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To Swede—a good sport, a great guy, and a remarkable husband. As I'm writing this, it's four in the morning Deadline Standard Time, and you're still at the desk with me. How can I surprise you with a dedication when you refuse to desert the command center?



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EXCERPTED FROM THE IMMORTALS'
BOOK OF LORE . . .

The Lore

“ . . . and those sentient creatures that are not human shall be united in one stratum, coexisting with, yet secret from, man’s.”

- Most are immortal and can regenerate from injuries. The stronger breeds can only be killed by mystical fire or beheading.
- Their eyes change with intense emotion, often to a breed-specific color.

The Vampires

“In the first chaos of the Lore, a brotherhood of vampires dominated by relying on their worship of logic and absence of mercy. They sprang from the harsh steppes of Dacia and migrated to Russia, though some say a secret enclave, the Daci, live in Dacia still.”

- Each adult male seeks his *Bride*, his eternal wife, and walks as the living dead until he finds her.
- A *Bride* will render his body fully alive, giving him breath and making his heart beat, a process known as *blooding*.
- *The Fallen* are vampires who have killed by drinking a victim to death. Distinguished by their red eyes.
- Two vampire armies continue to war: the *Horde*, which is mostly comprised of the *Fallen*, and the *Forbearers*, a legion of turned humans, who do not drink blood directly from the flesh.

The Valkyries

“When a maiden warrior screams for courage as she dies in battle, Wóden and Freya heed her call. The two gods give up lightning to strike her, rescuing her to their hall and preserving her courage forever in the form of the maiden’s immortal Valkyrie daughter.”

- They take sustenance from the electrical energy of the earth, sharing it in one collective power, and give it back with their emotions in the form of lightning.
- Without training, most can be mesmerized by shining objects.

The Turning

“Only through death can one become an ‘other.’ ”

- Some beings can turn a human or even other Lore creatures into their kind through differing means, but the catalyst for change is always death, and success is not guaranteed.

The Accession

“And a time shall come to pass when all immortal beings in the Lore, from the Valkyrie, vampire, Lykae, and demon factions to the witches, shifters, fey, and sirens . . . must fight and destroy each other.”

- A kind of mystical checks-and-balances system for an ever-growing population of immortals.
- Occurs every five hundred years. Or right now . . .

“My sanity will fail me long before my will does. Luckily, the only thing more interesting than a madman is a relentless one.”

—LOTHAIRE KONSTANTIN DACIANO, THE ENEMY OF OLD

“Me, a steel magnolia? Steel, my ass! [Laughing, then abruptly serious.] Try titanium.”

—ELIZABETH “ELLIE” PEIRCE, EXPERT IN BOYS, REVERSE
PSYCHOLOGY, AND LAW-ENFORCEMENT EVASION

“The difference between you and me is that my actions have no consequences for me. That is what makes me a god.”

—SAROYA THE SOUL REAPER, DEITY OF BLOOD, SACRED
PROTECTRESS OF VAMPIRES, GODDESS OF DIVINE DEATH



1

Slateville, Virginia

FIVE YEARS AGO

So you thought to exorcise me?” Saroya the Soul Reaper asked the wounded man she stalked by firelight. “I don’t know what is worse. The fact that you thought I was a demon . . .”

She twirled the blood-drenched cleaver in her hand, loving how the man’s widened eyes followed each rotation. “. . . or that you believed you could separate me from my human host.”

Nothing short of death could remove Saroya. Especially not a mortal deacon, one among a group of five who’d come all the way out to this vile trailer in Appalachia to perform an exorcism.

As he scrambled a retreat from her steady march forward, he stumbled over one of the broken lamps on the floor. He tripped onto his back, briefly releasing his hold on the spurting stump that used to be his right arm.

She sighed with delight. Centuries ago, when she’d been a death goddess, she would have swooped down and sunk her fangs into the human’s jugular, sucking until he was naught but a husk and devouring his soul; now she was cursed to possess one powerless mortal after another, experiencing her own death again and again.

Her latest possession? Elizabeth Peirce, a nineteen-year-old girl, as lovely as she was poor.

When the deacon met the dismembered corpse of one of his brethren, he gave a panicked cry, glancing away from her. In a flash, Saroya leapt upon him, swinging the cleaver, plunging the metal into his thick neck.

Blood sprayed as she yanked the blade free for another hit. Then another. Then a last.

She swiped the back of her arm over her spattered face as her demeanor turned contemplative. Mortals believed themselves so special and elevated, but decapitating one sounded exactly like a fishmonger beheading a fat catch.

Finished with the last of the five deacons, Saroya turned to the only survivor left in the trailer: Ruth, Elizabeth's mother. She huddled in a corner, mumbling prayers as she brandished a fire poker.

