



Ashen
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I have no memory of what woke me, save for the fact I know it was no sound or motion. A fragment of dream billowed across my fragile mind, and as so often happens on the edge of waking, I clung to it like a drowning man to a raft. I fought to gain some sense of the images behind my tired eyes, but I could hold on no longer. I fell awake.

The room was dark, and although the clock by my bedside showed midnight approaching, I had the strangest sensation of time having slowed or even stopped. From my bed, I could see out of the window and across the rooftops that made up my city, for I never drew my curtains during summer months. Clouds hung still in the air, smoke rising from chimneys seemed frozen, and yet I told myself that this was normal. There was no wind, the air was as still as a frozen river, and I could expect to see no movement from where I lay. Bravely, I told myself this. The feeling hung about me however, like a shroud, that all was not as it should have been.

The curtains, bunched at the frames of the windows, twitched as if a small bird had flown into them. My throat grew strangely dry as I watched them settle. An odour pervaded the room then (*or had it been present all along? Indeed, was it this that had woken me?*), like the sweet summer smell of an apple orchard, corrupted by time and rot and despair. I slept with the windows open, but knew of no orchard nearby that could have perfumed the air. I breathed deep of it, as if to better judge my situation, and immediately my head swam as if drugged. I became aware of a red cloudiness fogging my sight, and indeed my hearing, that became so pervasive and cloying that I believed I knew how it was to drown. I struggled and clutched uselessly at the bedclothes, pooled around me in damp twists, and tried to shout. Whether I was shouting for help, for courage or from a sense of dread I had no idea. The point became irrelevant, as what escaped my throat was nothing more than a ragged whine.

That whine dried up and I gasped aloud at the sight of the figure at the foot of my bed. Where he had come from I had no idea, nor did I recognise the sloping stance, or stick thin limbs. He reminded me nothing so much as a tree in full winter starkness. That the pervading odour came from him I had no doubt, for no sooner than I thought of it, I was hit anew by the stench, no longer reminding me of sweet summer apple, but rather now an abattoir smell filled my lungs, all meat and sweet raw blood and fear.

He gazed at me with eyes I could not see; such was the gloom that hung around him. I felt watched however, the way a rabbit must feel

before the ravening jaws of a wolf, and I admit that I let out an involuntary murmur that was more a result of instinctive terror than of anything else. As my eyes became used to the way darkness clung to him, I made out the shape of his head, the severe but beautiful slope of his forehead, the sharpness of his nose. His mouth swam into view, more a cursory nod to that feature than an organ of speech, of emotion. A small dark tongue flicked out to wet the thin lips, and left there a trail of thick glistening saliva. It looked black in the darkness.

I pushed with my feet, and felt the headboard of my bed scraping down past my neck, then my shoulders, resting under my shoulder blades. The sound was like nails across sandpaper, for my senses seemed to have exponentially heightened with the figure's presence. My arms hung limp by my sides and I felt nothing below my chest. If I could have cared about such things, I would have checked beneath the bedclothes for my legs, even felt for their lumping shapes on the bed. I didn't care about such things.

I felt I had kept my silence for long enough, for the figure seemed as a statue. Apart from the searching tongue, he hadn't moved.

Who are you?

It seemed I only mouthed the words, for no sound broke the stillness of the room. I *knew* I had not spoken, and yet the man (for that is how I *had to* think of him) cocked his head and smiled. It was quite the most fearful sight I had ever seen. Sparkling white teeth broke the gloom of his face and his lips peeled back into almost paper thinness. There seemed an abnormal expanse of dark red gum above the teeth, and it seemed alive, as though worms or maggots squirmed and writhed beneath the surface, the flesh rising and falling in impossibly small peaks as if something were trying to break free. It gave the teeth a false impression of length, because the lips rode so high on the gums. They were sharp too, narrowing to needlepoints it seemed, and although he was still the full length of the bed away, I saw how the very tips of the teeth were translucent, like fine bone china.

The air seemed to reverberate around him, and the blackness that had at first seemed to pervade the whole room but had then resolved around the figure alone, swirled and eddied like ink in a bathtub. The smile left his face. There was no transition from one state to the other. There was at once the pained, wretched, writhing grin, and then the face was as serene as a sleeping baby. I must have gasped because the head lifted and

his eyes met mine fully for the first time, their bloodshot and somehow lifeless gaze corrupting me, staining me with redness.

I pushed myself further up the bed, my bare shoulders chilled on the wall above, my spine knocking painfully against the headboard.

