked as he headed up Simon’s driveway. Simon shook his head.

“No, but I did hear a commotion out here a little while ago. Is something the matter?”

“We had a call about a possible homicide,” the officer said, stopping at the end of Simon’s front walk. “Did you see anything?”

“I saw a young woman arrive by taxi at about a

quarter after one,” he said. “And just a few minutes ago, the neighbor’s car left in a big hurry.”

“Did you notice the color or make of the vehicle?”

“It was a black Dodge Magnum,” Simon said. *I already told you guys this. You’re wasting time.* The cop nodded.

“And did you see which way it went?”

“Yeah, that way,” Simon said, pointing down the street. As he did, pale, twin beams of light swung around the corner as a long, dark vehicle turned onto Harris. Simon stared, disbelieving, as the Magnum slowed, signaled, and pulled up into the driveway next door. “That- that’s them,” Simon said, stepping down off his porch.

“Please, sir, remain where you are,” the officer said, his hand on the butt of his pistol as he began walking back to Julian’s house. Simon watched, heart racing, as the two officers approached Julian’s car. Julian got out of the car first, opening the door slowly and keeping his hands in plain sight. One of the cops said something, to which Julian responded, their voices too low for Simon to make out. After a moment, Raven got out of

the car and one of the officers had a look in the back seat and the cargo area. Julian and the other cop stepped away from the car, Julian doing most of the talking.

“No, no, no,” Simon muttered under his breath. “Don’t listen to him; he’s a monster.” Simon drew a sharp breath as Julian’s head turned his direction, a look of hurt and betrayal on the vampire’s pale face. Simon didn’t know what right Julian had to feel betrayed. *He* was the one who almost ended up as an entree.

The officer finished his search of the vehicle and walked away, stopping at the edge of the street and speaking into his radio. Raven was just standing on the far side of the car, her arms folded on the roof, watching with her sharp, black eyes. Simon found himself staring at her, wondering if she really was only human. He couldn’t say exactly what it was about her that bothered him, but she just didn’t seem...right.

Finally, the cop on the radio strode back up the driveway toward Julian. *This is it. Draw your guns and slap on the cuffs.* The officer said something and extended his hand. Simon’s mouth dropped open as Julian shook it and nodded to the men

with a smile. Julian and Raven locked up their car and started toward the house as the officers headed down the driveway toward their car.

Bare feet slapping on the pavement, Simon ran out to intercept them.

“You’re leaving?” he asked. “You’re not going to arrest him?”

“For what?” one of the officers asked. “He didn’t do anything.”

“But- But he killed that woman!” Simon said, exasperated.

“Sir,” the other officer said, his tone stern, “there is no evidence of any crime. Your neighbor was entertaining a friend who fell ill. They rushed her to the hospital. That’s all.”

“That’s *his* story,” Simon said.

“I checked with the hospital, sir,” the officer said, opening his car door and leaning in to turn off the flashing red and blue lights. He straightened up and turned back to Simon. “The young woman will be fine. Now please, return to your home and have a good night.” They climbed

into their cruiser and pulled away, leaving Simon standing in the middle of the street.

Alone in the middle of the street. Alone in front of his vampire neighbor's house at two o'clock in the morning. Raising his hands to cover either side of his neck, he ran for it, hurtling himself across his lawn and up onto his porch. At the door, though, he couldn't stop himself from glancing over at Julian's house. The vampire was just standing there in the middle of the lawn, staring at him. Goosebumps prickled all down Simon's body and he flung himself inside, slamming the door and locking it one more time.

Julian may have fooled the cops, but Simon knew the truth, and soon the whole world would, too. Or at least, the hundred or so people who read his blog. Sitting back down at the computer, he stifled a yawn and quickly typed up an entry. There. Let Julian try to deny *that*. He hit send.

With stakes stashed on the bedside table and under his mattress and pillow, Simon slipped into bed and turned off the light, his eyes burning with exhaustion as he stared up at the dark ceiling. It was going to be a long night.



Simon jerked awake, the room echoing with the shrill scream of his alarm. Sunlight streamed in around the curtains that didn't quite fit his windows, the thin silver of early morning. Simon groaned and groped across the bedside table for the alarm, his fingers brushing against something rough. He picked it up and raised his head, blinking bleary eyes as he tried to make out what it was. A pointed stick? Why in the—

“Oh, shit!” Simon sat bolt upright in bed, his hands flying to his throat as he checked for bites. Nothing. Thank God. He climbed out of bed and walked across the room, throwing open the curtains on the east-facing windows and squinting into the sun as he stared out over the roof of Julian and Raven's house. Standing there, in the morning light, watching a pair of blue jays harass a crow perched in the top of a cedar tree in their back yard, last night seemed like a really fucked-up dream. It was easy enough to imagine that he and Julian had polished off a bottle or two of wine and that everything from the shower onward was just a drunken hallucination. It was a nice thought.

Simon showered and shaved, ate breakfast and brewed a pot of coffee, but there was something surreal about his usual daily routine. A tiny voice in the back of his mind was screaming at him, *How can you make coffee? There's a vampire next door!* But what was he supposed to do? He had a job, he had a life, he had responsibilities. He wasn't pretending like nothing was wrong, though that's what it felt like. He didn't know what else to do, so he put on his shoes, grabbed his keys and his thermos, and headed out the door.

The sun was bright and warm as he stepped out onto his porch and he stood a moment, letting it soak through his pale blue shirt as he locked the front door. Slipping his house keys into his pocket, he glanced down for his paper, but it wasn't on the porch. He grimaced and leaned over the flowerbed, looking off the edge of the porch. The kid was usually such a good aim.

"Looking for something?" a gravelly voice asked and Simon screamed, whipping around pressing himself back against his front door, his thermos held up like a shield in front of him. "Relax," Raven said, holding out his paper to

him. "Julian told me not to hurt you." Simon eyed the rolled up newspaper, but didn't move.

"Then what are you doing here, if you're not going to kill me?" he asked. A flash of annoyance sparked in her dark eyes and she threw the newspaper at his feet.

"You made a big mistake last night," she said, taking a step toward him. "Julian is very upset. You need to apologize to him."

"Is that a threat?" Simon asked, his hand creeping down toward the pocket where his phone was.

"No, that's not a threat," she snapped. "You hurt his feelings..."

"Monsters don't have feelings," Simon said. "Besides, why should I listen to you? You're his daytime puppet person, out doing his bidding while he's asleep in his coffin..."

"He doesn't sleep in a fucking coffin," Raven said, her anger making her voice even more raspy. "And I'm not his puppet. I'm the only family he has left."

"Don't give me that shit," Simon said. "I know

you're not his sister. He told me he was eighty years old..."

"Eighty-four."

"Either way, you can't be his sister."

"You're not half as smart as you think you are, Earth-man," she said. "But you're technically right. I'm not his sister. My great-great-grandmother was his sister. Satisfied?"

"I would be if you'd get off my property," Simon said. Recovering from his initial shock, he stepped away from the front door and towered over Raven from his vantage point on the porch. "Better yet, get out of my neighborhood."

