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# **A Siren, a Shapeshifter and a Serial Killer Walk Into a Bar**

by

**Kerri Elizabeth Ballance**

An Honors Capstone

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the Honors Diploma

to

The Honors College

of

The University of Alabama in Huntsville

5-9-21

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### **Dedication**

This collection is dedicated to all of the wonderful people at the University of Alabama in Huntsville who have been such a tremendous help. Unfortunately, there are far too many of you to name, but you are all so greatly appreciated

I would like to thank my Project Director, Dr. Alanna Frost who was so understanding and gave me incredibly useful advice about my stories, and the academic side of this project.

I would also like to thank my parents for encouraging me to write, no matter what the content was. Without you, I wouldn't have had the courage and faith in myself to write what is quite possibly the longest original story I have ever written.

To everyone else in my life who encouraged my craziness, thank you.

### **Abstract**

I have written a collection of seven short stories that are connected in several ways. The main character of each story (with the exception of the serial killer) is some sort of mythological or supernatural creature. The stories take place across various time periods and locations on Earth. Some characters may appear in stories where they are not the main character. There is only an overlap if the secondary character's story is set in the same time period and geographic location as that current story, as only two characters are capable of time travel. There is also another connection that is not revealed until the final story, which is the only story that should be read last.

For the paper about this project, I wrote a reflection of sorts. In it, I discuss what inspired me to write the collection in general and what inspired each story specifically. I discuss what genre(s) the collection might fit into, including what aspects of the stories fit into the genre(s) and what aspects do not fit into that genre(s). I also talk about market analytics, including if I plan to seek publication, what publishers might I send it to, and what steps I might have to take to make the collection more appealing to publishers.

1888

*I was born of blood and death. I didn't know my mother, but I did know her pimp. He was a disgusting little man; his grubby mitts fumbling with everything he saw. Said after I came out, she just kept bleeding, said they couldn't stop it, so they chunked her weighted corpse into the Thames. He told me that, as she lay there dying, she named me Carin (pronounced Cuh-rehn, for you educated dandies who NEVER pronounce my name right). I made him tell me that story, over and over again. He said I scared him, said it wasn't natural that I should enjoy hearing it. But I did.*

*He kept threatening to have me carted off to Bedlam, formally called Bethlem Royal Hospital, famous for its "care" of the patients. I knew he wouldn't send me off; I was too useful. As an innocent child, I could often convince the younger Detective Inspectors, no matter what they had seen the girls doing, that nothing was going on that was against the law. I could weave the sweetest, most moving sob stories about how the girls had given up their life of crime to care for me after my poor, dearly departed mother perished at my birth. The more senior Inspectors didn't care; they*

were helping to keep the girls employed. But the newer Inspectors actually seemed to believe my stories, gullible fools.

I left all that, years ago. I taught myself how to dress and talk like a boy so that I could actually earn an "honest living." There's no honesty in what I do, but no one cares. I "procure" bodies for the doctors to cut up and study. I don't know what they think they're going to learn. But what do I care? It pays the bills and I so enjoy my work.

At first, I'd prowl around the alleyways, looking for fools who'd overdosed on opium, or over indulged in drink; they were easy enough to find. But the doctors got tired of overdoses; they wanted bodies that had died of more "creative" ways. I have no idea how they could tell an overdose from any other problem, but somehow, they could. So I had to get more creative, by any means necessary.

I started practicing with live drunks no one would miss; the lazy, prostitute beating ones were the simplest marks. My first kill was so easy; he didn't even budge when I slipped the knife into his chest, just gushed some blood, so much blood. I was drenched from head to toe in a matter of moments. The blood gave my shirt a nice



crimson pattern that I'm rather fond of. After him, I got more bold; I'd attack almost anyone in an alleyway.

And the more that I killed, the more I enjoyed slicing the throat, giving people the smile in death that they never had in life. There's something about the skin on the throat that makes the loveliest sound when I slice it. And, of course, there's always the challenge to see how deep I can get my blade to rake across; I've found that the deeper I cut, the tougher it is to pull through, but I've always enjoyed a challenge.

I know, I should have been more careful and selective with my victims, but I didn't care. The blood felt so good on my skin, especially in winter. Of all the months to hunt, December is my favorite. The way the warm, steaming blood drops on my chilled skin, there's nothing like it. But, sadly, most doctors require bodies, fresh bodies, in the spring; winter hunting was a rare opportunity. But it was a good system: the doctors paid me for the fresh meat, and the Detective Inspectors were none the wiser about the killer on their streets. Until Friday 31 August 1888, when London awoke and realized, they had a monster in their midst.

*Just for the record, I didn't kill those women. I had never even met them; they lived in a different part of Whitechapel than me. Oh wait. You have no idea what I'm talking about. I'm talking about 1888, the year that, as the papers first called him, Leather Apron went to town; or, as he told the newspapers to call him, Jack the Ripper.*

*He had a habit of slicing up broads in the messiest way possible, he slit their throats then cut out some of their organs. And, I gotta admit, even though I didn't agree with his choice of prey, I admired his style. The way that he would slice open their throats, perfection; he was an artist unlike any other. Removing their organs was kinda dumb, it cuts down on the sale value to the doctors but hey, who am I to judge?*

*He went through five women in a matter of three months. Even I don't usually go through that many bodies that fast. But I loved those three months. Stalking the night, wondering if I was going to be next, knowing I was not alone in my monstrosity.*

*A few days ago, I decided to go collect a few things from my old haunt. Saw me Mum's pimp, still as wormy and disgusting as ever, but he looked more nervous than usual, and that made me curious. I decided to have some fun with him, so I shoved him against a wall, knife to his throat, and growled,*

*"Talk."*

*He squeaked like the rat he is, but nothing came out. He stammered, but it was meaningless. So I dug my blade into the side of his throat, just enough to release some blood. Far less than if the doctors had prescribed bloodletting, but enough to get my point across. Finally, his teeth chattering, he eked out, "I heard th-th-that you had an interest in The Ripper." He tried to smirk as if he were lording around some great secret that I would pay good money for.*

*Mistake. I smiled, lifted my knife from his throat and slid it back into my blouse. I smoothed his collar and purred, "Says who?" I narrowed my eyes, and flipped a different knife father down his body. He caught my meaning.*

*His eyes about popped out of his head as he backtracked, "N-nn-no one. I-ii-I just figured, with the way you listened to that story, I thought-"*

*I sneered, "We both know thinking's never been your strong suit. So give me one good reason I shouldn't dump what's left of you in the Thames." That loosened his tongue.*

*He blurted, "I think the Ripper might have been one of your mum's customers."*

*I glared at him. "What makes you say that?"*

*"I heard some of the girls talking about your mum's best client from right before she had you-" he started. I cut off his pointless little speech.*

*"So...what you're telling me...is that you've wasted my valuable time. Because, if the girls really thought I was related to Jack, they'd be heading for America as fast as they could to ensure I didn't kill them like he's killing girls. Which means, you're lying to me." I stared him in the eye, daring him to say something. He didn't. But, since he hadn't given me a reason to keep him alive, I relieved him of the sack of coin around his waist.*

*Then I left him to change his trousers. Annoying as he was, he was a fixture whose absence would be noticed. I wandered along, thinking. What if Jack were my father? Even I had to admit to the similarities between our kills, between our victims:*

people that society wouldn't miss. Would it be so crazy if we were related? It would explain a lot about me.

But, do I want that explained? That thing that sets me apart from the masses? I love that thing; since I yielded myself up, gave myself over, I've been making a living off it. But you already knew that. And you don't really care. So I'll skip to the part that you might care about. I've accepted and take great pleasure in the idea of Jack as my father. I've decided that it doesn't matter if he actually is or not. The idea of him is enough of a father to me.

Sadly, though, since Jack brought so much attention to Whitechapel, I've decided to move to America, to be with family. When I stopped by to collect some things, the girls showed me some of my Mother's letters to her brother, a doctor by the name of Herman Webster Mudgett. I must admit I'm sad to be leaving my hunting ground, but I can't hunt if I'm in prison.

Signed,

Carin

Daughter of Jack the Ripper

*I don't know why I keep writing these things, but I find it exhilarating to know that there is a risk of being caught should someone find you. And there is some comfort in telling someone about what I have done, to know that I will leave some mark on the world when I die. And on that note, I suppose I should tell you what I have been about.*

*I would like to inform you that my uncle is an absolutely charming fellow. His wives are nice women, his children are lovely, they have done everything they can to make me feel at home here. Despite the pleasant atmosphere, or perhaps because of it, my desire to kill grew considerably. I tried to resist as I knew it would complicate things, but there is no use in denying what I am.*

*I slipped out at night, taking great care to not wake anyone. I thought it would take me more time to grow accustomed to this new city, but that first night proved otherwise. In no time at all, I found a woman unconscious from drink and clearly living on the streets. I slid one of my knives out and dispatched her with ease. She was so out of it that she did not even choke on her blood as so many do. I must admit, killing her released a great weight from inside me. I realized that no one in this country knew*

*of my darker inclinations, so no one would think to look at me for my crimes. I was positively giddy, a most unusual, but pleasant sensation.*

*As time passed, and my kills grew steady, I found myself taking a childlike glee in the hunt, in the freedom that it afforded me. This must have bled into my daily actions, as my uncle commented that America was doing wonders on my personality, that I become more juvenile, more carefree than I had been before. I suppose that growing up as I did, I had little time for immature frivolousness. But America gave me a chance to reclaim that childishness that I had never known. And I had no intention of giving that up.*

*As soon as I had the funds, I moved out of my uncle's home. They were kind to me, but their lifestyle was quite stifling to my nocturnal desires. Secretly, I think they were glad to see me go, but they put on quite a show trying to convince me to stay. I am glad to be rid of them all, though I will likely stay with them every so often. Purely so that I may learn about my mother, of course.*

*The hour is finally late enough that only the truly desperate and depraved will be out. Hopefully tonight is as fruitful a hunt as the previous nights.*

*Hello there. It's been a few years since I last wrote. Not much has changed. I still live in my own place in the city. I still go on near nightly hunts. My uncle is still a charming fellow. But I've discovered that he has a nasty penchant for lying, and hmmm. What was that other flaw of his? OH right! He also kills people.*

*Surprised? So was I. I couldn't believe that he was able to kill, right under my nose! But then I suppose I was also able to kill under his, so it is only fair. And, from what I read, we targeted different types of people (I strangers no one would miss; he associates and customers), so it makes sense that our paths would not have crossed. I read in some of the papers that his most famous alias was H. H. Holmes (if that helps you understand things a little more). And that he admitted to killing twenty-seven people! Except, the police, as you call them, could only verify nine kills, though they believe he killed more, possibly as many as 200! And several of the people he claimed to have killed are still very much alive. Who can be certain of anything these days?*

*His style of killing was quite different from Jack and I. We kill in a quite hands on manner. My uncle placed people in various secret rooms of a hotel he had built. He*



*only interacted with them before and after the kill, never during. I cannot imagine having to clean up a mess that you didn't even get to enjoy creating. That is a horrid example of all work and no play, and I want nothing to do with that style of life. Or, rather, death.*

*While it probably is dreadful to be related to his victims, I certainly feel better knowing that he is a killer. As a child, I used to wonder why I enjoyed killing. After a while, though, I realized that it didn't matter where these urges came from, they were mine and I loved them. But now I know; I couldn't help but enjoy it. I got a killer's instinct from both sides of my family, but they, unlike me, enjoy the public eye. And have to deal with any problems that occur because of it.*

*Since my uncle has been arrested, I have decided to find a less on-edge hunting ground. I've heard of cities on the east coast so large even the locals get lost. A perfect place to reestablish myself after this unfortunate set-back. We shall simply have to wait and see whether you hear more from me.*

I pushed the letters towards the strange barkeep. I don't know why I did it. Giving him this evidence was incredibly risky. What if he went to the police? Once more, I reminded myself that there was no definitive proof tying me to my crimes. If the strange man was foolish enough to take my letters to the police, then I would play the hysterical woman and cry that my mind was fraught with horrors described to me by a stranger many years ago.

The barkeep smiled at me, and I at him. As promised, he handed me a bottle of homebrew moonshine, an unusual drink that I had developed a taste for while in the American South. After leaving my uncle's home, I made my way all across the North American continent, but kept coming back to the American West and to Canada. Something about those cold winter nights still set my heart ablaze. The snow also made it easier to clean myself off after a kill and provided a tasty treat (so long as I avoided any yellow snow).

While in some practically nameless town in Canada, I was offered an intriguing trade by the local tavern owner and resident barkeep. The man was fairly unassuming, aside from the sideways eight engraved onto his necklace. His offer was that I would receive a bottle of moonshine every month, no matter where I might find myself. In return, he simply wanted to hear about what adventures had led me to his bar. At first I refused. To tell him would place me in great danger should he decide to tell other people of my crimes. I could have lied, but somehow I knew that he would be able to tell and things would go quite poorly for me. I walked away.

After several days of thinking things through, I decided instead that I would give him copies of letters that I had written to no one in particular over the years.

That way he could do what he wanted with them, and I could vehemently deny my actions. True to his word, the man gave me a bottle, then and there. I nodded at him and made my way out of town, just in case he did decide to publish my letters.

I made my way south and west, following the many cries of “Gold!” that came from California. A hunter can always find prey where there are fools in search of treasure. To that Canadian barkeep’s credit, every month I found a bottle of moonshine. Sometimes it was delivered to my door, sometimes it was lying on the ground, but I always found one.

Though the prey are plentiful, the weather is simply too warm for me. I shall head back north and see where my feet take me. Perhaps one day, I will make my way back to that strange little Canadian bar, but not today. Today, I need a nice, messy, cold weather kill.

### The Joys of Being Friends With a Witch

“I’m just gonna come right out and say it. You wanna know my biggest pet peeve? People assuming that I am just *itching* to make a deal with them. Yeah, I know, I’m a witch. *And* a genie. I’m *supposed* to make deals with people, supposed to try and cheat them out of their souls, or whatever. NEWS FLASH: I DoN’t CaRe! I don’t care about your desire to put a love spell on that guy. It’s actually *super* creepy. If he isn’t into you, that’s okay. There are tons of other people out there. You don’t have to possess this specific one for your life to have meaning. Get over it!

“But you know what I do care about? My cat. I know it’s totally cliché, but Mr. Fuzzybutt is a horrible being who needs all the love and attention he can get. And snuggles, but that part is probably just me projecting.

What?”

At this point, I felt the need to interrupt my friend. She was doing a great job of talking, but this wasn’t really going to help me with my project. I was required to interview a fellow creature about who they are, what they do with their abilities, how do they interact with humans, etc. Not report on the greatest annoyances in their life.

I reminded her of this.

“Who am I? Oh. Yeah...I should probably give a little background. Soooooo, my name’s Elsie, I’m a witch/genie hybrid--”

I asked her to explain what that meant for her specifically: did she get powers from both her parents? Was she better at being a genie or at being a witch?

“Oh, yeah. So, as a genie, I can totally make deals, but, like, I don’t wanna. It’s so bogus. I mean, c’mon. Who actually wants to make deals anymore? Like, what would they trade? Their

soul? What do I do with a soul? Can they give me their cat? I have a cat, so... Making deals is just so passe. I'll help people with stuff, and I'll accept gifts, but don't *expect* me to help. I don't have to do anything. You push me and I just might turn you into a toad. OOOO! Or a phone. I could use a new phone. Whatever; I'll think about it later.

Right, so, as a witch, I can also make deals, but I can use my magic outside of a deal, so that's pretty cool. Oh. Did I not talk about that? Oops. My bad. So, as a genie, I can do all kinds of fun things, like send you back in time, or make you super rich, or something else amazing like that. BUT. I can only do it for other people. I can't make myself travel back in time. Nor can someone ask for me to go back in time. Which completely sucks, but what am I gonna do about it? Wish it were different? Also, the wishing and rubbing a lamp thing, that's up to us. Like, my dad is super dramatic like that, but I'm pretty chill, so nah.

Yeah, so back to what *I'm* doing. I am currently participating in my friend Barric's interview assignment, as well as writing in my enchanted, self-aware notebook Nermal (I didn't name him; he came like this)."

Her notebook objected, using quite vulgar language from the little bit that I could understand. He seemed to be informing her that he was the third Nermal in a distinguished line of enchanted notebooks named Nermal. I think he said that his mother had named him and that Elsie was embarrassing him by implying that he had a strange name. I didn't dare ask how notebooks propagate, so I sat there quietly until Elsie continued.