"I have vanquished your daughter's spirit, woman. She will never return," Saroya lied, knowing that Elizabeth would soon find a way to rise from unconsciousness to the fore, regaining control of her body.

Of all the mortals Saroya had possessed, Elizabeth was the prettiest, the youngest—and the strongest. Saroya had difficulty rising to take control unless the girl was asleep or weakened in some way.

A first. Saroya gave a sigh. Elizabeth should consider it an honor to be the form to Saroya's essence, the flesh and blood temple housing her godly vampiric spirit.

Saroya peered down at her stolen body. Instead, she'd had to fight Elizabeth for possession, was *still* fighting her.

No matter. After centuries of being shuffled into stooped, elderly men or horse-faced women, she'd found her ideal fit in Elizabeth. In the end, Saroya would defeat her. She had wisdom from times past and present, hallowed gifts—and an ally.

Lothaire the Enemy of Old.

He was a notoriously evil vampire, millennia in age, and the son of a king. A year ago, his oracle had directed him to her. Though Saroya and Lothaire had spent only one night together in the nearby woods, he'd pledged himself to save her from her wretched existence.

He might not have the ability to return Saroya to her goddess state. But somehow he would extinguish Elizabeth's soul from her body, then transform Saroya into an immortal vampire—circumventing the curse.

Saroya knew Lothaire would be hunting ceaselessly for answers.

Because I'm his Bride.

She gazed past Elizabeth's mother out a small window, finding the wintry landscape empty. Had she hoped that a massacre like this might have brought Lothaire to her?

How much longer am I to wait for him in this godsforsaken wasteland? With no word?

He'd talked of the legion of adversaries out to destroy him, of ancient vendettas: "If a vampire can be measured by the caliber of his foes, goddess, then consider me fearsome. If by the number? Then I've no equal."

Perhaps his enemies had prevailed?

No longer would she remain here. The Peirce family had begun chaining Elizabeth to the bed at night, preventing Saroya from killing, the only thing she lived for.

Reminded of her treatment, she turned to the mother. "Yes, your daughter is mine forever. And after I've slain you, I'll eviscerate your young son, then sweep through your family like a disease." She raised the cleaver above her, took a step forward—

Suddenly, black spots dotted her vision. Dizziness?

No, no! Elizabeth was rising to consciousness with all the finesse of a freight train. Every single time, she surfaced like a drowning woman held underwater, overwhelming Saroya.

The little bitch might reclaim control of her body, but, as usual, she'd wake to a fresh nightmare. "Enjoy, Elizabeth. . . ."

Her legs buckled, her back meeting the carpet. Blackness.



Heartbeat heartbeat heartbeat heartbeat—

Ellie Peirce woke to a mad drumming in her ears. She lay on the floor of her family's trailer, eyes squeezed shut, her body coated with something warm and sticky.

No words were spoken around her. The only sounds were the living room's crackling fire, her shallow breaths, and the howling dogs outside. She had no memory of how she'd come to be like this, no idea of how long she'd blacked out.

"Mama, did it work?" she whispered as she peeked open her eyes. Maybe the deacons had been successful?

Please, God, let the exorcism have worked . . . my last hope.

Her eyes adjusting to the dim, firelit room, she raised her head to peer down at her body. Her worn jeans, T-shirt, and secondhand boots were sopping wet.

With blood. She swallowed. *Not my own.*

Ob, God. Her fingers were curled around the hilt of a dripping cleaver. *I told them not to unchain me until my uncle and cousins got here!*

But Reverend Slocumb and his fellow members of their church's "emergency ministry" had smugly thought they could handle her—

Movement drew her gaze up. A fire poker?

Clenched in her mother's hands.

"Wait!" Ellie flung herself to her side just as the poker came slamming down on the floor where her head had been. Blood splashed from the carpet like a stepped-in puddle.

"You foul thing, begone!" Mama shrieked, raising the iron again. "You got my girl, but you won't have my boy!"

"Just wait!" Ellie scrambled to her feet, dropping the cleaver. "It's me!" She raised her hands, palms outward.

Mama didn't lower the poker. Her long auburn hair was loose, tangled all around her unlined face. She used one shoulder to shove tendrils from her eyes. "That's what you said afore you started snarlin' that demon language and slashin' about!" Her mascara ran down her cheeks, her peach lipstick smeared across her chin. "Afore you killed all them deacons!"

“Killed?” Ellie whirled around, dumbfounded by the grisly sight.

Five hacked-up bodies lay strewn across the living room.

These men had been lured all the way out here by her mother’s imploring letters and by evidence of Ellie’s possession: recordings of her speaking dead languages she had no way of knowing and photographs of messages in blood that she had no memory of writing.

