

The background of the cover is a dark, textured red and black, resembling a dragon's scale or a piece of heavy, dark fabric. In the lower half, a large, dark, metallic, and highly detailed object, possibly a piece of armor or a weapon, is visible, extending from the left towards the center. The overall mood is dark and menacing.

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Instincts

A SHORT STORY BY
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IMMŎRTAL TEAM—PAST AND PRESENT—FŎR
UNLEASHING NEW BLOŎD ŎN SANCTUARY



Instincts

Twilight in eastern Kingsport was when everyone around started to vanish. Alodie was used to it, the sudden way the city got inhospitable, but she was no less bothered for the familiarity.

She walked with purpose as she traversed the street, more an outdoor tunnel, really, the cramped path sloping endlessly down in the dark. On either side were sodden old wood homes, divided and divided again until it was impossible to chop them any smaller. Then they were just lean-tos, hovels for the wretched and the poor.

Mewls Avenue's dwellings hid it well from everywhere else. At least Alodie could smell the ocean here, though she couldn't see it. Shouts and curses carried from the docks. Most corners were dead ends. Sad fish gagged their last somewhere out of sight. It stunk.

One saving grace for Kingsport's slums: nobody much cared what you were doing.

She followed her cousin along mold-flecked cobbles, keeping a body's distance.

"Hurry up," Boyce muttered, walking faster, not looking back at her, *still* not saying where they were headed.

Boyce was older and gaunt, deeper in the blood, with a nose so proud it served as his face from most angles. His coat was big enough to hide a broadsword. Alodie had fair and fine hair bound up tight. She'd put her ugly gloves on. They were dressed to settle someone.

Out of all the things she did for the family in Kingsport, she liked settling people the least.

Organizing was tense work. Preparing the coachmen for a delivery, making sure they knew which crates to open and which ones to keep sealed, and how much to bribe the watch if they got caught . . . Alodie was good with details, but too many left her exhausted at the end of a day. Even so, her allowance was decent. And while shipping manifests were mindless, Alodie could skip out if she finished fast enough. She cut through the dullness by making her nights more memorable. Earlier in the year, she and Linn had gotten dead drunk and wrote "ALMS" in cow's blood on the leather hood of one of the family's carriages.

The carriage looked pristine the next morning. Nobody was punished; nobody even mentioned it. Alodie amused herself for hours just imagining Boyce's old mother, the matriarch herself, her face winding up like a screw, directing the washing woman to take care of it through a string of curses.

Linn had been Alodie's only friend for far too long. Alodie couldn't say exactly what brought them together, though she knew what kept them close: Linn had a poet's spirit. She toiled away in her shop at all hours, but she made sure both of them always had the finest silks to wear out. Alodie envied her. At least Linn wasn't part of the family. She didn't have to settle anyone.

You only settled the worst kind of people. Leeches. First they got in debt, *then* they borrowed, and *then* they tried not to pay.

And Alodie always had to play dealmaker with a leech. Her cousins could get . . . excessive, and she needed to set the dates and the amounts and assuage the leech's fears while the boys stomped around and made a mess. Help the leeches help themselves before they got hurt. Even if most of them deserved to get hurt.

The whole practice—the need for it—was shameful. Why weren't people just better?

Boyce led the way down Nogarden. They were turning angles every few seconds as a maze of wood and stone choked the path around them. If anyone was looking, Alodie couldn't see them for the grime coating the windows. It made sense, people leaving them filthy. Despicable things happened on the other side.

Alodie was lost and a little nauseated. She tried Boyce. "Who's the leech?"

Boyce didn't look back or even acknowledge her question, as usual. He disappeared around a corner.

Rounding it, she saw her cousin fussing with whatever was under his coat. Boyce had finally, blessedly, come to a stop in front of the door to a squat brown row house, one she—

Alodie forgot the thousand annoyances that had strangled her attention all evening. Her heart and her guts dropped through the cobbles. Panic clawed her fingers inward.

The sign for Linn's shop creaked back and forth in the evening breeze.

Boyce smiled at her. His teeth were dingy.

"Toughen up, little sprite," he said. "Indulge the instincts. This'll go quick."

Then he turned and kicked the door open.



"How could you be so stupid?" Alodie screamed at her only friend.

Alodie was glad she couldn't see herself. She knew what she must look like. Spit flying, veins protruding in her neck and forehead, face flushed to full claret. A real grotesque.

They'd tied Linn to a chair in her shop, bound her hands together behind it, then tipped it over, pressing her against the ground. Just to keep her scared. The place was already a muddle. Heaps of wool and rabbit fur surrounded a loom on the back wall. Leather hanging in uneven strands; jars of clumpy dyes on the lone desk; straw everywhere on the floor. The ceiling was low and saggy enough to dump the upstairs tenants on top of them.

Opposite the clutter, in an open dresser, sat yards of fine silk, neatly folded.

THEY USED IT TO KEEP HER DOWN,
WHEN THEY KNEW FULL WELL SHE
COULD RUN THE WHOLE OPERATION.
SO THEY SAID SHE LACKED A
HUNTER'S INSTINCTS. A KILLER'S.

Alodie pointed at the silk. One of the family's deliveries. She swept her finger around the room. "We gave you all of this. The only thing you needed to do was pay on time."

