

BLOOD SHACKLES

ROSEMARY A JOHNS

I slowly stood to face the bastard, who'd started all this: Head of the Retrieval Team in Bangkok, who'd hunted me on his monstrous black motorbike and trashed my Triton. He'd kidnapped me - not like a person - but like a wild bird, which'd been trapped and sold into captivity. A pet to be tamed and trained, presented in a gilded cage on some rich man's wall. From the moment Mohawk had shot me full of tranquillizers, I'd been a slave. My blood roared louder than those motorbikes. It wasn't terror I trembled with any longer: it was rage.



FANTASY REBEL

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First Edition 2016
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Cover design by JD Smith

ISBN-13: 978-0995557925

ISBN-10: 0995557926

Fantasy Rebel Limited
rosemaryajohns.com

For A.

'There's nothing but snowflake patterns.'

The Slave Journal of Light

MAY 3

Look, it's all about the pain, right? Pretty playthings. Forever young. And no guilt.

The Lost reduced to nothing but a possession. Property. Slaves to you sodding humans.

See at the heart is the Blood Club: the new, most exclusive club for Russian oligarchs, sons of Arab princes and the brats of Silicon Valley.

Here we are - two species in this world of ours - and I should have my nut examined for reckoning it was big enough to share.

Ruby, my Author, once showed me a macabre museum: La Specola. She warned that you First Lifers would stuff and mount us Blood Lifers (like all the other animals you've screwed over), if you ever discovered we existed.

Ruby swore we had no place but the shadows.

I, however, didn't listen.

It doesn't look so bloody clever now, does it?

I'm sprawled on the bed of my cell; I'm still starkers except for the silver ring on my left hand - S.L.A.V.E standing out in stark relief. And yeah, it's a cell: Egyptian cotton sheets don't cancel out the lock.

Didn't they teach you that in *How to Be a Mistress* school?

Earlier I'd heard footsteps outside my door. I'd also caught the whiff of gorse and sunlight. You'd smelled just like that, the first time I saw you, when I was just one of many slaves - tiger-striped and

bruised - waiting for your inspection at Abona House. But then the scent had faded.

To be owned by Finlo Cain's daughter – Grayse - now *that* takes the piss. I'd forgotten you were *Master's* spawn, until you told me your name was Manx.

And even your name is torture: it strips me back, layer by painful layer. To my first love and betrayer. To the woman, who destroyed my heart and then got me killed. To the bitch, who became my first ever prey. *Grace*. That was her name. Still, your name's spelled differently. So best we don't take it as a bad omen, yeah?

I can't hear anything in the dark of the night anymore; you must be kipping by now.

I take another quick shufti around: there's nothing but four off-white walls, this strange bedside table (a stiff cube of crochet), and an eerie blue glow from the window blind, as if it's infested with magical ivy. You'd explained you'd had it fitted with electroluminescent fabric, which becomes brighter at night and dims as the sun rises: an early warning system for the dawn.

It looks like you're a dead thoughtful slaver.

Still, there'd also been this journal on my pillow.

A5 textured Italian calf leather, framed by smooth burgundy; it's so deep red I could suck the blood from it. The pages are buttery between my fingers.

I guess you're not big on irony, springing for such luxury on a slave. I imagine you only buy the best: this journal and now me.

The journal even came in a cracking navy presentation box; the bang was bloody satisfying when it hit the wall. It doesn't have any lines, so your thoughts can flow free. There's no lock. But

then I don't know why I expected one: privacy's for the free. There was, however, this blinding pink gold fountain pen, so...swings and roundabouts.

And its name – 'The Slave Journal of...'

See, that's where I got stuck.

You lot call me slave *shadow* to mock. Because my true name?

It's *Light*.

I feel like I'll be struck down or...beaten down at least, simply for writing that. But it's the truth. And truth can't be erased as easily as words.

You must be a mug if you reckon you can keep me here – tamed - as a willing slave. But then, I'm not exactly *willing*, am I?

Do you get off on it? The power?

If folks were honest, everyone bloody would (given half a chance). The thing is, most First Lifers never do. It takes being reborn as a Blood Lifer to taste that splendour.

I haven't forgotten the majesty of the night, even if the black's consumed me. I've more than a century on you. I'm a predator - not to mention a Rocker. You can take the clobber from a bloke but you can't take that.

Freedom means so little, until you lose it. But I will find it again, I promise you.