Abruptly, a wash of calm enveloped me, although I wasn't yet sufficiently under its spell to realise that it was just that. This creature, this man, was hypnotising me with his glare. I fought as bravely as I could against the feeling, peripherally aware of brazen, bloody images flitting in my mind, as if I was looking at a series of photographs and forgetting them almost instantly. I felt chilled by their content, red torn flesh, and ruptured viscera. I felt pain in the images, violation and ultimately loss, and yet I cannot place one single image firmly enough in my memory to describe it in any detail. Was he planting these images in my mind? Was he preparing me for some as yet unimaginable onslaught of experience? In the fraction of a second it took for this to pass through my mind, I knew.

These were his memories. This was *him*.

My life felt, if it hadn't all through this encounter, on the edge of existence. I knew I had minutes left. This creature was not of this world, and nor would I be. Strangely, all worry dropped from my shoulders, and I found myself spending what I knew would be my last minutes, trying to understand the images, to make some sense of them so that I might recall these experiences in whatever passed for the afterlife.

Perhaps I fell asleep then, for the speed at which he approached my bed was like time-lapse photography, like the first and last picture in a child's flip-book. I felt the feather-light touch of a breeze on my chilled skin, blinked my eyes against the motion of air, and yet he showed no signs of having moved. His hair was still, his clothes the same. His eyes stared down at me from their roost, like two black ravens set deep into the white alabaster of a castle wall. He moved his head then, cocked it to one side, and I had the strangest feeling that he was exhibiting great control over his movement, as if he could, and should, have moved so much faster. All this lent weight to my notion of him being inhuman, un-human. He spoke suddenly. I say suddenly because I saw nothing of movement in his lips. Only his eyes sparkled, and I heard his words deep in my brain, like the hint of memory.

Are you scared?

How did I answer this creature? Did he expect my answer? Surely he could sense my fear in the smell of my body, like sour sweat oozing from my very soul. Surely he could sense my fear in the set of my body, rigid, ready for flight. Surely the loud thump I recognised as my heartbeat answered his question as convincingly as I could ever have done with mere words.

‘Yes.’

He smiled. It was a toothless smile, as if his lips were glued together, and it gave his look that of sympathy, of inevitability. I swallowed and heard the click in my throat as if it was a snapping twig. He reached a hand to me, fingers open, palm upwards, as if he were inviting me to take his hand in mine. Suddenly his fingers clenched in to a fist and as if he had reached inside of me, my heart seemed to slow, and then stop. My breath caught in my throat and I stared at him, wide eyes. Then he released his fist, and released my heart and breath and I gasped air like a floundered fish. He laughed a low, easy laugh.

‘Come,’ he said. He turned from my bed and I squeezed my eyes shut against the vision of him outlined against the window. I heard the swing of the window as it opened, felt the light, warm breeze of the night. When I opened my eyes, he was gone.

‘Come,’ I heard again, as if the creature was still in my room. Without thinking I swung my legs over the edge of the bed, and hurriedly dressed in crumpled clothes that I had thrown off the previous night. I walked to the window and looked out on the glorious night.

It was one of those nights seldom experienced in England. Warm, clear, and smelling faintly of fresh cut grass and lovers’ perfume. I stepped out onto the balcony and held the iron rail tightly with both hands. I saw the creature standing a short distance away on the rooftops. My room was such that only a short jump could take you from the balcony onto the first of the roofs, and then away across the top of the city. I followed him. He turned and grinned at me, beckoned me to follow with one slender arm. His teeth gleamed white in the dark.

I followed him then, racing across the rooftops, my heart pounding to keep up with his swift strides. I stumbled and tripped countless times, and always he was yards ahead, his soft, confident laugh guiding me and mocking me. The stars shone brightly, and soft billowing clouds floated by on almost imperceptible breezes. It seemed for hours that we ran, until we reached a part of the city that I was not familiar with.

Sweat slicked my torso and ran painfully into my eyes. The creature stood perfectly still, on a roof slightly lower than the surrounding houses. He looked my way, and I could see a slight sheen to his white skin, as if the moonlight was liquefying on him. His hair hung as it always had throughout our race, lank, long and black, swaying slightly. He seemed to breathe not at all; as if the thousands of steps we had taken were mere memory to him, as if only I had exerted any energy. I stopped a few feet from him.

'Good, good,' he murmured. He nodded and held his hand to me, urging me to join him. I did.

'Where are we?' I asked.