Linn couldn't stop her tears. Her tiny face was apple-shaped, and the crying made it seem smaller. An intricate blue-and-gold ascot wound around her neck, she'd pampered her short auburn hair with rose powder and wax she'd stolen from the tanner. Alodie knew that for certain; she'd been the lookout.

The expression Linn wore was fully pleading. *Good*. It meant she'd be amenable. Alodie put a hand on the chair, as if to stand her up. "If you can just get us two hundred back in a month—"

Boyce interrupted. "Can't keep a promise, don't make one." He was a boor, and he sounded like it.

Immediately, Linn's face went defiant. As defiant as she could be with all seven stone of her crushed into the ground.

"Sard yourself, pinch-nose," she spat. "I hope your mum's cats eat her eyes and demons eat the cats."

Linn was never a boor. She had a point too: Boyce's mother was awful.

Boyce didn't say anything, just opened his coat and brought out a twin-head hammer. He put it through the dye jars one at a time, sprinkling glass and cobalt-colored pulp throughout the shop. Linn screamed. Alodie covered her eyes when the glass flew, checked for cuts when it stopped, didn't feel any.

Then Boyce was stuffing a rag in Linn's mouth, flipping the chair upright, and heading to the desk with his hammer.

"Stop," Alodie shouted, loud, before he could do something else ugly.

"And what do I get if I stop?" Boyce said, waving the hammer. He looked back and forth between the two of them, like he was their problem to solve.

Alodie glanced at Linn's face: cheeks flush, eyes big, brows stretched up. Terrified.

"She won't just pay it back. She'll give you an extra hundred gold, on the side, when it's done. For your trouble. In a month. Right, Linn?"

Linn nodded. In settling, this was progress. One show of force, and—

Boyce took a long, deliberate step toward Alodie. He had a tight grip on the hammer.

"I don't think she'd learn from that. I think"—he drew out the wait—"that's *undeserved* leniency."

Alodie's heart was pounding. Hopefully nobody could see it on her face. Now she had to settle both of them.

"All right," she said. "Linn pays in two weeks. I'll come pick it up. And I'll take care of your manifests for a month." A concession. Sometimes, concessions could be good. They showed you respected the other party.

"You really don't have the instincts," Boyce said, flexing his fingers around the hammer. He almost sounded sad.

His mother spoke fondly about the instincts, so Boyce did too. They used it to keep her down, when they knew full well she could run the whole operation. So they said she lacked a hunter's instincts. A killer's.

But Alodie had them. She'd proven it.

Up to a point.

"I think, if she's going to take our livelihood, we should take hers. That makes sense." Boyce turned, raised his hammer, and looked down at Linn, scrunched under the chair.

Linn shrank back, moaned something around the gag.

"Please," Alodie said.

Boyce held on to the chair to steady it.

Alodie knew what he was thinking. The instincts took over.

"You're an imbecile. If you break her knuckles, how exactly do you expect her to come up with the coin? She'll—"

He brought the hammer down, hard.

Linn thrashed around under the chair. Everything she tried to say was wordless inchoate nonsense. Not just because of the gag. Because she couldn't help herself. Because it hurt too much.

She was shivering and drooling as Boyce pulled the chair up and unfastened her wrists. Linn's right knuckles were crushed to pits, blood flowing up everywhere—under the nails, in the ragged little rents splitting her skin. She rocked back and forth, cradling one arm in the other.

Alodie didn't want to see. She made herself stare at Boyce—who, beyond a little sweat, didn't look like he'd done much of anything at all.

"Now we're getting nothing," Alodie sneered at him, hateful as she felt. "Less than nothing, you idiot."

Boyce just shrugged. "She'll pay. Got a faster way to make it back than a couple weeks' work." With one hand, he pulled Linn toward the door. She was still wailing behind the gag.

His nonchalance made Alodie cold. "Where are you taking her?"

What was he thinking? Selling her to a prize house? Selling her into labor? With her hand ruined like that?

Boyce ignored Alodie again. "She's not your problem anymore."

Then he kicked a rucksack at her feet. Straw swirled in the air. "Get the silk, take anything else worthwhile, and go home. We'll talk tomorrow."

Alodie's face burned red. She should stop him. Hit him. Do something.

But he was deeper in the blood.

Linn didn't take her eyes off Alodie as Boyce dragged her from the shop.



Alodie went through the slums like she was ripping out a stitch. Slow. Backward. Feeling more than she'd wanted.

She'd never bothered to help a leech when settling didn't work. But Linn wasn't a leech. Or at least, not an *ordinary* leech.

You didn't praise a leech's talent to your family. You didn't invite her to the table to deal.

When a leech did well for herself, the two of you didn't storm the upper district, dressed better than the gentry. Wantons and troubadours didn't fawn over you. Your

nights didn't go so deliciously late the sun was scared to show its face.

You didn't promise a leech you would watch out for her. And she didn't promise you the same.

Maybe Linn thought she would get special treatment from the family because they were close. Maybe Alodie had let her think that.

So she stayed farther behind Boyce this time, out of sight, leaning against the chophouses around Mewls until the slums went straight again. Alodie walked a scattered way; a drifter, not a hunter. When Boyce met up with a few more night-shapes and they shoved something dark and bundled onto a cart, Alodie picked up her pace just barely. A drifter with purpose.

