

The notice had been up for a long time. It informed adventurers and monster hunters that there was a bounty to be had for ridding the village of Sleepy Oaks of a “most hideous and despicable undead”. Many skilled warriors happily gulped down the page’s content, from the bits about glory and vanquishing evil of the night to the ridiculous price the villagers were willing to pay to be rid of the pestilence. Many seasoned fighters and soldiers of fortune wanted the job more and more until they reached the bottom of the page, where the hunted creature was actually named: a vampire. Suddenly, even the most courageous soul would flee from the offer, money and all, as if it were death itself. For this reason, the plight of Sleepy Oaks stretched out over two years before a new champion arrived.

The people were at last despairing, and citizens were leaving the town in a steady stream when the new hope arrived. She was constantly stopped on the road, as fearful villagers told her that she was going the wrong way and begged her to leave the cursed village at once. Each time she smiled and laughed, replying that the danger was the reason she journeyed. After each of these encounters, the locals would stand in awe, as her easy bravery and striking features seemed to mark her as the angel sent as salvation. Indeed, she was striking, young and tall, with long golden hair and catty green eyes. She seemed to radiate a “chosen one” kind of a power, her golden hair a halo and her innocence an aura of protection.

As she strode into town, everything around her seemed to brighten, and those few who still remained launched into their everyday tasks with renewed vigor. With a quiet confidence, she entered the town hall and asked to speak with the captain of the guard and village leader about the bounty that had been put out on the vampire. While the servant paled, he quickly dashed off to find the requested personnel. The girl was soon whisked into the presence of Captain Fletcher and Mayor Greene. Her beatific, commanding presence set her apart from the serious, rugged gentlemen she shared the room with.

“Esteemed Sirs,” she began, “My name is Ellison Rose. I have come in response to your reward for the slaying of a vampire. I wish to know if this bounty still stands.” When neither replied immediately, she clarified, “I am here to kill the vampire.” Both the captain and mayor were shocked. This young girl couldn’t possibly be serious; to attempt such a thing was suicide. There was a reason that those far more experienced than she had turned down the lucrative job. This girl couldn’t possibly hope to best such a powerful opponent.

“Miss, with all due respect,” Captain Fletcher began, “there are others, professionals in the field, who would be far better qualified than you to take on this job. I don’t doubt your skills, only your judgment. Whatever you’ve done before, a vampire is like nothing you’ve ever seen. They aren’t just strong and fast, they’re cunning, too. They excel in deceiving, and a look in their eyes and you’re wrapped around their little finger. Unless you’ve really done your research, miss, they’ve won before you even begin.”

“I assure you, Captain, I have ‘done my research’, and a look at the other jobs I’ve taken and thrived on should dispel all doubts.” Ellison replied curtly. “I am not some little girl who hides behind a mother’s skirts. I am absolutely capable of looking after myself.” The small stack of papers she had pulled from her satchel seemed to argue in her favor. They were records of her completion of past duties, from a letter home showing completion of an apprenticeship to a note of congratulations from a town leader for the destruction of a necromancer. She seemed to know her trade well, despite her youth.

The captain’s frown deepened. Every document declared Rose’s absolute competence and reliability, yet there was no concrete record of her ever facing anything close to a vampire’s power. They would have to allow her to pursue the bounty, though.

“Well, er, everything seems in order here.” the mayor spluttered. “You are free to proceed as you like here, assuming you choose to stay and help, that is.”

“I still think it’s folly for you to keep on this, Miss Rose, but if you insist, we must allow you to try.” the captain said quietly. Gently, he added, “Please be careful.”

“Thank you.” Ellison replied. Pausing in the doorway, she added, “I wish you a good afternoon, gentlemen.” before vanishing into the hallway and the then the empty street.

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Ellison spent the rest of the day learning what she could about the vampire from the townsfolk. The little she found out was that it was male, resided in a graveyard a little to the west of town, it was not from nearby originally, was an exceptional climber, and had claimed over one hundred lives in the past year. Also, most importantly, that it was often spotted far from its lair during the deep night. Shortly before sundown Ellison found a small inn at which to eat a warm, homey meal before the long night. Brushing off the innkeeper’s pleas to stay inside, she set off for the churchyard.