"*Yes*. Nermal is a weird name." She turned to me. "Sorry. Nermal likes to interject about what I write. He is sooo opinionated. Anyway. I'm writing in Nermal because I have to write a journal for a week, because that's what my instructor told us to do for my History in Magic class. Except. I kind of...um...forgot 'till like, now. So this is gonna be a week's worth of stuff written

in a day. It's totally fine. I don't know how this is gonna help us with magic, but here we are." I rolled my eyes.

The horrible part is, this is exactly what she always does: ignore it until the night before it is due. But she receives *amazing* grades because she knows how to cast time spells that let her stretch an hour into a day. She could do all this without any repercussions from the timeline (which is what happens if most people cast time manipulation spells). If she put that much effort into getting her work done on time, she would rule the world.

But she does occasionally buy me some time to sleep, which is nice. I am one of only a few nocturnal creatures on campus, so we have to adjust to the sleep schedule of daywalkers. It is a bit of a nightmare; sleeping during the day when I'm home on holiday; sleeping at night when I'm at school. My circadian rhythm is best described as Christmas lights: looped around in shapes and knots that shouldn't be physically possible, but are right in front of you all the same.

After a fair amount of thought, Elsie found her train of thought, only to be interrupted by Nermal. He was so frenzied I could not understand what he was saying.

"Let's see. So, Monday I went to the grocery-----what Nermal?

-----

What do you mean that's boring? It's the truth.

-----

Well, what *should* I say?

-----

I can't say I fought a dragon!

-----

Because I didn't, that's why!

-----  
 FINE!!! I fought a dragon! There. Ya happy now? .....

Now he's silent. Okay. Whatever. It's fine. I just gotta write the thing. *AND* answer your questions," she said looking pointedly at me. "I hadn't forgotten you, Barric. Just got a little distracted, that's all." Nermal made a sound that I suppose was a notebook's equivalent of a snicker. Elsie jabbed her pen into him, eliciting a shrill sound from the seemingly defenseless notebook. I suppose my face must have betrayed my surprise, as Elsie gave me a look and explained, "Oh he's *fine*. He actually enjoys it. Kinky little weirdo.

"Now. Where was I? Right! Monday. So. After the grocery store, I went to the woods to work on my seancing. That's a word right? Sure it is. Anyway, so I was working on my seancing and apparently I summoned a werewolf/ghost. A dead werewolf? I don't know, but that thing was totes epic. He had these huge claws, and massive eyes. I think he could've seen me three miles away, in the dark, on a foggy night."

Nermal the Notebook interjected something, to which she responded, "No. I *know* it has to be night to be dark. But it doesn't have to be dark to be night. That's what I was trying to get at. It's like when Barric goes out to find the pot of silver at the end of a moonbow," which is the moon's equivalent of a rainbow, "it has to be bright *and* night. BUT it can be night, without it being bright, like if there is no moon. But then Barric doesn't get a chance to find any silver. Now, could you not interrupt me while I'm telling the story?.....Thank you."

I asked her what she did with this dead werewolf that she had summoned. It wasn't as if she could just keep him as a pet; that was explicitly forbidden by the Witch Council. But she also seemed too intrigued by him to immediately send him back to his grave.

“I asked him why he answered my summons. It wasn’t like he had to show up. I would’ve waited until pretty much anybody appeared. But he hopped on that train almost as fast as I could conjure him. He said that he was so,” her voice dropped an octave, “absolutely spellbound with the beauty of my summons. He just knew I had to be as ravishing as my spell.” She giggled like a schoolgirl with a crush, and returned her voice to normal. “I mean, come *on*. Who talks like that? He was clearly just looking for either a way to cheat death, or to get lucky. Neither of which was I about to help him with. I come from a long and proud line of law-abiding genie/witch hybrids. I’m not gonna sully that with some werewolf. And a dead werewolf at that. Though ya do gotta wonder...”

I pointedly made a face. I loved Elsie but she could be a bit too risque for my tastes. She noticed my face and laughed. “Oh you. Let me have some fun. Life is so boring otherwise. And besides, it’s not like I *actually* did anything. There’s nothing wrong with having a healthy imagination. Okay. Okay. Judgey-McJudgeFace. I sent him on his way. He was clearly a shameless flirt, and I don’t have time for that. Well. I mean, I do--I could, but, like, I don’t wanna. D’ya know what I mean? Nah, how could you? Sweet leprechaun you. One day, somebody’ll fall for you and that person’ll be super lucky.”

When I was younger, I had rather hoped she might fall for me, but I now realize I don’t want to spend the rest of my life in a relationship with her. She’s great and all, but I need someone a bit less...high-energy. Elsie gives it her all, all the time, and that’s just too much for me to try and keep up with. I’d actually be okay with just me, her, and her cats. I would be perfectly content to bum off her for the rest of my life. “Bum off her” is not the right way to say it; I would be content doing all of the housework in exchange for a roof over my head.



But I do not think she would agree. She had plans to see the world, and I wanted nothing more than a comfy fire and to be surrounded by, well to be honest, her cats. I believe she had bewitched her felines so that they are polite, but still behave in a manner that befits cats. An example of this would be this once, when her familiar, the black cat she has cruelly named Mr. Fuzzybutt, locked eyes with me, then proceeded to nod in my direction and shove one of Elsie's makeshift milk-carton-potion-vials off the side table. He acknowledged my presence, then did what he wanted to. Far more polite than most felines. Her other cats are much better behaved; they do not knock anything off of anywhere at any time (which was part of why I was convinced that Elsie had enchanted them).

I realized that Elsie had started talking again. I am uncertain what more she said about the dead werewolf, but she seemed to have transitioned to another topic.

“So I said, ‘Well of course you can’t. Weaselwood doesn't mix with fig innards; it goes with junanna beans!’” She laughed, so I chuckled along with her, chalking it up to yet another witch joke that I would not have understood even in context. “But yeah, that’s pretty much everything. Anything else I can help you with? Maybe mix you a caffeine potion? One that’s less slimy this time?” I shook my head. “Oh, please? I could really use the practice. You know potions is where I struggle.”

I reminded her that the last time I had helped by drinking one of her potions, I had remained a newt for three days.

“Oh but that was three weeks ago! I’ve learned a lot since then.” I leveled my eyes at her. Even for one as gifted as she, there was no way she could have learned that much new information in such a short span of time.

“I did. Really! It was this old guy at the bookstore. You know, the one with the pearl earring in his left ear?”

I did not argue, but I have never once seen a man with a pearl earring at the bookstore.

“Well he told me that if I would tell him a story then he’d make sure I got a new book on spells every time I need one. I was kinda stressed about the upcoming F.L.A.C.K.S. test, so I just told him my life up ‘till then.”

I could not believe her. For a witch to tell her life’s story was akin to giving someone a key to the compartment that holds your soul. And if this mysterious man ever decided to, and he knew the right spell, he could slowly strip away everything that made Elsie behave as Elsie does. I reminded her of this, but she simply brushed my concern aside.

“Look, even if he does, which I seriously doubt, it would be worth it. Just yesterday I got a book about my level of potions, telling me exactly how to say the spell, how to prepare the ingredients, all the stuff that we are just supposed to, I dunno, intuitively know. I actually made a fire cradle without burning the tupperware I was holding it in! I’ve never been able to do that before. I’m telling you, this guy has some serious, hardcore magic. ‘Cause I’ve asked around and *nobody’s* heard of this book. I can’t find any record that it has ever existed, but there it was. Just sitting on my windowsill. The only thing written inside, that isn’t, you know, about potions, is this fancy handwritten note that basically says, ‘Thanks for the story. Keep an eye on your windowsill.’ Like, how cool is that? Some random dude is just gonna give me exactly the books I need! Totes a square deal. I’m gonna have a perfect life, if this keeps up!”

And she did. For the rest of her life, anytime she struggled with something, with anything, a book appeared on her windowsill. It told her exactly what she needed to do, and

precisely how she could achieve her goal. I searched for the man in the bookstore, but could never find him. Not that I was sure I would make the deal, even if I did find him. But I certainly wanted the opportunity, nonetheless. I did manage to find a man at the bank who had a gold medallion necklace. He promised to make moonbows appear near me every three nights in exchange for something negotiable, but I ignored him. No one can make the moon shine for just one person, *that* predictably. Can they?

### Family Isn't Skin Deep

Oren looked at the sky. Grey. Cold. It would rain, he was sure of it. He looked down. Also grey. Also cold. To his left, buildings. They had names of businesses, but he didn't care enough to read them. To his right, cars inched past as fast as gridlock would allow.

He sighed. Faces, names, exteriors, these varied, but the city itself never changed. New York was always New York, and no one would ever be able to change that.

Pink. Pink? Why was there pink? His city was grey. Pink was...memory. Pink was innocent and alive. He had given up on pink. Yet there it stood. A pink coat on a small child; she held her mother's hand, waiting to cross the street. Oren had had someone who wore pink. But she was gone, and the world was grey. The light changed, and the throng shoved forward. Oren allowed himself to be swept along with them. He hadn't been planning on going this way, but it could work. It wasn't like he had anywhere else to go. He flowed, allowing the crowd and the memories to sweep him away.

He'd been ten when he met her, Bridget. Short and angry and pink. She'd kick him and anyone else who got close enough. Kick, spit at, hit, her temper was as volatile as her little limbs were small. The world was yellow then; summer and weeds, the picture of suburbia.

Unlike the other kids, Oren never learned to stay away from her. He liked the pain; it was a sign that someone in the world saw him. She continued to hit at him throughout their days in school, even into their respective trades. Bridget focused her time into being a beautician, while Oren stumbled his way into being an electrician. Bridget kept telling him that she could have done better, been with someone better, but she felt sorry for him. Still, dealing with the abuse

must have paid off, because he was the one she married, whose child she birthed. They named their little girl Sophie, and everything had been pink.

Until it became red.

It had been a week like any other. Work, pick up Sophie from pre-school, boringly routine. Sophie had been complaining that her skin itched, but neither Oren nor Bridget thought anything of it. Each day, the itching became more insistent. Oren grew a little concerned, but Bridget brushed her off.

“Ignore her, Oren. It’s just a cry for attention. Remember? Like in those parenting books we read. I’m sorry, *I read*.” So, Oren didn’t take her to the doctor. Didn’t buy her anti-itch cream from the drug store. Just waited.

That Saturday, a little girl walked out of Sophie’s bedroom. A little girl in pink who most certainly was not Sophie. Bridget asked the little girl where she had come from and where Sophie was.

The girl laughed and said, “Mommy, I’m right here.”

Bridget glanced at Oren, her face contorted in that multifunctional expression of hers. Was it anger? Fear? Confusion? A mix of them all? He couldn’t tell. Then her eyes met Oren’s, and he knew he was doomed.

He pulled Bridget aside and explained it all as best he knew how.

“I never knew my parents. All anyone knew was that I had been left outside the hospital when I was about four years old. I never was adopted out. I never belonged. I--”

“Dear, I love that you’re opening up to me and all, but what does this have to do with Sophie and that little girl over there?” Bridget asked.

“That’s what I’m working on telling you, albeit in a very round-about way. That girl *is* Sophie.”

Bridget stared. She blinked. She frowned.

Oren tried to organize his thoughts to the bare minimum of what needed to be said.

“I’m a...uh... I call myself a shapeshifter. And apparently, so is Sophie.”

Bridget blinked. After a beat, she said “Riiiiight.” She turned and walked towards Sophie’s bedroom. Oren called out, “Wait! Bridget, come on. Please. Say something.”

“What is there to say, Oren? You think this kid, who isn’t even the same race as our kid, is Sophie. You’re claiming to be a ‘shape shifter’ --like, what does that even mean?

You know what? No. No. I don’t want to hear it, because this,” she gestured around, “is insane. Our daughter is missing, and you are trying to pull this load of bullshit? Seriously Oren!? We aren’t kids. You can’t just go around making up stories to explain every little thing. This is real life, and our daughter is *missing*. So, for once, do something useful. Look in her room. Scream her name from the top of the house. I don’t care. Just do something that doesn’t require standing next to me. Gah! I can’t even look at you right now.” Bridget shoved past him, but he grabbed her arm.

“Fine, but don’t say I didn’t warn you,” he said, in a voice so soft even God would have to bend down to hear. Oren cracked his neck back and forth, then reached up and pulled the skin off his face. Bridget screamed and jerked away, but his grip was too tight.

“Look at me,” he whispered. Bridget clawed at his arm, but the skin just sloughed off. She screamed again. “Bridget. Look at me,” his voice barely louder, but growing in intensity. She

beat her free arm against his chest, kicked anywhere her foot could get purchase, but he wouldn't let go.

“Look. At. Me.” Bridget felt his fingers close around her jaw, force her face in his--no, *its* direction. She screwed her eyes shut and shook her head as best she could.

“No. No no no. You can't make me. I won't. I *won't*.”

He waited. She fought, yet still he waited. Her jaw was beginning to ache when her eyes followed their own commands and slowly crept open.

To her surprise, there was in fact, a man standing before her. He had eyes, and a nose, ears, everything that a normal looking guy would have. Except. This man was a completely different skin tone and eye color than her husband. But the voice...that was unmistakably Oren. She'd know it anywhere.

“Ho--How? How is this...?” Her brow furrowed as her eyes searched his face, looking for some small resemblance to the man she knew. He released her jaw and her arm, and took a small step back. He stated that, for years, he'd wanted to tell her, but he was afraid that she wouldn't understand. Or worse, that she'd be afraid of him. He knew that the few humans who knew about monsters tended to react poorly, and often violently. After a while, he decided that this was simply a secret that would go with him to the grave. Until today.

She asked all sorts of questions. Could he change his gender? How about his age? His height? He explained that anything that went more than skin (and eye) deep exceeded his abilities. What about Sophie? Did those limitations apply to her as well?

“Probably,” he said “but I don't know. I honestly didn't think this was a genetic thing that could be passed to her. So I have no idea if she is bound by any of the limits that I am.”

“To change...does she have to...peel her” her body shook, “*skin off?*”

“Yes. That’s why I didn’t want you to go into her room and see the skin lying on the ground. It can be...quite upsetting to people who aren’t used to it.”

She laughed, a harsh bark of a sound. “‘Aren’t used to it’? How do you get ‘used to it’? It’s *skin*, laying on the ground.” A tremor raced through her. “So this isn’t, like, something she’ll grow out of? Like, I don’t know...asthma or something?”

Oren could hear the desperation in her voice. He was losing her. “This isn’t a bad thing. You know that, right? It’s like finding out that your kid has serious art skills--”

“No, Oren. It’s like finding out that your kid has some dormant disease that might flare up at any given moment. What if her skin sloughs off in the middle of a recital? What if her cells, I dunno, *mutate* to the point where she can’t shift back to looking like herself? So she’s stuck looking like someone else, with no one that she can call, because she can’t tell anyone. Scared out of her mind, and all because--” her shoulders heaved as a sob wracked her body. “What if--”

“Come on, Bridget. Seriously? That’s what you’re afraid of? That’s never happened to me. Why would it happen to her?” Oren asked, reaching out to hold her.

She jerked away. “That’s because you’re pure...*whatever* you are. She’s only half. She might not have as much control as you. She...I...I can’t deal with this right now,” Bridget edged around Oren and headed for the door. He reached a hand out towards her, then let it fall by his side.

---

Oren was asleep when she finally came home, *days* later. Too many days later. If he’d been awake, maybe he would have noticed the way she staggered into the walls. Maybe he would have noticed the smell on her breath. Maybe he would have noticed the kitchen drawer



opening and the glint in her hand. Maybe he would have heard the door to Sophie's bedroom being pushed open...

He definitely noticed the screams.

The first scream was wordless. Nothing but pure terror and pain.

The next was a single word that should never come out of a child's mouth as it did that night, "Mommy!"

By the time Oren, still half dazed by sleep, stumbled over the rugs and into Sophie's room, it was too late. Something was standing over his daughter's bed, stabbing over and over and over again. He ran forward, slipped on something slick, red, but managed to grab hold of the fiend. It whirled, the arm still rising and falling. He tried to get out of the way, but the floor was too slick. He fell, everything still sliding out from under him. What had once been his wife stumbled after him, the arm *still* rising and falling. She slipped on the same slipperiness that had messed with him, and went plunging down. She didn't get back up.

The once innocent pink walls were now stained red, and--

A car honked. He had wandered into a street without noticing. He had followed the crowd... somewhere. But the crowd was gone now, and with it the last pink in his otherwise gray world.