Apparently, Ellie had once written in Sumerian, *Surrender to me*.

Now Slocumb’s head lay apart from his other remains. His eyes were glassy in death, his tongue lolling between parted lips. One arm was missing from his corpse. She dimly realized it must be the one under the dining room table. The one lying beside the hank of scalp and a pile of severed fingers.

Ellie covered her mouth, fighting not to retch. The five had vowed to exorcise the demon. Instead, it’d butchered them all. “Th-this was done by . . . *me?*”

“As if you don’t know, demon!” Mama wagged her poker at Ellie. “Play your games with somebody else.”

Ellie scratched at her chest, her skin seeming to crawl from the being within. *Hate it so much, hate it, hate it, HATE it*. Though she never knew its thoughts, right now she could nearly *feel* it gloating.

Sirens sounded in the distance, setting the dogs outside to baying even louder. “Oh, God, Mama, you didn’t call that good-for-nothing sheriff?” Ellie and her family were mountain folk through and through. Any Law was suspect.

At that, her mother dropped the poker. “You really *are* Ellie. The demon told me you wasn’t coming back this time! Told me you’d never return to us.”

No wonder Mama had attacked.

“It’s me,” Ellie said over her shoulder as she hastened to the window, her boots squishing across the carpet. She pulled aside the cigarette-stained curtains to gaze out into the night.

Down the snowy mountainside, the sheriff’s blue lights glared, his car snaking up the winding road. Another cruiser sped behind it.

“I had to call them, Ellie! Had to stop the demon. And then the nine-one-one dispatcher heard the deacons just a-screamin’ . . .”

What should I do . . . what can I do? Nineteen was too young to go to jail! Ellie would rather die, had already considered suicide if the exorcism didn’t work.

Because these five ministers weren’t the demon’s first victims.

There’d been at least two other men since the creature had possessed Ellie’s body a year ago. Early on, she’d woken to find a middle-aged man in her bed, his skin cooling against hers, his slashed throat gaping like a smile.

None among her extended Peirce family had known what to think. Had a rival clan planted the body? Why single out Ellie? Why had there been blood on her hands?

Her close-lipped cousins had buried the man out behind the barn, telling themselves he must’ve had it coming.

The family hadn’t begun to suspect she was possessed until more recently, when the demon had posed a mutilated coal company rep among Ellie’s old stuffed animals, then “blasphemed” for her kinfolk in ways a girl like Ellie “could never imagine.”

After that, her mother and Uncle Ephraim had started chaining her at night, like Ellie was one of the hounds outside. Though she hated the chains and could easily have picked the locks, she’d endured them.

But it’d been too late for some.

Hikers had found a gruesome altar in the woods, with human bones littering the site. Mama had whispered to Ephraim, “You reckon it was Ellie?”

Not me! The damned thing inside her was *winning*, taking control more often, and more easily.

Just a matter of time till I’m gone altogether.

As blue lights crawled closer, glaring even in the bright moonlight, Ellie had a mad impulse to clean herself up, waylay the sheriff outside to badger him for a warrant, then *maybe* cop to a crank call.

After all, *she* hadn’t done these killings. Or maybe she should run!

But she knew the Law would put dogs on her trail; she'd never make it to the next holler, not in the winter.

And that wouldn't solve the problem of the demon within her—

She heard a thud behind her and spun around. Her mother, usually so resilient, had fallen to her knees, her face crumpling. "It told me it'd do me in, then go after the rest of the family, go after baby Josh."

Joshua, Ellie's adored brother. She pictured him toddling about in his footy pajamas, his chubby cheeks growing pink as he laughed. An aunt was babysitting him in a trailer just down the mountain.

At the thought of harm coming to him, Ellie's tears fell unchecked. "Wh-what should I do?"

Mama's own tears poured. "If the reverend—God rest his soul—and his ministerin' couldn't get that devil of yours out of you . . . no one can, Ellie. Maybe you ought to let the sheriff take you."

"You want me to go to jail?"

"We done everything we can." Mama rose, warily stepping closer. "Maybe them prison folks or even them psychiatrists can keep it from killin' again."

Prison? Or death? Ellie swallowed, knowing that once she decided how she'd handle this, nothing could sway her. If her mother was stubborn, Ellie was trebly so, as immovable as the mountains all around them.

Sirens echoed as the cruisers prowled up the long drive, then skidded to a stop in front of the trailer.

Ellie swiped at her tears. "I'll do you one better than jail." *I could take the demon with me.* If she ran out the front door with blood on her and a gun in hand . . .

Mama shook her head sternly. "Elizabeth Ann Peirce, don't you even think about it!"