"It's our neighborhood, too," she said, sharp eyes unblinking as she glared up at him. "You don't have the right to treat us like this; we're no different than anyone else..."

"He's a vampire," Simon said, perhaps a little too loudly for a weekday morning, but at the moment, he didn't care who heard. "And you—I don't know what you are, but you are *not* like everybody else."

"I'm a wereraven," she snarled through her

teeth, “and you would be *shocked* at the number of vampires and werewolf that live on your world without you ever noticing. You never *would* have noticed if Julian wasn’t such an idiot!” She looked back at her own house as she said the last part, as though for Julian’s benefit.

“Hold on,” Simon said. “You’re a *what*? A were...”

“Raven,” Raven said. “Wereraven. Why do you think I chose this name?”

“Uh huh,” Simon said, stooping down and snatching up his paper. “Look, I wasn’t born yesterday, you know. Maybe vampires are real, but there are no such things as werewolves or wereravens or- or...” He jerked back as Raven suddenly leaped at him, a cloud of thick, swirling black mist forming around her before imploding. Simon yelped and ducked as the biggest crow he had ever seen suddenly appeared in front of him, huge ebony wings flapping, the sharp clapping sound echoing from the face of his house. The bird cawed, a deep and raspy call, and dove at his head, sharp claws digging into his scalp. He swung the rolled up paper and the raven swooped away, winging back up into the sky as Simon ran

for his car, a trickle of blood rolling down the side of his face.

Fumbling with his keys, he unlocked the driver's side and jerked the door open, casting a quick glance over his shoulder. The bird attacked again, claws ripping through the back of Simon's shirt and into his flesh as he threw himself into the car. He yanked the door shut and locked it, his eyes wide as he leaned forward, trying to see up unto the sky through the windshield, his breath fogging up the glass.

The bird landed with a *thunk* on the hood of his car. Simon jumped and pressed himself against the back of the seat, his heart racing. The raven cawed and hopped forward, its wings half-spread, claws squealing across the hood and leaving faint scratches in the paint. It bounced up to the edge of the windshield, the heavy, black beak parting as it made a deep, guttural croaking sound. It cocked its head, looking through the windshield at Simon, sharp eyes glittering.

"Go away!" Simon shouted, waving his hand at the bird. It cawed and pecked at the glass—*thunk, thunk, thunk*. Simon reached around the steering wheel and hit the windshield wipers,

the dry rubber squealing and skittering across the glass, but it scared the raven back. Then the damn bird began pecking at the hood of the car, the thick, blunt beak making small dents in the metal. Simon laid on the horn, but the bird just ruffled its feathers and stared at him before slamming its beak into the hood a couple more times.

Jamming his key in the ignition, Simon started the Camry and slammed it into reverse, lurching backward out of the driveway. The raven cawed and leaped into the air, strong wings carrying it up to the corner of Simon's roof, where it perched and stared after him, head bobbing as it cawed over and over. Simon shifted into drive and sped down the street. At the first stop sign he came to, three blocks away, he pulled over next to the curb and put the car in park. The blood had run down the side of his face and was starting down his neck, cold and thick and sticky. He dug a coffee-spotted napkin out of the center console and stretched his neck out, peering into the rear-view mirror as he attempted to wipe the blood from his face. That got most of it, but he would still need to duck into the restroom when he got to work and finish washing up.

Finally, he tossed the napkin onto the floorboards on the passenger's side to join a couple of paper cups and a handful of gum wrappers. He sat a moment, staring down at the garbage. He needed to clean his car out. He glanced into the back seat, wincing at the pain that spiked high between his shoulder blades. He reached back, his fingers finding the ragged-edged tear in his shirt. He could wear his jacket, he supposed, but it was often hot and stuffy in the small office. It wasn't like there was a strict dress-code—every day was casual Friday—but this would be pushing the company's leniency.

It would also invite the inevitable question, *What the hell happened to you?* which Simon was unprepared to answer. He refused to acknowledge, refused to think about, what had happened that morning. Vampires were one thing. The fact that Julian was what he was didn't throw Simon's entire perception of reality into question. It was a fluke. But, if he had seen, for example, a young woman turn into a raven, he would have to admit that the world was a much stranger place than he had thought.

Simon glanced at his watch and then pulled

away from the curb. For the first time since he was hired, he was going to be late for work.



After a quick stop at the store for a new shirt and some first-aid supplies, Simon was able to clean himself up in the bathroom before anyone even noticed. With that behind him, he settled down to work, but in the quiet monotony of numbers and forms, he couldn't stop his mind from wandering, couldn't stop himself from picturing that dark mist as Raven turned into a bird. He tried to tell himself he imagined it, but as the day flew by and he was gathering up his stuff to leave, he realized that denial wasn't helping him any. He had to go home, where that psycho bitch bird-girl was probably waiting for him. And when darkness fell, then he'd have a vampire to worry about as well.

All the way home, he tried to think of a way to fix this, but other than moving—which wasn't really an option, with the housing market in the toilet like it was—his only other choice was to kill them. A stake through the heart for him, a silver bullet for her...

“Oh, my God, do you hear yourself!” he said, hitting the heel of his hand against the steering wheel. “Do you hear how insane this sounds?” No more insane than him talking to himself, he supposed. No, he couldn’t kill them, and he bet he couldn’t drive them away, either, so what was left, trying to get along with them? Making friends with a Goddamned vampire? Maybe he should put up a birdfeeder.

As he turned onto Harris, the pit of his stomach filled with a hollow sort of dread. What had she done while he was away? He was so worried about his house and property, that he was pulling into his driveway before he noticed the moving truck was gone from in front of Julian’s house. He breathed a hesitant sigh of relief. Maybe that meant that Raven wasn’t home.

No such luck. As Simon pulled the Camry up to the corner of his house, the side gate opened and Raven stepped out of her back yard, wearing a pink T-shirt with the sleeves ripped off and a pair of faded cutoff shorts, a flat of marigolds balanced on one arm. She didn’t notice him at first, and for a moment, Simon just sat there,

seriously contemplating the feasibility of locking his doors and praying she'd go away.

No, he couldn't let himself be bullied; he couldn't let her think he was afraid. Never mind that he was terrified. His gut churning, he opened the car door and her head whipped around, her sharp eyes boring into him. Raven's eyes. That's why they were so black; she had the eyes of a bird. Simon said nothing as he gathered up his things and climbed out of the car. He was done trying to be friendly; he just wanted to be left alone.

"Sorry about this morning. I shouldn't have lost my temper." Simon stopped halfway up his front walk, trying to decide if he should respond to the gravelly voice or not.

"Okay, then," he said finally. "Apology accepted." It wouldn't do him any good to hold a grudge, after all. He took another step toward his porch.

"And?" Raven asked. He glanced back.

"And what?"

"Aren't you going to apologize?"

“For what?” Simon asked. He hadn’t done anything.

“For what?” she repeated. “For *what*?” She yanked one of the little marigold plants out of the divided tray and flung it at him. He ducked and heard it hit the side of his house with a *thunk* and a shower of dirt. “How about for calling Julian a monster?” He ducked another flying marigold, this one landing somewhere in his yard. “How about for calling me a puppet and a liar?” She jerked up another plant and drew her arm back to throw.