He wandered into the nearest building: a coffee shop that sometimes doubled as a bar (if the owner was in the right mood). The barista's hair was slicked back in a ponytail, he was sporting a red dragon tattoo that snaked up and around his right arm. Oren ordered a black coffee, just something so that he could sit at one of the tables without being disturbed. The barista set it down and watched the man sit by the window, not touching his coffee. Oren only

noticed that time had passed when the barista informed him that they were closing. Oren nodded and got up to leave. The barista put a hand on his arm.

“What your wife did...it isn’t your fault,” the barista said. Oren blinked. How-?

“What did you just say?” he asked dumbly.

“She got involved with the wrong people, they warped her mind, showed her things she shouldn’t have seen, convinced her that her own daughter was a threat to humanity. That’s what they do, Time-Travelers. They convince the human parents that their half-human half-other kids are dangerous and have to be dealt with. But you could save those kids. If you tell your story, you can save so many lives...” the barista went on, but Oren stopped listening. What did it matter if he could save some kids? It would never bring back Sophie. It would never be enough. Oren walked out the door and away into the cold New York night. The barista sighed and flipped the sign: *Sorry, We’re Closed.*

### To Sing or Not to Sing

To the dear patrons of the Samsonite Museum of Archaeological History, I wish to extend both a sincere thank-you, and... a warning. What you are about to hear could be considered quite the prelude to a most disturbing life.

I am certain that you all remember learning about the Fight Of Our Lives, where humanity fought with our allies against any supernatural creatures who dared threaten to obliterate us. The Fight where so many lives were lost and atrocities committed on both sides.

What we have here in our care is a genuine, first-hand account of one of the most horrific leaders of the last of those insidious wars: Miss Corramae Eliot. Convicted of committing some of the most heinous acts imaginable, Eliot was one of the last Sirens to be snuffed out at the conclusion of the fighting.

What follows are carefully chosen excerpts of her recorded account, detailing how she changed over time and laid the groundwork to become one of the most horrible women in recorded history.

*Dear Diary,*

*My name is Corramae Eliot and today is my ninth birthday. Momma gave me this recording diary thingy and says I should get into the habit of talking into it, recording what I'm thinking. She says it will really come in handy when I grow into my Siren powers- Oh. Momma says I should go play with the other kids.*

*Bye Bye Diary!*

*Dear Diary,*

*Momma and I went to the toy store today! She said she had a really good day at work, so we should celebrate. I got to pick any toy that I wanted, so I picked this super cool clay making kit! Momma's worried I'm gonna make a mess, but I promised I'd be really care---oops. Uhhhhhhh I gotta go.*

*Bye Diary!*

*Dear Diary,*

*Momma was not happy about the clay making incident. She was really tired that day, so I tried to clean it myself. But she said I waited too long, so now we have a really weird stain on the carpet. She took my clay machine away and won't let me watch tv. I'm not allowed to do anything besides homework. Not even talking to you.*

*(Sigh) It isn't fair! I was trying to be careful, but the clay was so slippery it just fell! Now she's--Oh! I hear her coming.*

*Bye Diary.*

*Dear Diary,*

*Sorry I haven't talked to you in a while. Momma found out I'd been secretly recording when I was supposed to be grounded. She was not happy.*

*Anyway, I'll be turning twelve tomorrow. So, Momma's given you back to me. She says I should record a lot now, but I really don't have anything to say; nothing ever happens to me. I don't understand her. First, I get in trouble for recording, now she wants me to record basically everyday. I'm so confused. I don't know what she expects me to tell you.*

*I guess I could talk about-- Huh? Whatd'ya say Momma? Oh. okay.*

*Gotta go. Talk to ya later Diary.*

*Dear Diary,*

*Had an interesting talk with Momma today. She wrote down some things she wants me to record. She says it'll be important to look back at these recordings when I have my own kid. I don't really get it but whatever. I'm sure it'll make sense when I'm older.*

*So, when you hear the word Siren, what do you think of? Is it the sound thing on a police car? The warning sound that signals an approaching storm? What about those bird-like creatures that lure sailors to their deaths?*

*I mean, that last one is pretty funny, .... and the luring to the deaths part is right, but Momma says we are descendents of these things called Loreleis and we're actually from Germany. She says the only real difference between the Greek and German is that we aren't bird-like and Loreleis sit on top of a hill along some river and sing. As long as no boats sail near their cliff, everything's fine. Oh! And we look just like everyone else, totally human-looking. I guess you could say that we're just women with magical voices. Huh?*

*Sorry. She reminded me that we have "Evil" magical voices. At least that's what the humans think of us. It isn't our fault that people get hurt when we sing! The bad news is that now, when we sing, we get hurt too. Some "wonderful" human sorcerer thought it would be a good idea to place a curse on us. Momma says that every Siren has a curse, but each curse is different. She says that the way that the curse works is that each time we sing, the curse gets stronger.*

*So if I never sing, no curse; if I sing all the time, super cursed. I heard about one girl who's curse made it so that, each time she used her powers, she would be less able to remember things. I heard about another girl who's throat just keeps getting tighter and*

*tighter the more she uses her powers. Momma said she's in a coma because her throat is so tight that she can't breathe. Momma's been losing her ability to speak. We don't know what my curse will be, because the Sooth ladies can't tell you your curse until it activates. Your curse doesn't show up until after you get your powers, and most Sirens get their powers at thirteen; some girls sooner, some later.*

*Anyway. She's gone to water her plants so we can be real for a second. Momma's REALLY worried what my curse might be, but I don't see what the big deal is; I've just decided I'm not gonna sing. She's coming back.*

*Catch you later, Diary!*

*Dear Diary,*

*I'm kinda getting tired of saying that every time, so I'm gonna start switching it up. Anywho. Thirteen came and went and I have no idea what my curse is because Momma's really worried what the Sooth ladies are gonna say and refuses to take me to see them.*

*BUT.*

*My powers*

*are SO cool!!!*

*I can make people do whatever I want; it's so awesome. Momma says I shouldn't play, that this is serious, but who cares!? For all we know, I might not even have a curse. We don't actually know how this works.*

*Other than that the Sooth ladies are the only ones who can tell you what your curse is.*

*Momma's probably right though. I don't want to end up writing or whispering everything like she has to. So, I'll try not to use my powers.*

*See you later.*

*Thursday, March the 17th.*

*Okay. I know what you're going to say, but it's not like I **planned** on using my powers. But that guy was gonna hit the dog. I had to do something, so I sang and made the guy swerve around the dog. No problem. I mean, maybe the curse is made up. I certainly haven't noticed anything different about me. I don't know what to think about it all.*

*Friday, January 22nd.*

*So. You remember how a while ago I said that I thought that whole curse business was fake?*

*Yeah.*

*It's not.*

*It is SO not made up. I just looked at a guy and wondered what he would look like hanging from a noose made of his own guts. Is that not an "ew" thought or what? I'm scared to tell Mom because she'll probably freak out on me and that is the LAST thing I need right now.*

*Tuesday, February 12th,*

*Saw a cute cat. Tried to pet it. The cat bit me, and now I'm on drugs because the cat got me sick.*

*On the bright side, my teacher felt really bad that I had to go to the hospital, so I don't have to write that paper for my English class anymore.*

*I may have also...sung. A little. Look, it isn't a big deal, I just didn't want to write the paper. I'm not gonna do this on every assignment, but I got sick.*

*Don't judge me. You would totally do the same if you could.*

*Whatever, I'll talk to you later. And yes, I'll stop using my powers.*

*Tuesday, October 5th.*

*SO!*

*Turns out Mom's been keeping a really big secret from me. Turns out, Sirens **have** to use their powers. It's yet another part of that stupid curse. If we don't use our powers, you know, like I'VE been doing, then we build up Sirenical energy (I don't think that's what it is actually called, but you know what? If someone doesn't like it, they can bite me. I really don't care). If someone builds up enough energy, then it explodes out of them, almost literally.*

*Doesn't sound so bad, right? Just a big fireworks show and off you go with your life.*

*WRONG!! Mom said she did that right after I was born, and that the explosion of that energy is what killed my father. So yeah, I'm kinda upset. How could she keep this from me? She's the one who keeps saying, "We need to be open and honest with each other." How is THIS honest? Or open?*

*I get that she didn't want to hurt me or our relationship with each other, but I could have killed someone because she was worried about my feelings. Plus, if it weren't for her, I would still have a dad. I--I can't totally blame her because, if it weren't for her, I wouldn't be here. And, she didn't grow up with a mom who could teach her how to be a Siren. So, I get that I shouldn't blame her, but I'm just so angry right now. I mean, what else is she not telling me? What else is she keeping secret to protect my **feelings**? I'm gonna go to one of the Sooth ladies; I'm fifteen years old and I still have no idea what my curse is, so I think it's about damn time that I find out.*



*OH! And that's another thing. The whole reason that she hasn't taken me to a Sooth lady is because she wants to see if I'll develop a curse if I don't go see them. What even? She's treating me like I'm some sort of science experiment. I mean, excuse me but isn't this MY life we're talking about here? Not hers, not anyone else's, just mine.*

*Dear— Oh. Who cares. Let's just get this over with.*

*It's Monday. So there's that to deal with.*

*I went to the Sooth ladies over the weekend. They said that my curse is that I will progressively become more evil, whatever the heck that means. Isn't that just such a copout answer, though? "Yes, I see-oh- I see that you will become-hmm, evil" like seriously? Are you for real? How stupid do you think I am?*

*Become evil. Like, what does that even mean?*

*Whatever. I'll just have to find a way to handle it.*

*Thursday, October 31st,*

*Weird thing happened. Well, weirder than usual. So I was walking home from school and I saw that this new clothing store was open. Just a cute little hole-in-the-wall, bargain store. I've been having a really crappy week so I figured maybe a little retail therapy might help.*

*I go in there, find some cute clothes, head up to the register and there's this creepy old guy who keeps looking at me. There's nobody at the register so I just keep waiting, hoping this guy will take the hint and leave me alone. Just my luck, he's the cashier. He walks over and starts ringing me up. I ignored him, but couldn't help noticing the scar that broke his right eyebrow in two. He opted for talking. "How are you?" "Are you having a good day?"*

*“Do you want to make a trade?” Yeah, he asked me if I wanted to make a trade! I’m in a cheap store, does it look like I have something to trade?*

*He said, “I can give you any physical thing that you desire, be it a new book or a person’s location written on a note. If we trade, I will uphold my end of the bargain for the rest of your life. No matter where you are in the universe, you will receive your chosen object at the agreed upon time.” I asked what he was offering me specifically. He gave me a creepy smile.*

*“For you, I think it best that you have access to escape routes when you need them. No matter where you are, when you need it most, you will find a note telling you how to leave the area completely undetected,” he said. I asked why I would need that. He just stared.*

*“And what do you want in return?” I asked.*

*“Tell me your life’s story. Tell me everything that has happened to you thus far in your life.” This was getting too weird for me so I paid him for the clothes and left. There’s no way he could actually hold up his end of the bargain. Right? And, it’s not like I’m actually going to need escape routes. Why would I need to run?*

*Wednesday, April 30th.*

*I think I’m losing control. I almost caused this woman to shove her husband into traffic. They just looked so happy and it made me sick. I wanted them to stop, so I guess I started singing. I don’t even remember picking a song or anything. I just saw her reach out to shove him into the road.*

*Thankfully, he found a coin on the sidewalk, so he stooped and she missed him. She was shoving so hard that not connecting with him made her lose her balance and she fell on top of him. They laughed, but I knew. I realized I’d been singing. I--I don’t know what to do.*

*Everyday feels more and more like I'm slipping away. I keep singing even though I'm trying not to. It's like I can't stop.*

*Maybe it's just stress. Yeah. I've been really busy with school and maybe my siren powers are trying to help relieve some of that tension. I'm sure it'll be better after this class year.*

*Friday, September 3rd,*

*Oh, what's the point? Why fight the inevitable? My dark obsessions are just getting stronger. Every person that I look at, I keep seeing ways to kill them, or to make them kill someone else. Everything sucks because I am so tired of fighting back these urges; it's just miserable. I mean, if I **have** to use my powers and I'm **going** to become evil, why not enjoy the descent? I've heard life's way more fun when you quit struggling.*

*Saturday, February 16th.*

*To anyone who finds this journal, please. Stop me before I hurt someone else. I can feel myself slipping away and I'm terrified. I've already killed one person; I don't want to hurt anyone else, but I don't know what to do. I feel so helpless all of the time and I hate it. I hate it so much.*

*So please. Please. Just make it stop. Make it all go away: the thoughts, the urges, all of it.*

*I'm begging you.*

*Who knows what I'll be capable of?*

### A brief note from the Curator

In regards to the abruptness of the end, this is Eliot's final journal entry before she seems to have succumbed to the power of her curse. I suppose that she was simply too busy forcing cities to slaughter each other to bother with keeping a journal. The reason this account is now on display is that it was recently donated by a local shop-keeper, who claims to be descended from the shop-owner that offered Eliot the strange deal, but we are currently unable to verify this.

For those patrons who are able to stomach such horrors, a more detailed account of Eliot's actual crimes can be seen in the next panel. For those who cannot, we hope that you will leave the Museum with a better understanding of one of the most cruel women in our recorded history. To all patrons, we appreciate your generous contributions for, with proper vigilance and continued funding, we aim to prevent the tragedies that befell Eliot from plaguing any of our other cursed young ladies.

And with that, I leave you with a Siren saying: To sing or not to sing is the purest question of all.

---

A young woman listened to the tour guide in silence, subconsciously rubbing at the scar on her throat. Since the wars, every female of the family had their vocal cords removed as soon as they turned thirteen. The family could take no chances that someone might inherit their ancestor's curse and bring destruction into a world that had finally made peace with all its creatures.

No one knew exactly how Corramae had survived the bullet that ripped through her throat during that last battle, but she crawled away from the fight and founded a new siren

lineage. One who now knew that the curse could not be prevented so long as a siren retained her power. So, when her own daughter began to show signs of inheriting her mother's gift, Corramae slit her throat, not deep enough to kill her, but enough to guarantee that she would never speak again. Corramae stayed around long enough to write down an explanation of why things had to be this way, then took off into the night, leaving nothing but her recorded diary from so many years ago. She was never seen again.

With every subsequent generation, they learned how to make the surgery safer, cleaner, less invasive and they passed on the lessons of Corramae. When her time had come, the young woman was not afraid. But she decided that her family had been silent long enough. She donated Corramae's recordings to the Museum, hoping that maybe if humans understood Corramae better, then one day sirens might just be able to sing again.

### What's So Great About Time Travel Anyway?

I wish you could have seen the look on his face. The last time I had seen that stupid vampire was 1772. I had my knife at his throat and a blade at his heart. We both knew his life was mine. Then my "blessing" kicked in and I was whisked away to times unknown.

You see, I am a Time-Traveler. I come from a *long* and prodigious line. I think the unofficial family motto is "Don't leave a time period until you've slept with at least three people," there are simply that many of us. The hope is always that at least a few of those unfortunate women would bear strong, Traveling boys who could abandon their mother as soon as she reached an age where she *needed* them in order to survive (because society is horrible). Not that the boys intentionally left their mothers, mind you; they were simply not taught how to go back in time. Reverse time-travel (i.e. going backward on purpose) is considered highly dangerous, so only the best of the best are able to see their mothers again.

Despite what people seem to think, it is actually quite hard to control *when* you Travel. One moment, everything's fine. The next, you're whisked away to a new time period. If you are *really* disciplined, you might be able to buy yourself a few minutes, maybe even a few hours. Ultimately though, once Time has decided to move you, you are going to move.

Time seems to notice us about when we hit puberty. So the guys begin just at the moment that they are most easily molded into mighty warriors, and the girls begin just in time to be vulnerable to the slightest suggestions (because "hormones make you *quite* emotional"). I don't actually know if boys are more likely to Time-Travel than girls or if the female Travelers are ignored and left to the whims of Time. There are some female Travelers who are taught How; they're just rare. Lucky for me, it was just another way to distinguish myself from the crowd. But we'll get to that later.