Her cousin's cart rolled over the filthy cobbles, west and north. Four figures and a cart: a prelude to a shipment. Their evening would be bigger than Linn.

But they were headed away from the docks. At least they weren't shipping her to Bilefen.

Alodie followed Boyce's crew for an hour without stopping, out of the always-yawning north gates with their flamboyant blue-green banners, and onto the trail roads. She crept in the dark, with no more slums to hide her, starting at every owl-sound. The little dots of their torches led her off the trail and toward the woods, where the smell of the sea fled for rich, rotting earth.

Then she waited. Gave them a few minutes to get ahead before she started moving. Alodie had a fairly good idea of where they were going.

The family kept a coach stop miles out of town, in the thinnest part of the Solterwood, for swapping riders and cargo before starting on new trips. Alodie had made the walk there more than once.

The stop was well hidden, right where the tree canopy started to get thick. Boyce dusted his hands behind a big four-wheeled carriage; two other carriages sat yards beyond. All three were hooded in plain leather, open-backed but dim inside, their cargo concealed.

Alodie could hear their horses huffing and stamping, and muffled chatter between the coachmen. She crouched low to the forest floor, hands down in the worms and moss and scat. Shrubs and brambles pried at her skin.

Boyce and his crew, squash-head Lachlan and two other thick-necks, turned and shuffled toward her in the dark, toting weighty clubs and torches that

doubled as clubs. Some of the family's people had come over from the knife gangs, she remembered.

They were grim-faced and dead quiet to a one. Usually, a handoff brought out some ill humor. Talk about how they'd spend the money, if nothing else. And they walked faster than they had on the way up, their heads swiveling about like gophers. As if they wanted to put the place behind them.

Alodie bit her tongue hard. She felt the throb of new pain as they brought their torches closer and closer. To illuminate the night. To find her hiding in a bush.

She looked at Boyce. Really looked at him. He was deeper in the blood, but he wasn't invincible. His eyes were mostly black pupils, soft and supple jelly all. His throat narrow and bare enough to crush. If only she'd thought to bring a sap, a sharp stick, even a gloveful of broken glass from the shop floor.

He walked right at her. Alodie tensed her fists, bent at the knees. If they found her, she'd wish she'd struck first.

And then what? Get her knuckles crushed. Get sold into labor. Boyce had been absolutely right: She didn't have the instincts. She was pretending.

Or she wasn't listening hard enough. He was distracted. Letting him ignore her, letting him get away with it—that was an opportunity. The instincts knew.

Soundlessly, Alodie sunk closer to the undergrowth.

The crew marched past Alodie's hideaway, swift and determined. Their torchlight receded from view. She found herself swaddled in enough shadow to breathe. Ahead, three carriages creaked, kicking up soil and dirt in their wake, lead horses tugging them forward at the crack of a whip.

Step out too fast, and the family would see. But if the horses got up to speed, she would never catch them.

Keeping her eyes off Boyce's crew, imagining them still withdrawing with their backs turned, Alodie crept to the closest carriage. She held her breath tight, begging herself not to cough as equine stink and forest rot washed over her.

At the front of each carriage sat a coachman, with a long horsewhip and a pair of mounted torches flanking their seat. They fussed with their whips, calling out commands to each other. Whistling. Shouting. Occupied. The lead horses started to gallop.

MAYBE A GOOD BIT OF THE INSTINCTS
WAS JUST IGNORING CONSEQUENCES.

Maybe a good bit of the instincts was just ignoring consequences.

Alodie lunged. She got one foot on the step at the back of the carriage car and heaved herself up and in. She landed hard on her belly, felt the wind fly out of her.

Grateful for being breathless, given the hell she found.



The inside of the carriage was a portrait of misery. Bodies slumped atop one another, crushed up against the walls. Ragged gray forms taking wheezing half-breaths, trussed to iron posts like coney. A few were unshod, with their feet broken and purple at the knobs, or their hands smashed into ruins of dangling nails. Most had been blindfolded; all were gagged. Heads lolled in stupor. Lit by tiny threads of torchlight from above, they were more like silhouettes than people.

Boyce's mother—the whole family, Alodie included—shipped a lot of things. Things they shouldn't have. But this was beyond what she knew.

Alodie sucked in a breath she didn't want.

She couldn't stand, and not just for the sick upheaval in her stomach. The carriage moved fast. Rolling forward, the horses pulling them straight north, where the trees were denser. That route would make the Solterwood impassible on the wheel after too long. Where in the Hells were they going?

Alodie looked frantically across the faces of the condemned, avoiding the unfocused eyes of the ones who looked back. She didn't recognize a single one. Probably they'd been leeches. Surely they weren't any of *her* leeches.

She felt frantic then, as if she would start weeping, but the instincts wouldn't let her. Everything poured into the clod in her throat.

Linn lay farther in, nearly atop two other prisoners. Eyes closed, bound and gagged. Still.

Alodie pushed herself up to a crouch. "Shh," she whispered to the passengers,

putting a finger to her lips. Not really talking. Hearing her own voice talk. Tapping herself for emphasis.