“All right, all right,” Simon said, raising his arms in surrender, his thermos in one hand and his ripped, bloody shirt in the other. “I’m sorry.”

“No you’re not, you’re just saying that so I’ll stop,” Raven said, but she didn’t throw the marigold at him.

“No, really,” Simon said, slowly lowering his arms. “I’m sorry for what I said. I had no right. I’m just feeling a little...overwhelmed by all of this.” Raven eyed him suspiciously, but finally set her tray of marigolds down on the ground.

“Fine,” she said, scowling at him with her

hands on her hips. “You want to give me back my flowers?” Simon wanted to tell her to get her own damn flowers, but the last thing he wanted was to start something else. Tucking his thermos under his arm, he picked up the bedraggled marigolds out of the lawn and off the porch, and handed them to her across the juniper hedge. “Thanks,” she grumbled, and turned away. Simon rolled his eyes behind her back and went into his house.

Simon went straight upstairs and opened his laptop, kicking off his shoes as he sat down and began to type, describing everything he could remember of the attack that morning, and the conversation that evening. When he had finished, he posted it to his blog and went back to see if he had any comments on the previous entries. Just as he had thought, no one believed him. A few called him a liar and told him to get a life, but most treated it like a joke, like a game, some even making attempts to play along. Even his brother, David, told him to grow up and reminded him to send their mother a card—her birthday was coming up. Simon had expected as much, but it was still disappointing. With a sigh, he closed the laptop and went to change.

Wheel of Fortune was half over by the time he made it back downstairs to start dinner, and he missed most of the second half while he was cooking, since the TV didn't face into the kitchen. When he finally dished up and sat down on the sofa, Double Jeopardy had already begun, and the show was over before he had finished eating, so he got to sit there and flip through the channels while he picked at the rest of his food. Damn neighbors; they had thrown his entire evening out of whack.

He had just gotten up to do the dishes when someone knocked on his door. He froze, his heart suddenly pounding as he stared toward the foyer. Was it him?

"Who is it?" he called, hoping for any answer other than the one he got.

"Simon, it's me." Simon closed his eyes, shuddering as Julian's warm, rich voice did indecent things to his body.

"Go away," Simon said, taking his plate on into the kitchen.

"Simon, please, I just want to talk to you," Julian said.

“We have nothing to talk about,” Simon said. “Nothing you could say will change what I saw. You killed that woman!”

“No, I didn’t,” Julian replied vehemently, and Simon threw his dishes into the sink. He stalked back into the foyer and stood in front of the door.

“I watched you drink her blood,” he said, his voice thick with disgust.

“Yes, I did, I admit it,” Julian said. “What can I say? I’m a vampire. But I didn’t kill her. She was discharged from the hospital this morning. You can call and ask them...”

“And they’ll tell me whatever you told them to say, or paid them to say, just like they told the police. Just leave me alone, Julian.” There was a long silence, but Simon didn’t believe for a second that Julian had given up.

“Simon...” Julian said finally. He sounded tired. “Will you please just open the door? I’m sure you’ve done your homework; you know what I can’t do.” Like enter a house uninvited. Simon worried his lower lip between his teeth, then stepped over and unlocked the door. *Just*

don't look at him, don't make eye contact. That had to be what Julian was planning. If he couldn't come in, he would try to talk Simon out. Simon pulled the door open and moved back, his gaze fixed on Julian's shoes.

"What do you want?"

"Aren't you going to invite me in?" Julian asked. "It's chilly out here."

"It's not as cold as your handshake," Simon responded.

"That was mean," Julian said after a moment, his voice quiet. "I just wanted to see if you were all right after what Raven did this morning."

"I'll live," Simon said, and he started to close the door. "Good night."

"Not so fast," Julian said, reaching out and shoving the door back open. "I brought you something, though I'm not sure if you deserve it, as rude as you're being." Simon's eyes grew wide and he stumbled backward as Julian stepped into the foyer and shut the door behind him.

"You- You can't do that," Simon stammered,

backing into the living room as Julian continued to advance on him. "I never invited you in."

"I know," Julian said. "You see, I did my homework, too." He held up a rolled-down paper sack and gave it a shake, making the contents rattle. "This planet's information on vampires is hysterical. Where did you people come up with this shit?" He opened the bag and reached inside, and Simon leaped backward as Julian drew his hand out. Julian looked vaguely annoyed as he held out a small glass bottle of some clear liquid.

"What is that?" Simon asked, making no move to take it.

"Holy water," Julian said, tossing it to him. Simon caught it on reflex alone. "Blessed fresh this evening. And you might want this, too." He pulled a four inch tall silver crucifix out the bag and set it on the back of the couch, along with a string of pungent garlic and a bag of rice. "Be careful with these," Julian said, setting down a wooden mallet and a sharpened stake. "You could put someone's eye out."

Simon looked at the assortment of anti-vampire paraphernalia, and then back at the

vampire as Julian carefully folded his paper sack and tucked it under his arm.

“Why are you giving me these things?” And how was he even able to touch them?

“I’m trying to make a point,” Julian said. He gestured to the items on the back of the couch. “All of this stuff is supposed to repel or kill me. The garlic makes my eyes water, but that’s because my sense of smell is ten times stronger than normal. This silver talisman—” He touched the crucifix. “I have no idea what it means, but it has no magical properties as far as I can tell. This rice—” He shook his head. “Throw rice at a vampire and he will have to pick up and count every grain? One guy with obsessive/compulsive disorder gets turned into a vampire, and suddenly we *all* have OCD? How much sense does that make? And that water...it’s just water. If you throw it on me, I’ll only get wet.”

Without thinking of the consequences, Simon unscrewed the lid of the bottle and flipped the holy water across the room, hitting Julian full in the face and all down the front of his shirt. Julian gasped, his body stiffening, and then he looked down at himself, water dripping onto the floor.

“You couldn’t just take my word for it?” Julian said, wiping the water out of his eyes and shaking it off his hands. “This is a brand new shirt, Simon—dry clean only.”

“Sorry, I- I just...”

“Don’t worry about it,” Julian said, still frowning. “I’ll send you the bill.” Simon sheepishly screwed the lid back on the nearly empty bottle and set it on the back of the sofa, next to the wooden stake.

“What about that?” he asked.

“This?” Julian picked up the stake again. “Yeah, this would kill me, just like it would kill you, or any other living creature if you drove it into their heart.”

“Are you trying to tell me that you’re alive?” Simon asked. Julian hesitated.

“By some definitions, yes, I am.”

“And what definitions would those be?”

“It’s complicated,” Julian said, tossing the stake down onto the seat of the sofa. “If you want to go by your world’s very narrow definition, no,

I'm not alive. I don't have a heartbeat, but that doesn't automatically make me a monster."

"No, but killing people and drinking their blood does," Simon said.

"I told you, I didn't kill that woman," Julian said through his teeth and Simon took another hasty step away from him.