So, dear Reader (because I know you're reading this, there's no use pretending otherwise), did you reckon giving me this poncey journal - all softness and stink of leather - would make me spill my Soul? You already have my body, bought and paid for. You *think* you have my mind.

My thoughts, however..? They're my own.

Write in it every day, you'd ordered, with that little smile.

What do you think this is: *Bridget Jones's Diary*?

I'm not a performing monkey. I'll write, when I write. You want more?

Good luck with that.

You want to know how I was captured? Enslaved? Defanged?

I won't guarantee you'll like what you read. No one does when it's the truth: raw and flayed. Bloody.

But not tonight.

The glowing ivy is dimming in the blind. The sun is on its way. And I'm knackered. I need a kip and a wank. That's what comes of you not giving me any clobber: black jeans and t-shirt please. Nothing fancy.

Maybe you won't even read this. Why would you? I'm only a slave now. What difference could my thoughts make?

MAY 5

So, I guess you did read my journal then?

The look on your mug this evening when...

I noticed the journal had been straightened on the crochet table. It's not like *I* leave anything straight, is it? Because rebel here, yeah?

I knew you'd read my pissed off ramblings, when you tossed the black jeans and t-shirt at me, before slamming down a cup of blood and banging out. Not a single glance at me. Not one word.

OK, wanker here, and you're a... I don't know yet. That's what brings me out in a cold sweat - the uncertainty, which haunts all slaves - because nothing is under their control, least of all what their new *owner* will be like.

Still, if you don't want honesty from a Blood Lifer, don't demand it.

In the 1950s, I knew this Blood Lifer from Darwin, who was so blindingly honest he'd tell you to your face you were a *crook* or a *fiddler* (and sometimes both).

I asked him once if he didn't get tired of all the barnies.

The bloke had stared at me evenly out of his purpled peepers, before shrugging. 'The truth is free.'

Turns out, however, that the git wasn't right: he copped it when some *crook* or *fiddler* took exception, shanking him through the heart.

Shame that - because wouldn't it be nice and comforting if life could be tied up pretty in a bow?

Anyway, now you've left me alone for the night. I don't know if it's punishment, or if that's simply the way it's going to be. If it is, I'll start scratching lines on the wall to record the dawn, as the ivy brightens and dims, transforming this into a proper gaol.

I've paced up and down to burn off the buzz and roar of the blood, as my muscles bunch and tense, dancing on the balls of my feet and gagging for a go with my fists and my non-existent fangs.

Or a shag – I'm not fussy.

You've been feeding me cows' blood, which is richer than my normal pigs'. It trickles into the system slow and sensuous, manna to a starving man, after all these months.

Christ in heaven, can it really be so long..?

The blood's not human. But after existing on so little, it firework sparks technicolour, until overloaded I could lick the walls and kiss the stars dancing in front of my peepers.

There's nothing to do in my cell. I've lain for hours counting, losing myself in the exquisite coloured song of numbers: whorls of plaster on the high ceiling, strands of entangled crochet cotton, moulded into servitude and leaf tendrils on the alien ivy.

Then I've played with the numbers, drawing out the game to fill the void: ordering them into sequences and memorising the never-ending tumble of morphing shapes.

I should be used to my bondage. When I was first captured, I drowned in it. And now..? Sometimes I think it'll turn me touched after...

No, you haven't earned that memory. Not when you've locked me in here. Alone.

I tried the door earlier, just before I started writing this entry.

It's a heavy, original affair, or it'd splinter with one good boot. I've broken through enough doors in my time (you don't want to know why). There was no budging it.

Then I lost my blasted temper.

All of a sudden, I was hammering on the door and hollering.

You sodding well let me out... I'm not your bleeding pet... Open this...

Until reality crashed in: Abona House's severe grey façade, the dark stables, *Sir*, the slaves, who I'd left behind and the parades of punishments for just such rebellion.

I freaked out. Trembles shook every nancy boy inch of me, as I fell back, scrambling to the illusory safety of the corner. I hugged my arms tight over my nut.

Good boy. Got to be a good boy. I promise to be...

I huddled there - I don't know for how long - but you never came. The blind showed it was still twilight. You must be out.

Lucky break for me.

That's why I reckoned I should write this entry...you know, honesty and that. To show you I can be a *good boy* too.

You can't imagine how much I hate myself for that slave thinking. But you're free. You have options.

I don't.

