

BLOOD RENEGADES

ROSEMARY A JOHNS

They twirled each other round, as they danced out into the courtyard garden, like I'd once danced with Ruby in the carnage and the flames – a kid let loose in the world. No conscience or battle for redemption. Nothing forcing me to grow up and face an adult world beyond my own will, wants and delights.

Together? A fanatical Magnificoe and his wicked witch?

The First Lifers didn't stand a chance.



FANTASY REBEL

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The Light Inquiry

NIGHT 1

Betrayal. Death. Hope. Isn't that how all truly great stories start?

I don't know if anyone will hear it. Governments silence their critics. Censor. Detain. Execute.

Bollocks to them.

The Blood Life Council's atrocities and war crimes--

Mr Blickle, please note: we are not at war.

Yet. We're not at war – yet. And my name is Light.

Very well, Light. We're not holding this inquiry, however, to debate the nature of the Council's actions. Rather those of your terrorist group.

We prefer 'freedom fighters', sweetheart.

And I prefer to be called Liberty.

Having a laugh, aren't you?

You don't think *Light* has a touch of irony to it?

All right, Liberty, but I delivered my band of merry misfits out of slavery – one you wankers sold us into. So labels..? They don't figure.

They never do.

Your band of misfits does have a name?

Yeah, it's called a family.

Captain told me you were cute. Renegades. As you know, we're well aware what you call yourselves. You paint it bloody for us to find.

Look, you want me to bear witness? I'll bleeding bear witness. I'm a prisoner here anyway with a stake pointy-like at my heart and I'm all about survival. Just don't figure on liking what you hear.

No one does when it's the flayed truth.

You want to be ready don't you? You know what's coming in less than two weeks?

Your trial.

Kangaroo court more like.

Closed court. Nothing's been decided. Yet. It rests on your testimony.

Then where's my solicitor?

You're a terrorist - you've forsaken your rights, as you have your own species.

And the jury?

The material's too sensitive--

Embarrassing. The word you're grasping for, sweetheart, is embarrassing. For you and the rest of the Blood Life Council. So here's a question--

I ask the questions, Mr Blickle.

Bit of respect here: dead man talking. So who's the judge?

It won't help you to know...

It's Captain, right? I'll take your awkward silence as a *yes*.

Bugger.

So let's say Captain doesn't like what I have to say – and he won't – what then? What happens in two weeks? Slap on the wrist? Trip to the naughty step? Bare bottom spanking across his lap until I bawl? Or..?

Execution. By fire. Most likely.

Figured. Thirteen more nights until I go up Mr Bonfire for you nice people then.

You don't know--

Don't play games. Not about this.

That's outside my remit; I'm only here in the council offices with you to take your statement.

It must be nice to fit everything into neat little boxes. Then go home happy each dawn with no dirt on your pretty hands because all you've touched is paperwork.

Hitler's lawyers were good at that too.

If I'm going out in flames, high in their glory, then Christ in heaven will you get my witness: one you'll never forget.

Even though I may only have two weeks to live, it's a truth I'll remember until my second death.

Sod it; bring on the fire and ash.

But before all that dramatic buggery...I'd kill for an e-cig.

When I was hauled in here, like catching your most wanted had sun maddened you into a spot of desperate slap and tickle with your new toy, some bureaucratic bird snatched my e-cig; she also managed to get in a good grab and grope. How many of you pervs does it take to do a strip search?

Perhaps you're just popular.

I've been called many things over the last 150 years but never that.

I tried going nicotine cold turkey once; I don't recommend it. So unless you want one pissed off Blood Lifer, do me a favour and--

Why should I do you a favour?

Seriously? You're pointing at a 'No Smoking' sign?

We're Blood Lifers – glory of the electrifying, sublime, *beat* of the night and burn of the endless hunt – yet you're following *No Smoking* rules?

Wait, sorry... I'm in the greedy clutches of the Blood Life Council. Pale ghosts of Westminster. I forgot who I was talking to for a moment. What do you kids, only decades old to this dark evolution, know of real Blood Life?

I know you're not permitted to smoke.

Sodding hell...please?

You almost sound desperate. Intriguing: for a brutal terrorist leader.

We could negotiate.

Haggling with the Devil never ends well.