Where was I? Yes! The vampire. So, after nearly ridding the earth of one more bloodsucker, I was yanked away. Within moments, I had Arrived, but the question was when? I couldn't just walk up to someone and ask, "Hey. What year is it?" Well, I suppose I *could* but that's the fastest way to get yourself killed. Unfortunately for us, monsters have caught on to the tell-tale signs of when a Traveler is dazed from just Arriving. I checked my surroundings to be sure that the vampire hadn't decided to leave some friends to greet me *whenever* I finally showed up. Fortune must have smiled on me, because, aside from a passed out drunk, I was alone in the alley. I checked around the corner, still clear. After that, just a matter of figuring out when I was, and then I could get back on the vampire's trail.

Based on my surroundings, I had been shunted forward. The buildings looked even shabbier than the last time I had seen them. There were almost no people around, as if the population had been decimated by a disease, which happened with an annoying amount of frequency. I examined the drunk; he was in too much of a stupor to notice me, so I rifled through his pockets. Lucky for me, he had a sodden newspaper in his waistcoat. Most of the ink had run together, but I was able to make out the year: 1830. Sixty years for the vampire to prepare for trouble. It didn't matter. I'd find him. It was just a matter of time.

In one of the drunk's other pockets, I found house-keys and some money. I doubted it would be enough to cover a night at a decent inn, but anything would help. I made my way to a nearby tavern, which had somehow survived for sixty years (the name was different, but the building had barely changed). I purchased the cheapest thing they had and listened for talk of suspicious deaths recently. I had only been there for a few hours when someone rushed in.

"They found another one," the man said, breathless.

"Like the others?" someone asked.

“Yes and no. Like the others, this one is missing its organs and fluids, but...” he hesitated.

“But?” the others prompted.

“It... it ain't got eyes. They's been cut out or something.”

The blood loss sounded like a vampire, but removing the eyes? That sounded like a dryad, a forest spirit. Could they have teamed up? But to what end? Dryads only took eyes from their enemies. And why would this one be in a city so far away from any wilderness? Sure, this area was once a forest, but that was over 300 years ago. It didn't make sense.

Some of the men who questioned the newcomer moved towards the door.

“Show us the way, Jimmy,” one said. Jimmy nodded and led them into the night. I downed my drink (no point in wasting good booze) and followed them.

The trip took longer than they had anticipated because Jimmy got lost. Three times. I heard someone say that he had only recently moved here, but it didn't matter. What Jimmy forgot to mention was that the body had been suspended upside down and gutted like a deer. Several of the men went off to the side streets and upended whatever they had consumed at the tavern. I slipped through the shadows until I was standing just near enough to see. If this was a vampire, it was more violent than any I'd heard of. If it was a dryad, the city had some dark nights ahead of it.

On a wall nearby, I noticed a message written in the victim's blood: “It's human hunting season, blood-bags.”

A few people were muttering about the meaning; was it a prank, an afterthought, or a warning? The message had the species-typical arrogance of a vampire, but why bring so much attention to themselves? I glanced around, looking for anyone who was enjoying the carnage a



little too much. I figured that, like many violent creatures, this one might return to the body to see the chaos it wrought. Everyone was either decently disturbed, or busy throwing up whatever their stomachs contained. I was the most suspicious person in the vicinity.

I scanned a second time; surely there was something here that would help me find the killer. I was fortunate that he turned away a second too late. I couldn't believe my luck: there was the vampire I'd lost sixty years ago. He was dumb enough to actually return to the mess he had created. I followed him as he walked away from the scene.

He led me halfway across the city, not even bothering to make sure he wasn't being followed. Typical vampiric ego. Near dawn, he entered a decently sized townhouse; for a vampire as old as he was supposed to be, the building was rather on the small side and quite disheveled. I scaled the outside and forced my way through the upper window. I heard voices and proceeded with caution. One can never be too careful in a vampire's lair. As I drew nearer, I realized the vampire was speaking aloud to himself.

"What am I going to do? If the council finds out, they might think it was me. But I did not kill that poor girl. But since I did not, I must discover who did. The council would have informed me if another vampire had taken up residence in the city, yet they have not. If not a vampire, who else might have committed this atrocious crime? A werewolf? No, despite the apparent chaos, the wounds were deliberately and coolly inflicted. A werewolf in the midst of bloodlust could never show such restraint. A ghoul would not have left the body for others to feast upon, nor would they be likely to venture so far into the city. And what are the chances that this girl would be slain so soon after I had folded her into my dietary schedule? Could this be an attack upon me? But to what effect? If another vampire wished to lay claim to the city, they need

only ask. No other creature has a reason to wish me gone. Aside from Menadice, but I do not believe that she would...well... In actuality, she might.”

I thought this a good time to interject, “Menadice would not be a dryad perchance, would she?” The vampire whirled, then froze; his mouth gaping open. “I am pleased you remember me.” I smiled, batted my eyes and tilted my head coquettishly. Though I wanted nothing more than to kill this vampire, I must admit that the surprise on his face nearly caused me to laugh aloud. After several seconds, his mouth opened and closed, much like a fish consuming food.

Finally he said, “You--That was...That was more than fifty years ago.”

“From what I understand, ‘twas closer to sixty,” I replied.

“Yet you look the same as when last I saw you?”

“And what an enjoyable moment that was. While we are on the subject, I would actually like to finish what I started in that moment, if it is not too much trouble.” I pulled my knife out of my belt and walked towards him. He stared at the knife, eyes wide. He could have easily killed me, sloppy as I was. To his credit, he simply thrust his hands in front of him and backed away.

“Wait,” he said, “I did not kill that girl. Please. You have to believe me. I would never kill her; I was feeding on her, yes, but I would not kill her. Killing me will not avenge her death. Please. Let me help you. Think what a vampire and monster hunter could accomplish together? If nothing else, at least grant me a stay of execution. Hear my case. Let me help you eliminate the true killer. Please!”

As we slowly moved around his kitchen, I managed to back him up against the counters. I placed my blade against his neck, relishing the way his Adam’s Apple bobbed in his throat. I stood there for a moment. I finally realized that I had decided to spare him several minutes ago, but was only then figuring that out. Why else would I have announced myself in such a foolish

fashion? I silently chided myself on my carelessness, lowered my blade and slid it back into the sheath. His previous kills *had* been purely for food, so I was willing to use him for whatever I could before I killed him.

“Very well,” I said. “Convince me that you did not commit this act. AND who you think is truly the culprit.”

We spent the next several hours in discussion. He explained that, in nearly every city, there was a council who oversaw important affairs in the monster community. He had to obtain permission to move to this city seventy years ago and, during that seventy years, remained the only vampire in a 30 kilometre radius around the city. If another vampire had moved in, he would have been informed that his territory was being divided. In dividing the city, the council ensured that there were no squabbles over food, nor that the human population was over-hunted.

As such, my prey was quite confident that the murder had not been committed by a vampire. He explained his reasons why he did not think that this species or that had done it. He was actually quite thorough in his explanations. The problem, which I repeatedly tried to explain to him, was that he was not actually giving me any new information and certainly not a reason why I should spare him. After what seemed to be the fiftieth time that I explained this to him, I laid my blade on the table between us. That conveyed my meaning much more effectively.

He rushed to explain why *he* had not killed the girl. He said that, after forty years of merciless and wasteful hunting, he realized that he could not continue in this way. As it turned out, our close-call forced him to acknowledge that, so long as he was leaving such a bloody trail in his wake, people would come to kill him.

After a great deal of thought, he realized that he did not need to kill in order to satisfy his hunger. Instead, he fed upon a few people as they slept, alternating each time he needed

nourishment. After a month of feeding, he would move on to a new group. In this way, he did not attract attention to either himself nor his species, and his victims were only slightly inconvenienced. He explained that the murdered girl was part of his latest set of food, and that he had only been feeding on her for about a week when she was killed.

“Alright. Let us pretend that I believe you. Who do you think killed the girl?” I asked. He sighed.

“I believe it was a dryad that I have ceased relations with. Her name is Menadice. It was a most unpleasant breaking apart.”

I wanted to believe that he was the killer, but even I was forced to admit that an angry dryad made more sense than the idiot vampire before me. I rolled my eyes, silently granting him his desired stay of execution.

“Come,” I said. “Where does she reside?” He led me to the edges of the city.

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“I was certain she lived around here,” he said for the fifteenth time. I was tempted to tell him that we were still too close to the city for any self-respecting dryad to comfortably live, but did not wish to put forth the effort to speak. “Well,” he said, throwing his hands up, “I give up. We will never find her at this rate.”

I looked around for the usual dryad signs, but found nothing. Something bumped to my left; the vampire shrieked. I glared at him. How could someone so naturally built for hunting be so bad at it? A cat sauntered out of the rubble and away from us. The vampire smiled sheepishly and shrugged. I rolled my eyes.

I should never have turned away from him; I should have known he was too reckless to pay attention to his surroundings. Behind me, I heard a *woosh* coupled with a yell. I turned and saw the vampire dangling from a net; we had stumbled into an ambush.

I looked around to see if anyone was nearby, but the only sounds were the wind and the vampire. He was ranting indignantly about how undignified the situation was and began demanding that I cut him down. After several minutes of receiving no acknowledgment from me, he tried a different tactic. He whimpered and quietly asked,

“Would you, if you have a moment, perhaps please release me? This rope restricts the circulation of fluids in my leg and it is all becoming rather uncomfortable.”

I snorted and asked, “Do vampires actually have circulation? Is not one of the tenants of being undead that your bodily fluids cease the progressions that they once took in life?” He did not reply.

I had hoped that would be the end of our conversation, but the vampire had other plans. “You know, as I dangle here, it occurs to me: we have not introduced ourselves to one another. I am dreadfully sorry for this; I am usually much more courteous. I shall start. My name is Luca Leander Constabulary the Third. I most recently spent time in England, but after several, shall we say, accidents, all related to taxation of course, I thought it best to leave for wilder shores. Ireland is a most lovely and untamed place, don’t you think? I certainly think so. Anywho --”

“You are leaving out the most important part: you are a vampire who preys on innocent people, leaving death and destruction wherever you go. The only thing I need to know about you is that you *are* a vampire and you *will* kill me and anyone else at the first chance that arises.” I turned and walked away. I don’t know how he did it, but I could actually hear him pouting behind me. If things were different, I might have felt sorry for him. IF being the key word. I

decided to accelerate the timeline for my plan and said, “Oh, and I need to know how loud you can scream.” I smiled, “For tax reasons of course.”

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After several hours of alternating between making him yell and listening to him chatter in the trap, someone finally arrived. Luca chittered,

“Menadice! It has been a fair amount of time since last I saw you. How-how are you?”

The dryad glared. “How am I? *How am I?* You have not seen me in six months and you have the nerve to ask how I am? Well--I am doing quite well. How are you darling? Getting enough blood? Maybe a little too much?”

“Why did you hurt that girl, Menadice? And why did you frame me for it? She had nothing to do with us--” Luca said.

“She had EVERYTHING to do with us! You left me and were using her as a blood bag. I tried to gain your attention in more subtle ways, but you are just so oblivious that you did not even notice. I realized that if I wanted to have your attention, I would have to resort to more...drastic measures.”

She continued explaining why she had framed him, how simple it was, what she was going to do now that he had wandered into one of the several traps she had spread around the edges of the city to catch him should he try to stop her. I snuck up behind her with my torch and was about to set her ablaze when things went sideways.

Luca had been glancing in my direction and the dryad stopped monologuing long enough to realize it. She whirled, plant tendrils extending five feet past her arms. I was too close to retreat, so I ducked and rushed towards her. She leapt up; her plant limbs forcing her higher than I could go. Luca started yelling for me to cut him loose, that he could help. I scoffed. The last

thing I needed was for the two of them to decide that I was more dangerous to them both than either of them was to each other. I ignored him and focused on dodging her plant limb attacks.

To be so far from a dense forest, she was surprisingly powerful. Each blow was just as strong as the last and she showed no signs of slowing. Every time I got close to the tendrils connecting her to the earth, she forced me onto the defensive. I felt the familiar tingle that altered me that I would be Traveling soon, so I needed to make the most of what time I had left.

I watched for some weakness that I could turn to my advantage. I noticed that she was reluctant to physically harm Luca, so I used him as a shield as much as I could. After several attempts to hit me, her tendrils snipped the rope holding Luca in the air. He dropped unceremoniously, squawking the entire time.

I ran to another spot of cover, my eyes darting back and forth between them. Menadice ignored Luca and focused on advancing her limbs towards me. Luca jumped from one ruin to another until he was of a height with her. He wrapped his arms around her and ripped her from her roots, forcing her back onto the ground near me.

“Hurry!” he yelled. I rushed forward and thrust the torch into her regenerating root system. We backed away and watched the flames spread. Once again, I was glad that dryads were so flammable. She was dead in three minutes and ashes in fifteen. Luca turned to celebrate, but I never gave him the chance. I shoved him against a wall and brought the blade from its sheath.

“Wait-wait! Are we not allies? I thought--” he started.

“This changes nothing. I’ve not much time and you are far too dangerous to be allowed to escape.” To my surprise, I found it difficult to meet his eyes. But that was something that they drilled into us: no matter what you feel, you owe it to your prey to witness life leave their eyes. I

forced myself to stare into his and I hesitated. I did not see the bloodlust that I expected of a vampire. I saw surprise and hurt staring back at me. I steeled myself and brought the blade down.

I Traveled.

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This was one of the longest Travels of my life. I finally noticed how Time stretched in every direction around me. How many times had I Traveled yet never noticed? I was simply too focused on the next fight, the next monster. But Time was surprisingly beautiful and as equally unsettling.

When I arrived, my blade was against the wall, but no one was there. I glanced around, but saw no evidence of significant change. Whatever year it was, not much time had passed. I noticed something, so I backed away and was able to see it all. Someone had carved a message into the wall before me:

”To the girl beyond time,

Whenever you are, thank you for your efforts. I was forced to realize that my way of surviving was still hurting people, despite what I told myself. After much searching, I have found a new way, a better way, which allows me to survive without harming a living soul.

My sincerest thanks,

The Third

P.S. I have decided to return to England. I should very much like you to come and visit me there, should you have the time. I will wait one hundred years in London (unless something should force me out). Do please come and see me!”



I reread the message. Why would that stupid vampire leave me a message? “Come to London”? Why? I couldn’t wrap my mind around it. I tried to kill him, so he invited me to his residence? It was all too much.

I wandered, letting my feet carry me away from the city, trying to make some sense of it all. I came up with more questions than answers. Why did he invite me? Why did he leave me a note? Most importantly, why did he save my life?

I spent the next several years trying to answer these questions. I would Travel every so often, just for something to distract me from my thoughts. I journeyed all across Ireland, killing any monster that was causing problems for townsfolk, but I could not find my answers. I thought of returning to the Travelers, to see if they could explain why a monster who was supposed to be a bloodthirsty beast had risked his life to save me. I knew, however, that I would find no answers there. They had worked too hard to ensure our ruthlessness to give me an honest answer to a question that undermined everything that they had ever taught us. After a while, I realized that the only person who could answer my questions lived beyond the sea.

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Once I arrived in London, I had surprising difficulty tracking Luca down. I had spent thirty years questioning everything I believed in, so London was much more crowded than the last time I had seen it. I could not even be certain that Luca was still in London after all this time. My only hope of finding him was to keep trying to track as I would with any elusive monster. Weeks passed; I visited more bars than I care to admit, but still I could find no evidence of him. In an amusing turn of events, he found me. Sort of...

I was standing by the docks, contemplating if I might not be better served by returning to Ireland. At least there I could figure out the customs based on what they had been before I

Traveled. Here, it seemed, everyone had their own customs and expected you to understand and act accordingly. As I examined the outside of each ship, I sensed someone watching me. I turned and was swept into a hug.

“Ever! I was beginning to think you were not going to reappear in my timeline! I am truly glad that you are here. OH! You are going to love my home. And London. It truly is a remarkable city. There is so much art to appreciate. There is this man--”

“Put. Me. Down.” I said. I was unaccustomed to hugs, and I certainly did not enjoy being hugged by someone who, by all rights, should have been trying to kill me. To his credit, Luca did put me down, with his characteristic pout of course. Just as before, I found it difficult to meet his gaze. I turned back towards the water. He walked over and stood beside me.

“I am glad you came, Ever--”

“Why do you keep saying ‘Ever’ as if it is a name?” I interrupted. He paused.

“I... I realized, after you disappeared, *and* I came to terms with why you tried to kill me, that I do not know your actual name. So I decided I would call you Ever. Until I could discover your true name of course.” He smiled apologetically. “While we are on the subject, what *is* your name?”

An important question. One I was not prepared to answer. I replied as we had been taught to reply, “My name does not matter. Only my work: making the world a safer place.” He was clearly confused, but nodded as if he understood.