Still, writing this has given me something to do in the vast expanses of boredom, seeing as you've abandoned me in this cell. It keeps the nightmares out: the ones of my past and future. Spectres of what's been done to me and shadowed fears of what will be.

It doesn't half bring home a fellah's helplessness, however, to have the long length of an empty journal spread in front of him, with all these blank pages to fill, like these walls and my slavery.

How about I write what it was like when you came to buy me?

Maybe then you won't leave me in isolation. A bloke's got to hope or else he's truly dead - and I've already tried that. I didn't fancy it much.

It was the rebirth, which was glorious.

'Whoa, this one's wicked frickin' busted. What did he do, Mr Yates?'

A line of us had been herded into a wing of Abona House, which I hadn't seen before: a humungous entrance hall, with a baroque chandelier, all smoky flourishes and brass scrolls amongst the sharp glint of Austrian crystal. I'd only caught a shufti of the room, before we'd been ordered to *kneel*. Then all I'd been able to see, as I'd bowed my nut, has been the cold black-and-white chequered marble floor.

When I heard the woman's unexpected voice, I risked a quick glance up from underneath my eyelashes.

It was some bird, tall and willowy in a lace Victorian knit sheath dress, who'd come to inspect us, as if we were expensive antiques for sale.

The bint was a First Lifer; I could smell the blood pumping through her.

Christ in heaven did I crave to violate that dainty throat and gorge my starved fill.

I told you this would be the truth flayed bare, didn't I?

The woman's grey, piercing peepers caught mine, before I had the sense to lower mine.

‘The pretty leech makes trouble he does,’ *Sir* - I could feel him hovering behind me. I tensed. I could imagine *Sir* pushing his black framed glasses up his neb, in a habitual gesture of disappointment. ‘You don’t get nowhere without discipline, see. It was all on your dad’s orders, Miss Cain.’ I flinched. This bint was the *owner’s* daughter? *Master’s* daughter? *Bollocks*. Shrinking down, I tried to look as uninteresting as possible, as you strolled closer. I sensed your hand reaching out towards my cheek. Just for a moment, I allowed myself to imagine you intended to caress it, rather than clout it. ‘You carry on now,’ *Sir’s* voice contained a hint of impatience in its Cardiff lilt: that never boded well.

I struggled to stop myself fidgeting; the stripes across my back and arse ached deep into the muscle.

Stuff *Sir*, I was going to risk another look.

This time when I raised my peepers, you were staring right at me. Neither one of us looked away.

‘I’ll take this one.’

‘What? I mean...’ For once *Sir* seemed lost for words at your announcement, and wasn’t that just harmonious, orchestral backed choirs in Heaven music to my lobes? ‘Look you, the boy’s not ready. His training’s only... Your dad’s been thinking on this leech for the Estate.’ *The Estate*. Two words, which hung over us Blood Lifers, as the ever present threat, which made Abona look like a sodding kiddie’s nursery. I only realised I’d begun to gasp in panicked breaths, when *Sir’s* manicured talons landed on my shoulder and squeezed painfully. ‘See? Not right at all. But isn’t this little one a lovely job?’

When he released my shoulder, *Sir* tried to drag you on to the next Blood Lifer - this blue-eyed

teenage crush of a Dutchman - who was staring vacantly ahead.

My breathing slowed at last: that was me forgotten then.

‘Na-ah,’ you shrugged *Sir* off, ‘I’ve already told you - I’m taking *that* one.’

‘But I need a few more months to break him. If I was given a couple of weeks, maybe I could--’

‘Naw,’ I was surprised by your sharpness, ‘I want him like he is. Right now. Intact.’

I nearly laughed.

Intact?

I sodding wish I was, sweetheart.

‘Up. Inspect,’ *Sir* barked. I jumped up, standing to attention, with my legs spread apart, as I balanced on tiptoe. I clasped my hands behind my nut and arched my back - my whole bloody wares on display. When you circled me, I felt your hand close to my skin, skimming it but never quite touching: it was torture. Your fingers hovered over the lash marks. *Sir*’s voice was low. ‘It’s a mistake.’

‘You want me to call my daddy?’

‘No, no, look here... But the leech’ll have to be sent to you.’ Panic. There was definite panic in *Sir*’s tone.

I sensed you directly in front of me; you were studying me. ‘I want to talk to him alone. We could walk in the gardens. He’ll be on his best behaviour, right?’

I ventured a small nod.

‘How about some pants and a t-shirt for him? It’s wicked raw out tonight.’

I tensed.