"Fine, let's say you're telling the truth," he said. "You didn't kill *that* woman. But don't tell me there haven't been others that you did kill."

"I haven't lost control while feeding and killed someone in more than fifty years," Julian said, his voice low. "As a young vampire, I had a few accidents. I'll admit it. But all vampires do. Then we learn control and the accidents stop."

"You make it sound like potty-training," Simon said, incredulous. "And I noticed you picked your words rather carefully. If you hadn't killed *anyone* in fifty years, you would have just said so."

"What are you, some kind of lawyer?" Julian asked, frowning. "You're having a fit because I'm a vampire. As a vampire, I haven't killed anyone in fifty years, but I lived in a rough city, Simon,

and I worked for an evil man, and I killed a lot of people that I didn't want to, but *not* because I was a vampire. I didn't have a choice."

"Why didn't you just leave?" Simon asked. Julian shook his head.

"You can't just leave the employ of a Master vampire," he said. "They watch their flock like a dragon, ready to slaughter anyone who steps out of line. I got out as soon as I could. That's why I'm here."

"In my house?"

Julian chuckled, a low rumble like the purr of a big cat.

"No, on this planet," he said. "Earth is the last place a vampire would choose to go, and is the last place they'll think to look for me. You don't really think I enjoy living like this, hiding what I am as if I were ashamed to be myself?"

"Wait, wait—Hold on just a second," Simon said, suddenly feeling light-headed. "Are you trying to tell me that you are...not from Earth? You're a vampire *and* an alien?"

"Yes, if you want to get insulting," Julian said.

“B- but...you look human...”

“I am human. Human vampire, anyway. Look, don’t think on it too hard—it’s not important. What is important is that you understand that I’m not going to hurt anyone, and especially not you. I like you, Simon. A lot. I don’t want you to be afraid of me.” Julian took a step toward him, and Simon couldn’t stop himself from drawing back.

“Could- could you just- just leave, please,” Simon said, ignoring the hurt look on Julian’s face. Honestly, what had he expected Simon to do, run to him with open arms? All the reassurances in the world didn’t change what he was. And now he was an alien, too. A fucking alien! Simon couldn’t even begin to fathom the depth of what that meant. He needed to be alone.

“Simon...”

“Julian, please!” Simon practically shouted. “Just leave me alone!” The vampire stood for a moment, then turned and walked out of the house, closing the door quietly behind him. Simon rushed over and locked it, his heart racing as he turned his back to the door and pressed his

hands to his face. He felt like screaming, sobbing, laughing, a hysterical pressure building up inside his chest... Simon ran into the kitchen and threw up in the sink.



Simon lay awake, staring up at the ceiling, the heavy wooden mallet in one hand and the pointed stake in the other. His whole body was taut as a drum, his sheets damp with cold sweat as he flinched and twitched at every creak and groan that the old house made. This was not a way to live.

As the first light of dawn stole through the curtains and lifted the veil of night from Simon's room, he climbed, cold and exhausted from his bed, and went to take a shower. Standing in the steaming water, letting it pound on the back of his neck and ease the tension from his shoulders, one thought ran back and forth through his mind—a dark, wicked thought wearing the guise of rationality—*Kill him.*

It wouldn't be murder, because Julian was already dead, or rather, undead, and it was the

only way that Simon would be able to sleep at night. It would be self-defense. He didn't want to do it, but there was no other choice; Julian had to die. Surprisingly, after having finally made the decision, Simon felt better, like a huge weight had been lifted from his shoulders.

As soon as he got out of the shower, Simon called in sick to work—again, for the first time since he had been hired. It gave him a nervous, fluttery feeling in the pit of his stomach. Deciding to kill your neighbor was one thing, but taking steps to actually carry it out was another. He was starving, but he wasn't sure that he wouldn't just throw up again, so he ignored the rumbling in his stomach as he stood at his upstairs window, watching the sun rise over Julian's house, wondering what to do about Raven.

For some reason, killing her bothered him a lot more than Julian. She was alive. She was a bird, but she was alive, and that would make it murder. Before he had to come to a decision, thankfully, she emerged from the house, climbed into the Magnum, and drove away. Simon watched her disappear down the street, lost behind the thick branches of the trees lining the

road, and his mouth went dry, his hands starting to shake. This was it, his only chance. For all he knew, she was running to the corner market for milk and would be back in moments. He didn't have a second to lose.

Grabbing the mallet and stake from off the end of his bed, he raced downstairs, slipped out the back door and across the yard, dragging a sturdy plastic patio chair with him. Carefully, he climbed up on the chair's arms and scrambled over the tall cedar fence, dropping lightly to the ground. Holding his breath, he glanced around Julian's backyard. So far, so good. The hard part would be getting into the house.

Simon checked above the doorframe, beneath the plastic mat, and underneath all the pots sitting beside the back porch. Nothing. Maybe freaks and monsters never locked themselves out of their house? He could break a window, he supposed, but he didn't want to risk waking Julian. He stood, hands on his hips, and surveyed the large, empty yard. Raven had planted a line of marigolds—apparently the nursery was having a sale on them—all along the back fence to either side of the squat, metal garden shed...

Simon trotted across the lawn and pulled open the shed door. Aha! Hanging on a nail just inside was a shiny house key. Lifting it free, he clenched it in his fist and hurried back to the house. The door opened into the small kitchen and Simon hesitated in the doorway, his heart beating loudly in the silence. Shoving the key into his jeans pocket, he gripped the stake in one hand and the mallet in the other, barely breathing as he crept through the house and to the basement door.

Simon shivered as he slowly opened the door and the cool air from below wafted up to caress his face and bare arms. Compared to the main house, the stairs were pitch black, but as he reached the bottom and stepped into the main room, his eyes adjusted to the dim blue and green light of a glowing lava lamp perched on top of the TV in the corner of the room.

Julian had been busy. He had a loveseat and a coffee table, two floor to ceiling bookcases, and half a dozen bright oriental rugs hanging on the walls hiding the painted-over windows. Simon stood for a moment, his stomach churning. This didn't look like the lair of a monster. Tightening

his grip on the stake, he set his jaw and made his way to the bedroom door. He would not let himself be fooled by appearances.

As he pushed the bedroom door open, the faint light from the lava lamp spilled past him, onto Julian's bed. Simon's mouth went dry as he moved toward the bed, his eyes wide as he stared down at the vampire, sound asleep, the dark satin sheet tangled around one leg, the rest of him uncovered, wearing nothing but white boxers with little blue paw prints on them. He was lying on his back, one arm raised up over his head, the other resting on his stomach, his head tilted to one side, his beautiful face relaxed and tranquil. He looked like an angel.

Feeling himself start to lose his nerve, Simon held the stake over Julian's heart as he raised the mallet to strike. His hands shook, and the tip of the stake scratched across Julian's skin. The vampire jumped, his eyes snapping open, and Simon jerked back, but he wasn't fast enough. In a blur, Julian hit his arm, numbing it from elbow to fingertips, and the stake went flying. Simon heard it hit the wall on the other side of the room. Raising the mallet to defend himself,

he screamed as a strong, cold hand gripped his wrist and jerked him forward, yanking him onto the bed.