“What *should* I call you?” he asked. I sighed.

“You may call me” I gagged a little, “Ever. For now,” I emphasized. It was a ridiculous name really. So feminine, genteel, and far too on the nose about time-travel for my tastes. But

Luca seemed proud of himself for coming up with it, and I didn't want to tell him my real name. "Ever" was better than nothing.

I could have told him my name, but I hadn't said it aloud in so long it seemed that speaking it might somehow unleash something inside me. Something I had locked away long ago. I shook my head to clear it. I was clearly spending too much time around Luca and his dramatic personality was rubbing off on me.

He smiled as though I had said something impressive and nodded sagely. "Do you have a place to stay while you are here?" he asked. "If not, I will gladly offer you a place in my home. There are several bedrooms and, as I have no need for any of them, you may choose whichever you desire. While you are there, I can also show you the art that I have been collecting..."

I do not understand Luca's obsession with art, but he continued to describe various pieces that he had collected. He did not stop talking until we arrived outside a rather large house. I must admit, I had assumed that he would live in a sewer or someplace smaller, less noticeable and less... human.

He grabbed at my hand and tried to usher me inside. I pulled away and slipped into a defensive stance. Here it was. He *was* going to seek revenge. Completely understandable, but still a dangerous situation for me. I drew my stake and braced myself.

Luca stood there, his mouth agape. "What...what are you doing?" He stared at me and I at him.

"I know exactly what you are doing! You brought me here so that you can feed off me until I die!" I shouted. He blinked as I had once seen a sloth blink.

"No?" he said, his voice rising at the end. "Why would I want to kill you? I told you, I only drink blood from people who give me their permission."

I scoffed, “First, no. You did not tell me. And second, you truly expect me to believe that you do not seek revenge for the many times I have tried to kill you?”

“I would not say ‘many times.’ Only twice, yes?”

“I was close many other times, but I was forced to Travel before I could finish my task.”

“Is that why you are always so angry and ready to kill me? Because I am the one who got away?” he asked.

“Of course! Why else would I track you through this many years? You are the only monster that I seem unable to kill, despite my best efforts. Every time I get close, I Travel. I-”

“Oh Ever, silly goose. Is that what you think? No, I do not blame you for your attempts on my life. No no. I am deeply grateful that you forced me to see the error of my ways. I thought that, by not killing, I was no longer hurting people. But when you tried to kill me that last time, I realized that this was not the case. I meant what I carved into that wall: I *have* changed.” He smiled at me and opened the door. “Please. On my life, I swear that I have changed.”

I was uncertain what trick he was about, but I saw few options before me. If he was lying, then he was simply postponing the inevitable. But if he was telling the truth? Could humans coexist in peace with monsters? Seeing Luca’s earnest smile, somehow I believed it was possible. Maybe, just maybe...

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Over the next few decades, Luca proved true to his word. He never once tried to harm me and always gave me food and shelter, no matter when I Traveled to. He would regale me with what had happened in London while I was gone. Most of it was useless to me, talk of art and trivial human affairs (who was in charge, who had married whom, which people had moved away, or had children, or bought a new horse).

Despite the frivolities, I grew to enjoy his talks. He was so unconcerned with the world around him. All he could see was what was right before his eyes. But while annoying when I was trying to understand the important events that I had missed, his naivety was one of his more endearing qualities. He almost made me forget my mission, my inherited burden. But, all good things must come to an end, as I hear the people say.

Everything fell apart when other Travelers grew too close for my comfort. Luca, of course, did not notice, but I could feel the tingle in the air that occurred when many of us were grouped together. I put them onto the trail of other, dangerous monsters, including one the humans called Jack the Ripper, but I was quite certain that he was a werewolf rather than a man. In spite of these others, the Travelers still circled closer, as if they could sense Luca's very presence. Or, perhaps, my presence. I hoped that, perhaps, Luca would realize that he was better without me, that our companionship was doomed to end in blood. And...tears.

He was standing by the window, smiling as the peasant children played in the streets below. I drew my stake and lunged at him, screaming. His reflexes kicked in and he dodged, too slow. The stake caught him on the side of his throat. Blood began to rush out. He clasped his neck and stared at me in horror. I screamed and lunged again. My eyes were clouded with tears, so I misjudged where he was. I tripped over one of his ridiculous rugs, plunging the stake into my own abdomen. Luca hurried over, his own injuries forgotten. I pulled out one of my blades and lunged at him again. He dodged, his reflexes more aware this time. I screamed and cursed at him. I called him every cruel name I could think of, I hurled anything I could get my hands on from where I lay, anything that would force him to leave, to run.

And he did. Hurt and confusion on his face, hand to his neck, he used his inhuman speed to leave me and London far behind him. I collapsed and sobbed more than I had since I was a

child, ripped away from my mother by fate and Time. For a brief time I had known peace, maybe even *love*, and now it was gone. As I slipped into Time, I could only hope that he managed to survive his wounds.

---

I Arrived in a world different from what I knew. I bandaged myself with the blankets and draperies near me, and forced myself onto my feet. I stumbled down the steps, past velvet ropes, and into the night air. I made my way toward one of the main streets in London, thinking I could hide in a wagon and thus leave town without much fuss.

But I could find no wagons. There were horseless carriages racing by at impossible speeds. Lights everywhere, but no flames. Sounds and smells I had never encountered before. I made my way along, trying not to gawk too obviously. I picked up a newspaper that someone had thrown away. The year was 1911.

I stumbled towards the docks, hoping to find a ship headed for Ireland that I could stow away on. I asked around, but the few sailors who seemed at all reliable said that ships were not leaving port very often as most of the crews had made their way to the cruise lines in the south.

The newest one, *RMS Titanic*, was to be making her maiden voyage the next year. She was heading from Southampton to New York, if that suited my fancy. I thanked them for the information and soon after found a quiet place to think. My heart screamed at me to steal a boat and make for Ireland by myself, but my head reasoned that America would be the best place to lay low and decide what I wanted from life. It would also be the simplest, as one of the sailors told me that White Star Line, the owners of *Titanic*, were hiring pretty girls to wait on the upper class guests. He thought that I would more than make the cut. So I headed for Southampton.

I assumed that *Titanic* would be large, based on the name alone, but she was enormous. Bigger than any ship I had ever seen, I could not imagine how many cities of people must have been able to fit on her. I did not have much time to marvel at her though, as I quickly had to learn how to handle the guests, to treat them with dignity and respect, to coddle them and cater to their every whim. And that's how it was, running from one place to another, day in and day out, trying to keep up with the guests demands. If I hadn't been a wee bit sick to my stomach that night, I'm not sure I would have noticed when we struck the iceberg. As it was, the force of it nearly threw me overboard.

The chaos that followed was deafening, but for the first time in my life, I was glad to be a pretty female. I was one of the first women to be shoved into a lifeboat, simply because I was standing next to the lifeboat before anyone else was and I was female. The crew tried to remain calm and to keep the passengers calm, but they were drowning rats quickly running out of dry area to tread on. Even from the safety of being a ways away, we could still hear their screams as the ship finally sunk beneath the surface. It was several more hours before the screams died away altogether which, somehow, was worse. Rich and poor alike, we were grateful when another ship appeared on the horizon and carried us the rest of the way to America. After passing through immigration at Ellis Island, I was released into a world both familiar and new. And forced to Travel soon after.

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When I Arrived, the lively city that had once stood before me was much darker. People kept their heads down, shops were closed, even the air had a lifelessness to it. I walked south and I kept walking (or hitching rides) until I reached the coast of what they called Florida. Not finding whatever it was that I thought I would, I then turned my feet west and a bit to the north.

Somehow, I made my way to Iowa. Through sheer luck, I found a kindly farmer, with a mermaid tattooed on his left bicep, looking for someone to keep him company on his land and to help him look after his sheep. Though I had not tended sheep since I was a child, I surprised myself with how quickly the memories came back to me. Before long we had settled into a comfortable routine.

After several months, he made me a very strange offer. If I told him my life's story, he would give me what he thought I needed most in the world: no matter when or where I was, I would find a note on the wall nearest me saying exactly where I could find Luca. I stared at the man. Though we had swapped brief stories, I had never once mentioned Luca, and I had certainly never said his name. I demanded that he tell me how and what he knew about Luca. The farmer explained that, though he couldn't tell me everything because my mind would literally explode out of head, he could tell me that he could see into the past and the future and that I would one day seek Luca.

I laughed at the man. If he could see as he claimed, then he was clearly a fool. Luca was better without me, safer without me, probably even happier without me. And my life was less complicated without him. The farmer patted my hand and shook his head. He told me that, while Luca found something to love about everyone that he met, I was the only one who found something about him to love. I told the farmer how ridiculous that was; Luca was beloved by everyone who knew him. He was sweet and kind, and a well-intentioned idiot. He could find love anywhere he went with *anyone* he met.

The farmer nodded, "Before you, yes. He certainly could. But, after you drove him away, Luca decided that if he could not love you, then he would never allow himself to be loved again.



The lovesick fool keeps thrusting himself into ever more dangerous situations, hoping that one day you will appear and rescue him.”

“And if I do not?” I asked. The farmer stared at me until I cast my eyes down. “Oh,” was all that I could say. Assuming that the farmer was telling me the truth, I asked, “Will he ever understand why I chased him away?”

“Only Time will tell, my dear. Now, are you going to tell me a story or are you going to let that poor fool die for love of you?” I sighed and told him everything I could think of, from my earliest memory all the way up to how I found myself at his farm. In return, he handed me a slip of paper, touched my forehead, and sent me flying through Time.

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I was stunned when I Arrived. How was he able to send me through Time? He must have been some sort of Traveler, but I had never heard of anyone who could send another Traveler whirling through Time with simply a touch. An old memory arose about the legend of Time itself. Supposedly, Time was a conscious entity that could take on a physical manifestation at will. But that was just an old wives’ tale that some of the younger Travelers told to one another.

I realized that all of these questions would simply have to wait. I needed to find Luca, and quickly if I believed the farmer. I glanced at the paper the farmer had given me. There was only an address in New York, but it was a start. I hitched rides with anyone who passed by. Most were kind enough; some had other plans that I cut short by crashing their vehicles. I thought about killing one of these horrible people and stealing the vehicle, but I hadn’t the foggiest idea how to make it work. In crashing the vehicles, I guaranteed that they could not follow me or anyone else.

Thankfully, there were enough kind souls that I was able to make it to New York in a day and a half. Once there, I knew I had a much larger problem to deal with. During the time that I had been away, the city had grown exponentially. How was I to find one, non-violent vampire in a place this big? I had the address, but there was no way to know for sure that Luca would be there. I also had no idea what part of the city the address was in. I asked several people, but they either refused to help me, or had no more of an idea than I did.

After several hours of wandering, I found a map of the section of the city that I was in. It very conveniently had an arrow telling me exactly where I was in relation to everything else. I found the address on the map and set about memorizing the path. A few more hours saw me standing outside a rundown warehouse by the docks. I made my way round the building until I noticed a broken window on the second floor. I shimmied my way up and into the building, easing my way closer to the a hole in the floor. I peered down and saw someone suspended upside down from the ceiling. As the figure continued its slow turn, I could tell that it was Luca. His face had several bruises, some old, some quite new. I couldn't move. I knew I would need some sort of plan, but I could not tell how many people were holding him captive. I heard at least three voices, but they spoke in too low of tones for me to be certain.

While I was deciding on the best course of action, the front doors were propelled inward from a blast. Dust and smoke flew everywhere, making it nearly impossible to see if you were on the ground floor. I saw a figure advance towards Luca and start fiddling with his binds. One of his captors noticed the stranger and lumbered towards them. Neither Luca nor the newcomer had noticed and there was insufficient time to warn them.

Not one to waste an opportunity, I slipped through the hole and dropped onto the captor. He was instantly unconscious. The noise of the man crumpling to the floor drew everyone's

muddled attention towards me. I braced myself, clocked where each assailant was and calculated about how long I had until they overran me.

As I ran towards the closest one, I heard Luca yell, "That's my girl!" I rolled my eyes, but found myself blushing all the same. I rolled into the first assailant's legs, knocking him off balance. With a kick to the head, he was unconscious. The others were just as easy. Though I did not get a chance to subdue the last assailant, as I saw a carton labeled "Milk" fly past me. When it connected with the man, there was an explosion and he was gone. I turned around and was met with fabric in my face, arms snaked around me.

My hand was on my knife, when I heard Luca's voice above my head say, almost to himself, "I knew you'd come." I smiled and slowly put my arms around him.

"I missed you," I whispered into his chest. His arms tightened around me.

Hands clapped nearby and a feminine voice said, "You two are *totes* cute together. Let me take a pic of this." Luca pulled away, but kept one arm around me. He gestured to the stranger.

"I'd like you to meet a friend of mine. Ever, this is Elsie. Elsie, Ever," he said as if that explained everything. The young woman walked towards me and extended a hand.

"It's nice to finally put a face to all those stories Luca keeps telling me."

I gave Luca a sideways glance. He had the decency to blush. After a few moments, he cleared his throat.

"We should go. I for one would like to get a hot shower and slip into some clean clothes." He walked towards the still smoking doors, gently pushing me to walk alongside him.

I looked over where Elsie strode beside Luca, and asked, "What was in those containers you were throwing?"

As we walked back to Luca's apartment, I learned that Elsie was a witch who had agreed to help Luca with his crazy schemes to attract my attention. He and Elsie informed me that Luca's plan was to place himself into increasingly more dangerous situations until I decided to save him. In case I did not, Luca's reserve plan was for Elsie to use her spells and potions to get him out of his own mess. Elsie confessed that she agreed to help him because she thought the whole thing was quite romantic.

Luca's apartment was, as usual, quite tasteful, though far too cluttered with art. There was art hanging on the walls, art leaned against the walls, even some hanging on the ceiling. He was quite reluctant to part with me, but I assured him that I did not want to push him away, not ever again. He was clearly not satisfied, but accepted my answer all the same. While he showered and changed clothes, Elsie peppered me with questions. How had Luca and I met? What was it like being a Traveler? When did I realize I was in love with Luca? Why did I push him away?

I answered her as best I could, then asked some of my own. The most important of which was, "What year is it?"

"2019. Pretty cool, right? It's a great time to be alive. Don't have to worry about most diseases; cars are a thing; cell phones are amazing; there's the internet..." she continued listing things until Luca returned. I noticed the scar around his neck. Before, he wore a scarf that concealed it. But his current loose top made it far too visible for my comfort.

He must have noticed, as his hand slid up to rub the back of his neck, and oh so conveniently cover the scar. Elsie excused herself soon after. I wanted to talk to him, to apologize, to make him understand the reasons why I did it. But all my words seemed hollow. We sat in silence.

Day turned to night and still we said nothing. My stomach rumbled, so I stood to make some food. Luca's hand shot around my wrist. He looked up at me, his eyes pleading. I whispered, "Food." He smiled apologetically and released his grip.

"I was just worried you were gonna leave again," he said.

"Technically you left me," I said, feeling the sting of tears in my eyes. I laughed and glanced at him. He smirked.

"Only because you gave me no other choice. Actually, there's something I've been wanting to ask for a while. Why *did* you push me away? If you didn't want me around, you could have left. Instead of, you know, practically killing me." He chuckled and glanced at the counter, not even aware that he was rubbing the scar on his neck.

I stared at the floor. "Well..." Here was my chance, but what would I say? What could I say? "It started when I noticed that London was attracting many Travelers. A city that big was bound to be full of monsters. I figured, since you weren't killing anymore, they would have no way to track you down; you were safe. But they kept getting closer to the house. I'd steer them towards monsters who *were* killers, but that only slowed them down. They just kept circling back to us. Finally, It dawned on me: if I could sense them, they could sense me. *I* was putting you in danger. They would keep coming for us so long as we lived there. I thought about running away, but they would have followed us. I thought about leaving you, but then *you* would have followed me. If I had Traveled, then you would be forced to deal with them alone if they found you. I considered every option, but making you leave was the only one that made sense. And it hurt far more than I thought it would." I sniffled, ashamed to cry in front of him.

"So why come back now?" he asked.

“To keep a long story short, someone made me realize that you were going to get yourself hurt if I didn’t do something. I cannot stay, but you deserved to know why.” I forced myself to hold his gaze. I regretted it instantly.

“Wait. You just got back and you’re already making plans to leave? *Come on!* What was the point of even coming here at all!? Don’t you at least want to catch up? To know what you missed in the world? To know what you missed about me!?”