"If this *thing*"—Ellie slashed her nails across her chest—"thinks it'll hurt my kin, then it don't know me very good." Though her own gun and ammo had been taken from her, her father's Remington remained in his closet. The sheriff wouldn't know it was empty.

“You ain’t doin’ this, Ellie! There might be hope, some kind of new-fangled treatment.”

“You want me to go from roamin’ these mountains to being locked in a tiny cell?” She didn’t remind her mother that she’d probably get the death penalty anyway.

Slaughtering five *deacons* in Appalachia? Ellie was done for.

“I won’t let you do this.” Mama jutted her chin.

“We both suspected it’d come to this.” *The demon’s just killin’ me slow.* “My mind’s made up.”

At that, Mama paled even more, knowing it was as good as done.

“And just think—if I kill this demon, I’ll go to heaven. Be with Daddy,” Ellie said, hoping that was where she’d end up. She held out her arms, and her mother sank against her, sobbing. “Now, stop actin’ like you don’t know this has to happen, like you haven’t known for months.”

“Ah, God, honey, I just . . .” More sobs. “Y-you want to say a prayer?”

Ellie stood on her toes and pressed a kiss to her mother’s smooth forehead. “No time. What if it comes back?” And already the deputies were surrounding the trailer, their boots crunching in the snow, while the pompous sheriff demanded that Mrs. Peirce open up for them this minute.

He knew better than to storm a household on this mountain.

With a steady exhalation, Ellie turned toward her mother’s bedroom, forcing herself to look at the bodies. These men had had families. How many children were fatherless because of this demon?

Because I’ve been doggedly clinging to hope?

Ellie passed her own bedroom, shuddering at the sight of the chains at the ends of her bed, coiled like rattlesnakes.

Then she stared bitterly at the Middle State University pennants she’d tacked to her room’s vinyl walls just before all this had begun.

How excited she’d been about college! To afford the tuition and dorm, she’d worked at her uncle’s outfitter shop each day after school and as a guide during every holiday for years.

Ellie had been in classes just long enough to comprehend with wonder,

Holy shit, I can . . . I can actually do this! Coursework had come surprisingly easy to her.

Then she'd started losing time, waking in strange places. They'd sent her packing back home before the semester was over.

She would've been the first one in the family to get a college degree.

When she reached the back bedroom, she spied her reflection in the mirrored closet door. Blood covered her—her long brown hair was wet with it. Her eyes were as flinty gray and hard as Peirce Mountain.

Her sodden T-shirt read: *EPHRAIM'S OUTFITTERS: rafting, fishing, hunting supplies & guides.*

What would Uncle Eph say about this?

She pictured his weathered face and earnest expression, so like her late father's. *You go on now and take care of your business, Ellie. Ain't nobody gonna do it for you.*

She slid the closet door open, reaching past her father's old work gear—a mining helmet, locksmith tools, a handyman belt. Before he'd died in the mine, her adoring pa had never held fewer than three jobs at a time.

With a knot in her throat, she collected his favorite shotgun: a Remington double-barrel twelve-gauge. It was empty, no slugs to be found; Uncle Eph had long since come round and gathered up all the shells—just in case the demon got any ideas with the scattergun.

The familiar heft of the weapon was reassuring. Soon all this would be over forever. At the thought, she felt a strange sense of *relief*.

When she returned to the living room, Mama rushed forward. "Please, baby, couldn't you just try prison?"

I'm doomed anyway. An injection later, or a bullet now.

Ellie would die on her terms—bleeding out in the snow, atop her beloved mountain.

"No, jail's out of the question. Now you need to think about Josh. About the family." Ellie forced a smile. "I love you, Mama. Tell Josh I loved him, too. You know I'll be lookin' down, watchin' out for everyone."

As her mother began to bawl, muttering jumbled words, Ellie pointed

to the back room. “You go on in the back and stay in there! You hear? Don’t come out till they make you, no matter what happens. Promise me!” At last, Mama nodded. Ellie gave her a shove, and she dragged her feet away, softly closing her bedroom door behind her.

Before Ellie lost her nerve, she turned to the front door, Remington in hand. She began to reach for her hand-me-down coat, then made a fist instead. *Fool. You won’t be cold long.*

On the count of three. Ellie took several deep breaths, her thoughts racing. *I’m just nineteen—too young.*

One.

I got no choice. Soon, nothing’ll be left of me.

Two.

Imagine waking up to Mama and Josh, dead, their eyes glassy and sightless.

Never! With a shriek, she threw open the door, raising the gun.

“Shooter!” the sheriff yelled. Bullets went flying.