“Need to get her. Then I’ll help.” Could she help these wretches? Did it matter?

A dull moan rejoined. From near the wall, a shuddering, pitiful inhale. Alodie wasn’t sure they heard. Or understood.

She tried for all the authority she could fit into a whisper. “Don’t make a sound.”

Alodie inched forward, feeling every movement of her hands, trying not to touch their agonized limbs. Close to the front of the carriage, she saw Linn’s eyes flutter, and the wash of relief staggered her.

Linn’s eyes were puffy. But she looked back, and Alodie saw recognition in them. She hadn’t been drugged, Alodie figured—the good fortune of being a late addition to the shipment. But the rag in her mouth had been swapped for a leather gag, and both her hands were bound tightly to a post.

Her right hand was a travesty, ugly purple-yellow and swollen. Broken, surely. Beyond a healer, likely. There were a lot of bits to make a hand work.

Leaves and branches scraped along the sides of the carriage. The forest was getting denser. Alodie gingerly tried to remove the rope on Linn’s wrists. Then she’d free her feet, then get the gag. Then they would run.

As she fought with Linn’s bindings, Alodie’s hands trembled. For all that she could control them, they might as well have been someone else’s. At least the ugly gloves soaked up her sweat. But there were so many knots. No fray points. It was taking too long.

In frustration, she tried to work one of the loops over Linn’s good wrist. Linn whimpered into the gag and clenched her eyes shut, taking panicked snorts of air, each minute mounting agony.

Then Alodie heard the coachmen shouting, and the carriage started to slow. She pulled frantically at Linn’s bonds.

Meager torchlight vanished above them. Someone dropped from the coach seat onto the forest floor, squelching in the soil. Alodie swiveled to the back of the carriage, but the footfalls moved quickly around the front, followed by the sounds of horses getting unhooked. They clomped noisily away. The coachmen were running.

No one entered the carriage. Had they been abandoned?

Linn tried to say something around the gag. Knowing her, it would be a joke

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about her mangled hand. *Looks a beauty, don't it?* Or maybe she would be furious. She had every right.

Alodie got Linn's good wrist free and yanked the gag loose.

"They ain't shipping us out," Linn whispered, ragged. "We're bait."

From outside, Alodie heard the sound of timber splintering in multiple places at once, a tumult of axe blows falling on the forest entire.

One horrified scream ripped through the air. A chorus followed.



A minute passed in the shape of an hour. The shrieking outside the carriage began to shift. Wet, low gurgling took its place. Alodie could hear frenzied scrabbling, a different, throat-shredding yell, then silence.

The instincts quailed in her. Every impulse melted into fear. Her breaths burned. She could barely move. She mostly just trembled.

With one working hand, Linn worried at the bonds on her own feet, saying nothing. Her progress was hobbled, slower than the death that stalked them. She'd never get loose alone.

The condemned were coming to life now, glancing around sluggishly, trying to drag themselves off their posts, wringing at ropes and sweat-slick leather straps.

Alodie had to be the only person in the carriage halfway to her feet. Free to run. Linn looked up at her, wondering. Asking. She had every right.

Linn only nodded when Alodie leaned down and got a thumb under the bonds

on her feet. They worked at it together, until the slow scrape of something heavy dragging along the soil assailed Alodie's ears. It was all she could think about while she tugged the rope over Linn's left foot, shredding skin.

Until the front of the carriage split in half.

Wood splinters exploded around them. Alodie scabbled backward, tugging Linn by her good arm.

The carriage tilted. Three of the condemned vanished, ripped bodily off their posts and into the dark. Screams burst forth from everywhere at once.

Alodie caught a glimpse of ink-stained gums and rows upon rows of teeth. A serrated red-black tendril flicked through the ruin, catching her across the shoulder. She tore herself away from it painfully, and it snaked away to drag another of the condemned out of view. Alodie didn't look at the other prisoners, just heaved Linn forward. They scurried out over the carriage's bent back.

Linn took a child's steps, limping on legs numb from her bindings. Alodie's shoulder buzzed with pain as they lurched forward, in the deep of a wood neither recognized. Behind her, Alodie could see the wreck of all three carriages, red-splattered, blood coating them thick as yolk. A chamber torch, stubbornly ensconced and still burning, jutted atop one like a candle.

The bodies of the family's offering were everywhere behind. Red, ropy innards trailed from them, bunched and pulled like marionette strings. All of them, dead and half-dead and not-dead, writhed in unison on the ground, matching one another's movements, one another's noises.

Heart pounding, Alodie pulled Linn along the loam, deeper into the Solterwood's shadows, as fast as the instincts would allow her.



An abomination stalked the Solterwood with blood on its claws. Slunk low to the ground, it moved like a whisper.

Trees crowded out the moonlight but could not dissuade it. Its eyes were made for the darkness.

As it had many times before, the abomination lingered on hours-old ruin: two grievously wounded corpses, the remnants of their flesh hewn by claw and fang. What little skin remained to them was spiny, different than it had once been.

The bodies lay on ochre-stained soil. Both were still. That was important.

The abomination prodded at the bodies, then punched a hand through one. It bore down with a squelch, the corpse wooden and unmoving.

Then it loomed over the second one. Repeated.