Sir had never yet shown his *other* side to a human, but – and I had to give it to you – you had the skill to right royally piss him off.

There was a significant pause, before *Sir* replied, with what I knew was a supreme effort of restraint, ‘These creatures don’t feel the cold.’

‘That’s why they’re like, shivering their asses off?’

This time I couldn’t help it. I spluttered with laughter. Then I yelped, as *Sir* grabbed me by the scruff of the neck.

‘What slaves *feel*,’ *Sir* spat, ‘doesn’t matter.’

A moment later and it was your soft fingers on my neck instead of *Sir*’s, as you prised him away, before steering me out of the room.

We strolled in silence through the kitchen gardens at the back of Abona House, the herbs – basil, mint and chime – melding in sunbursts of scents and hollowing my starved belly with the memories of long ago dinners. We wove past the ice house and down to the large walled gardens and horse pond; I could see the fat koi sleeping under the black mirror of the water. The gravel of the drive was sharp under my bare feet, nicking my soles bloody, but I bit back my pain because I was outside and that was...like breath.

I was desperate to tip my nut back, stare up at the stars and howl at the crescent nibbled moon, like I was off my bloody trolley.

Yet I didn’t dare.

You just kept on walking, tense as I felt.

When we reached the long, low stable block, I couldn’t repress the tremble, which ran through me. I wished I could forget my last trip there but I was still welted in rainbow stripes.

You glanced at me. ‘Cold?’

‘Yeah, it is rather parky, darlin’.’

You gaped at me, as if you’d been expecting me to speak some strange Blood Lifer tongue and not the Queen’s English. Like you hadn’t assumed I’d

sound...human. Then you gathered yourself together. 'Here,' you led the way to a sheltered trio of arches, which made up the poncey fakery of a loggia. 'Better?'

'Almost like I wasn't starkers.'

You gave a tight smile.

I leant against a column, as I had a gander back at the silhouette of the great house, its steep terrace, the wood encircling it beyond and the drive sweeping down to it, between the dark sentinels of oaks.

In some screwed up world, this was the worst Jane Austen scene ever.

Well, maybe not *ever*...

You were giving me these quick, surreptitious looks. 'This is, like, fried.'

I shrugged. After the year I'd had, this new twist to my existence had some dead stiff competition in the *fried* department.

You edged closer. 'You don't have to look so scared; I'm not gonna scoop ya.'

I raised my eyebrow. 'Good to know.'

That flummoxed you.

You ran your fingers nervously through your ash blonde hair, which I now noticed hung in a bob to your shoulders. I had the sudden thought of how soft it'd feel on my lips...and then wanted to scrub my brains out.

I haven't long been alone - utterly, truly alone - since my first death. Since I lost the only person, who mattered to me in this brutish world, I feel too easily.

Us Blood Lifers do that; every emotion is amplified.

I looked down, but you forced my chin up.

Reluctantly, I met your sharp gaze.

‘I meant it. I didn’t want...one of those broken *things*. Though you’ve gotta be soft making trouble for daddy. He’s the one, who’s insisting I buy one of you. He’s eager for me to learn about the business now I’m back. It’s not like *I* want...’ Embarrassed, you looked away.

‘Don’t worry, I wouldn’t want me either.’

‘Naw, it’s just...I’ve never even looked after a dog before.’

‘Lucky I’m not a mutt then.’

The wind whipped through the gaps in the arches, goose bumping my skin. The air was fresh and sharp. For the first time, I could smell more than my own blood and sweat.

‘Look, it’s late. I’d better get you back.’ *Bugger it - me and my big gob*. I hopped from sore foot to sore foot after you down the drive, leaving a crimson snail-trail in my wake. ‘Just tell me what luggage you’ll need sending with you?’

I built up the bottle to reply, ‘I had a coat. A leather motorcycle jacket – studded - with a gold ace of spades on the back. I don’t know where it is; the buggers took it. It’s vintage, from the ‘60s. It’s a bit faded now but...’ You were staring at me in surprise. I dropped my gaze. ‘It’s a blinding coat,’ I muttered. When I looked up again, I almost caught a smile.

You may be a Cain, but it doesn’t have to mark you. We’re more than what our families, ancestors or species make us.

At least I used to reckon so.

There isn’t bleeding anyone, who won’t try and control you. The system’s set up like that, cradle to the grave.

But that doesn’t mean you have to play their game.