“All I need to know is that you are going to get yourself killed if you don’t stop! I’m not worth your life! You could find someone, maybe a vampire. You could be happy. But not with me. I am so sorry. This...it will never work. Travelers will always be around. And if they sense my presence, they might seek me out. And then they might find you. And, I could not bear to know...” I turned away so he wouldn’t see the tears on my cheeks. After a few minutes of silence, I heard the chair scrape against the ground. Luca stood behind me.

“That isn’t your decision. It never was. You have to respect my right to choose how I want to live my life. And if that means having to go on the run every so often, that’s okay. As long as I have you, everything else will work itself out,” he said quietly. He pulled me towards him, but I whirled around to face him.

“Do you *really* believe that? I hunt monsters. *That* is my job and you truly believe that we can make this work? Gah! You are so naive! How? In what reality could this possibly--” He pulled me into his arms and kissed me. I couldn’t move. Part of my brain screamed to shove him off, to run. But the other part only whispered, ‘Stay.’ And I did.

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It was several years before I felt truly comfortable staying around Luca, but we managed to settle into some sort of routine. I wanted to keep moving, to never stay in one place for too

long. But, since Luca was the one who had to live through it while I Traveled, I consented to returning to a small village that he had “adopted” during our time apart. While I Traveled through Time, he traveled the world. Whenever I Arrived, I would (per my agreement with the farmer) find a note nearby telling me exactly where Luca was. I would track him down and we would return to our village.

The townspeople would occasionally question why we did not age, but Luca would simply buy them whatever they needed to make their lives easier. A new well? Done. Some tractors? Done. A new roof on the church? Done. Every so often, some reckless youth would decide that we were monsters threatening his village and try to kill us. We simply made him disappear and compensated his family for the loss of labor.

During my time away, Luca’s art collection grew and grew. We built a completely new section of town just to hold his art. I teased him about it, but he didn’t care. He would retort that as long as he had his art and me, he was happy. He can be so sickeningly sentimental at times. And I wouldn’t have him any other way. I still worry that other Travelers may track us down, but for now, all is right with my world.

## Should You Avoid The Book on the ‘sill?

### (A Witch’s Story About the Benefits of Talking to the Right Stranger)

“You know what I care about? My cat. I know, it’s totally cliché, but Mr. Fuzzybutt is a horrible being who needs all the love and attention he can get. And snuggles, but that part’s probably just me projecting.

What?” I asked.

My friend Barric cut in, “This is great and all, but I’m supposed to interview a fellow creature about who they are, what they do with their abilities, how do they interact with humans,” blah blah blah. He’s a nice guy, but BOY does he talk a lot. And he’s such a dork. But he’s a good friend (which, for a witch, is saying something. Witches don’t usually have a lot of nice friends, so I keep him around).

And, since I agreed to help him, I gave him the spiel: My name is Elsie, I’m a witch/genie hybrid. So I can make deals, but I don’t have to. Just cause ya rubbed a lamp near me doesn’t mean I have to do whatever you want. Plus, I prefer trading actual things to just “Here’s a buncha free wishes.” Ya know? So, for the most part, I do sometimes help people for free -- I’m not a completely terrible person, okay? -- or I let them give me things, but I don’t *have* to do anything I don’t want to do. I explained how my genie powers work compared to my witch powers (Genie = gotta make a deal to use ‘em and can only use them *for* other people *on* other people. Witch = can do what I want *if* I know the right spell). And so on, and so on.

I turned my focus back to Nermal. (He’s my enchanted, self-aware notebook. Been in the family for a while, but we witches mostly just use computers nowadays. It’s way faster and you can have all your stuff anywhere you need it with the Cloud. Plus, it’s pretty hard to hex the



internet. You can, but honestly, why would you want to?) Nermal gets really persnickety about his lineage, so he insists that I write in him as much as I can, rather than using my laptop.

Actually, if I use my laptop in front of him, he starts yelling and swearing at me, and then we get into swearing wars, and then my mom yells at me for swearing, it's so unfair. Like, I didn't start it, but she doesn't care about that. I'm the humanoid. I'm supposed to be more mature. Whatever. Where was I? RIGHT! Nermal was yelling at me because I "disgraced his heritage and I should show more respect to my better," and crap. If he weren't a family heirloom, I think I'd set him on fire. Bet that would shut him up.

Honestly, I usually keep Nermal in a box in my closet so I don't have to deal with him (like I said, laptops are *way* better), but I had to hand-write stupid journal entries for a week in my History in Magic class. And I was gonna have to make the whole thing up because I had more important things to do. I still had to figure out how to make a potion that would turn any solid to liquid *and* any liquid to solid. The hell!?! How? How am I supposed to do that with *one* potion? But I had to figure it out. I knew I was close, because I could get a potion that would do one *or* the other, but not both. Which meant I was gonna have to hit the books. I'm not opposed, but I do like doing things for myself. So yeah, I was super busy. Plus, I don't see how hand-writing something is going to help us when magic is oral, but whatever. An assignment's an assignment.

And besides, after I helped Barric with his thing, I was just gonna use a spell to freeze time anyway. Best way to get homework done is knowing that time is limitless before you. I'd have done it right then, but I know Barric doesn't like when I mess with time. He says there'll be consequences one day, but I mean, what's gonna happen? The universe is gonna explode? The physical manifestation of Time is going to break into my place and beat me up? I mean seriously.

Not that I actually think that Time has a physical manifestation. That's just a story people tell their kids to freak the ever living daylights out of them. Everybody here knows that. I just want to make sure you know that. You, you disembodied weirdo creeping on me. I'd tell you to shoo, but it's kinda hot.

Anyway, *sometimes*, I do a time spell when Barric's around 'cause I know he needs the sleep. As a nocturnal leprechaun, he's, like, one of the few night creatures on a daytime campus, so his sleep schedule is all kinds of wacky. *Especially* if he goes home to see his folks. I kinda feel bad for the little guy. He's busting his ass but that dang time difference really gets to him. I know he's smart (like, super smart), our teachers know he's smart, but his grades aren't amazing because he keeps falling asleep during tests. He's fine during class because there's noise to keep him awake. But when everybody's dead silent for a test, he passes out.

I keep telling him to talk to the admins but he's just so shy. He gets really nervous around authority figures who aren't teachers. It's weird: if he's in class, this guy will straight up tell a teacher that they are wrong and explain why they are wrong, which takes a serious amount of guts. But outside of the classroom, mice could beat him up and he wouldn't do anything. I seriously doubt he would even squeak for help. And I'd talk to the admins, but they can't do anything unless *he* files the whatever and talks to them. Shake my head at this poor dork.

So anyway, I was trying to figure out what to write in Nermal, but he kept erasing everything I wrote. For Monday, I wrote that I got groceries. He erased it and said that was boring. Like, yeah it's boring, but this assignment is boring. That's the point or whatever. When I asked him what he thought I should write, he suggested that I say I fought a dragon. Like I'd give the time of day to a freaking dragon! But I had to write it because he kept erasing everything else I tried to write. And a lie on paper was better than a blank page.

I looked over at Barric, just sittin' there quiet as can be, and said, "I hadn't forgotten you, Barric. Just got a little distracted, that's all."

Nermal snickered or, at least, did the notebook equivalent of a snicker. I jabbed my pen into him, which made him loose some kind of shrill sound. I glanced over at Barric and could tell what he was thinking (he is so bad at hiding his emotions. Anything he feels, right there on his face), so I huffed and said, "Oh he's *fine*. He actually enjoys it. Kinky little weirdo. Now. Where was I? Right! Workin' on Monday. So, after the grocery store/dragon fighting," I glared at Nermal for good measure, "I went to the woods to work on my seancing. That's totally a word right? Sure. Anyway, so I was working on my seancing and apparently I summoned a werewolf-ghost. A dead werewolf? A ghostwolf? I don't know, but that thing was totes epic. He had these huge claws, and massive eyes. I mean, they were *huge*. Like, I think he could've seen me three miles away, in the dark, on a foggy night, kinda huge."

Nermal butted in that "Of course it would be night. It cannot be 'in the dark' if it is not nighttime." Douchebag.

So I said, "No. I *know* it has to be night to be dark. But it doesn't have to be dark to be night. That's what I was trying to get at. It's like when Barric goes out to find the pot of silver at the end of a moonbow," (which I found out from Barric is the moon equivalent of a rainbow, 'cause a rainbow only happens with the sun. Cool right?) "it has to be bright *and* night. BUT it can be night, without being bright, like if there's no moon. But then Barric doesn't get a chance to find any silver. Now, could ya not interrupt me while I'm telling the story?.....Thank you."

Barric asked, "What did you do with the werewolf that you summoned?"

I said, "I asked him why he answered my summons. It wasn't like he *had* to show up. I would've waited until pretty much anybody appeared. But he hopped on that train almost as fast as I could conjure him. He said that he was," I lowered my voice by at least an octave (thank you years of vocal lessons), "so absolutely spellbound with the beauty of my summons. He just knew I had to be as ravishing as my spell." I giggled and let my voice do its normal thing. "I mean, come *on*. Who talks like that? He was clearly just looking for either a way to cheat death, or to get lucky. Neither of which was I about to help him with. I'm from a long and proud line of law-abiding genie/witch hybrids. I'm not gonna sully that with some werewolf. And a dead one at that. Though ya do gotta wonder..."

Barric pointedly made a face. I love messing with him like that. He thinks I'm an absolute party-girl, and he does *not* like that. He thinks I can do better than the guys I hook up with. And he's right. But right now, I'm young. I just wanna have fun. I can get serious about life and love later if I want.

I laughed at his ridiculous face, "Oh you. Let me have some fun. Life is so boring otherwise. And besides, it's not like I *actually* did anything. There's nothing wrong with having a healthy imagination. But *Okay*."

If you must know I sent him on his way. He was a shameless flirt--Don't give me that face! I have shame. I enjoy a good flirt as much as the next person, but even I have my limits. Plus, I don't have time to deal with him. I could but I don't wanna. Ya know? Nah, how could you? Sweet leprechaun. You know, one day, somebody'll fall for you and that person'll be *super* lucky.

Anyway, after I sent him away, I called up Tabi, you know, the cattywampus? She gave me some advice about managing the cats. Mr. Fuzzybutt has been super possessive of me lately,

and I asked Tabi about it. She said that I just need to give him his own space. I don't know how I'm gonna configure that, but if it makes him happy, I'll make it work.

So yeah, after I talked to Tabi, then I called up Agatha, my witching bestie, and she wanted to know if I'd heard the joke about the potion master and the weaselwood. I'm the one who told her that joke, but she wanted to tell somebody, so I let her run with it. As usual, she butchered the punchline, so I corrected her. Politely, of course.

But yeah, that's pretty much everything. Anything else I can help you with? Maybe mix you a caffeine potion? One that's less slimy this time?" I said apologetically. I still feel really bad for the poor guy. My last caffeine potion was basically goop, but he was desperate for something to keep him awake after spending a month at his parents' place. And then it turned him into a newt for several days, so I really can't blame him for being skeptical. He wasn't that desperate this time, so he turned me down. I could tell he was tired though, so I tried to make it sound like he was doing me a favor. I reminded him that I could use the practice, 'cause I used to really struggle with all potions.

I hadn't told him about the bookstore guy with the pearl earring. That guy radiated powerful energy, but not in a dangerous way. More of a "I've got it and I'm gonna use it how I see fit, so you better stay on my good side" kinda way. So, when he said, "Tell me about your life and I'll make it worth your while," I wasn't gonna argue. Plus, I love talking about my life, so I would have done it for free. But he actually kept his end of the deal: anytime I had a question about *anything* I would find a book on my windowsill. A weird location, but what do I care? If I struggled with something, I'd find a book on my 'sill explaining it in perfect detail. Super helpful!

But Barric *freaked out* when I told him about my deal. He started talking about how dangerous it was, blah blah blah. I mean, *supposedly*, it's kinda dangerous to tell a witch's life story, but that's just what parents tell their kids to keep the kiddies from talking to strangers. I ended that convo as quick as I could. Barric's great and all, but he can be *such* a kill-joy.

After I got Barric to leave, I went to my windowsill to see if I had a new book yet. I had tests coming up about some spells I hadn't figured out. *Yet*. Plus there was that potion that was kicking my ass and I was still no closer to figuring it out. Sure enough, there was a book. I don't know who that bookstore guy was, but he was definitely my favorite person ever.

I was still kinda wound up from Barric's lecture, so I went for a walk around the edge of campus. There are always interesting people around, but, if I'm honest, I was looking for this one vampire I know. His name's Luca and he is absolutely in love with some girl. He doesn't even know her name, but he keeps trying to get her attention. Boy deserves someone who appreciates him, but the heart wants what the heart wants, so there we are.

Luca was really wired when I found him. He was pacing back and forth, muttering to himself. He was doing the whole "I'm definitely gonna do something dangerous and stupid, so either help me or stop me" thing. So I proposed the craziest thing I could think of: attacking dangerous people until this girl showed up to save his behind. Or didn't. I figured if I could make him realize how dangerous his little schemes were, maybe he would move on. Find a different girl. Not die. You know, little things like that.

Oh boy was I wrong. He thought it was a great idea. He argued that if things went south and his girl didn't show up then *I* could save him. I tried to backtrack, but his gears were already going. Crazy as it was, I knew the best choice was to help him. If I didn't and he got hurt I'd

have felt really bad. So we went our separate ways. Me to figure out how the hell I could fight and him to figure out who to pick our first fight with.

The main problem with the plan is that Luca didn't wait for me to tell him I was ready. He just went out and started harassing the first monster hunters he found. The only reason I found out is because a fairy had seen it happen and had been chattering to anyone who would listen about a vampire who picked a fight with some monster hunters. According to the fairy, the hunters were so surprised that they forgot to kill Luca and locked him up until they could decide what to do.

I will admit, Luca is an absolute idiot, but his stupid plan was super romantic. If somebody went to that much effort for me, I'd totally stay with him. It's so sweet! But also totally stupid. Don't risk your life, kids! Your crush ain't worth it! Since I think it's kinda cute, and since he'd prob die if I didn't save him, I used a spell to track him down and rescue his dumb, lovestruck behind.

By the time I showed up, they had Luca tied up and gagged in a corner. I cast a spell to elongate time, so that I could slip in there and cut him loose without alerting the hunters. Because, while Luca might not have any problems risking his life, I still had things I wanted to do and I didn't have a great grasp on offensive spells. Once we were safely away, I got ready to fuss at Luca about how dumb his plan was, how he could've gotten himself killed, how he could've gotten me killed. But the absolute dejection on his face. The little way he said, "She didn't come" broke my heart in pieces. He really thought this girl would save him. I mean, what do you say to that? I sighed and told him we'd just have to keep trying until she showed up.

Eventually she'd have to find out, or he'd give up. Either way, it meant he was doing something, and I could keep an eye on him.

For the next several years, we repeated this pattern: cast a spell so Luca wouldn't get instantly killed, get Luca taken prisoner, wait several hours, and then rescue the love struck puppy. After a while, I became a bit of an adrenaline junkie myself, quit stretching time so I could watch things unfold in real time. And time and again, Luca's girl didn't show. I couldn't blame her though. It's a big world in one time zone. I can't imagine how big it must be when you could time travel. All those possibilities and changes to sift through. How could she know about one lil vampire doing dumb thngs in New York?

That's why I was super surprised when she did show. It was a run like any other. Luca was being held in a warehouse by the docks. I waited the usual number of hours, checking on Luca every so often to make sure he wasn't in too much danger. Then I made my entrance, which is, to be honest, my fav part. I get to wear this dramatic cloak, and there's smoke from the potions; I get to look so cool. I threw the first potion and blew up the door, then walked towards Luca to cut him loose from where they had hung him upside down. Apparently I wasn't the only one with a flair for the dramatic. I was so focused I didn't even notice that one of the bad guys was still up and about and walking towards us. I only turned after I heard this *thud* behind me.

I saw this woman standing over the unconscious bad guy. She looked at us, then attacked the other guys. She was awesome. A sweeping kick here, a flying tackle there. It was like watching one of those action movies guys are so into. I went back to untying Luca and heard him yell,

“That's my girl!!”



So apparently this was the long lost gal he was so hung up on. She was pretty badass, but my word what a hassle. After I cut him loose, I turned and threw a potion at the last guy still standing. Didn't want this chick to have all the fun, ya know? I overdid the mixture though because it knocked the guy clean through the wall instead of just knocking him off his feet. Oops. Guess I need to study my books a bit more.