'We are precisely.....here.' he answered, a gleam in his eye. 'Why did you follow me?'

'I...I thought you wanted me to,' I stammered.

'Oh, I did,' he answered slowly, looking me up and down. 'We must go inside now. Dawn is approaching.'

I looked to the horizon and saw no sign of approaching sun. I turned to tell him this, and he vanished. I saw him, standing at the edge of the rooftop, clinging to a ladder, looking at me. Always looking.

'Come.'

So it began.

The room in which I stood was austere and gothic, all sober tapestries and heavy curtains hanging over thick stone walls where windows should have been. It was a wonder I didn't know this building from the outside, for it must have been formidable to see. I remember nothing of the journey into its grand cocooning darkness, for the creature had helped me onto the ladder and then....nothing. I felt drugged by the same clouding redness that had assaulted me in my room, and when the fog cleared, here we were.

I looked around me slowly, not wishing to appear scared, but knowing I was, feeling it to my very marrow. The creature was busying himself at the great fireplace, stacking thick logs over shredded paper and sticks. It seemed he had no matches, but soon a flicker of flame bit into the kindling. I watched the flames, as if to ground myself in whatever normality I could, until the fire was blazing, concentrating on the familiar and comforting sound of crackling sap and exploding knots. The creature stood.

'I am a vampire,' he said, without turning. 'My name is Ashen. You need not fear me.'

I would have laughed had the situation not been so utterly dreamlike and alien to me. Somehow I knew he did not lie. Ridiculously, I began to reply with my own name. He swiftly held up a long fingered hand and drew it slowly into a fist like a closing flower. The sentence never left my lips.

'It matters not what you are called, my friend,' he began, 'only what you believe. Do you believe in vampires?'

'I ...' I could go no further. It was a question I would never have imagined having to answer, and yet here I was, with the words rattling about my mind. He waved his hand, as if to dismiss the thought as a troublesome fly.

'No matter.' He turned to me.

The firelight lit his features so that his face appeared to burn, such was the luminescence of his flesh. Shadows stood out like tattoos across his sharp, angular bones and his hair became a deep toffee red where it had been black. My breath caught again in my throat for he had quite the most striking appearance. It was as if he was not of this world, or even of this time, and this idea grew in my mind until all my doubt and aversion to it was shed like the cracked and broken cocoon around an emerging butterfly. And strange as it may have been to me, that butterfly was *this* thought; that if I was to die this night, if it transpired that my life had reached its end and my lifeline cut with destiny's blade, then so be it. I have seen what it is to be godly, (for at this time, that is truly what I believed this thing to be) and I have known mortal fear and broken through it to utter understanding. There was nothing to hold me to life now, or rather, no experience that could ever match this. Oh, had I but known.

I had taken in my surroundings the way one will when thrust into a situation against one's will. I had noticed everything and yet seen nothing. I looked again now, and saw meagre light from several sputtering candles, dripping fat gobbets of dark ochre wax onto the heavily carpeted floor. I saw a table and chair against one wall, no cup or plate on the table, only a thick book and several pens, expensive silver nibs and turned bone handles looking incongruous in the severity of their setting. There were no windows and I could see no door through which we must have come. I saw no other furniture and in my mind I marked this place as not so much lodgings as prison cell. Only the warmth from the fire (for despite the summer night, this room was as chill as a mausoleum)

dispelled the prison image from my mind. I grew brave as the fire crackled its comforting dialogue.

‘Where are we?’

The creature started as if he had forgotten I was there and turned to face me.

‘Ah..’ he smiled and it was a return to the awful shifting rictus from my room. I held back a shudder. ‘We are in my house. I live here.’

‘But...’ I started.

‘Underground, about 8 miles from your room.’

8 miles! Had we really travelled so far?

‘Why are we here, underground?’ I asked with no small tremor in my voice.

He looked at me as if genuinely surprised.

‘Because you followed me from your room, and because this is my house.’

I opened my mouth but found nothing there with which to counter this statement.

‘Please sit,’ he said and motioned to the one chair in the room. I did as he bid, and found even the bare wooden structure offered not only immeasurable physical comfort (I never felt such relief at taking the weight off my feet), but also comfort of an emotional kind. As I ran my still shaking hands over the chair back, I recognised their design from my grandmother’s house many years ago. I smiled.

He looked for a moment confused at my smile, and I stored that knowledge deep in my mind. I had no idea whether it would furnish me with a way of escape, but it seemed important.

‘Thank you,’ I replied after some minutes. He inclined his head softly and came to sit on the table next to me.