For the first time in months, as the Stuart shadow of Abona swallowed us again, I let my mind wander to escape – and it smelled just like you: of gorse and sunlight.

Then again, you've shut me up in solitary now, so I got that wrong, didn't I?

Maybe you *are* marked by Cain.

MAY 6

Your little pinkie stroked mine, when you passed me my blood just now, so that's progress..?

No, you're right, I'm barmy: too much blood and boredom.

I noticed something though, when you handed the blood to me, inked on the inside of your wrists, before the delicate pulse points (and trust me, you don't want to know why my gaze was drawn there).

Tribal black outlines of a Manx cat, with long hind legs and shortened, stumpy tail.

There's one other place I've seen the same design. It signifies white, searing agony. Snaking fire. Schumann playing wild carnival.

Do you have the tracker?

That thought makes me shudder. I remind myself just who you are – a daughter of Cain.

The Manx is marked out by its genetic mutation: the shortening or nonexistence of its tail. That makes it no different to us Blood Lifers.

It's all in the evolution – venom and fangs – which are from Komodo dragons, if you're interested (although I reckon your sort isn't).

We're simply numbers on a page. Cash in the wallet. You prefer to commodify us. Pretty up the image.

Trap us in a tattoo.

MAY 9

I'm writing this in your kitchen: humungous, blinding white and stainless steel affair, with silver brocade wallpaper, Smeg fridge and a Rangemaster gas stove, which has more dials than I know what to do with (and looks like it's never been touched).

I'm writing this entry because you stuffed the journal in front of me, before ordering me to do something *quiet*, since you had *like so much work*. You'd reckon I was a snotty nosed brat with a colouring book - not a century and a half old Blood Lifer.

It's not as if the last week has been a picnic, shut up in my cell.

This evening started the same. Except that the call of the blood – the night, in all its electrifying glory – beat in my veins. Until my nut felt like exploding bloody firework. Until I struggled not to scream from the pulsating migraine agony.

All I wanted was to drive the pain away...*bang, bang, bang*...to the *beat, beat, beat* of the blood. My nut against the wall, painting it crimson.

The new pain grounded me. There was no thought or sensation, except the...*bang, bang, bang*...

I didn't even hear the door open.

The next thing I knew, you were dragging me away from the wall and hollering at me.

My blood was dripping sticky into my peepers. Shadowing you into a spectre.

Then you quietened. To my surprise, there was the light touch of your fingers down my cheek, followed by the firm grip of your hand in mine, as you led me out of the cell for the first time.

You parked me here in the kitchen, before swabbing me with balled cotton wool, pinking a bowl of tepid water, as you cleaned my cut.

Ruby would've licked the blood from me like a proper feast. Then buzzed, we'd have shagged right there on top of the gleaming counter, shoving the avocado knives, nut milk bags and kombucha jars smashing to the marble white tiles.

You, however, just threw the used cotton wool into the rubbish. 'Well, that was frickin' stupid.'

I shrugged.

'Ya huh! You're not getting off so easy. You're telling me what that was about on account of I don't want you decorating my tasteful apartment a vivid shade of red.'

All right then, veiled truth time.

'I don't like to be caged. Alone. I'm sorry.'

And there was that piercing look of yours.

Then you sighed, settling down on the stool next to me, before piling out an iPhone (that was miraculously charging inside your monochrome tote bag), workbooks and a handful of rollerballs onto the counter. So definitely no shagging then...

Your hair was hanging in damp strands, as if you'd recently been caught in a downpour.

I flipped open one of the workbooks. '*Masters in Management?*'

You snatched the workbook back, as if I'd sully it. *Right, I've got the memo, sweetheart.* 'It's why I've been...distracted this week. Daddy wants me trained. But it's so intense. I mean, wicked exciting, with global experts and networking, you know? But this week there've been evening summits and--'

‘So you reckoned... What? You could stuff me in a spare room like a...hoover?’

‘A Hoover?’

I couldn’t help grinning. ‘Alright, not my best analogy.’

You shivered, running your fingers through your wet hair. Tiny rivers streamed down the vast bay window out in the dark. I craved to feel them coursing down my skin too. ‘It’s wick raw out. Does it do nothing but rain in this city?’

‘Drizzle. It drizzles mostly. And making small talk about the weather? That marks you as an honorary Londoner right there.’

‘Yah, I’m from Boston; it’s not like I don’t get it.’

‘So, that’s it then? I mean...’ I ducked my nut.