It does for the Devil.

And which of us is that then?

You want your nicotine hit; I want to impress my superiors.

An inquiry into the leader of the ruthless Renegades: a terrorist organization fanatically dedicated to eradicating human slavers, thereby endangering our secret world.

That's the remit.

Yet I know I could provide answers to questions the rest of the Council don't even understand they need to know.

This is more important – bigger – than anything they can conceive. But I do.

So I want one truly personal memory every day of the trial. *Your* secrets. Ones

you've never told anybody. Then I may allow your treats.

Memory? You want to violate my mind as well?

That's the deal. Or we could just get on with it. You don't need to smoke.

I abs-bloody-loutely do.

Right, I'll bite. One secret a day. Something I've never told anyone. But I want something else thrown in: vintage '60s motorcycle jacket with gold ace of spades on the back. It's mine, and you wankers took it.

Cold are you?

That coat? It's been through the bloody wars with me, and I've been through the bloody wars to get it back.

What's it worth? One memory – one secret - for one coat.

A sensory deprivation hood is a cracking piece of kit.

Sight, sound, smell. Taste and touch. Wiped out.

Blackness. Silence. Nothingness.

As if you don't exist, or the universe doesn't.

All that remains is the howling in your mind.

I was adrift in the darkness. Giving these shallow, panted gasps. No gag this time, so small blessings.

I could only smell the suffocating stink of leather. Only feel the freeze of the cellar floorboards underneath my shivering skin. Everything was narrowed down – focused – onto the few senses I had left: the strain in my shoulders, as my hands were shackled behind me and the furious *beat, beat, beat* of my heart.

My blood called to me, whispering *predator* in every pulse, harsh behind my eyelids.

I was lost, however, in the black.

Soon I didn't even feel the pain...cold...floor. My shoulders weren't mine because I wasn't sodding me.

As I said: a sensory deprivation hood is a cracking piece of kit...if you want to break a Blood Lifer, and the First Lifers of the Blood Club wanted us as their pretty playthings all in a row.

The specters of the dead rose before me in comfort: my two human sisters, Nora and Polly beneath our willow tree, my Blood Lifer family and first mate Alessandro, smiling up from a chess match waged against himself. And Kathy: my gorgeous Moon Girl.

Each of them was erased, however, as fast as they were conjured, as if my brain was shutting down.

Loss. Loss. Loss.

Each one abandoned me. Alone in the dark at the end. Because we always bloody are.

Alone in the dirt.

And it was my own wankering fault.

I was still playing the rebel, you see. Because there's no play about it.

You're a born a rebel; you die a rebel.

It's just that moment was looming closer than I'd hoped.

'Prostrate.' *Tap, tap, tap.* I'd risked a quick glance from underneath my eyelashes at *Sir*; he'd been tapping the red-and-black hide riding crop impatiently against his grey-suited trouser leg. A little furrow had been between his plucked brows. 'Prostrate, shadow.'

I'd known that one: drop to the floor on my stomach in front of his bloody Nibbs, and then turn my nut to place my cheek against his black Oxford shoe. If *Sir* was in the mood? It gave him a stiffy if I also kissed it; it didn't matter that *I* was never in the mood.

I'd stayed in *kneel*, however, even straightening my shoulders.

It's hard to look dignified when you're starkers and on your knees before a bloke in a suit, but I like to reckon I pulled it off.

Yeah, deluded prat here.

That shred of Light not yet swallowed into shadow hadn't let me prostrate myself. Not to Mr Poncey Corporate. Not again. I wasn't a trained monkey: even if I performed like one.

Pride: it'll catch you by the balls every time.

Sir had pushed his black framed glasses further up his nose. He'd studied me in disturbing silence. Then the tongue of his riding crop had licked out, wetting my right cheek.

I'd yelped.

'Look you, my pretty leech, don't start and make trouble,' a sick caricature of a smile had tugged up just one side of *Sir's* mouth, 'or maybe you're the sort of bitch as likes to make trouble, isn't it? Shall we play a game? See if you're a true hero or just a worthless little leech?'

I'd knelt in silence.

I'm not that much of a nitwit: *Sir's* games were never going to end well for yours truly.

Sir's smile had snarled into a frown. He'd reached behind him excruciatingly slowly.