This corpse opened its dislocated jaws wide, hissing rotten mucus from between its teeth. Like a dying insect, it flailed at the abomination with every limb. Even in this state, its strikes were brutal. The razorlike prongs poking up through its skin scraped against the abomination's hide but could not find purchase.

The abomination twisted. With a crunch, the corpse fell still. Its eyes were sunken, encrusted all around with red rheum. In all its frenzy, the lids had never once opened.

Rising to its feet, seeking past the sweet smoke and putrefaction, the abomination found something else. Its gaze fell on scattered tracks, trailing east to the densest part of the wood. It pawed at the dirt, stopped, inhaled.

Two more. Both blooded.

The hunt would not end here.

Shadows coiled around the abomination, and it was gone.



Alodie and Linn fled from the things in the night. The darkness was impenetrable. More of the forest seemed to just emerge around them with every step.

Alodie was steering Linn with both hands. And the instincts were steering her. No one was in control.

They had run for what felt like hours, harried by brush cracking and wet, ferine snarls. The hair on Alodie's neck stood up without ceasing. It was like she was being watched, always, but she couldn't see how. Or by whom.

Every few minutes, they'd been forced to stop. Linn would slow and need to rest.

Or she'd fall before Alodie could catch her. This time, the wound on her hand had bled through the cloth they'd wrapped around it.

"Do you think it's gone? That . . . thing?" Linn asked. She was slumped in the grass, trying to keep her breath quiet.

"We should move like it isn't," Alodie said.

Linn just winced and pulled at her makeshift bandage, rearranging it like that would fix something.

"It's not so bad. Boyce has done much worse," Alodie said, helping her up.

"Now you feel like helping?" Linn sneered as she rose from the bramble.

"I'm here, aren't I?" Alodie said, trying her best to keep them moving. "I would have told you if I'd known."

Linn was quiet.

Concessions could be good. She tried again. "If I had done anything, they would probably have killed us both."

Linn stared at her, dumbfounded. Maybe mad at herself for not realizing what a nightmare she'd cozied up to. Maybe madder at Alodie for letting her.

"You know, normally the smart ones pay on time." Alodie tried to keep the criticism out of her voice. It didn't work.

Linn shoved away from her and walked on her own. It was even slower going.

"And you've never been in a rut, have you, Miss Alodie?" Linn spat back. "Nobody wanted to come down to Mewls for months. I tried taking orders in the Upper. Things just slowed."

Despite herself, Alodie felt the instincts surging, spoiling for a fight she could win. "So you decided to have us carry the debt for you?"

"Us'?" Linn was incredulous. "You know how much money they have. You're always talking about how shite they all are—why do you care if I need a couple weeks?"

"I don't," Alodie said, realizing. She let the fight lapse. Linn deserved to have this, at least.

Alodie reached out to help her over some misshapen roots. "When they're coming by for your other hand, I'll give you a warning first."

Linn just stared back, face all ashen misery. "You don't get to joke about it."

Alodie had gone too far. It hadn't even been a night.

“Not until I joke about it a couple times.” Linn smirked. “Ideally with an audience.”
The forest was quieter. Tentatively, they settled into a slow walk. A shared pace.



In an hour, they'd heard no sounds of pursuit and seen nothing else alive. The forest seemed stripped of its chatter, and there was no sign of the night giving way or of the forest thinning out. They were both shivering.

From far off, Alodie heard a noise she recognized. A dying horse, whinnying around a mouthful of fluid. As they drew closer, she saw its belly had been opened. Linn looked away and covered her face with her good arm.

Alodie stopped to help her lean against an oak and searched near where the horse had fallen. She returned with a torch and a strikebox, then took Linn by the shoulder. “Are you going to . . . ?” Linn asked, leaving the question unfinished.

Alodie ignored her. Hustled them both away, fast.

She'd watched coachmen put down horses before. It was always sad, seeing the trust in their eyes. But at least she could tuck that away. The sight of those writhing bodies by the carriages, the way they moved like puppets . . . that, she couldn't forget.

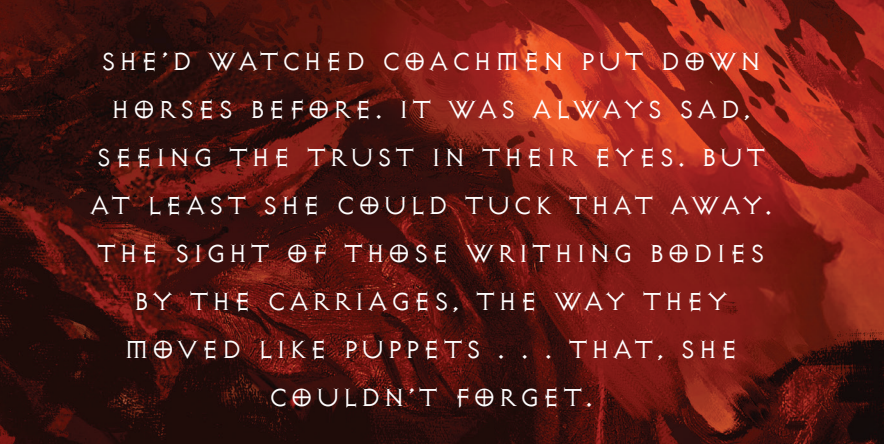
If an animal was dying here, still making noise, that could be a distraction. Whatever was hunting them could go hunt something else.