‘I grew up with my aunt in Beacon Hill. After that it was Harvard, of course. Do you wanna see my resume too?’

‘Right little bluestocking.’

‘Right little killer.’ Your peepers were hard now.

Bugger. My chest was tight. *Breathe, bloody breathe.* ‘You don’t know the half of it, sweetheart.’

The look on your mug was worth it. When you slipped off your stool, however, stalking down the hallway towards my cell, I tensed for flight.

Fight or flight – they’re our two most basic, ancient responses. I used to imagine I’d always fight. That’s been tested, however, these last few months.

We none of us have one identity alone and immutable.

To the Blood Club I’m *shadow*. But my true name is *Light*.

Yet what does that even mean?

In First Life I was *Thomas*. In Blood Life we must all transform, when we're rechristened into our new world: I chose *Light*. I was, however, to change again, when I met... Let's just say she was a First Lifer - like you - and I never saw anything the same way. *I* was never the same. I shed the Blood Lifer I'd been, like snake skin.

Now she's gone. And who am I without her? In the blackness of this new life and grief?

It was *Sir* who rechristened me once more as *slave shadow*.

So who am I now? The type of bloke who scarpers in terror from a First lifer?

When you returned to the kitchen, however, just as I was poised to leg it, I saw you were only holding this journal. When I caught a glimpse of its blood-red cover, it was strangely comforting.

You thrust the journal down in front of me, with that order to do something *quiet*.

Since then you've been tapping away at your laptop.

I don't know what's wrong with pen and paper.

You know, it's not as comfortable as you'd reckon travelling by crate. No, you're right: no one reckons it's comfy.

That first night, when they delivered me to you like the product I've become, I'd been travelling for so long in the stink of brittle straw and the dark, that the bright light of your chandelier blinded me.

I lay there, wedged in and tied down by red nylon ropes, which had bruised my wrists and ankles (even purpling my throat), gasping for air and slowly opened my peepers.

I squinted up at the light refracted by the vast chandelier, which my muddled mind realised was

hundreds of pieces of plastic rubbish, the type that could be washed up on a beach: bottles, bags, balloons and fishing lines.

Then I could feel rough hands dragging the tight ropes off me. Finally, I was hauled upright, like a sodding statue.

You were simply standing there – watching – your hands clutched together. I didn't know which of us was paler.

Your apartment was Georgian, panelled in polished mahogany, with a classical, fluted fireplace at one end and two high bay windows with heavy blinds and silver velvet curtains. It felt Bohemian, however, rough around the edges. The furniture was a mix of antiques, modern pieces (more like art than anything else), and junk shop finds. There was a tree trunk bench along the back wall: a huge log, with traditional chair backs stuck into it. I wondered whether the plan was to similarly domesticate me.

The apartment reminded me of how a Blood Lifer would decorate, picking out what they liked from across the ages. It felt like...home.

You muttered something to the workers and they left, taking that bleeding torture device of a pine crate with them. You didn't tip. My kind of bird.

Then we had a silent staring contest. It was more awkward for me, considering I was starkers, except for the silver S.L.A.V.E ring. Somehow the ring only made me feel more exposed.

I hugged my arms close around me. 'Where might this be then?'

'My apartment.' Not a flicker. You should play poker, you'd be bloody blinding at it.

'And that's where? Exactly?'

'Exactly where it's meant to be.'

I wandered over to the far bay window and peered out.

A city.

Towers, small blocks of flats and the low black ghosts of estates. The occasional sharp church spire, like needles.

Yet only in the distance because the apartment was overlooking a park, with an avenue of tall sweet chestnuts guarding the street and the black hump of a hill to the north.

It was so familiar, my skin itched - of course, that could've been the nicotine withdrawal. Still, I couldn't help the smile, as I spun to you. 'London?'

Suddenly a memory flashed back with such vividness, I could taste the blood warm.

AUGUST 1866 PRIMROSE HILL, LONDON

Ruby and I had stalked this reprobate through the steaming heat of Regent's Park. He was a right ruffian in a dirty crimson choker and a crooked tile, which he kept pressing to his nut, as if expecting it to be swept off.

He stank of onions and sex.

The wanker was a kidsman; all evening the little ones had flocked around him with their petty thievings - a billy or a jenny - as he knocked them around, whilst fondling their arses.

Ruby had let me pick our mark for tonight; the kidsman might as well have offered me his neck himself.

I reckoned he must be up to some caper or other, when he skulked into the park shifty-like; it suited us just fine because so were we.