Luca ran over and pulled the girl into a hug; he looked so happy. Honestly, crazy as his scheme was, I have to admit it was all worth it to see them together like that. They were so cute, hugging and whispering to each other. Oh, it was adorbs. I couldn't help myself; I had to take a pic. (It's still on my wall if anybody wants to see, btw.)

At the sound of a digital shutter, Luca and his little lady turned towards me. Luca said, "I'd like you to meet a friend of mine. Ever, this is Elsie. Elsie, Ever." I walked toward the lady and extended a hand.

"It's nice to finally put a face to all those stories Luca keeps telling me," I said smiling. I think I got him in trouble because Ever gave him one of those "we need to talk" looks that made him blush. He is honestly just so cute, I don't know how anyone could stay away from him. After a few moments, Luca cleared his throat.

"We should go. I for one would like to get a hot shower and slip into some clean clothes," he said. I nodded and fell in-step beside him. He walked towards the still smoking doors, with an arm around Ever, kinda forcing her to walk beside him.

She looked over at me and asked, "What was in those containers you were throwing?" So, as we walked back to Luca's apartment, I told her all about how I was a witch/genie hybrid, and how that affected my life and my powers. I also told her how I had agreed to help Luca with

his romantic scheme 'cause he is just so gosh darn cute when he's in love and that I figured he'd be even cuter if she showed up (and I was right).

Once we got back to Luca's apartment, things got a little awkward. He clearly wanted to get a shower, but seemed kinda worried she might run off, which is totally understandable given their past. Ever did what she could to reassure him, but even I could tell he wasn't buying it. Still, I guess it was enough, 'cause he left us alone for a bit. TBH, I tried to give Ever some space, but I just had too many questions that needed answers.

I asked her how they had met (she kept trying to kill him and finally decided not to, *super* endearing), what it was like being a time-traveler (annoying but interesting, she got to see how civilizations progressed over time, which I guess is kinda cool), when did she realize she was in love with Luca (no comment), why did she push him away (she mumbled some kind of half-assed answer about it being complicated and a long story, blah blah blah. I didn't buy it, but she was here and that was what mattered to Luca so I didn't push it). Then she asked me a few questions, including what year it was. So I told her some of the cool stuff going on in the world, I dunno, just trying to catch her up I guess.

When Luca came back I figured I should give them some space, so I excused myself as soon as I could. After that, I went home and tried to figure out where I had screwed up my potion to make it so strong earlier. Turns out I used too much eye of newt (which, despite its name, is not made from the eyes of a newt. Not anymore anyway. I won't say it was never made from actual newts, but we witches figured out how to make a substitute, so that's kinda nice).

I never saw Luca or Ever ever again, so hopefully things ended well. He really had his heart set on her for some reason. I, meanwhile, graduated third in my class (I could've been first

but then they might have looked into how I went from struggling in several of my classes to top of the school and I didn't want that kinda publicity). After that, I traveled the world, learning what I could about matchmakers. What can I say? I really liked helping Luca get his girl. He just looked so happy with her and I wanted to help other people get that. Plus, the way I have it set up, I get to travel to meet my clients, so I don't have to stay at home all the time.

I guess matchmaker is a bit of a misnomer; I help people figure out if their significant other likes them, and then come up with a super romantic way to pop the question (whether that question be: marry me, move in with me, or eternity). I have a place near my old campus, and that's where I leave Barric to look after my cats while I'm away. I don't trust anybody else with my babies; Barric just vibes with them. Plus he cooks and he cleans. It isn't a romantic arrangement, but it works for us. I might eventually settle down, but honestly, it's gonna take a really special someone to convince me to slow down and start that "family" life. The way things are right now, I don't think it's in the cards for me, but I am kinda cheating the fortune system to swing in my favor so, eh. It's all good.

### **One of these Things is Not Like the Other**

What you have just encountered, or read, or skimmed, or skipped (naughty person) is a collection of some of the more intriguing individuals that I have come across. As Time itself, I have witnessed billions of stories. I can see the life of every person that I look at. But, as you may know, people tend to put their own spin onto their stories. And that spin, that unique voice is why I offer people a deal. I have existed for, well, forever. Because of that, I know that if I am going to ask something from people, then they should get something from me. It's only fair after all.

I won't say that I had no beginning, or that I have no end, but I am not aware of either of these. I have existed for what seems to me to be forever. I witnessed the birth of the universe, of Earth, and of humanity (no, I'm not going to tell you if there is intelligent life out there. You're simply going to have to figure it out for yourselves). But this is all quite philosophical, isn't it? I'd much rather talk to you about why I chose to show you each of these stories, what drew me to these individuals, and (in a way) what drew them to me.

Since the birth of intelligent life on this planet, I have been absolutely fascinated with you little creatures. Your determination to survive, to create things that exist longer than yourselves, and your insistence on destruction are all so intriguing. You are all unique and yet so similar; you want to do something with your short little lives, but you go about it in completely different ways. It's those differences that draw me to certain people; when you can see all of the stories that might ever happen, only a few can truly pique your interest.

When I walk among you, I wear one of several forms, depending on what will be the most trustworthy form to the person whose story I aim to hear. I also alter my business to attract specific people. There are some things about me that remain constant despite my business and

my form, but each person that I interact with focuses on a different aspect. Oren the shapeshifter, for example, noticed the red dragon tattoo snaking up and around my right arm. I knew that, if his wife went through with killing their daughter, that he would either need coffee or a drink, hence why I opened a business that operated as both a coffee shop and a bar. Despite luring him in there, he was too distraught to tell me what happened. I knew, of course, but I wanted to hear how he would tell such a disturbing tale. Had he taken me up on my offer, I was going to help him help other families. I try not to involve myself in most of your lives, but Oren made me want to help. I will not directly help, which is why I did not warn Oren beforehand. It is not my place to change the story. I can gently nudge you into altering your own life, but I will not sweep in and tell you to, or not to, do something. The one exception to this rule that I allow myself is my Time-Travelers. But I'll tell you more about them later on.

I could see Oren's emptiness across his timelines and I wanted to give him some closure, to help him help others. Had he told me his story, I would have given him the names and addresses of all the other half-human, half-monster families that risked suffering the same fate as his family. As I am sure you are aware, most parents would not kill their children just for being unusual. But some of my Time-Travelers have realized that they can brainwash the human parents into killing their monster-partner and hybrid offspring. This gives those Time-Travelers a safety bubble that would not exist if the TT's killed these families themselves. Getting one's hands dirty like that carries a certain risk. And, given that they don't really understand who carries the TT genetics, they have learned to try to avoid any risks to their already dwindling numbers.

My hope for Oren was that he would move past his own emotions by saving other families. If he could learn to share his own story, then he could make hybrid families realize the

danger that they were in. But he just couldn't see past his own grief. And there is nothing that I will do that will change that (I could force him to change his mind, but I do enjoy seeing what you mortals do with free-will, so I try not to meddle but some stories just need a little push).

I must admit that it was the witch/genie hybrid Elsie's vivacious personality which drew me to her. Her personality, *and* the fact that she mastered a time elongation spell. Being able to stretch time as she could is quite difficult for people who aren't me. But she had no problems. She almost had some problems, but I made sure to step in and gently nudge her away from any issues she might cause that would permanently disrupt the natural flow of time. Despite her brilliance, she struggled with potions, a key part of a witch's education. I knew she wouldn't be able to do all the things she wanted to do if she didn't figure that part out. So I agreed to give her books to help her on her path. And, I'll admit, I was curious to see which of her destinies she would fulfill if given the proper help over her speedbumps. Glorified matchmaker wasn't my top choice, but she has made a lot of couples happy, so all's well that ends well. If I'm being honest, I was hoping she would transcend her mortality and come spend eternity with me and the other immortals, but that's life as the mortals say.

I do find it interesting that Elsie was one of only a few who focused on my pearl earring. I'll have you know it was a gift from a very ill-fated French noble girl. And no, I won't name names. But she was beheaded, so make of that what you will. Wearing an earring isn't exactly my style, but she was a sweet little kid, and she asked so nicely (plus it was a rare moment where I felt bad I wasn't doing anything to change her bleak future) that I keep wearing it in her memory.

I tried to help Barric the nocturnal leprechaun, simply because nocturnal leprechauns have a tough lot in life. Being nocturnal by nature, they only accept silver from the end of a moonbow, which is incredibly rare in nature. As such, nighttime leprechauns are considerably poorer than their daytime cousins and have to work much harder. Barric himself has quite the potential, but he holds himself back. By going to school and getting an education, he could become one of the wealthiest nocturnal leprechauns to live. But his timidity keeps him from shooting for the stars, from achieving more than he thinks he is capable of.

Right now, he doesn't want much from life, which is fine but not incredibly interesting. He is also far too serious for his own good. He wants to attract the attention of girls like Elsie, but he isn't willing to change, to be more eye-catching. I approached him at the bank because I knew that he would feel more comfortable discussing money there.

By giving him a moonbow on a predictable basis, I hoped he would at least be able to find someone to love his money, and eventually love him. I hoped that he would believe that unlikely things *are* possible and that would give him confidence to strive for his own goals. But he refused to believe in anything that he hadn't seen with his own eyes, so I'll have to leave him on his own.

In a surprise to no one, the leprechaun focused on my gold medallion, but it was only the serial killer who noticed the infinity symbol on it. It's actually a combination of an infinity symbol and an ankh, but Carin wasn't exactly well-educated, so points for seeing what she did. The medallion was a gag gift from a pharaoh who figured out that I was Time itself. He thought it was hilarious, so he combined the symbols of life and eternity and gave it to me. I wear it now because it makes me smile on my bad days. It reminds me why I keep bothering to interact with people who will one day die.

I didn't actually choose Carin; she found me. I try to steer clear of people who cause too much trouble, and a serial killer is about as bad as it gets. But she just took so much joy in her kills, I had to know why. What could make a person become that bad without just completely breaking their spirit? For her at least, it was a combination of genetics and upbringing. She had bad genes and a crap childhood, and I guess that made her a bit monstrous. She just took such joy in the kill. She didn't even really care who she killed. She certainly preferred to make the streets safer, but she didn't entirely care. A kill was a kill.

I didn't want to help her, so that limited what I could trade to hear her life's story. Because someone like her is going to have a very interesting take on things. By looking at her timeline, I knew what kind of alcohol she appreciated, so I offered her that. It being a bar, she didn't even care if I could provide past the first bottle. And that's part of why I love working in bars. Most of the time, you don't even have to offer them a deal; people will just tell you about themselves for free. But, I am a being of my word, so I made sure that she had a bottle of moonshine, as promised.

It wasn't too long after that, a bar fight broke out and some drunk idiot nicked my eyebrow with a broken bottle. I could have healed it, but I was curious who would focus on it. Corramae the siren, for instance, noticed.

Corramae was quite the character. Started off sweet as can be, then got more and more awful as she got older. Heck of a curse that girl got. I knew she was going to cause problems, but I also knew that she would give hope to generations of sirens because she would figure out the bloody way to stop their curses: your curse can't work if ya can't sing. When I saw her timeline, I opened a little boutique close to her home called The Bar. It was supposed to be kind of a joke



about “bar” and “barre” but I don’t think most people got it. She was a sweet enough kid with a small penchant for retail therapy, so I knew that was the best way to reel her in. But she turned down my get-out-of-danger-free card, so I let her be. Crazy cat managed to escape even without my help.

All of this brings me to one of my favorite stories: Ever and Luca. Which, incidentally, also ties into my thoughts about Time Travelers. Every so often, a particularly lovely mortal catches my eye. I just can’t help myself; I enjoy being around those people. And *sometimes* being around means somebody gets pregnant. And *sometimes* those kids grow up to be Time Travelers. Not that ever Traveler is one of my children, but every Traveler is related to me. As their numbers grew, the Travelers met over the years and began to radicalize the younger generations. I don’t approve, but I try to not get involved. Because, once you start changing people’s lives, where would I stop? And I do try to respect people’s freewill. *Including* Ever (though I certainly “nudged” her life more than I did any of my other children).

Ever is my latest child and, so far, my last. Once the Travelers started radicalizing the new kids, I became far more careful about who I slept with. My offspring are more powerful than other Travelers, as they are genetically closer to pure Time. As such, me having children makes the Travelers bolder as their numbers would be higher. You usually have less problem sacrificing troops in the fight if you have higher numbers of troops. And, since my kids are better able to control time, I don’t want too many of them floating around the timeline.

But I just couldn’t resist Ever’s mom. She was this feisty Irish girl from the coast. She saw me come in on a boat and completely ignored every other man who flirted with her. She’d tell them that her mother had warned her what sailors would do to her if she let them, and she wasn’t ready to be a single mom. Her fiery hair reminded me of so many mermaids I knew, so I

called her my mermaid. At first, she fought against the name, thought it was silly. But I won her over in the end when I got a tattoo of her as a mermaid on my bicep. She laughed long and hard when I showed it off.

We moved in together and played husband and wife. She understood that, as Time itself, I couldn't be with her all the time. There would be occasions when I would have to leave her to check on the state of the world (Can't let you mortals do *too* much to the world; I do still want to see future timelines). Imagine my surprise when I return and my little Irish lass has gotten a wee bit larger 'round the middle. She was fuming. Kept on about how she wasn't going to raise this baby by herself, that I was going to have to stick around more if I wanted the baby to grow up right. So I did. She just had this way with words, and fists, that was quite persuasive.

I know I should have glanced at her timelines, looked at what might happen if I stayed with her, but I just couldn't do it. I didn't want any spoilers about how our life would turn out. Plus, I would have changed things, tried to keep her around, and she would have been furious that I was screwing around with my own timeline. I wish I had looked, then I wouldn't have been so blindsided when I lost her during delivery. She struggled and fought for as long as she could, but she just lost too much blood. She passed within a few nights of giving birth to our daughter.

I couldn't handle the loss. My mermaid was the best thing that had ever happened to me, and she was gone before I could truly make her understand that. Unfortunately, I saw her everytime I looked at our little girl and it was just too much. I ran. I left the baby in a nearby town and took off. I told myself that one day I would come back to my girl, and I would make it up to her. Given her mother's strength, our daughter was bound to be a Traveler. And, if she wasn't that was alright too. I just wanted her to be happy.

When I finally healed enough that I thought I could be there for my daughter, I returned to the little village I had left her in. No surprise, she wasn't there. According to the locals, she had just up and vanished. Looked like my girl was a chip off the ol' block. But, since my daughter wasn't there, and it would take time to find her, I looked through her timelines; I wasn't about to be blindsided again. In those timelines, I saw how happy she was with that dramatic vampire Luca. In fact, Luca was her best chance at having a happy ending. Every timeline where she succeeded in killing him ended with her alone and depressed at the end of her life.

So, when I did finally track her down, I may have made sure that she couldn't kill Luca. Not that she gave up easily. She had her mother's strength and determination so I had to keep a close watch on her to make sure that she didn't kill her only chance at being happy. I couldn't believe that, even after she accepted Luca as part of her life, she drove him away at the first sign of trouble. I love that girl, but she could be so foolish.

I realized that, while she would never accept me as a part of her life, I still needed to meet her, to help her. So I bought a farm in the United States and waited for her to come to me. I knew that, despite her training with the Travelers, she was still a farm girl at heart. Once she was there, I got to know her, tried to figure out what would be the most useful thing I could do for her, aside from revealing myself and breaking every one of my rules by allowing her to remain in one time period for as long as *she* wanted. Being able to locate Luca, no matter when my girl had Traveled to, was the best thing I could think of. And I wanted to hear what she thought of her life, so I pretended to be some kind of fortune teller guy to explain how I knew what I knew.

Thankfully, she believed me and accepted my help. I'll be honest, I screwed up when I directly sent her forward in time. I had meant to send her eventually, but I was just so excited that she was chasing her happiness that I reached over and plopped her into the timeline. It didn't

seem to mess her up too much, since she tracked Luca down and rescued that fool. I check in on them from time to time, but she finally is allowing herself to be happy and that makes this proud papa's heart glad.

Well, I think that about wraps these stories up. I hope you enjoyed these lives as much as I did. I may add more lives to this collection, but for now, I'm happy with these six. Since I hate endings, given that I really only somewhat understand them. I won't say goodbye. Instead I'll say, "See you around!"