She felt none of them; a towering man had appeared out of thin air, standing between her and the officers.

With a furious growl, he shoved her to the ground, knocking the gun from her hands as he took the bullets in his back. She stared up in disbelief. His irises were . . . red. At least five shots hit him, but his monstrous gaze never wavered from her eyes.

—“Hold your fire!”

—“Where’d he come from?”

—“What the hell’s goin’ on?”

The man’s skin was like perfect marble, stark against the black shirt and trench coat he wore. His hair was pale blond, his features chiseled. And those eyes . . . *otherworldly*.

“Another demon!” She blindly rooted her hand through the snow, automatically reaching for the shotgun, but he stepped on her wrist.

When she gave a cry of pain, he pressed down harder, his lips drawing back to reveal . . . fangs. “You dare risk *my* female?” His voice was deep and accented, his tone filled with scorn. At his words, the baying dogs immediately fell silent.

“Wh-what are you talking about?”

“Your attempted blaze of glory, Elizabeth. And all because of a few murders?” He gave her a look of disgust, as if to say, *Grow up*.

The sheriff ordered, “Put your hands where I can see them!”

Instead, the pale-haired demon hunched down beside her, cupping her nape to snatch her closer. With his other hand, he tossed her gun away.

When another bullet plugged him in the back, he hissed over his shoulder, baring those fangs. “One—*moment*,” he snapped.

Ellie sneaked a glance at the cops; they looked too confounded to react.

And behind them, Ephraim and some of her cousins had come running up the mountain, rifles in hand. They’d slowed in shock upon seeing the demon.

The male sneered, “Mortals,” then turned back to her. “Listen very carefully, Elizabeth. I am Lothaire the Enemy of Old, and you belong to me. After considering my options, I’ve decided I will allow you to go to jail this eve.”

“Y-you’ve got the wrong girl! I don’t know you—”

Talking over her, he said, “In your human prison, you’ll be hidden from my kind, which means you’ll be relatively safe while I continue my search. I will return for you in two years. Or so.” He gave her a harsh shake. “But if you try to harm yourself—and therefore my female—again, I will punish you beyond imagining. Do you understand me?”

“Your female? I’m not yours!”

“I wouldn’t have *you*.” He narrowed those red eyes. “The glorious being who lives within you, however . . .”

“I don’t understand! What’s inside of me?”

He reached his free hand toward her face, his black claws glinting in the moonlight. Ignoring her question, he huskily murmured, “I will have *her*, my queen, forever.”

When he brushed a strand of hair from her face, she flinched. “Unhand me, demon!”

He stared down at her even as he addressed another in that deep, hyp-

notic voice: “Saroya, if you can hear me, sleep until I return for you. When all my plots and all my toiling come to bear.”

Saroya? It has a name?

With inhuman speed, he rose, looming above Ellie. More words in another language followed, then he disappeared into thin air.

The shaken deputies closed in on Ellie, their jaws slack. Sweat ran from their foreheads even as their breaths smoked. One cuffed her silently, while the others aimed their pistols in all directions—even up.

Ephraim and her cousins looked stricken; they could do nothing to save her, short of killing four cops in cold blood.

Her stunned mind finally registered that she would be taken alive.

The red-eyed demon had prevented her death. And Ellie burned to kill him for it.

*Ridgevale Correctional Center for Women, Virginia*

PRESENT DAY

Does the condemned have any last words?” the warden intoned. “No!” Ellie squirmed against her bonds on the gurney, pulling taut the electrodes dotting her chest. With each of her frantic heartbeats, the nearby EKG monitor spiked. The IV tubes snaking from each arm swayed back and forth. “No, I’m ready!”

She might have felt dread that she was about to die, but urgency overwhelmed all other emotions. She’d had death snatched from her grasp once before.

And the demon was stirring inside her.

Fearing “Saroya” would rise and attack everyone around her, Ellie had taken no last meal, had met with no family or chaplain. She’d inventoried her worldly belongings—ChapStick, college textbooks, four dollars in change, and her journals—with a swift efficiency.

Ellie had made peace with her fate long ago, had hungered to die ever since the night of her arrest. She’d written apologies to the victims’ families, saving them to be delivered after she was gone.

“Please hurry, sir,” she begged the elderly warden.

At that, a hum of murmurs broke out in the next room. The witnesses

behind the tinted glass window didn't know what to make of her behavior, didn't know how to process such an unusual murderer.

She was young, had filed no appeals to her sentence, and by all accounts had never displayed violent behavior growing up.

There *had* been run-ins with the law. Some minor—getting caught parking with boys. Some not so minor—poaching on state lands and refusing to testify against family members or cooperate with law enforcement.