Ruby grasped my hand, as we prowled under the London planes and oaks.

Authored in Elizabethan times, for a century Ruby was my red-haired devil, Author, muse and love. Together we were alone against the world - or so I'd thought.

I've since learnt never to trust such simple appearance.

We tracked the bloke past avenues of sweet chestnuts and limes, darting underneath the spreading arms of ancient oaks. The air was fresh, in a way it wasn't on the streets. You don't know what pollution is, until you've been in a pea-souper.

I sparked with the freedom, twirling Ruby round and unbuttoning my shirt.

We passed the darkened tea-rooms of Chalk Farms and their pleasure grounds. The bull *croak* and *bark* of the frogs from the preserve called out in the black. The rogue was still slinking onwards, up Primrose Hill.

I hadn't been back here since my election to Blood Life. I remembered, however, my papa bringing me and my sisters, Nora and Polly. We'd munched on Barcelona nuts from sellers and cocktail sticks of treacle and peppermint. We'd climbed to the top, out of the smoke of the city. I'd stared in awe over the vast lake of Barrow Hill Reservoir, the crowded cottages and public houses, the zoological gardens and Wren's domed St. Paul's, which was like a decoration on the horizon.

London.

It hadn't seemed large enough to me, laid out like that; I never could find a world, which was big enough. I reckoned I had, when a second life opened up, like a puzzle unfolding, in Blood Life.

But I'd been bloody wrong.

That day with my sisters when we'd reached the summit, my papa had picked two creamy primroses - sun yellow in their centres - and laced them into their long locks. Papa had gently kissed each of them on their foreheads.

A year later papa had been dead, and I never saw my sisters again.

I guess my little sisters are dead too. I hope they were allowed some happiness in their short First Lives.

At last, when the kidsman reached the junction at the top, we saw a whole gang of coves gathered in the darkness. I wondered what they were plotting. Their dark seeds, however, wouldn't make it past tonight.

When Ruby stepped into the dim glow of their gas lanterns in all the beauty of her crimson silk, the kidsman smirked.

I knew then he was going to have his baubles trampled.

The ruffian leered at her. 'You looking for a tup, pretty pinchcock? You show us your cunney, I'll show you my weapon. Here's something for your troubles.'

A copper tuppenny bit landed on the grass at Ruby's feet. There were sniggers.

I remained in the shadows, waiting for my cue.

'Faith, you are foolish slaves. Nothing but base beasts. By this hand, you will cry mercy before this night is over.'

The laughter died.

'What, you bitch..?'

The kidsman tried to backhand Ruby, dropping his lantern. In one practised movement, a steel shiv had flicked into his paw.

Ruby twirled the ruffian round, however, as if he was a ragdoll. Then she sank her fangs into his neck.

I heard the bloke's shocked scream, before he began to shake, as he fought the paralysis that was setting in. Soon the second ingredient in the venom would stop his heart, just as it'd already sealed the holes in his throat.

And that's why we're the ultimate camouflaged predator: we leave nothing but natural death behind. We were always meant to be the *Lost* species. Being dragged from the shadows was Ruby's greatest fear. She was my Cassandra.

Ruby tossed the kid'sman's frozen body back to me, as I too now joined in the game. I swung the bleeder round, before rolling him down Primrose Hill: a nice little snack for later. His slack limbs bounced over the holes and hillocks, before coming to rest.

Then there was uproar: shivs, coshes and cudgels appeared, as if by dark magic.

When the First Lifers rushed us, we took those crooks apart one by one, chucking them between us, before hurling them down the hill to join the mound of paralysed treats.

I copped a mouse - a right shiner - before I could drag the giant off me by his Newgate knockers. The ramper bellowed, as I tore tufts out of his greasy whiskers.

I dived for his throat, my fangs extended and sank through his skin, piercing two tiny holes and delivering the toxin. He struggled, trying to thrash away, even in his pain. When I booted him, however, he too tumbled down the hill.

At last, Ruby and I were alone: two Blood Lifers on top of a hill in the black, a pile of First

Lifers at the bottom and the velvet sky above pricked by stars.

We were conquerors of our world.

I noticed the primroses then, which had been crushed in the struggle. It reminded me of that day with my papa and sisters, who I hadn't seen for so many years. Who I knew I wouldn't see again.

I knelt down and plucked a primrose. Its face was tightly closed against the moon. I knew I'd never see it open. Still, I slipped it into Ruby's scarlet hair. It suited her.