Kicking, screaming, arms and legs flailing, he thrashed and struggled, trying to get away, but Julian was so strong. Simon found himself on his back, the vampire straddling his waist, pinning his wrists to the mattress above his head. Eyes wide, he stared up into Julian's pale face, the monster's lips drawn back from his slim, pointed fangs. Simon screamed again, bucking and kicking...

"Simon, stop it!" Julian ordered, his grip on Simon's wrists tightening. "Hold still or I'll kill you!" Simon was pretty sure Julian would kill him anyway, and wondered why the hell he should make it easy for him, but he went still, gasping for breath as he waited for the worst. "What the fuck are you doing here?" Julian demanded through clenched teeth.

"I- I- I was..." His stuttering excuses died upon his lips as Julian's gaze shifted to the wooden mallet still clutched in Simon's hand.

"You came here to kill me?" Julian asked and

Simon quickly let go of the mallet, as if that would help.

"I'm sorry," Simon said. "I- I was scared. Please, let me go."

"I can't," Julian said, his lips barely moving. Simon began to shake deep inside.

"Julian, please," he whispered. He didn't want to die.

"I said I can't," Julian snapped. He turned his face away. "You startled me, scared me, made me angry, and now my body is flooded with adrenaline." He was speaking through tight lips, and Simon could see his shoulders shaking. "In mortals, it's called a fight-or-flight response." Simon nodded; he was experiencing it at that very moment. "It's automatic, instinctual, chemical, you can't control it. But in vampires, adrenaline makes us want to fight, feed, or fuck. Right now—the best that I can do—is nothing."

That wasn't what Simon wanted to hear. His whole body went cold and he couldn't stop himself from trying to pull his arms free. Julian's head snapped back around, lips parted and fangs

visible. Simon froze, a small whimper escaping him.

“If you struggle,” Julian said slowly, his voice barely louder than a whisper, “you feel like prey and I will bite you. You need to stay still and relax.” Simon wasn’t sure if he could. Julian’s hands were like ice around his wrists, and he could feel the coldness of Julian’s body seeping through his clothes. It made his skin crawl, made his muscles twitch restlessly. This was stupid. This was so fucking stupid.

Julian leaned toward him and Simon cringed, turning his face away. But that left the side of his neck exposed. He turned back, and found the vampire’s face mere inches from his own, Julian’s bright green eyes burning with hunger, desire, and regret.

“Julian...” Simon whispered, and he gasped, stiffening as Julian closed the distance between them, capturing his mouth in a cold, gentle kiss. Simon drew a startled breath as Julian shifted his body and Simon felt the hardness of Julian’s erection pressing against his own groin. Julian moaned into Simon’s mouth and began to grind against him, his movements slow and fluid.

Somewhere the back of his near-hysterical mind, Simon suspected that Julian was one hell of a dancer.

Julian broke the kiss, cool lips traveling slowly along Simon's jaw, back toward the side of his throat, and Simon made a high, strangled sound, squeezing his eyes shut and clenching his fists as he felt Julian's chill breath slide down his neck.

"Don't be scared," Julian whispered in his ear. "I won't hurt you, I promise. I just need to do *something* until the adrenaline fades. Just be still and try not to react." Julian might as well have told him not to breathe. His heart was hammering, every nerve in his body on edge and screaming, and when Julian's lips brushed against the sensitive skin at the base of his jaw, Simon shuddered with inexplicable pleasure. He realized, with much chagrin, that Julian's body on top of his, writhing and grinding, was making him hard. It wasn't long before Julian noticed.

"Simon..." Julian said, rocking his hips and rubbing against the bulge in Simon's jeans, "is that what I think it is?" Simon didn't answer. "It's all right, you know. A lot of people find fear

an aphrodisiac. You just didn't strike me as one of them."

"I'm not," Simon insisted. "I'm not enjoying this."

"No, I can see that," Julian said, a trace of sadness in his voice. He kissed the side of Simon's neck, his grip on Simon's wrists easing, but only a little. Simon swallowed hard and fought the urge to try and pull free. He knew from his biochemistry classes in college that adrenaline could linger in the body for hours unless spent through physical activity. It looked like the only physical activity Julian might be interested in was sex, and regardless of what his body was doing, Simon did not want to be fucked by this undead *thing* on top of him. Wait...there was something...sex...orgasm...endorphins...

"Julian...can you let go of my arm, please?" he asked. He had barely passed biochem, and could possibly be completely wrong, but he couldn't stand the thought of being trapped beneath a horny corpse for the next three hours.

"I don't know," Julian said, his fingers flexing around Simon wrists. "Just one arm? Why?"

“An orgasm often releases endorphins, which act kind of like anti-adrenaline. If I make you come, you should feel calmer, more relaxed, and maybe you can let me go.”

“It’s worth a try, I suppose,” Julian said after a moment, his lips hovering over Simon’s skin. “Just don’t make any sudden movements.” Slowly, Julian forced his hand open, drawing it away from Simon’s right wrist, and Simon began to pull his arm down from above his head. “Watch it,” Julian gasped, and Simon tensed as Julian grabbed a handful of his hair instead. He winced as the vampire twisted his head to the side, baring his vulnerable neck, and it was all he could do not to grab at Julian’s hand.

“What happened?” he asked through his teeth, drawing short, shallow breaths as he tried not to panic.

“Sorry,” Julian said, breathless. “I had to grab something. It was either your hair or your throat.”

“Good choice, then,” Simon muttered. He took a deep breath and slowly eased his hand down between their bodies, shuddering as he touched Julian’s bare stomach, the vampire’s skin

so abnormally cold. Julian groaned, pressing his face into the crook of Simon's neck as Simon's hand slid into his boxers. Julian raised his ass into the air, giving Simon room to shove the front of the boxers down and pull Julian's cold, hard cock out. Wrapping his hand around the shaft, Simon began to stroke him.

"Simon..." Julian moaned, his grip on Simon's hair tightening as he began to rock his hips, humping Simon's hand. Aching, trapped within his jeans, Simon's own cock twitched, but there was nothing he could do about it. As Julian's lips played along his jugular, Simon closed his eyes, praying he'd survive to jerk himself off.

Rubbing his thumb in small circles underneath the head, Simon drew a long, low moan from Julian, the sound sending goosebumps crawling across Simon's body. Julian's movements grew faster, more erratic, and Simon tightened his grip, holding his breath as Julian's muscles tensed. The vampire let out a soft cry, his hips jerking, and Simon felt the cold, thick semen splatter across his T-shirt and soak into the material. Above him, Julian continued to rock his hips in long, languid thrusts, his body shaking as the orgasm

echoed through him. Finally, he became still, his grip on Simon's hair relaxing.

"Julian?" Simon said after a moment, not daring to move. The vampire didn't answer at first, and Simon felt the cold tendrils of panic squirming up out of the pit of his stomach.

"It's all right, Simon," Julian said at last, untangling his fingers from Simon's hair and releasing his wrist. "It worked." Simon wasn't so sure. Julian was still on top of him. Slowly, Julian began to crawl backward, moving down Simon's body until he was sitting astride Simon's shins, and then he stopped. Simon stiffened as Julian placed his hand over the bulge in Simon's jeans, fingers rubbing him through the thick denim.