But there'd never been a drop of human blood spilled by her hand until a yearlong killing spree.

Saroya had been busier than Ellie had ever dreamed.

“I'm ready.”

The warden frowned at her, and the two prison guards flanking him shuffled uncomfortably. Against all their best efforts—and Saroya's—they'd ended up liking Ellie, admiring her quiet determination to educate herself, to earn a degree, though she had no future.

Ellie had always had a good sense of people, and she'd ended up liking the three back. “Thank you for everything.”

“Then God be with you, Ellie Peirce.” The warden turned toward the adjoining control room. As the guards followed him out, one briefly laid his gloved hand on her shoulder. The other gave her a quick nod, but she could tell he'd be affected by her passing.

The door shut behind them, a deafening final click. *I'm alone now.* She stared after them, comprehending that no one would be getting out of this room alive.

Alone. So scared.

I didn't want to have to die. . . .

She gazed at her arms, strapped to the padded supports. Her wrists were taped, her palms up. The two IV lines were a dozen feet long, running from her inner arms to a pair of portholes in the wall behind her, continuing into the control room.

Half an hour ago, a nameless, faceless doctor had started a saline drip back there. At high noon, he would add a trio of chemicals, and moments later, the nightmare would be over forever.

Have to finish this. Almost there.

Funny what one would think about on the verge of death. How many people knew—to the minute—when they'd pass on?

She doubted anyone had ever gone to her own execution with such a feverish drive still spurring her, with a *goal* and an iron will bent on achieving it. Far from muting her determination, jail had only honed it, like adding layer after layer of plating to shore up a mountain train trestle.

I'm about to win. To beat her. Saroya had risen only twice in the last five years, both times in the first few months. Ellie's blackouts had resulted in the permanent disfigurement of two fellow inmates.

All done with her bare hands.

Long dormant, the demon now stirred. Sensing its own doom? *That's right, you're going down, bitch.*

Only two things could save her life at this point.

An unexpected call from the governor.

Or Saroya's powerful red-eyed mate.

Not a day went by that Ellie didn't think of the fiend named Lothaire the Enemy of Old. She'd seen the male appear out of thin air and then vanish, had seen bullets *annoy* him. Members of her family, the sheriff, and those deputies had witnessed these things with her, no matter how many times that up-for-reelection sheriff told her they hadn't. . . .

She craned her head back to look at the clock on the wall behind her. Three minutes till noon.

One hundred and eighty seconds until death slipped down the tubes.

Though driven, Ellie wasn't without regrets. She wished she could have *used* her hard-won psychology degree, had a career, made friends with women who weren't murderers.

She regretted never having a family of her own. Maybe she shouldn't have been so careful not to wind up a teen mother like her mama and grandma.

Hell, maybe Ellie should've given it up to one of those eager boys she'd gone parking with. She probably should've been less rigid and unbending in general.

Unbending. But that was the Peirce in her; Ellie *would* get her way in the end. *Best step aside.*

Another glance at the clock. Two minutes till—

The lights flickered, ratcheting up her anxiety. Another power surge a moment later had the witnesses muttering nervously.

With the third flicker, Ellie froze with dread even as the EKG went crazy. *Nothing can stop this!* Heart rate 150, 170, 190 . . .

Darkness. The EKG went blank with a last jagged spike.

No windows in the death ward. Pitch blackness. The witnesses were banging on the door, clamoring for an evacuation.

“What’s *happening?*” Ellie cried. For some reason, no generator fired up, no backup lights to cast a glow.

Lying in the dark, strapped to a gurney.

In the distance, a scream rang out.

About to hyperventilate, she twisted against her restraints, cursing her bonds. “What’s going on out there?”

An agonized yell sounded, but she refused the thought that surfaced. A jarring clap of gunfire fueled her fears. Some man bellowed, “I can’t see him! Where the hell did he go—” then came a bloodcurdling scream. Another man begged, “Please! *Nooo!* Ah, God, I have a fami—” Gurgling sounds followed.

Realization took hold.

He had come. Lothaire the Enemy of Old had returned for her.

Just as he’d promised. . . .



3

That little *súka*,” Lothaire sneered as a guard’s neck snapped in his fist. Elizabeth was about to be executed—voluntarily—for a trifling number of murders.

In mere moments.

The guard’s partner fired wildly in the dark; bullets plugged Lothaire’s skin, but he hardly noticed them.

He’d fed yesterday and was strong from it. At least, his body was. His mind, however . . .

With a yell, he lunged forward to slash his claws across the shooter’s throat. When blood splattered over his face, Lothaire’s fangs sharpened for flesh, his thoughts blanking.

Madness. Licking at my heels.

Even now with so much at stake. Too many victims, too many memories. Forever tolling.