‘Would you care for anything to drink?’

The moment was so familiar, so understandable, and so *normal*, that I stuttered my answer, and he rose and walked to the far end of the room. Tucked into a corner, hidden from my view as a result of the darkness there, was a small chest. He lifted the lid and took out a small bottle swishing with dark amber liquid. He brought it, along with two exquisitely cut crystal glasses to the table. The sound of the liquor pouring filled my senses and the smell, a particularly fine brandy, wafted to me and set my head reeling from its strength and warmth. I gulped without thinking and coughed violently. He chuckled. The sound was not pleasant, a forced laugh sounding almost as if he had had to learn the trick of it. I sipped slowly the rest of the drink and set the glass carefully down

on the table. It was perhaps the finest thing I had ever drunk and I told him so.

He shrugged his thin shoulders and poured me a second glass. I held out my hand in a gesture that I hoped would stop him from pouring further, but I only appeared to be thanking him.

'It is time,' he said, and with those three words, words that I had heard thousands of times in my life, my heart went cold, and my stomach knotted.

'Time,' I said, managing to keep my dry mouth from swallowing the words before they were uttered.

'Let me explain,' he continued.

'I am a vampire,' he said.

He emphasised this last word with undisguised venom, as if the mere word revolted him. 'There are not so many of us left as popular gossip would have you believe, perhaps half a hundred. I am by no means the oldest, but there are more vampires younger than me than there are those older. I do not recall the means of my creation clearly, nor the year of it, and of my time as a human I have no recollection whatsoever. That time is mere folklore to me now, and for all I know, it may never have happened.'

He stood slowly and stretched his back. The gesture was so human that for a moment I forgot where I was and what he claimed to be; what I *knew* him to be.

'I need blood in order to live. I must have the blood of humans or pigs, but nothing else. I cannot digest food as you do. It would sit in my stomach and rot. I would grow sick and die.' He seemed to ponder this for a moment before continuing. 'The heat of the sun will kill me. The blood of the dead. Nothing else.'

He looked at me as if to garner my reaction, but in truth I was overcome. I had no doubt that he told me the truth. My hands shook with the scope of it. I managed to voice a thought.

'Why are you telling me this?'

He chuckled. 'You may wonder if I am happy with what I have? Whether I give any thought after so many decades to my situation, and what I could have done to prevent it? Well, after so many years, any thought of what and when and how becomes irrelevant. And yet the why of it intrigues me still. Why must I drink blood in order to live, where you may eat meat and bread? Why may I not enjoy warmth on my skin, when you sit in my house now fairly glowing with the sun's

rays? I long to taste bread once more. I long to have warmth on my skin that is not generated by fire or electricity.'

I swallowed audibly and checked myself in the act of pouring another drink. He saw me and smiled.

'Please,' he gestured with a thin hand. I poured and drank, allowing the effects of the alcohol to numb slightly the effects of his rhetoric.

He continued.

'Strength I have, uncommon strength. Money I have. Security and all the...food..' (for my benefit, I am sure, he paused and gave that last considerable thought and accent), '..I need. I have all that. Has it been so long since my own humanity that I forget the smell of daylight? I grow weary of the night, of the blood, even of the strength. I need to feel the simple joy of a summer's day on my face, the helpless weakness of humanity.'

He sat once more on the table next to me and held his head in his hands. I quelled a feeling of revulsion as I imagined having to comfort him in his distress. I was spared that decision as he lifted his head. His face was dry of tears and emotionless. His eyes were black holes and showed me nothing of the man he must once have been. I pushed back into my chair.

'Simple really, John.'

This familiarity shocked me because until now he had not addressed me in any way. I never thought he may know my name.

He looked into my eyes, as much as he could with his cold shark's eyes, and spoke to my mind as he had done at the start of all this.

Simple.

'I wish to change places with you. I want mortality and the only way I am to achieve this is to take yours.'

There was such confidence and surety in his thoughts that I crumbled beneath them. I am ashamed to admit that I cried then. Not inward, noble tears. Great wracking sobs as the weight of his words struck me. All thoughts of escape left me then.

I hadn't noticed until that moment, but his cold hand encircled my wrist, the tips of the fingers easily touching at the pulsing veins. I felt a charge in his touch, not unpleasant, but I was sure that it was another of his glammers used to ensnare me. I knew he would kill me then and I steeled myself against the pierce of tooth or knife or bullet. He bent his great head and bit suddenly, savagely, at my throat, where neck and jaw met, rending the flesh there; releasing my blood into his mouth. I cried

out, but was powerless to defend myself. I let him drink, and waited for death.