'My dearest prince,' Ruby snogged me, biting my lower lip and sucking at the droplets of beaded blood, 'how did you like my game?'

'You were...breath-taking,' I couldn't help grinning. 'But I was taught by my mama not to play with my food.'

Then Ruby's long-nailed fingers were tight around my throat. Squeezing. She always liked to play rough, this one. I licked my lips. Just as suddenly, however, Ruby's grip loosened. 'Prithee,' she smiled, 'let's feast.'

Ruby clutched my hand, dragging me after her down the hill in skipping leaps. I noticed, however, that first she'd stooped to pick up something from the grass.

The boss was still twitching where he lay buried under the rest of his gang at the bottom of Primrose Hill. Ruby grabbed him by the leg, hauling him out. I heard the wet, messy *crunch* as his neb smashed.

When Ruby crouched over the kidsman, I could see she had something small pinched between her thumb and finger. Then she held it up high in front of the kidsman's terrified lamps: it was the copper tuppenny bit, which he'd tossed at her feet.

I could see his sauce-box working, like he was fighting to form words. Ruby lowered her mush to his, as if intent on hearing them, but his stiff tongue couldn't force out more than a garbled, 'Please...'

Ruby gently placed her soft fingers on the First Lifer's blue lips. 'Peace be quiet.'

Faster almost than even I could follow, Ruby was straddling the poor bastard and forcing the tuppenny bit between his gnashers...and then deep down his throat.

I tilted my nut, listening to the coughed, wet rasps, as the kidsman choked to death.

I hadn't heard someone cop it that way before. I'm a human camera: life is a series of shots, branded into my brain. A day or night is always richer for a new experience.

Then we feasted. Bloody hell, how we feasted.

And that's how I knew I was home. The memory. The *taste*.

'Primrose Hill?' I gazed at you hopefully.

'What's it matter? It's not like you're going out. Ever.'

I turned my nut away, trying to hide the sick dread. Yet you must've seen it, plain as day.

I hated the whole bloody lot of you First Lifers then. I imagined you in a pile of twitching corpses mounded at the bottom of Primrose Hill – you, *Sir*, *Master* – and felt better.

Bollocks to it all.

I straightened my shoulders. 'Well, figured. Not with no clobber on.'

You seemed taken aback. 'I'll order something. But that doesn't mean you'll... Follow me.' That's when you led me into this white and silver kitchen for the first time, setting me on a shovel-like, red-

and-black stool, as if you didn't know what to do with me. 'So, shadow, you hungry?' I couldn't hold back the flinch. You noticed. 'That isn't your real name, huh?'

I looked away. 'It's what I'm called now.'

'Na-ah, I wanna know. I'll tell you mine. I'm Grayse. It's a Manx name.'

I remembered the agony of the belt... *My name is Light...* Cane... *My name is Light...* Riding crop... *Light, Light, Light...* Sir's boot, fist and the *snap* of shattered bones.

'Light,' I whispered, 'my name is Light.'

'OK then, Light, you hungry?'

I nodded. Every molecule roared for blood.

You swung open the fridge, pulling out a baby's bottle - thick with crimson - which you held towards me with an expectant expression.

Starved though I was, a bloke's still got to draw the line somewhere.

I raised my eyebrow. And didn't reach for the bottle.

After a moment, you lowered your arm. 'I don't get it. She said this is what you needed on account of your fangs having been removed.'

Suddenly I found myself off the stool and right in your face. To give you your due, you didn't back away, although your fingers clutched at the marble kitchen top. I didn't miss that. 'What's next? Pretty little bowl with *Light* printed on the side for my din dins? Or a leash?'

'At least it'd go with the collar I've got you.' I drew back to study you. Your grey peepers were coolly amused. 'Joke.'

'Right. Ha-bloody-ha.'

'So, what..?'

You waved the bottle of blood at me.

Hypnotised by the scent, I weaved after it, like you were a sodding snake charmer. ‘A cup’ll do me. Warmed.’

Before you turned away, you glanced back at me. ‘You’re not what I expected.’

‘And how did you expect an unwilling Blood Lifer sex slave exactly?’

That amused expression in your peepers, which didn’t quite make your serious mouth again. ‘Not like you.’

‘No one’s like me.’

You busied yourself pouring the thick blood out of the bottle and into a bright red-and-black teacup; I liked that I matched your décor. ‘I’m just figuring that out,’ you murmured.

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