No, focus on the Endgame! Get to her, save your female.

His foes had prevented him from reaching her sooner. *If I’m too late . . .*

He charged forward through lightless corridors, easily seeing in the dark, but the place was a maze of hallways and minuscule rooms.

Blyad! He couldn’t scent her over the odor of ammonia. Another

hallway came into view, more labeled chambers: family rooms, visitation rooms, cells.

No time. He'd warned Elizabeth not to hurt his female. Yet she'd opted to have herself condemned, directing her public defender to file no appeals, to broker no pleas.

After living thousands of years, Lothaire was very rarely surprised; her actions had surprised the hell out of him. Running into a hail of bullets was one thing, tirelessly plotting a years-long suicide quite another.

He couldn't decide if she was fatally flawed with willfulness or crazed.

In any case, she was proving to be a thorn in his side, costing him in untold ways. Lothaire was known throughout the Lore for collecting blood debts from immortals in dire straits, bargaining with them to make deals with the devil. Though he was proud of his overflowing ledger of entries, hoarding them, he'd already burned two because of Elizabeth.

He'd forced a beholden oracle to keep tabs on her incarceration. And just minutes earlier, an indebted technopath had accompanied him here to cut all the facility's power, including the backup generators, leaving no lights, no cameras.

Only utter confusion.

And that was the extent of Lothaire's plan today: technopath cuts power while vampire massacres his way to female. Laughably simple for a born strategist.

As if to sacrifice themselves to the plan, two guards intercepted him in the corridor, shining their flashlights into his red eyes. During their stunned silence, Lothaire had time to anticipate their reactions.

The larger one to the right will fire first, three shots before he realizes I've plucked his spine from him. The one to the left will stutter an answer to my question, though he knows he'll die directly after.

"Hands where we can see 'em!"

Lothaire attacked. First shot, second shot, third—

A tortured scream. The big one's spineless body crumpled to the floor. With one hand, Lothaire tossed away the length of bone. With the

other, he lifted the remaining guard by the throat. “Which way to the execution chamber?”

Lothaire eased his grip just enough for the man to grit out, “R-right, then . . . then second left. All the way to the end. But p-please—”

Snap. By the time the guard’s body collapsed, Lothaire was already at his second left.

He’d put Elizabeth from his mind, assured she’d be *relatively* safe. After all, he didn’t care about her mind, only about her body, the temple that housed his Bride.

My mate. The female meant only for him. And what a glorious, blood-thirsty female she was. . . .

Did Saroya sense this execution? Was she desperately struggling to rise, to protect herself?

His black claws dug into his palms till blood flowed. *Focus. Focus!*

As he delved deeper into the building, Lothaire fought to distance his thoughts from his own recent imprisonment. *The reason I’m late for my Bride’s execution.*

Weeks ago, when he’d learned of this date, he’d been on the verge of rescuing Saroya. Then he himself had been captured by the Order, a mortal army.

He’d escaped them . . . but in time?

Beams from more flashlights shone ahead. Three guards in riot gear escorted out a handful of civilians.

“Is someone there?” one guard demanded.

Lothaire envisioned cutting a swath of blood and screams through the group. *No, focus!* Though pleasurable, it would be selfish.

To save time, Lothaire traced past them, disappearing and reappearing in an instant.

When he reached the viewing room, he teleported inside. Two young males had just burst through the door of the adjoining execution chamber to guard her, fumbling with Maglites and assault rifles.

Then, for the first time in five years, Lothaire’s gaze fell upon Eliza-

beth. The last time he'd beheld her, she'd lain in the snow, her unusual gray eyes peering up at him with delightful fear.

Now she lay restrained, dressed in a dingy orange uniform. Her long, coffee-colored hair was pulled back severely from her face.

Again, she was terrified, her eyes darting blindly in the dark, but he felt no sympathy, only hatred.

This was all her doing! With Elizabeth's blessing, needles had been sunk into both of her inner arms—

A transparent liquid already flowed down each tube.

His heart felt like it might explode. *Too late?*

With a roar, he traced inside, batting the two males away, launching them headfirst into opposite walls.

"Who's there?" Elizabeth cried when he laid shaking hands on her delicate arms to thread those needles out of her veins. "What's happening? Can't see!"

He leaned down to scent the fluid, nearly sinking to his knees with relief. Saline. No chemical odor, merely salt water.

To be certain, he sliced the line with one claw and dripped the liquid on his tongue.

Safe.

But if he'd been seconds later . . .

As he ripped free the electrodes covering Elizabeth, he grated, "You've been a bad little mortal."

A sucked-in breath. Then she yelled, "Stop this, you bastard! You leave me be!"