She veered opposite their path, driving Linn on, moving south. What she hoped was south—the trees were too thick to see the stars. The grainy wet soil started to give way to rocks, shards of granite that scraped her boots. Linn tripped even more often, breathed heavier, walked with her head down. Alodie stumbled a few times herself. They made a sluggard's pace in the dark, but the Solterwood thinned, ever so slightly, until they nearly smacked into a wall.

They were leaning against cold, mossy granite. A cave mouth yawned open a few dozen feet from them. Shelter.

Relief flooded Alodie. The constant feeling of being watched receded.

Alodie laid the torch on dry rocks, hunched over it with the strikebox open. She began pounding flint and steel, then blowing on an ugly gloveful



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of tinder. It was awkward and imperfect work, but not her first time. The torch burst into flame.

"Now you're not being serious," Linn said. But she shivered. Her voice was questioning, not demanding. She wanted to be wrong.

"Are you thinking we just walk until we collapse? We'll be safer if nothing can sneak up on us," Alodie reasoned. She motioned Linn forward.

They paced into the cave, the torch high above Alodie's head, feeling their way along the cave walls. An open area, somewhere to wait out the night, was all they needed. They hurried, drawing on the vigor of a second chance.

The torch was their lodestar. As they walked, Alodie felt it scrape the cave's ceiling. She wanted to hold it high, to send its light far ahead.

"How long do we need to be at this?" Linn asked, huffing. Where her fear had receded, her pain was filling the gaps.

Alodie's throat was so dry she cleared it twice before she could answer. "We should go deep enough that it would take work to get us out. Somewhere wide open, where we can keep our eye on the entrance." Alodie wasn't sure. She just wanted to sound sure. "Then I can take watch for a few hours, keep the torch lit. So you can get some rest."

They left the moonlit parts of the tunnel behind. The cave's walls were humid and wet, the stone occasionally hiding tiny beads of moisture that made her hands slip. Alodie certainly wasn't looking forward to sleeping on the ground. But they

had to make it through. Linn had to make it through.

Something scraped at the cave wall behind them.

“Shhh.” Alodie turned the torch, scanning the area as best she could. She didn’t see anything near in the dimness. But the sound was back the way they’d come.

They backed up, scrambling deeper into the cave, down the corridor. Ahead, it split in two.

Alodie drove them left, ensuring Linn was front of her, nearly shoving her to keep them moving.

Another maze in the dark. Alodie brought them to a turn, took it right—and realized they’d walked an elbow. The cave doubled back on itself.

A sound like an axe-head hitting stone reverberated through the cavern.

Her whole body was paralyzed with fear. Alodie stood unmoving, just pointed Linn down the right corridor. That was all she could manage. Linn looked back at her. Looked ahead again. And started to take shuffling steps forward. Trusted that she wasn’t another dying horse.

It couldn’t corner both of them. Alodie took the other corridor.

She held the torch as high as she could, gripping it with both hands, careful to avoid the wet walls. She didn’t want to see the thing that had ripped the carriage apart. But she had to for them to have any hope of surviving.

Alodie could hear Linn’s breathing for a few seconds, and then she outpaced the sound. There were no more scrapes, no more clangs. She would find the thing or Linn would. Alodie followed the torch down this new path. Walked until she noticed the droplets beading on the wall had changed, and stopped for just a second to look at them.

They glistened, reflecting something redder than her torchlight.

Alodie turned from the wall, and a fiend looked back at her. Tendrils jutted from its torso like umbilical cords. Its black-gummed mouth bristled with canines and too many tongues, each covered in sharklike teeth.

Its eyes were pits, merciless but not mindless. Too keen. Too human. Fine brocades that would have been genteel a century ago clung to its waist in tatters. She’d seen clothes like it in Boyce’s mother’s home. Handed down from their parents’ grandparents.

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TØ THIS THING. MØNEY?
PRØTECTION AGAINST ITS HUNGER?
A BLØØDLINE ØBLIGATION?

The horror of her family's arrangement hit her. Alodie knew their business made victims. But she couldn't imagine any human justification for selling people to this thing. Money? Protection against its hunger? A bloodline obligation?

Frantic, Alodie stabbed the torch toward it. Fire was the Light's weapon. She swung it wide, twice, then launched herself forward, pressing the torch against the monstrosity, trying to keep as much distance as she could.

It didn't shriek or recoil as the flames sizzled against its face, just leered at her. Then it swatted the torch away and tore her throat out with its teeth.

Alodie hit the ground slowly, like a stone sinking to the bottom of a pond. She gasped, unable to make the air go where it should.

In the guttering light of her discarded torch, Alodie watched as Linn limped around the other side of the corridor.

The creature turned, cast two of its tendrils out like whips, and Linn fell, screaming. The tendrils pulled her close. It settled down to feed.

Alodie's head lay in a gummy red pool. Everything was numb. She tried to turn away, but she couldn't.

Darkness took too long to claim her.



At last, the prey took its time to feed. Distracted.

The abomination had watched the two survivors of the carriage move noisily through the forest. At the cavern's mouth, the taller of them cast torchlight all around, signaling.