I'd tensed, my cheek still stinging from the crop's kiss.

That's when *Sir* had pulled out something, which had been tucked into the waistband of his

suit trousers. It'd been folded in half, so I hadn't been leery of it until...the smell.

That stink of leather.

And before I'd known it? I'd been bawling out my nancy heart. 'Please, *Sir*, I'm sorry *Sir*...'

'Don't. Move.'

Intense citrus underlined with cedarwood – *Sir's* aftershave – had choked me, as he'd leant closer.

Closer.

And...

I'd shuddered but I hadn't legged it like every instinct shrieked. Fight had already been stolen from me in the fight or flight equation.

Then everything had gone dark.

I don't know how long I was lost in the dark. Time has no meaning in that torture. Our blinding senses are our strength but used against us they become our weakness.

An hour? Day?

In that panicked, gasping void, I lay curled on the freezing floorboards and I shook.

All right, so I was a pillock to nark off the human, who had the power to steal the light.

Yet such extreme punishment, over such minor rebellion..?

We'd been playing cat and mouse for weeks; it's not like I had bugger else to do: starkers and chained in a bricked up cell. A thrashing here, a day or two of starvation there. Adrenaline drenched interludes, in between days of lying on my back counting the blossoming demonic hordes of spores; angelic warriors clashed against them, when I counted the splinters in my fingertips.

Numbers are the only mates who've never deserted or betrayed me.

The game? Somehow it'd changed, and I'd been caught bloody in the cat's jaws.

Problem was: I hadn't reckoned I was the mouse.

White needles pricked my retinas. I screamed, as the hood was wrenched off. I screwed up my peepers against the sudden light; tears tracked from their corners.

I let out a sob of relief; I wasn't lost anymore.

Sir had found me.

Rich mould, thick dust and ancient floorboards; I could smell again in a volcanic rushing overload. It was citrus, however, which was invading every bleeding inch of me. Through my bleary peepers I could see a dark shadow.

Sir was crouching down.

I curled closer around myself but I couldn't save myself: I knew it. Even in the midst of our dance, I'd never forgotten that.

I could feel again: my aching shoulders and numb legs. My body was my own once more.

That was the illusion, however, because I was property.

Possessed by *Sir*.

Then *Sir* was on me; he crouched over me, one arm cradling my thin spine, whilst the heavy weight of his legs held me down. He stroked my cheek with his manicured fingers, lightly tracing where the red welt had paled to pink. If I'd fed? It would have become as invisible as I now was to the world outside, locked here in Abona House.

Sir gently lifted my chin. I forced myself to meet his hard gaze. I was shocked to see it suddenly tender. 'You don't know nothing, you don't. How things work in here. On the Estate. Why I have to...'

Sir tightened his grip; I gasped. ‘Now, little leech, you tell me which bitch has been feeding you, like the greedy baby bird you be.’

Sir knew?

The Blood Lifers risking – everything - to feed me blood gnawed from their own wrists, even though blood sharing was like communion, a bond as close as family?

Two Blood Lifers saved me: Hartford, the powerful Long-lived (or angel-haired cupid to the johns), and my cousin Donovan (with slave name *ailill*, meaning *elf* in Irish Gaelic, just to right royally strip away his dignity).

I’d once done in Donovan’s sadistic twin, Aralt; I’d saved the world too from his screwed up vision of using our venom in the name of superior evolution. Yet even Donovan, with his dark mop and lilac eyeshadow, blood shared.

We were united in adversity.

True hero?

They were the bloody heroes.

Sir knew?

I shook my nut quickly.

Sir’s lips brushed my cheek, whispering wet patterns across the pretty pink of the skin. ‘Come on, don’t look so frightened. I’ll keep you safe, my shadow. Your *Sir’s* here. Just tell me which bad bitch is forcing you to feed. It’s cupid, hmm?’

Shocked, I startled, but *Sir* held me fast. His long body hard on mine.

I had the sudden flashshot memory of Hartford’s tiger-striped arse, bruised from the same riding crop, with which *Sir* had marked me, and then Hartford’s brilliant smile, as he watched me suckle at his bloody wrist.

‘No, *Sir*,’ I blurted.