## Reflection

To begin with, I will discuss what inspired me to write this collection of stories, and then I discuss what inspired each specific story in the collection. I was somewhat inspired by the novel *Station Eleven*, which UAH Honors students had to read my freshman year here at the university. I, and several others, thought that the events and characters in *Station Eleven* were a little *too* connected. My problem was that *every* little plot detail in *Station Eleven* was given a meaning, to the point that I did not care about any of them anymore.

I have noticed in other "connected" texts that the connections frequently overshadow the plot. Too much connection is exhausting to readers and breaks their suspension of disbelief. Too little connection is simply a missed opportunity. I do like the idea of showing, through those little details, that people are more connected than we sometimes realize, but I wanted to do it in a subtle way, so that my audience is somewhat surprised by the big reveal in the final story.

One of the main ways that I connected my stories was through a deal which the main characters are each offered. In each of their own stories, the main character walks into a business and, somehow, winds up talking to the main character of the final story (who is not revealed as being the same character until his chapter). This main character owns different businesses that it thinks will attract certain people to come in. The main character wants those people to think that they are meeting by chance, when it has actually orchestrated the entire moment. This main character, who is actually the physical manifestation of Time, offers everyone essentially the same deal: tell me your life's story and I will provide you with something that you either need or desire for the rest of your life, no matter where you are in the world.

I planned on writing between 10 and 15 stories, with the complete collection being somewhere between 40 and 50 pages. As you have noticed, my estimate was quite off. My first

drafts of several of my stories were five pages or less, single spaced. I assumed all of my stories would be about that long. After receiving feedback from friends and classmates, I added more scenes to the existing stories and increased the size to double-space. I also allowed myself more pages to develop the characters, which meant that my page count increased significantly. Next, I will discuss my inspiration and decisions for each story specifically.

“1888” was the first story that I wrote, so I thought it fitting that it be the first that my audience reads. I wrote the first draft of this tale several years ago because I wanted to submit something to The Writer’s Block literary magazine. I had recently been watching a BBC show called *Ripper Street*, which follows several policemen trying to put their lives back together in the years after Jack the Ripper struck England. Because of that show, I did a “small” amount of research into Jack the Ripper. So when my mind needed to create a story, I decided that Jack the Ripper had a daughter, Carin, who followed in his bloody footsteps.

In my first several drafts, I rather heavily handedly told my audience that she was Jack’s daughter. But on later revisions, I realized that, since I did not name a person as Jack, but kept him shrouded in mystery, I could not truly claim that she was his daughter. There are certainly similarities between their styles of killing, but I could not definitely say that she was in fact his daughter, not without peeling away the mystery around Jack. I have read a few books where people have a fictional character as Jack the Ripper, but I disliked most of these because knowing his identity took away some of what makes him so interesting. He could have been anyone, and that is part of why he is so scary and intriguing.

As an afterthought, I decided to increase Carin’s (the main character) genetic disposition towards killing by making her related to another famous murderer from around the same time

period. I could comfortably tie Carin to H.H. Holmes because she knew her mother, and we in the real world know the identity of Holmes. I became interested in Holmes because I had recently watched an episode of *Supernatural* which featured Holmes as the monster of the week. When I discovered that the timeline worked out, as Holmes was convicted a few years after Jack ceased killing, I knew it was too perfect an opportunity to pass up.

Despite not fitting the usual definition of monster (ie. a supernatural being), I decided to include the serial killer partially because I had already written a first draft of her story, partially because I liked the title that I could create with her in the collection. My primary reason, though, was because part of the motivation of writing my collection was to play with the idea of what makes someone monstrous. Given that killing people for fun is monstrous, I thought she would fit well with the theme, despite not being a traditional monster.

In terms of “Family Isn’t Skin Deep,” I would like to apologize to any parents. I do not fully understand how this story came to be. It was simply an ever spiraling case of “What if” during the writing process. I knew I wanted to write a story about a shapeshifter, but the story actually began with a color prompt during a meeting of The Writer’s Block here at UAH.

Writers were to choose a color and then write a story based off of that color. My initial color was grey, then it spiraled into pink and, somehow, red. I suppose I was partially inspired by the 1993 movie *Schindler’s List*. The entire movie is set in black and white, with only a few pops of color for dramatic effect, particularly a little girl in a red jacket. I think this scene inspired my own moment of a little girl in a colored jacket standing out in a grey world. So I followed these colors, seeing where the story would lead. As I wrote this story, I kept asking myself, “What if x

happened?” “What if y happened?” “How can I surprise my readers?” until I wound up with a story much darker and more disturbing than what I had set out to tell.

With several of my other stories, I can see where the ideas came from. I have no idea why I decided to have a mother kill her own child. It really was just a case of, “What if the mother snapped?” and then I wrote it, more so I would have something on the page than actually planning to keep it. But the plot worked. That scene was horrifying and disturbing. I still struggle to reread that story even while trying to edit it.

Because that scene was so dark, I purposefully strove to make my other stories lighter, or to at least end on happier notes, because this one was quite disturbing. I freely admit that this is the darkest story I have ever written, and I would like for it to stay the darkest story that I write. I do not want to see how I could top this. I am sure it would be interesting, but there are some questions that are simply better if left unanswered.

The idea for the “To Sing or Not to Sing” came from my own German heritage. Along the Rhine River, there is a section where the cliff juts out into the river that is particularly dangerous and has caused many boating incidents. As I understand it, it was believed that a creature lived there whom the locals called the Lorelei. She would stand atop the cliff and sing; the power of her voice luring sailors to their demise. I learned about her during one of my several trips to visit family who lived in Germany. For some reason, (likely my own love of singing) that legend stuck in my mind and would pop up in my memory from time to time. When, again, I needed a story to submit to the Writer’s Block magazine, my mind seems to have gone back to Germany.



I knew that I needed to give my siren/Lorelei some sort of limitation, otherwise she would have been too powerful. The idea of an inescapable curse was inspired by 2006 film *The Covenant*. In that film, several families are able to use magic to do almost anything that they want to. The problem is that using magic is very addictive and the more power one uses, the more health issues one has later in life. The idea of being unable to escape such a horrid fate worked well in quite literally forcing my main character to become a villain.

In my initial drafts, all of the sirens and the majority of the monsters in the world were killed when my main character forced the two sides into a confrontation. After realizing how dark many of my stories were, I changed things so that most monsters still exist and the ending is lighter in that the main character survived, but could no longer use her powers to hurt others. By no longer accessing her powers, her curse was severely diminished and she was able to live a somewhat normal life and have offspring, whom she then mutilated to prevent them from following in her footsteps. But the hope of later generations is that one day they will no longer have to repress their abilities. So it is a bittersweet ending with hope for something better.

“The Joys of Being Friends With a Witch” and “Should You Avoid The Book on the ‘sill?’” are the most connected of all the stories. I wanted to write a few tales where the narrator is telling someone else’s story. My plan was that Barric the nocturnal leprechaun would tell Elsie the witch/genie hybrid’s story, and Elsie would tell Barric’s story. Instead, I wound up writing a passive narrator telling his best friend’s story, and a witch hybrid who refuses to share the spotlight. I allowed this dynamic to play out in their tales because I think it actually plays into their personalities. The leprechaun avoids conflict where he can, to the point where he isn’t the

main character of his own story. Whereas the witch hybrid is supposed to share the spotlight with her friend, but instead makes the story all about her.

I chose for Barric to be a nocturnal leprechaun because normal, daytime leprechaun are common knowledge. A nocturnal leprechaun, in my head, is a sidestep to their daytime cousins. The normal variety are at the end of rainbows and have a pot of gold. The nocturnal variety have moonbows and a pot of silver because moonlight is somewhat silvery.

For “Should You Avoid The Book on the ‘sill?” I toyed with the idea of writing a separate story for a genie and a witch, but then I decided to play around with people’s expectations by having a hybrid character. Initially, Barric was supposed to be a hybrid, but Elsie became the hybrid when I realized the similarities between genies’ abilities and witches’ abilities (and the expectations that are put on them). Once again, Elsie stole the spotlight from poor Barric. One of the similarities, which I touched on in Elsie’s story, is that both witches and genies use their magic to fulfill some sort of contract. Witches make a deal, while genies grant wishes.

I struggled to find a way to make Elsie’s story separate from Barric’s. I wanted there to be a significant amount of overlap between them, but I did not want to tell the exact same story all over again (though I have noticed a recent trend for authors to release their stories from a different character’s point of view). At the same time, I also needed a way to keep Luca the vampire (from “What’s So Great About Time Travel Anyway?” alive while he was being held hostage). I realized that, by linking Luca with Elsie, I solved both of my problems and created another overlap between my stories.

My longest story by far is “What’s So Great About Time Travel Anyway?” This, my time-traveler story, was inspired by a prompt from Tumblr that I saw on Pinterest. Unfortunately,

I have not been able to find the post on Pinterest. Essentially the post was a story prompt. The first person wanted to read a story about the friendship between a time traveler and an immortal, how the immortal would be able to fill the time traveler in on important events that they missed. The second person thought it would be interesting if the two started out as friends, then became lovers. A third person proposed starting out as enemies and turning into lovers.

Somehow, my mind equated immortal with vampire and then the time traveler turned into a monster hunter, as that would set her at odds with the vampire. Even before I decided that my immortal would be a vampire, I liked the idea of the immortal focusing on little details. Rather than informing the time traveler about a major world event, such as either of the two World Wars, the immortal described things that had changed in the village they lived in (so and so got married, so and so moved away, so and so's cow gave birth to twins, etc).

Despite choosing to write a romance, I really struggled with the romantic aspects of this story. As I struggled to figure out why, I realized I always stop writing my stories as soon as the two characters begin to have romantic feelings for one another or I simply skip to a point when the two are in a committed relationship. As I tried to figure out why this might be, and how to move past it, I realized that it was partially because I have never been in a committed relationship myself. I think I struggle to write romance because (other than reading about it) I really do not understand how it works and thus feel uncomfortable portraying something so real for so many people.

I decided to move past the romance and allow the story to be less a romance, and focused more on a girl allowing herself to be more than her past. I will fully admit that this stemmed from watching Marvel's *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier*, namely from witnessing the character Bucky Barnes, a former assassin, struggle to forgive himself for his past actions. It is

not a one-to-one comparison, but Barnes' struggles certainly influenced how I moved forward with the time traveler's character development.

I decided not to give the main character of this story a birth name because I think it was stripped from her by the militarized Time Travelers who trained her to hunt monsters. Due to her harsh upbringing, the main character is initially uncomfortable with frilliness and femininity. For her, the name "Ever" is quite feminine and she understands, but does not fully approve of, the pun about "forever" and time travel. As the writer, however, I quite like the name "Ever" for those exact reasons, so I finagled my way into giving her the name I wanted, while also acknowledging her rough upbringing. I had also intended to write more about the Time Travlers' society, but this story is already pushing over 20 pages, so I may return to Ever, Luca, and the Time Travelers in a much longer story.

"One of these Things is Not Like the Other" was one of the most difficult stories to write. The main character is the physical manifestation of Time. Initially, Time (the character) was simply the tie between why a siren, a shapeshifter and a serial killer walk into a bar. Time was an immortal, omniscient being who enjoyed hearing people talk about their life stories. As I was writing about Ever and Luca, I jokingly thought "What if Ever can't kill Luca because Time itself ships them?" Then I started seriously considering the ramifications. There had to be a reason why she kept Time Traveling everytime she got close to killing Luca. And Time as an actual person would be immortal and able to see people's lives.

The more I thought about it, the more it made sense for Time to be the final character. Time can be anywhere, at any time. It can do what it likes because it literally is time. I then had to explain why Time, who is a mostly decent person, does not intervene to prevent tragedy. I

decided that Time tries not to interfere because it believes in free will; it wants to see what people will do with their lives. Time is willing to give nudges towards special people, in the form of the deals it makes. But then I had to explain why Time had no issues interfering in Ever and Luca's lives. At first, I thought it was because Time was the father of all Time Travelers, but that opened up more issues.

I decided that Time is only the father of a few, incredibly powerful Time Travelers, including Ever. Time has no qualms interfering with Ever's life because this is Time's offspring, one of only a few rare beings in the universe, so she is immensely precious to Time. Time simply wants her to be happy and knows that Luca is her best chance at having a happy ending.

The next thing I would like to discuss is what genres my collection fits into, or almost fits into in some cases. First and foremost, all the stories in my collection are fiction. My collection fits into several, more specific genres though. It is certainly supernatural, as almost all of the main characters are supernatural beings. Most of the stories are urban fantasy as well, due to the supernatural characters existing in secret alongside the modern world. Several of them, particularly "The Joys of Being Friends With a Witch" and "Should You Avoid The Book on the 'sill?'" are young adult tales as I intentionally made it somewhat ambiguous if the main characters are in high school or college. As the writer, I vacillated between a high school or college setting, so I decided to leave it to my audience to decide for themselves.

On a different note, "What's So Great About Time Travel Anyway?" is a paranormal/time travel romance, to a certain extent, because of the romantic relationship that develops between Ever, the main character, and Luca, the vampire. I had intended for romance to be a larger part of this particular story, but things did not work out that way. I instead focused on

Ever's development as a character. That development means that, in some ways, this story is also a coming-of-age story. Ever, who I intentionally did not give a birth name, is forced to alter her understanding of the world when Luca, the vampire she is hunting, repeatedly refuses to kill her. Based on her understanding, Luca is simply a monster who does nothing but kill, for food and for sport. When he challenges her understanding, he forces her to reexamine her worldview. From the beginning I hinted that she knew something was wrong, but she did not know just how much she had been lied to about how people and supernatural creatures truly behave. She was raised to see the worst in supernatural creatures and Luca's behavior forces her to develop as a character. Due to Ever's travels through time, this is also an alternate historical fiction as she interacts with the *R.M.S. Titanic* and, briefly, with Jack the Ripper.

On a similar note, "1888" is also alternate historical fiction, since it tells of another serial killer operating around 1888 who might be related to Ripper but was related to H.H. Holmes. "1888" is also a caper, as Carin is a criminal who evades and belittles the police chasing other serial killers.

I struggled to classify both "Family Isn't Skin Deep" and "One of these Things is Not Like the Other" I would not necessarily call "Family Isn't Skin Deep" suspense, a thriller, or psychological horror, as I think the mother's murder-suicide comes rather too quickly for these genres. These genres focus more on unsettling their audience throughout the story, whereas mine is mostly fine until the mother snaps. So I am not certain what genre(s) this story best fits with. "One of these Things is Not Like the Other" is a retelling of all of the stories; it is another character commenting on/criticizing the main character of each of the previous stories.

"To Sing or Not to Sing" is both a mythic story and a reverse coming-of-age. This tale is mythic as it was inspired by both the sirens of Greek mythology and the Lorelei of German

mythology. A typical coming-of-age story shows how the main character grows to become a better person and figures out their place in society. I used the term “reverse coming-of-age” as Corramae, the main character, does not grow as a character. Instead she devolves until she starts a war between humanity and monsters and commits unspeakable atrocities.

In terms of seeking publication, I have not decided if I will seek publication for this story. I likely will because I have already written the stories, so I might as well place my tales into the world so that other people can read them. Hopefully they will bring enjoyment to at least one person in the world. I would likely start by publishing my collection on Amazon as I know that they have a self-publishing feature and several people have told me that I should look into publishing my stories (this collection and others that I have written) on Amazon. I would have to see if, by publishing with Amazon, I would give up any chances of publishing my collection elsewhere.

I am interested in sending my collection to different publishers; I simply need to research which ones would be the most likely to take a collection like mine, because I do not think that my collection fits with the general aesthetic of publishers like Penguin Random House. To make my collection more appealing to publishers, I will likely have to make more edits as some of the stories are still a bit rough in some places (but I am not entirely certain how to fix that). Thankfully, I have several friends who, like me, want to work as editors at publishing companies, so they might be able to offer a perspective that I, as the author, cannot see.

All in all, writing this collection has been an interesting and, mostly, pleasant experience. I have learned a great deal about myself, including that my mind is a considerably darker place

than I had initially imagined. I can partially remedy that by watching more lighthearted shows and less crime/murder dramas. There is nothing wrong with crime shows, but I think they do affect our mental states. It has also been interesting to figure out where/how I came up with ideas for my stories, that some of them drew inspiration from writing prompts or ideas I have come across in other stories, and how some had much less clear origins (such as the mother murdering her child in “Family Isn’t Skin Deep”; I have no idea where that came from). In addition, I have discovered how much I loathe endings and struggle to make them feel satisfying.