"Julian, don't..." Simon said, struggling to sit up.

"C'mon, Simon," Julian said, his rich voice deep and husky as he reached up and swiftly unbuttoned Simon's jeans, tugging the zipper down and exposing the taut material of his briefs, a wet spot of pre-come darkening the thin cotton. "Just relax and let me take care of this." Simon choked back a moan as Julian's fingers played up the length of his cock before hooking

the waistband and drawing it down, letting Simon's aching arousal spring free. "I enjoy sucking more than just blood, you know." And he leaned down, his lips parting as he neared the tip of Simon's cock.

"No, don't!" Simon shouted, imagining those wicked fangs near his delicate flesh. He jerked one leg out from under the vampire and kicked, the heel of his shoe striking a solid blow to the left side of Julian's chest and shoving him backward off the bed. Scrambling to his feet, Simon tucked himself awkwardly back into his pants and backed into the bedroom doorway, his gaze fixed on the far side of the bed, where Julian had disappeared.

"That is the kind of dumb-shit move that will get you pinned to my bed again," Julian said, slowly climbing to his feet. "You're lucky those endorphins are still in my system." Scowling, he ran a hand back through his hair. "So what the hell happened? You don't like having your cock sucked?"

"Not by a monster like you," Simon said, stripping off his soiled T-shirt and throwing it at Julian. Julian batted it away. "You keep

your teeth away from me.” Heart hammering, Simon turned and stalked across the main room, toward the stairs. He heard Julian coming after him and tensed, whirling around to confront the vampire.

“I don’t know what makes you think you have a right to be angry at me,” Julian said, stopping not quite an arm’s-length from Simon. “You’re the one who broke into *my* house and tried to kill *me*, not the other way around. I have been nothing but patient and understanding about your inability to accept me for who and what I am, but my patience is reaching an end. I haven’t done a damn thing to you...”

“Not yet!” Simon shouted at him. “God knows why, but I’m sure it’s just a matter of time before you kill me just like you killed that poor woman.”

“*I didn’t kill her*,” Julian said, raising his voice. “I wouldn’t have even sent her to the hospital, but she was stupid; I was her second client this week. More than one a month isn’t even safe. I should have checked her other wrist for marks, but...” He fell silent, glancing away for a moment

before turning back to Simon. “It was your fault I even had to call her.”

“Because I ran off before you had a chance to bite me?” Simon asked.

“No, because of that fucking hot shower you took,” Julian said. Simon opened his mouth, then closed it again, confused.

“What?”

Julian sighed.

“Heat degrades vampire tissue,” he said. “It won’t kill us, but it causes our bodies to burn through the blood stored in our systems in order to repair the damage—first whatever blood we may have recently consumed, and then the blood in our veins. We don’t actually digest blood, you know. It’s stored in our stomachs and used to maintain cell integrity. If a vampire suffers heat trauma—like a hot shower—it takes an awful lot of blood to return their body to equilibrium.

“When it comes to something like that, bottled blood just doesn’t cut it,” Julian continued. “The preservatives and anti-clotting agents reduce its effectiveness by half. Usually, that isn’t a problem. I don’t mind drinking twice as much blood if it

means no one has to get hurt, but I didn't have enough blood in the house to fix what that shower did, and my body was screaming, my veins on fire as my tissue stripped the blood out of them. I needed a live donor."

"But..." Simon said, "but you had to have known what would happen. Why did you come into the shower with me?"

"I thought it would be worth it," Julian said, his deep green eyes filled with longing. "It *was* worth it, until you ran away." He took a small, hesitant step forward. "You have to believe me, Simon, I never would have hurt you."

"I don't *have* to believe anything," Simon said, reaching behind him and feeling for the stair rail as he backed away, "and especially not a line of bullshit like that." Julian was suddenly standing in front of him, a cold hand gripping Simon's throat.

"Get out of my house," Julian said, his voice trembling with anger. "If I ever catch you on my property again, I'll kill you for trespassing." He released Simon and turned on his heel, stalking across the room and into his bedroom, slamming the door behind him. Simon fled.



Simon jerked awake, sitting bolt upright on the couch. It was dark in his living room, not a single light on. Not surprising, since it had been early afternoon when he had finally collapsed out of sheer exhaustion. He got up slowly, careful not to kick the edge of the coffee table with his bare feet, and made his way over to the floor lamp in the corner, switching it on and filling the room with warm, golden light. What time was it? And what had woken him?

A sharp knock on the door made him jump, and answered his second question. Running a hand back through his sleep-tangled hair, he stumbled toward the door.

“Simon, it’s me.” Julian’s quiet voice stopped Simon dead. He stood, heart pounding, in the foyer, trying to decide what to do. Pretending not to be home wasn’t an option, now that he had turned on the light.

“What?” he called after a moment. There was a long pause.

“I don’t want to do this again,” Julian said. He sounded tired. Couldn’t sleep after letting

his prey escape, probably. "Please just open the door." Supposing that if Julian really wanted in, there wasn't anything stopping him from breaking down the door, Simon stepped over and unlocked the deadbolt, pulling the door open about a foot.

"What?" he said again.

"I brought you back your shirt," Julian said, holding out the freshly washed shirt. "You can keep the hanger." Simon reached out and grabbed it from him, expecting to be yanked out, but Julian just gave him the shirt and stepped back down off the porch. "I'm sorry about this morning," Julian said before Simon could close the door again. "I didn't mean what I said about killing you for trespassing. I lost my temper."

"Fine," Simon said, and shut the door. After only a second, though, he opened it again. Julian had started to walk away, but turned back. "Here," Simon said, digging into his pocket and pulling out Julian's back door key. He held it out to the vampire.

"Keep it," Julian said after a moment. "It's probably safer with you than hanging in the garden shed."

“But I- I don’t want...”

“Simon, why are you being so damn stubborn about this? What do I have to do to prove that I’m telling the truth? *I like you*. I’m not going to hurt you. Why can’t you just trust me?”

Because you’re a monster. For once, Simon kept that thought to himself.

“Why do you like me?” he asked. “You barely know me. We moved some furniture...”

“We made love...”

“We had sex,” Simon corrected. “And that was a mistake.”

“I know you don’t mean that,” Julian said quietly. “And I don’t know why I like you, I just do. I did from the moment I met you. You must have felt it, too. The gryphs—I mean, one culture where I come from believe that such instant connections are the result of two old souls meeting again in new forms—family, friends, lovers from past lives finding one another in this life.”

“Well, I don’t believe that,” Simon said, looking down at the key in his hand. He thought about

tossing it to Julian, making him catch it, but then he tucked it back in his pocket. "A person only gets one life, and I like the one I have. I don't need complications." He stepped back out of the doorway. "Good night, Julian."

"Is that what I am?" Julian asked, frowning. "A complication?" Simon hesitated, then shrugged.

"I don't know what you are, but I want you to leave me alone." Julian stared up at him for a moment, then sighed and looked down at the sidewalk.