It never came however, for even as I could hear my heart beating like a drum in my ears, feel the pulse of it at my wrist, as if it would beat strongest at the last to defy him, he released me and I fell limp against the chair-back. The sound and heat of my heartbeat settled and faded like a great ship's engines over the horizon.

He stood back from me, and I saw my fluids give life to his otherwise deathly pallor. He flushed a pale rose, and as soon as the colour came, it faded. He sighed and shut his eyes for a moment, and this time a single red tear streaked his face from eye to jaw line. I was as immobile as a statue then, as if he had taken not only my blood but also my will.

'It has begun, John,' he whispered.

I saw a mist collecting around his form, more leaving him through pores and orifices, and all else went dark, so that I could see his aura and nothing else. It formed exactly the contours of his body and once free from him, the mist took shape in front of him as a perfect copy. It spoke.

'This happens every time I feed, John. I do not pretend to understand it. I like to think of it as my true self, leaving the nastiness of consumption and digestion to my physical being, while I am free for a few moments to enjoy life as I once did, I think. Perhaps even before mortality bound me, and immortality freed me.' The mist shape looked pensively at me. 'Ashen, the mortal.' He stretched his ghostly limbs and he was impossibly big then. I closed my eyes, the only movement afforded me it seemed, and when I reopened them, he was as he had been.

'Why I have never fully tried what I am about to try, I am not sure,' he said. I took immeasurable discomfort in his words and tried to move away from his mist. My limbs were leaden, and I could not move. My eyes flicked back and forth like a wild horse, and I snorted and frothed like some rabid beast before him. He hushed me, knelt by my side and laid a transparent hand on my brow. I calmed. Against all my will and my instincts, I calmed.

'Yes,' he said. 'It happened like this, a year ago. I had fed deeply; the mortal was lying as you are lying, close to death but not yet dead. I could still feel his heartbeat; still hear the ragged hiss of his last breaths. I knelt by him as I am now, and my mist form was pulled toward him. I could not prevent it, and I didn't try. I actually lay on his prone body and felt myself sinking into him! Can you imagine that, John?' I admit I couldn't imagine any such thing. 'My God, John, I was becoming one with this man who had late become my sustenance. I was terrified, and

used all my will to repel myself. I felt the strength of the mortal's soul doing the same and I left him to die. I could not feed for days afterwards. The episode had frightened me more than anything has frightened me for centuries. Could it be done? Could I become a mortal by taking a body?'

He left off then, as if to leave his words for me to digest as his physical body was digesting my blood. I flicked my eyes to look upon the body, and it stood still, eyes open but empty, no movement whatsoever from its limbs or head. It looked nothing so much as a photograph. The Ashen that was mist before me swirled and eddied like smoke, and yet was as clear to me as anything I had ever seen. I digested his words, as was his wish. I tried to move again, but again I felt an unseen and immense pressure preventing me from doing so. I was terrified, mortally terrified, for I had long ago stopped fearing death. I now feared for my soul, and although I am not a religious man, I prayed then. I prayed I would have the strength to repel this mist being from entering my body and ousting my quivering soul.

'I knew it was possible then. I knew I could become mortal again. A year has passed, John, and I found you asleep and for no other reason than I liked the look of your face as you slept, I wanted to try again. So here we are.'

I wept.

I cannot say for certain that I know the exact time that he began his assault. I felt rather than saw the misty shape begin to dissipate and felt what I can only describe as my soul begin to curl away, like paper from a flame. It began in my fingertips and moved slowly through my arms. I fought as best I could, and as the assault continued, I began to feel less and less like I was a part of it. It seemed that I was above looking down at the rape, for surely that's what this was. I found a measure of strength and pushed against his intrusion. Images, like the ones that had entered my head when I had first met Ashen, struck me again; blood and flesh and death. I held onto those images as long as I could, for they tied me to a time when I was mortal, when I was terrified, and when I was me. My torso constricted suddenly, and I sat up. I felt elated, as if I had won the greatest battle. I turned to find the shape in the mist, and was horrified to find my prone body lying where it had been all along. I looked at my hands, looked through them almost, and in my moment of distraction, he finished it.

It was too easy. I offered him no fight, and he took me, and then it was done. My body sat, and then stood. I could not move from where I was. When finally I did turn, the mechanics of it nearly drove me insane. There was no thought or physical exertion. Rather I felt like smoke in a wind, and went where the wind took me. I screamed then, and it was the howl of a wind and I felt my mouth stretch impossibly wide to allow the sound to escape.