‘Don’t lie,’ *Sir* jerked my nut back; *buggering hell that hurt*, ‘you leeches think I’m stupid, isn’t it?’ When he laughed, every part of me wanted to crawl into itself and hide. ‘Say it. The truth now.’

‘No, *Sir*.’

‘Cupid thinks he can be a father to you leeches. That he still be worth something. But look you, he be nothing but a whore, and after this offence? I’ll send him back to *Master*. There was never no slave he couldn’t break. Even cupid. The things *Master* will do when he trains him a second time--’

‘No, *Sir*.’

Sir’s lips crawled across mine. ‘You must love the dark, isn’t it?’

I heard a rustle. A movement, like the slither of black tar. Then *Sir* was dragging the hood over my nut again.

I screamed, thrashing side to side like a snared Komodo dragon, but I was pinned tight under *Sir*.

Then everything went black.

I was trembling. Sight, sound and smell: all gone. The scratch of leather was against my lips.

‘Ailill,’ I whispered.

I’d played the game and come out a fake: no *true hero*.

I’d lost.

Yet I’d made the darkness hesitate. Pause over my lips. And in that moment?

That was a sodding victory.

Then the black was being delicately rolled back: senses returned one by one. To a world I no longer wanted to face.

The Judas betrayal (of my own cousin), sickened me.

I heard *Sir*’s, ‘good boy,’ as he ruffled my hair like I was a mutt.

Yet drowned in my own guilt, it was as if I was underwater. When *Sir* pushed himself off me, giving my cheek a final paternalistic pat, I doubled up with it.

What the bleeding hell had I just done?

The chest looked suspiciously heavy when *Sir* dragged it in. He'd taken off his jacket and sweat patches had formed like growths under his salmon pink shirt. He never sweated. Now he stank but he was smiling.

The smug bastard.

The chest was steel. Strapped shut and padlocked with leather round its middle like a chrysalis. There were also these strange pinprick holes along its side, as if...

The bloody, bollocking, bugging bastard...

Sir dropped the end of the chest hard, and I heard the groan.

I had a gander at *Sir* from kneel, not even attempting to hide the glare.

'Don't fret you,' *Sir* turned his smile on me indulgently, 'he can't hear us.'

Clang, clang.

When *Sir* banged on top of the chest, there was a terrified whimper; it clawed at my insides, shredding them.

'Sensory deprivation, like the hood, see? Hotter though. It's an experiment. Let's see if ailill enjoys the dark as much as you.'

Sir left me alone then. Alone with the chest.

I'd botched up, and Donovan was paying the price. It hurt too much to imagine Donovan as he danced the Charleston yesterday with Hartford around this cell, reliving Hartford's glory days on

the hunt in the Cotton Club to the throb of Duke Ellington. Then as they'd snatched my hands, pulling me up too with them. As they'd pulled me out of despair, reigniting the fire and rebellion, which today had led to...

'Please, I'm sorry. Whatever I did...whatever it was? I'm sorry. *Sir?*'

Sir hadn't told Donovan.

Wanker that I am, I was shot with relief. Then I was sick from it. I knew what it was to suffer and not to know why.

I crawled across the cell to the chest as if – irony of bloody ironies – it could hurt me.

'I'm about to freak out here... This is not cool... *Sir?* Let me out... Let me out...'

Clang...Clang...Clang...

This time the banging was from inside the box. It was muted. Padded then; considerate of *Sir*. I reckon he didn't want the merchandise to bruise itself: that was his job.

I raised my trembling hand to the steel side; the heat was radiating in waves like the sun. But I didn't quite touch. The banging stopped. I heard a stifled sob.

'Are you there?' No more than a whisper.

'Yeah, Donovan, I'm here.'

'Is anybody there?'

Christ, I wished he could hear me. 'I'm here, you git.'

'I'm sorry.'

'No, I'm bloody sorry, right?'

'Just, don't hurt Hartford. I...whatever it was...I did it. Me.'

True hero, see?

I threw myself to the corner, as far as I could from that mummified box. And rocked when the

screams started. Yet it was worse when they stopped.

Because Donovan's silence was like an accusation.

When *Sir* came back – all I knew by the burn for blood was that it must be days not hours – he found me huddled, with my knees drawn up and my arms over my nut, at the back of the cell. I'd briefly considered gouging out my own peepers, so I wouldn't have to keep looking at that chest – or I couldn't see it staring at me. See how guilt turns you potty?