The abomination had also watched its prey. An old vampire, wrapped in the vestiges of its human wealth. Clever, sharing its hunt with people in Kingsport—staying out of sight, trading for chattel, and spreading its plague faster for it.

The vampire was led by its impulses. It did not know restraint. Did not accept being denied. It would seek the survivors.

It was agile. The abomination had not wanted to fight it on open ground.

But the two survivors had entered a cave. Allowed themselves to be cornered. Offered an opportunity.

The smell of blood wafted out of the cave mouth.

It brought Zebediah back to himself.

He was tall, with a beaked nose and long, cloud-white hair he left loose. He had a broad, square face, plain and pale but for the most obvious sign of the curse—sunken red eyes, surrounded by spiderwebbing black veins.

Zebediah wore polished armor, ornamental enough for an old Kehjan court, with brilliant crimson plates horizontal along the abdomen. An ampoule on a chain was fitted tight to the gorget of his armor, the vial filled with green-blue water from the river where he had nearly breathed his last, cornered by beasts he'd thought to draw off alone. To spare others—that had been the highest good he knew, back when he was more like a child.

His weighty gear was unusual for a hunt in the Solterwood. For anyone hoping to move quickly and quietly through the forest. Yet he had been called to the service of the Annulet as one of their blood knights for decades. He found it hard to change his ways; they had become indistinguishable from his pledge. *All that remains of my life, weighed against the darkness.*

Every time his journey became impossible, he found his way back to the pledge. Few could say it and mean it; in agony, in dilemma, he had lived it. Zebediah had slain comrades grown accursed and cut the rot from the innocent before it could fester. The life after his life was only ever monstrous; to face it and remain himself demanded a soul like ice. Unbending.

Zebediah whispered dead syllables to the night air. Shadows rolled around him like fog, silencing the sounds his boots would make on stone.

The screams from within the cavern had quieted, but Zebediah could still hear the raspy croaking of the vampire as it fed. He walked quickly through the cavern, needing no light to find his way.

The tunnel tightened, the rasping louder and louder to his ears. Near a bend in the passage, he at last saw the vampire hunched low, its tendrils cradling one of its victims, attached to her body like a dozen lampreys.

Zebediah had not expected any of the carriage victims to survive, even these last two. But if their deaths could give him a slight advantage against the vampire, he had been right to wait and watch. Nothing was more important than ending its threat.

Zebediah could cloak his approach, but not his scent. The vampire turned to look at him and sprang to its feet, hissing around a mouthful of jagged tongues.

A purple-black lance of solid shadow materialized in Zebediah's hand, and he hurled it with all his might. Before the vampire could spring away, the lance slammed solidly home, piercing its throat. Its tendrils shot up, struggling to tear away the shadow that ate at its cold flesh.

Somewhere within Zebediah, the curse exulted at the sight of the prey wounded. He forced it down.

Zebediah advanced on the vampire ponderously, knees bent, longsword held in gloved hands. He did not want to smell the rotten blood pouring from its wounds; he had to kill it quickly, before it could heal. He stabbed out, punched two quick holes in its chest, and tensed his whole body for a double-handed swipe—

Four serrated tendrils wrapped around Zebediah's throat and arms, shredding flesh. The pain was more shattering than anything he had experienced—the hundred tiny teeth of the vampire opened sucking wounds that burned, spreading like fire. As the vampire's tendrils constricted, Zebediah's spear fell from his hands. He could feel himself being torn apart.

The tendrils met in the middle of his body. Zebediah melted in a pool of blood.

The vampire paused, hissing, flailing its arms about. It padded forward, tendrils prodding fingerlike at the air. Then it turned back toward the bodies of its victims, insatiable.

A crimson puddle bubbled up behind it, an amorphous body-like mass. The

longspear rose with it, clutched in Zebediah's hand, reforming one finger at a time. His human form returned as blood slid off the mass, and he sprang at the vampire's back.

Zebediah tried not to look as he stabbed the creature over and over. But he couldn't help himself. Three holes. Four. Five. There was something enrapturing about their symmetry, about the perfect bursts of black-red ichor that washed over him. He struck with relish, mortifying his enemy, taking strikes he hardly cared to acknowledge.

Until a tendril scraped at the keepsake around Zebediah's neck and tore the chain free from the gorget. This vampire had been hunted by a blood knight before. It *knew*.

Zebediah dropped to the ground, catching his precious keepsake seconds before it could crash upon the stone. The vampire's limbs enveloped him, but the curse was what truly held him. Zebediah's skin stretched and changed; he gave in, growing into a flayed mass of muscle and blood to rival the vampire in strength and hunger both.

The abomination rent the prey in half, tearing off tendrils and a putrefying arm. Tore at it with the claret claws of blood its hands had become.

The prey was slick with gore. Wriggled this way and that. Trying to escape. Escape was impossible.

The abomination swung in a fury, over and over, with no thought of surcease.

Zebediah shook his head like a dog. His hands throbbed in agony. Of all the great distractions that kept him from losing himself, pain had brought him the most clarity. He was pulping the cave wall, had hit it so much he'd cratered the stone a foot deep.

Half the vampire's sloughed-off flesh lay below him. The other half was gone.