Meanwhile, my body, Ashen, was rushing through the room, knocking chairs this way and that, howling, beating his hands on his chest and face. Almost by accident it seemed, he found the door to this place, and turning the handle, he was gone.

Panic hit me like a physical blow to the face. I felt myself dispersing, swirling, and I used whatever thought I had left to drag my components together, to draw all my smoke and shade into one coherent form. How I managed it is a mystery and my mind seemed to go blank with the effort.

Suddenly I felt utter despair and a feeling that in mortal terms was like terror and loneliness and paranoia. I cried out, a wind's breath, and was drawn to the only thing I recognised; the only thing that my soul needed at that time. Physicality. Of course.

I took his body as he had taken mine.

It was an easy transition. I thought of the movements needed and they were there in my powers. The mist that I had become edged toward the still body of the vampire, and by every hole and orifice and pore, I entered it, and filled it perfectly. There was silence and then there was cacophony.

I covered my ears and the sound of skin on skin was like two granite slabs being pulled over one another. I screamed and screamed, and dropped to my knees. I felt warmth coursing through me and I knew that this was my blood I could feel. His last meal. I took nourishment from it, as I had always done. A mirror hung from the far wall, and in its length I saw the creature I had become.

'Ashen,' I whispered.

I let my sight go dark with some mechanism I scarcely understood, and curled like a foetus on the stone floor. All went silent and dark.

That was six months ago. Had I but known it, I had forced myself into a hibernation that vampires need after every feed. It lasted until the next sunset, about ten hours, and I woke then, and stood and looked about

my prison. I found pen and paper and set about writing the words that have become my tale. Of my body, my mortal body, there was no sign. I felt a kind of distant loss, but no more. That has grown in the intervening months, until now, in the dead of winter, my loss and fear has grown into a deep and powerful hatred.

Let me explain the nature of this beast that I find myself. As I woke that night, it seemed I knew what it was to be a vampire. I knew of the threats to my survival; the sun and dead blood. Of course, Ashen had told me these things almost in passing, but was he preparing me? Did he want me to preserve this body for him when he had grown tired of the mortal charade? Surely he knew that, as a vampire, I would be too strong for him?

I knew of the feeding that I must do, and I survived for the first of those months on the blood of pigs. The first mouthful I took caused such violent rejection that I could have died right there and then, for I was laid out prone, shivering fits of nausea preventing any movement, until the warmth of the sun became the pain and fear of approaching death. I made it back to this place with minutes to spare, and now my skin has the darkened hue of sunburn. I like it that way. I am ashamed to admit that I have taken humans now. I feel for them, but rather like a human may sometimes regret the death of an animal so that he might eat. It is no more than that, and the blood sustains me and thrills me like the blood of pigs never did. It is an unexplainable sensation to drink human blood as a vampire, and I will not try to contort its pleasures into words here.

I knew of my strength, for that first pig, and the first human I took, both died of such severe spine trauma, such was the force that I fed, that I was again in grave danger, this time from drinking their dead blood.

I could scale buildings, and cloak myself, shield myself from eyes that had no business seeing me. As I have mentioned, I know not of any of these mechanisms. It is just my nature and I know how to do these things.

And of my mortal self? I am sure he assumed me dead, burned in my first sunrise. I am not dead, and in not realising this when he finally took up residence in my mortal home, he has made a grave error. I saw him for the first time tonight, and I have planned and seethed and raged for so long, that I was almost powerless to approach. I shielded myself from him, and followed him, letting the thirst grow in me till the anticipation was almost unendurable. Where he has been these months, I do not care. Tomorrow will be his last day in my home, for I have learned

his trick. I feed, and I feed, and at the last, I allow my soul-mist to leave my body. That first time, I stood and watched my stillness as I watched my prey breathe and stutter her last, and I knew I could do it. Timing will be everything, for I must have my body at the break of dawn, and allow him nowhere to hide. That will be the trick of it.

My night of Ashen is over. Mortality awaits me. Pray for me.

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Where myth and fact meet, there is a line that should not be crossed. A sculptor, hopelessly trying to bring his dead son back, crosses that line. What he creates will haunt him forever.

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In times of reckoning, there are always those that feel that they have been cheated; that the path hewn for them through the mountains and valleys and plains of destiny is not theirs. Carson was one such.....



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