Lady Macbeth has nothing on me.

Instead, I'd hidden and counted the cost of betrayal.

Then *Sir* was there, crouched like a long-legged spider, stroking my hair away from my mush, as he cooed, 'Is he disturbing you, my pretty little leech?'

I could've exploded in anarchic rage, until the world cowered in its rightful place at my feet. Instead, I twisted my silver S.L.A.V.E ring, as I stared at my dirty toes. 'No, *Sir*. But--'

'Yes?' There was danger in the tightness of that one word.

Family. It makes you weak. That's how they hurt you; shank you through the heart.

Love? It's for berks with neon signs over their goolies flashing *Boot Me Here*.

The world's one tangled web; you can strain against the sticky matrix all you like but you were born inside the nest. You'll die inside it.

I'd reckoned – daft bugger that I am – that my glorious rebirth into Blood Life had burnt through the web, and I was safe on the other side. But that was the lie. The con. As long as we love? We control, and we're controlled.

You don't have to be a slave to lose your freedom. Just look around you – every First and Blood Lifer is a zombie cradle to the grave.

And *Sir*? He was a necromancer.

If I denied family...love...then *Sir* couldn't make my dead limbs dance.

At least, that's what I thought.

'It was my fault I drank from ailill, *Sir*.'

'What a good boy you are. Confessing at last. So you need punishing then, don't you?'

I froze: not the outcome I was going for. *Not the dark, not the dark, not the dark...* 'If I'm punished, you'll let ailill out?'

'Do you want me to?'

Sir was playing with my hair, tufting it up into a mocking pompadour; I hungered to rip off his bloody fingers. 'I'm sorry I was bad and...I want to be good for you.'

I realised I'd walked the right humiliating line, when *Sir*'s mush lit up. He stroked my cheek, now pale and perfect, as if to check I was real; I'd been wondering that too, ever since I'd been hunted, defanged and enslaved.

'Of course you do. I'll take that bitch away, and then we'll have some quality time, see? Just us. You'll still need to be punished.'

When I tensed, *Sir* chuckled, as if my conditioned terror was a blinding joke. 'A fortnight without blood. That'll teach you to only drink from one source. I feed you, isn't it? Me. Now,' his too soft lips whispered into my lobe, and I cringed, 'ailill didn't know why he was punished. That can be our secret - just between us.'

I'd been wrong: *Sir* could make me dance any time he liked. It hadn't mattered what I'd said or done. Because family? Love? They hadn't made me weak to *Sir*'s magic.

My own bloody betrayal had.

Secrets: we all have them worming at our Souls.

Sir never told Donovan why he'd been punished, but *I* knew, and that's the bleeding point.

Hartford or Donovan.

That'd been the choice at the heart of it. Biological or chosen family.

I'd betrayed my blood, and everything comes down to blood. If Ruby – my Author – had been alive to see it? It wouldn't have been pretty: my goolies and trampling comes to mind.

I tell myself I betrayed Donovan out of fear for Hartford: to save Hartford from *Master*. He survived *Master's* loving attentions once; I barely came back from it. No one – not even a Long-lived – could come back twice.

Deep down, however, there's still that whimpering slave git *what if..?*

What if I grassed on Donovan because of my own unnatural fear of the dark? The black of that hood? *Sir's* control?

You reckon I've ever confessed this sin? Not bloody likely. You're the first person I've ever told.

Donovan is still - as he was then - in the dark.

Secrets stain, fester and ultimately corrupt.

We can all hurt and betray those around us. Even those we love. It just takes the right pressure.

Who do you trust?

You tell me this sob story, and I apologise on behalf of the wrongs sanctioned by the Blood Life Council: is that how this works?

I dare to dream.

There will be no apology, official or otherwise. The Blood life Council

established the human Blood Club to enslave our own kind – that’s the *atrocities* you expect to expose? You’ve already set *Master’s Estate* on fire.

What you fail to understand is the justification and necessity.

This’ll be good.

Only certain Blood Lifers were selected for slavery: the most powerful lines, Magnificoes and their descendants.

Play another tune, I’ve heard this one.