"All right," he said. "If that's what you want. But I would ask the same in return. No peeking in my windows, no calling the cops on me, no breaking into my house and trying to kill me."

"Fine," Simon said, and started to push the door closed.

"One good thing about being immortal," Julian said, and Simon paused, "is that a human lifetime is but the blink of an eye in the grand scheme. I have time to wait, to see if you'll change your mind about me."

"I won't."

“I know, but if you do, I’ll be waiting.” He turned and headed for his own house. “You know the worst thing about being immortal?” he called suddenly, his voice drifting back out of the darkness. “Human lifetimes are but the blink of an eye, and so much time is spent dwelling on fear, hate, greed, anger, distrust...Don’t waste your time, Simon. There are so many more wonderful things in this universe than you could ever imagine. I would love to show them to you.”

Simon stood in the doorway for another moment, waiting to see if Julian had anything else to say, but the vampire was gone. He stared out into the darkness, a funny, empty feeling in the pit of his stomach, and then closed the door and went to bed.

About the Author

I was born and raised in western Oregon's Willamette Valley. After graduating high school, I skipped college and took a part-time job to help support my family. I am contentedly unattached, working for the school district, and spending all my free time writing, reading, or watching TV, movies and sporting events. I'm a huge football and NASCAR fan.

I've been writing stories since I was ten, and in all these years, the one constant in my writing has always been the magic, the supernatural, the inexplicable. Nothing inspires me like fantasy. These days I'm working on numerous short stories and a dark homoerotic fantasy romance series, the first two volumes of which are *Magebound* available in spring of 2009 and *Spellwrought* available in Spring of 2010 through PD Publishing.

Book Excerpts

Following are some excerpts of other hot m/m erotic romance titles from Shadowfire Press.

If you enjoyed *The Vampire Next Door* the first book of the *Suburban Fantasy* series, you might also like *Unspoken* by Katica Locke

An impulsive werecat sparks a twisted game of cat and mouse he may not survive.

Huntsmen kill Werewolf--it's what they're trained to do. Kae, a young and impetuous werecat, knows this, but it doesn't stop him from following one surly Huntsman into the bathroom of a nightclub. One spontaneous, not completely unwanted sexual encounter later, he's running for his life, pursued by a Huntsman bent on murder...or is it simply revenge? Or is it something else entirely?

Here is a short excerpt from *Unspoken*.

Book Excerpts

Hands clenched into fists, he starts to rise, but I grab him by the back of the shirt and shove him off balance, his pants tangled around his ankles. He falls against the stall wall and I twist one arm up behind his back, pinning him there. For a moment, the only sounds are the throbbing music and our ragged breathing.

“Well?” he says finally. “Go on then, kill me. Won’t your furry friends be impressed—the big bad wolf caught a retired Huntsman in the toilet with his pants down.”

“Shut up,” I say, shoving him harder against the poorly painted wood. “I didn’t think Huntsmen retired,” I add, leaning against him as I dig into my pocket.

“Shows what you know,” he says through his teeth. “Now what the fuck are you doing?”

I smirk to myself as I open the little tube of lubricant, warmed by my body heat and slick on my fingers.

“You,” I say, reaching down and pushing a single slippery finger into his ass. He jumps like he’s been shot, a surprised cry escaping between his clenched teeth, and tries to pull away from

Book Excerpts

me. “Just relax, old man,” I say, adding a second finger.. “I don’t get off on hurting people.”

“You fuck—I’m gonna—son-of-a-bitch, stop it—I’m gonna kill you,” he hisses, rattling the entire set of stalls as he twists and bucks, trying to throw me off.

“Don’t try to tell me you don’t want it,” I say, taking my fingers out of him and reaching around to grasp his still hard cock. He gasps, his whole body going rigid, as I let my hand slide along his shaft. “If you weren’t such a bigot, this would be deep in my ass right now.” His cock twitches in my hand and I let go of it, freeing my own growing erection instead. I slick the remaining lube across the head and then position myself at his entrance. He makes a strangled sound as I slide inside, several short thrusts burying my cock up to the hilt.

Or you might also like *Plague Dance* by Michael Barnette.

A plague ravaged the world. Cory and Deshawn

Book Excerpts

survived. But can they survive Roderik, the man who would be King?

After a mutated strain of Ebola ended the world as we know it, Staff Sergeant Deshawn Roberts finds himself alone and longing for companionship.

Cory Wilson, one time office worker, finds himself a captive of Roderick, King of the Lone Star Empire. It's a life of slavery worse than death, and Cory escapes to find himself on the run.

Brought together by chance, can these two men survive in the harsh reality of post Collapse America, and will they find the love they both crave?

Here is a short excerpt from *Plague Dance*.

A torrent poured forth from the darkened sky, the pounding drops intermingled with the chattering sounds of hail against the windows. Bursts of lightning shattered the night, bright as explosions in an embattled city.

Book Excerpts

Deshawn Roberts stared out at the fury of nature, wondering who else might be out there witnessing the storm. Wondering if he might be the only one left after the outbreak of Ebola tore through the country leaving millions dead.

Millions that included almost everyone else on the base where he'd been stationed.

Other than himself he didn't know who else might have survived the pandemic that had swept the US— the entire world— and left more people dead than living.

The barracks where he'd lived with the rest of his platoon was empty, the rest of the men he'd liked, and those he'd tolerated were dead. Their mortal remains lay in the mass grave he'd managed to dig with a backhoe from a construction site, a subdivision that would never be finished.

There was no one left to do the work, and no one alive to buy the half finished houses anyway.

Of the hundreds of people who'd lived at the base, he was the only one left.

Him alone with the echoing silence. He'd never understood that term, 'echoing silence' until he experienced the utter quiet of a place so

Book Excerpts

devoid of life that seeing a bird made his heart fill with joy.

He braced his forearms against the window sill, stared out at the raging storm.

Lonely.

He craved the sound of a human voice. The camaraderie of other soldiers, of men he knew, missed, wished he could talk to one last time. Share a beer and off color jokes, stare at the TV and hear laughter and angry words exchanged.

To hear any voice break the plague of silence that ate at him day after day the way the plague of the body had eaten away at the people he knew until all that remained was the dust of the grave.

Ashes to ashes. Dust to dust. The words mocked him. Taunted him with the promise of a release from loneliness he was unable to take.

A few others *had* survived, a couple men from a different platoon, one of the officers from his own command group. But they'd gone to find their families and no one had tried to prevent it. Not after Captain Ferrel had killed himself in the bedroom of his home, surrounded by his Ebola murdered family. There wasn't much

Book Excerpts

point in saying anything to them about duty or remaining to guard the base. Not after the government collapsed.

That's what the media had begun to call it in the last few struggling days of the United States. The Collapse. The end of civilization as everyone knew it. Even then the reports of warlords rising to power were coming in. Men— women too— carving out a niche in the plague shattered land.

He wondered if any of the men he'd known reached their homes. Wondered if they'd found anyone alive if they had.

Deshawn sighed, gaze riveted on the wild night, the storm torn riot beyond the glass and came to a decision.