Bloody tracks led out of the cave. It had fled.

He hissed, turned to slam the wall again. The vampire was faster than him; it *knew* about him. He could still try to catch it. If he started now, maybe—

One of the bodies of the women on the ground twitched. Then, a few seconds later, the other. Again.

In unison.

Who had they been before? Siblings, perhaps? Paramours, the casual and affectless way they spoke?

He had come here to slay the vampire. To stop its curse from spreading.

THE FAIR-HAIRED WØMAN. SHE HAD SEEMED . . . PRØUD. HAUGHTY, EVEN. AND YET HE HAD SEEN HER STRUGGLE WITH HER INSTINCTS. KNØWING HER CRUELTY, USING AND TURNING FRØM IT IN EQUAL MEASURE.

And yet it had spread anyway, because of *his* choices. *His* lack of restraint. *His* curse, from long before he took up the spear.

What was the highest good? The best amends?

The smaller brown-haired woman was a thrill-seeker, with a sense of joy that would have served her well. She had believed she was worth something, even if the world was not.

The fair-haired woman. She had seemed . . . proud. Haughty, even. And yet he had seen her struggle with her instincts. Knowing her cruelty, using and turning from it in equal measure.

A start. He placed the spear and the keepsake on the ground and knelt before them.



Alodie shivered. Shivered with her whole body. It yearned to move, to tear free from her thoughts and her mind, each limb crawling away of its own accord. Her sight was buried, a pinprick of seeing in the blackness.

Visions drifted around her. A white-haired man, his beautiful armor caked with gore.

“You are going to die,” he said, in a voice neither cruel nor kind. His accent was unfamiliar, his cadence plain and quick. “It has tainted you. The change will be worse than you can imagine.”

He held a small vial filled with green-blue water above her and unstopped it. In all the haze, in all the dark, his movements looked fluid and slow at once. “I can

give you peace.”

She wanted to nod. Wanting wasn't enough to make it happen.

“Or I can give you time. Years. Decades. Perhaps longer.”

Alodie's body felt like it was drifting somewhere far away. She could barely hear the words. But they held her attention.

He continued, his pitch rising. “It will not be easy. You will train, and you will hunt. And you will die a monster, more wretched than the one that took your life. Your end will be no better for the evil you have slain, for all the good you have done.”

The good you have done. She tried to look around for Linn. Failed at it.

Urgent words transfixed her. “If you would wake to this life, then vow. Vow it on your blood.”

Alodie was unable to speak. Unable to move. She let her eyes answer him.



The ritual was hurried. Chanting and ablutions from the vial, the darkness of the cave sinking its fingers into Alodie's eyes like a thing alive. She lapsed in and out of consciousness, spoke, listened, remembered only pieces.

Standing turned out to be a labor, but she stood. Breathed. Ran her tongue over her teeth. Normal. Felt her pulse. Blood beating still. Looked at the white-haired man sitting cross-legged a few feet from her.

Between them was a small puddle of dew. Alodie realized she could see in the dark. Naturally, as she'd done so many times, she checked her reflection.

The wound on her throat was an ugly stitch. Her eyes glinted like light through rubies. They were surrounded by tiny veins the color of grave dirt.

She felt the pang of irreversible change, and let it go. The first need was to live. The second—

Linn sat up as though she had been dragged. Her arms hung limply at her sides. Her face was sallow. Spines poked through the skin of her neck and arms. A guttural, animal noise rose in her throat.

Somehow, Alodie felt weaker than she ever had.

“What you did to me,” Alodie told Zebediah, stammering over the words, “do it for her. You have to.”

Zebediah shook his head. “She has progressed too far. She will be a thrall of the vampire soon. I am sorry. I only had time for one of you.”

All Alodie had left was the good she could do. He had said that. He had made it a promise.

“We . . . If we kill the vampire, will she . . .” Her voice sounded raspier than she remembered, as if her throat hadn’t healed right.

Zebediah cut in. “Once the change takes hold in earnest, there is no stopping it.”

Alodie felt sick. Tears came unbidden to her eyes, the same useless leaking they’d always been.

“Why me? Why didn’t you pick her?”

Zebediah looked away. “Ours is a hard road, and you must know who you are to walk it. Forget yourself—even for a moment—and there is no way back.” There was a far-off look in his eyes as he turned back to her. “I sense that resolution in you. You, at least, have a chance.”

She walked to Linn, who was writhing like the puppet bodies at the carriage. Trying to get closer to Alodie with arms and legs that wouldn’t listen. Making sounds that weren’t quite words.

Alodie looked in her eyes, watched her pupils as they turned red and spread out, eclipsing the whites.

Linn couldn’t say anything back to her. And nothing was worth saying just to herself.

The sumptuous blue-and-gold ascot around Linn’s neck was stained to unrecognizability. Alodie slowly unwound it, pulled it over her head, and tied it around her neck, covering the scar. Her own keepsake.

She looked back at Zebediah. Not asking. Accepting. He handed her his spear.

Alodie pointed the spear at Linn’s heart. Waited for some kind of a reaction. For trust to show in Linn’s eyes.

Mercifully, she didn’t see it.

Trust.

She closed her eyes and let the instincts push.