You’re throwbacks to wilder, darker times. Politically destabilizing to our new world. Fundamentals and fanatics. Our council was attempting to bring in worldwide modernizing regulations with the Highbury Edict. Hartford was the first to refuse.

What?

That’s why he was our first acquisition. Hartford was trying to stop... He was in the way of the Council’s authority.

Now listen here, sweetheart, there are only two words to justify the cruelty of one species enslaving its own: power and money. All the rest is spin.

Extermination. That’s a third word. Captain used it, if slavery didn’t work. If the old families couldn’t be controlled.

Which is preferable? Slavery or extermination?

That’s like asking a bloke how he’d prefer to be castrated: starting at the right or left bollock.

Still, at least it’s a choice. Never gave us that, did you?

I don’t speak for the Council.

Bleeding sounds like you do.

I'd start worrying more about how you'll sound when this witness is used in court.

Don't think I've forgotten that; not for one second. And it backfired, didn't it? The Blood Life Council's attempt to neuter your political enemies? Screw over the strongest bloodlines? You call us *tamed* Blood Lifers, but who's your Most Wanted now? On your Red List? In chains--

There are no chains, Mr Blickle.

Metaphorically speaking. See, I can use big words too. We Victorian bank clerks are the most viciously pedantic berks you'll ever find.

Shame you sound – and look – like a '60s Rocker then.

Shame you're too young to know we cleave to the times we pass through, nicking what we love best. Babes to this world, your Council don't even know how to be Blood Lifers. When were you elected? A decade ago? I've walked these streets generations before both your birth and rebirth. And the '60s brought me to life. Saved and freed me. I learnt we're not predators alone to nosh on humans as prey--

Play another tune, I've heard this one.

Ha--bloody--ha. How about this then? Us tamed Blood Lifers are the terrorists in your new world. Yet we only enslave, imprison and scapegoat blame those we fear.

You must be terrified of me.

Would you enjoy that? After your period of impotency?

My what now?

I believe you said you knew big words.

Your fangs were removed, as part of Abona's regimen. You haven't had them back for long; I can only imagine how disempowering that must've been.

**Does it feel good to cause fear again?
Instead of *tremble* with it?**

You don't fear me. Why is that? Despite the obvious?

Who are you?

**I'm Liberty. I'm born of Captain's fangs.
And he's told me all about you - traitor.**

I'm the traitor?

See here's the thing: you can betray love, family, country, your own species, the world...or yourself. I've done all of that, at one time or another. Our identities, however, shift like chameleons.

Still, if you're Captain's elected (my commiserations, by the way), then he knows by my fist what it's like to be defanged.

Does that make Captain impotent too?

You can ask him tonight when he returns.

Blinding. I've missed being brutally tortured. Hang on a tick, no, I haven't.

No need to be anxious; you're under my protection. I have the lead on this inquiry. No one'll hurt you for the next thirteen nights.

If you say so.

You asked who I trusted. It made me wonder, Mr Bickle: who do you trust?

You've got your one secret. Isn't that enough? What more do you want from me? Blood? Wait...don't answer that. Just an e-cig and my coat, that'll do me.

This isn't voluntary.

So I ask again, who do you trust?

**Betrayed by your own people to your enemy. All it needs is the right pressure..?
When it was applied to the Renegades they**

buckled, choosing to hand over their leader for burning on Easter Sunday to save themselves.

Don't blame us that you don't like the outcome of their vote. We didn't rig it.

Everything's rigged. If you can't see it, only means you haven't worked out how yet.

For the purposes of the Light Inquiry, I wonder if you knew your family was a nest of Judases.

If they're Judas, does that make me Jesus?

Only if you have a messiah complex. Do you?

Bird once accused me of having a hero complex. Betrayal's a funny thing: it hurts the one who does it, more than the one who suffers it.

Will you still be saying that in two weeks? When you're facing the flames?

I didn't think my death was a dead cert? My witness--

Is the witness of a traitor, terrorist and betrayer. Tell it. See if it saves you.

Don't fret, I get this is my Last Will and Testament.

I won't hide from you, Captain, the Council or the danger of words because I've spent most of my life hiding in the shadows and hoping invisibility meant invulnerability.

But it doesn't.

Remaining the Lost condemned us to slavery.