At first light he would load up a Humvee with supplies and head out. There wasn't any reason to remain at the base, no one left to care what he did or whether he remained loyal to his oath as a soldier.

With no government he had no one left to be loyal *to*, so his oath meant less than the rain hammering the base.

Sooner or later other survivors would show

Book Excerpts

up. Survivors he might not want to meet. People like the warlord types the last few newscasts he'd seen reported about. He'd heard a few radio broadcasts after that, the station running on a generator for a few days. The last disc-jockey left for hundreds of miles talking himself hoarse, passing on any information he received, broadcasting rumors about the self-proclaimed King of the Lone Star Empire. A king who the rumors said was some former military guy named Roderik who'd raised an army and sent them rampaging around the countryside capturing the few people alive. People he forced to work for him, women he turned into servants fit only to cook and clean, the prettiest ones forced into lives of slave prostitution.

Then the station went silent. Either out of fuel for the generator or silenced by one of the warlords. Deshawn didn't know and he'd probably never find out.

In the long run it hardly mattered.

The world had gone from a thriving global economy, from civilized high-tech and instant communication across the globe to a barbaric age of savagery in the span of less than a month.

Book Excerpts

There *were* some really bad customers out there, prowling the post-Collapse landscape. People he had no desire to meet. Nor any desire to join in their egomaniacal quest for power.

“Rain, rain go away,” he murmured to himself before turning from the hammering of hail and rain to try and get some sleep.

Deshawn climbed out of his bunk the next morning, loaded up the Humvee and rolled out into the new world created by the Hand of Fate at a wink from Old Man Death.

Or you might enjoy *Swordbrothers 2: Four Winds* by Auburnimp and Michael Barnette.

Magic never lies.

Summerbreeze Warmwind is ostracized because of his blue hair. He never expects to find anyone to love him.

Sword Dancer is a wealthy weaponsmith who lacks for nothing, except a swordbrother to love him.

Book Excerpts

Trueflight Woodbender is a well known bow maker who isn't looking for love... until it finds him.

Zephyr Northernwind is the son of a camp whore, despised and living his life on the fringe of clan after clan. What man could ever love someone like him?

When the bond of swordbrothers unites these men to one another their lives change. But is it for the better?

Here is a short excerpt from *Swordbrothers 2: Four Winds*.

"I'm going too fast for you, aren't I?" Sword questioned. His blue eyes were hot with lust.

They barely knew each other, yet the call of their magic, the pull of the bond, could not be ignored.

It could, however, be tempered with willpower which Sword seemed to possess as the smith took a deep breath, then gently pushed Breeze away.

Book Excerpts

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have let the magic and the bond get the better of me.”

Breeze let out a whimper of frustration and need and watched sadly as the wind and colors dispersed. He stared down at his hands, wondering if he’d imagined the magic due to his desire for Sword. It was very obvious the man didn’t want him after all. “It’s all right,” he managed to say after a moment, “there’s no reason for you to apologize.”

Why would any warrior want me after all, sorry excuse for a man that I am?

Fingers stroked through his hair, smoothing it from his eyes, a spark of desire, a breath of wind followed Sword’s touch in a second, feather light caress. “I want you as my swordbrother. I want it *very* much, but I also want to be sure it’s what you want. It won’t be said of me that I took advantage of *anyone*. So tell me, Breeze, do you really want this with me, or do you want to think it over?”

Sword’s words, and the feel of the wind as well as his touch, made Breeze look up again, hope stirring in his chest. “I still think I must be dreaming,” he said. “I’m no great catch as

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a swordbrother. I'm an adequate hunter, and a reasonable cook. I can skin and make good leather but that's nothing compared to your skills and talents. I'm not very good with people and I don't understand how you could possibly want me."

Sword's sensual mouth curved sharply downward. His dark brows pulled together, and the man frowned at him. The look lent Sword a seriousness, a very manly expression that only made the heat in Breeze's flesh, the ache in his groin worsen.

"The magic decides, Summerbreeze. We aren't a pair of men taking one another as lovers. This is the real thing, true love forged by magic and the power of our very souls." Sword brushed his thumb across Breeze's cheek, the power of the bond rising at the touch of skin on skin. A puff of wind moved through Breeze's hair, a tingle flowed through the contact into him.

All of the hurt and pain Breeze felt, after years of slights over his bizarre appearance and gentle nature, was expressed in his cry of, "Then why did you push me away?"

Strong arms wrapped around him, pulled

Book Excerpts

him close, held him tight. “Not to hurt you. By the Ancestors, I never wanted to hurt you! Not you, Breeze.” Warm lips touched his, the kiss gentle, soothing. A stronger wind tugged at their clothes, flickers of blue, ribbons of magical energy rose from Sword’s body, from his body too.

*

Sword ended the kiss, gazed into the beautiful gold of his soon to be swordbrother’s eyes. “You’re precious to me, Breeze. Don’t you realize that? I’ve searched for my swordbrother, my true love for ten years and never found him. Not until I found you.” he explained, and showered gentle kisses on Breeze’s face, his throat.

He wanted the young man, had wanted him since he’d first set eyes on the fall of his odd blue hair, the sharp curve of his cheek, the sensual form of his lips.

By the same token, he didn’t want to force the issue. He didn’t want to rush the younger man into his bed. He could tell Summerbreeze was

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uneasy, nervous as a virgin girl on her marriage night. He didn't understand it, but suspected that, like so many among the clans who were different in appearance, Breeze had been all but shunned by his own clan. He'd seen things like it before. Recalled how he'd seen other young men treated over some small difference. And blue hair like Breeze's was hardly a *small* difference.

Sword stopped kissing Breeze, the younger man breathless, cheeks flushed with what Sword hoped might be passion. It could just as easily be embarrassment. The two of them were in the middle of camp surrounded by people, some of whom were watching surreptitiously, while pretending not to pay them the slightest attention.

Not a few of them were young unmarried women. Sword sighed. *No wonder he's nervous. All these people watching us, if I had any sense I'd be embarrassed too. Time for a change of scenery.* "Why don't we take the food inside? You can cook our meal and we can talk about anything you like. How does that sound?"

He received a breathtaking and obviously grateful smile in thanks. Breeze gathered up his

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pot of tubers and the rack of meat and carried them into his tent. He placed them over the fire pit and got the firestones going underneath them before looking up and saying, "Thank you for being so understanding."

"Not a problem," Sword replied, giving the younger man a sheepish grin. "I should have done more thinking with my upper head, rather than letting the lower one get the better of me." He sat down beside Breeze, and favored him with a big smile. "Feeling the pull of the bond, and seeing how beautiful you are was too much for me, I'm afraid."

He touched the soft blue hair, twisting a lock around his finger, letting it slide up the digit, marveling at the color. "You're one of a kind, Summerbreeze. And I'd be pleased to have you as my swordbrother. That is if you'll have me. I really am sorry for making an ass of myself, but at my age I had given up on the idea I'd find my swordbrother."

You can buy *Unspoken* by Katica Locke, *Plague Dance* by Michael Barnette and ?? by ??

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