Once he'd slashed through her bonds, he clamped his hand around her wrist and yanked her to her feet.

Before Lothaire traced her back to the safety of his home, he promised her, "Now, Elizabeth, you will pay."



When the ground suddenly reappeared beneath her, Ellie pitched forward. She knew that monster had ahold of her, would recognize Lothaire's voice anywhere.

That deep, accented timbre had haunted her dreams.

As nausea washed over her, she realized that she was no longer in the prison. Somehow he'd transported her into a fancy sitting room, some type of mansion.

Just as she regained her balance she felt her body lifted off the ground. "Ah! Stop, *stop*—"

"I warned you, mortal!" the demon bellowed as he hurled her away from him.

With a strangled cry, she landed sideways on a couch halfway across the room.

Get up! Dizziness . . . Keep him in sight, Ellie! After a clearing shake of her head, she clambered to her feet. The demon strode back and forth in front of her, vanishing and reappearing as he paced.

He was bigger than she remembered, and this time he looked even more murderous. His fists were clenched, tendons straining in his neck. His irises glowed red, veins of blood forking out over the whites of his eyes.

His face was spattered with blood, his pale hair stained with it. Again he was clad all in black, from his trench coat to his boots. Bullet holes riddled his shirt.

This can't be happening! Stolen from death row at a maximum-security prison? By *him*.

"I promised you punishment!" He swung one long arm out to the side, bashing a marble column.

Chunks of it landed on the plush carpet at her feet, the entire building seeming to rock. His strength was monstrous, just like everything about him.

"You disobey me at your peril."

She should be covering from him. Instead, she felt a blistering rage

boiling up inside of *her*. Ellie had thought she'd finally be free, that she'd at last defeat Saroya. She'd been two minutes away from death, *ready* for it. But this devil had thwarted her yet again.

He'd already taken away her freedom, ensuring she'd spent half a decade in a tiny, rank cell.

Five years despairing.

As she recalled those years, she found herself screaming, "What do you *want* from me? *What?*" Out of the corner of her eye she spied a vase, snatched it up. "Why can't you leave me the hell alone?" She flung the heavy piece—it struck him in the chest and *shattered* from the impact.

As though she'd bashed it against a brick wall.

Even as she stared in disbelief, a heavy candleholder found its way into her grip. *Two minutes. So damned close.* She lobbed it overhand.

He . . . *dematerialized*, and it flew through his hazy form.

She gave a shriek of fury. Another candleholder went flying, a paperweight, a lamp.

He just dodged the missiles.

Can't be happening! She was out of breath, desperate to hurt him, to punish *him*.

Eighteen hundred and twenty days without seasons, without snow or blooms, without friends or family. Her baby brother didn't remember her. While Josh had been steadily growing toward manhood without her in his life, Ellie's existence had been stagnant, punctuated only by bouts of evil.

She no longer felt like a . . . person.

I'm not a person, I'm Virginia DOC Inmate #8793347. I'm Saroya's host.

Because of him.

Ellie's gaze landed on a sword in a display cradle. She leapt for the weapon, yanking it free from its ornamental sheath.

The glimmering metal reflected light into her eyes. In that instant, clarity came.

She knew what she had to do.

Clutching the hilt in both hands, she turned on him. "I'm gonna gut you, demon!"

He drew back his lips so she could see his horrifying canines, then flicked two fingers at her. *Come on, then. . . .*

Her eyes widened and she charged, sword poised to sink into his chest. At the last moment—she turned it on herself.

“*No!*” he bellowed. Then somehow he was between her and the sword tip, wedged against her body.

The blade slid into his lower back until it met bone.

She gasped, feeling his muscles tensing against her, sensing his escalating rage. The red of his irises bled over the whites of his eyes completely. He bared those fangs down at her. “This makes twice that you’ve defied me, *súka*. You’ve erred for ill.”

With a snap of his wrist, he sent her flying to the floor.

Stunned. Flat on her back. Hysterical tears threatening.

She heard him removing the sword from his body, then tossing it away. *Won’t cry in front of him. Won’t surrender to his bitch.*

For courage, she recalled the years spent staring at cinder-block walls. Counting the blocks, the grout lines, seeing patterns and shapes. She’d called it the Cinder-Block Channel.

All block, all day. No interruptions. Ever.

Gritting her teeth, she twisted to her side, working to rise. Her hair had come loose, spilling over her face. She shoved a lock from her eyes.

“Stay—down,” he ordered, towering over her. He was a fiend, an animal, still had blood sprayed on his face. How many had he murdered today?

“Go back to hell, asshole.” Then she spat on his boots.

We hope you enjoyed this excerpt from LOTHAIRE!

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