I reckoned I could keep my misfit family safe by skulking on the edges in the dark.

Yet when you hide in the wardrobe – alone – that's when the monsters come. First Life or Blood.

They always find you.

The Cannibal Tarantula – that’s what they called him. The Blood Lifer I met one night in Southwark.

Met? Maybe too strong a word.

The Tarantula was quite a Blood Lifer tourist attraction back in the 1960s. He nested in the crypt beneath Southwark Cathedral choir. I’d crossed London Bridge, prowling through derelict warehouses, which had been bombed out in the Second World War and left to rot, home to squatters and junkies.

Ruby would’ve delighted in exploring such horrors back when she’d first authored me. But by then? She’d become distracted by her brother Aralt: money and power. Plus blood sharing with him, let’s not forget that. I’d been left that summer in ’68 to wander London alone.

There was always going to be danger in that.

I jumped the last two stone steps, landing in a fog of bone and stone dust. I spluttered, as it caught in my nostrils, stinking of decay and the merry dance of death.

Just my kind of joint.

I bowed my head under the low arch, peering through the deep black. Corroded lead coffins lined the crypt, which was sealed to humans. We Blood Lifers had our own way in. Sweat trickled down my neck; bleeding hell it was like being baked in a stone oven.

‘Mr Tarantula, I don’t fancy playing the fly but I’ve come for tea, yeah?’

No reply, only the faintest rustling at the far reaches of the crypt.

Sighing, I swaggered towards the sounds, which became dry *snaps*, *cracks* and *scraping*, which had my fangs aching.

I needed my bleeding nut examined.

An albino web of bones tangled out of the gloom.

‘Bloody hell...’

A Blood Lifer crouched inside the white cage, hiding in the shadows, but it didn’t look up... *Snap...* Its long hair covered its mush, but its industrious fingers never paused... *Crack...* A femur was shaped, pushed into the intricate framework of the web... *Scrape...* Just for a moment, glowing peepers darted to mine and then away.

Yet although it was as grubby as any street urchin, it was dressed – *he* was dressed - like a toff, in striped boater jacket and dove grey waistcoat; his socks stuck out comical grimy, as he worked hunched over.

It was as if someone had dressed him up doll-like to keep up appearances.

‘Shame of it is, he won’t feed from First Lifers.’

‘Christ in heaven...’

If I hadn’t been so distracted by the sight of a bloke building his own human bone cage, whilst dressed like he was watching a 1920s Boat Race, I’d have sensed the Blood Lifer sidling up behind me in an emerald beaded flapper dress.

She was the type of bint I would’ve both idolized and been too much of a mouse to raise my gaze to in First Life; her majesty grabbed you by the bollocks. If I hadn’t already been leashed by Ruby, she’d have collared me.

The Flapper caressed my shoulder, tracing over the gold ace of spades on the back of my leathers, as if this was a new sign language. When she stroked lower between my legs, I jumped.

‘It’s a damn bother but he needs Blood Lifer. Blood, I mean. Yet he won’t feed from me.’ The anguish in the Author’s frown made a lie of the studied boredom in her words, as well as her

wandering hands, which were crawling over my arse, like she was laying claim to it. How many times had she repeated this routine, like she was the sideman in a freak show? When the Flapper pressed her palm to the web and a bone clattered to the stone floor, I flinched. 'Will you feed him?'

'You must be off your trolley.'

The Flapper's mask slipped; such fire burned she could blaze continents to ash. I took a step back. Then her mush was blank again. She swung her pearl necklace in tense arcs, as if winding a hidden weapon. 'Don't be so horribly wet; put your arm through.'

At the sounds of the clattering bone, the Tarantula had become still. His nut twisted towards us. Then he...sniffed...as if scenting the air.

The bird had circled me predator-like. The crafty bugger was now between me and the way out of the crypt.

How voluntary exactly was this *donation*?

My black t-shirt was sticking to me, like a damp layer of skin, but I wasn't taking off my jacket. Not in this place, no bloody way.

I inched my arm towards the cage.

When, however, was I ever frightened of being bitten?

I thrust my arm into the web, with my hand tightly fisted because I didn't want my fingers to look like delicious nibbles.

A scuffling *scuttle* and...

The Tarantula was there.

His warm breath was over my tender wrist - right over the pulse point.

Blood sharing was intimate, and I was about to break one of those rules with...

He was beautiful. His black hair hanging in matted waves over a mush as pale as his bone prison.

His violet peepers were...blind.

The Tarantula was so thin his ribs showed through like knives. His delicate fingers were searching, smoothing over my wrist in quick motions.

‘The darkness,’ he muttered. ‘The black feeds. Three...three...three...’

Each *three* lit up spectacular explosions in my brain: my magical number. Hearing it gunshot chanted, with the sensation of the Tarantula’s soft strokes over my pulse point, was orgasmic.

Shuddering, I breathed, ‘Have yourself a good nosh, mate. Looks like you need it.’

Tarantula startled, like he hadn’t expected to be spoken to; I wondered how long it’d been since he had been. I don’t know why I’d felt the nancy need to reassure this stranger. Why did I give a rat’s arse if he shriveled to nothing in his web?

Yet the idea of being trapped tugged at me, awakening a confusion of new feelings.

That’s why when Tarantula sank in his fangs deep I hissed, yet – just as fast – I was lost. I closed my peepers in ecstasy.

I could feel the steady suck, the touch of his lips and the swirl of his venom: it was firework in heaven glorious. I was caught in the bond, every molecule alive with it.

Sod it, no hunt or feed can equal blood sharing.

I wondered faintly why Ruby had denied such joy to me – rationing her own bite, as well as other blood sharing – she might as well have forbidden me to wank.

The Tarantula? He was touched. Some of us don’t survive the rebirth whole or put a match to

our Souls after. Else the snowflake patterns of difference were there to start with and Blood Life merely amplified.

What I couldn't figure – as I swam in the bubbling flow of our bonding – was whether Tarantula had caged himself or *been* caged. Whether he truly was touched? Or if this treatment of him (and didn't I bloody remember it well from Bedlam?), had *turned* him touched?

The dark...

I smiled, sinking deeper into the bond, imagining Ruby's expression if I brought Tarantula back to Advance with me. If I saved him...

When suddenly – agonizingly – the bond was broken.

I shot up.

The Author was standing next to me. A human rib, gory crimson, still grasped in her mitt. She dropped it – *clatter* – so loud in the silence.

Woozy, it took me a moment to...

Tarantula lay on his back in the bone cage staring up at the stone ceiling of the crypt, with his unseeing violet peepers. Red crept out of his waistcoat.

Over his heart.

Where the bitch had shanked him.

I'd been a distraction. A toy to dangle, whilst she did in her own elected.

I don't know whether it was the blood sharing, but I was shaking.

'He came back wrong,' the Flapper whispered, staring down at the boy she'd authored and then murdered. 'The Order of Electors warned me, but I thought it no account. I stole him away, before they could... I hoped I would be enough.'

I didn't hesitate, and she didn't stop me.

When I rammed the same rib through the Flapper's heart, she fell next to the cage like an emerald butterfly. Broken – the same as the kid she'd authored. Her pearls spilled like shining tears into the crimson.

She stretched out to try and touch the Tarantula's fingers with her own but couldn't through the layers of human bone.

How's that for bleeding irony?

It turns out you can't hide in the shadows. You're not safe in your cage. And the dangers in life? They're from those you love, as well as from across the divide of the species.

You know what I learnt that day? There's no way to tell who's the predator.

And who's the prey.

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ROSEMARY A JOHNS is the bestselling author of the *Rebel Vampires* series. She wrote her first fantasy novel at the age of ten, when she discovered the weird worlds inside her head were more exciting than double swimming. Since then she's studied history at Oxford University, run a theatre company (her critically acclaimed plays have been described as 'uncomfortable, unsettling and uneasily true to life'), and worked with disability charities. She's a music fanatic and a paranormal anti-hero addict who creates spellbinding worlds, thrilling action, gripping suspense and passionate romances, all uniquely told. When Rosemary's not falling in love with the rebels fighting their way onto the page, she heads the Oxford writing group Dreaming Spires. She can also be found listening to Nirvana. At full volume. Or not found at all. When she's dived into her secret worlds again. **WINNER OF THE SILVER AWARD in the Wishing Shelf Book Awards.**

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