The walk was short, and the sun was setting just as she arrived at the desecrated churchyard. The gravestones had long since crumbled into rubble, and the small church at the other end of the yard was slowly being pulled apart by ivy. The graves were overgrown, the fence rusted, and the forest pressed in closely on all sides. Ellison rubbed herself with earth and wove leaves into her hair as camouflage as she settled behind a bush near the fence. The bush was thorny, but had a small, sturdy hollow beneath it and provided an almost unobstructed view of the surrounding area. It was a perfect watching place.

It was nearly midnight when something changed. A fervent, dark shadow appeared near the ruined doorway of the church. It stood there a moment, as if surveying the area, aware of a danger but unable to ascertain what it was, before darting off into the forest. Ellison let out a breath she hadn't realized she had been holding. The charm on her hair was starting to wear off, revealing that it was truly a plain, dull brown. She had actually only done one other job on her own; all the rest she had had help with. But she knew what she was doing, and this was the ultimate chance to prove herself. She needed to. For her parents. For her aunt. And her late Master, too. She would destroy the dark as it had destroyed those she loved.

After about an hour, she decided that the vampire was definitely gone. She crawled out from her hiding place and began painstakingly picking her way across the churchyard, careful to stay hidden and leave no trace. It was a lengthy process, but a necessary precaution. For this reason, the moon had already made considerable progress toward the western horizon by the time she arrived at the church itself. Ellison climbed over the pile of rubble where the door had long ago stood.

The little church had long since fallen into ruin. The once magnificent stained glass windows were broken and dirty, and several piles of rotting planks indicated where the rows of pews had once been. There were gaping holes in the walls and a fuzzy coating of moss and weeds covered large sections of the room. Moth-eaten rags that had once been carpets and tapestries adorned the floor and walls. The altar had been smashed, but the rubble from it and the walls had been sloppily pushed into a corner. Crossing the room to examine the pile of debris, Ellison's nervousness crumbled as her confidence grew. *So this is the mighty vampire's lair? So much for cleverness. Why, it's quite clear there's a trapdoor right here! This is hardly even worth the effort!* As she began to push away the rubble, her lips curled into a self-satisfied smirk.

“So, you think you’re so clever, do you?” a quiet, silky voice from the direction of the church entrance startled Ellison. “Really, you aren’t going about this right at all. You were never taught how to do this kind of a thing, were you? No matter. That will soon be the least of your concerns, I’m afraid.”

Ellison whipped around. Leaning against one of the crumbling walls was a young man, almost a boy, but not quite. He was very handsome, with ivory skin and long hair the color of a raven’s plumage. His eyes were a brown so dark it bordered on black. His dark clothes blended with the night as he moved away from the wall and towards her. He had a cat’s elegance and grace, and there was something mesmerizing about his presence. Ellison had a strong urge to look into those beautiful, perfect eyes...

A faint memory struggled its way to the front of her mind. *A look in their eyes and you’re wrapped around their little finger...*

“NO!” Ellison screamed, scrambling to her feet and whipping out her long, curved knives. A faint look of surprise at her outburst crossed the vampire’s haughty features, but it was quickly replaced by a cruel, icy smile. “So, it’s going to be that way, hmm? Ah, well. So be it.”

He was hardly even a blur, he moved so fast. Her reflexes saved her, and the X of the crossed knives shuddered under the force of his blow. A few drops of black blood trickled down the silvery blades. The vampire drew back as quickly as he had attacked, and Ellison almost dropped the two knives. He slowly circled her, searching for a weakness in her defenses. Suddenly, he lunged forward and unleashed a flurry of almost devastating blows. Ellison parried each, but only barely, and she was driven back into the corner of the room. She held up her knives and waited for the next attack, but the vampire laughed mirthlessly and vanished through one of the gaps in the wall. His mocking voice echoed through the ruins, purring, “Follow if you dare...”

Ellison hesitated, and finally decided that this might be her only chance to escape the ruined church. If she could just hold the vampire off until the sun rose, she would be free. The night was so close to through. She rushed out of the church, following the vampire’s path through the gap. The moon hovered over the tree line, and its weak light painted the world black and white. The scene of the empty graveyard before her was darkly clear, broken all over with

dark shadows. As she stepped into the open, the whole world seemed to stand still. The moon seemed menacing and huge, and was a lucid sign that the nightmare hadn't ended yet.

She took another few puzzled, uncertain steps forward until she stood in the center of the graveyard. A twig snapped in the trees above her, momentarily breaking the unnatural silence. *In the trees above her...* Suddenly, too late, Ellison realized her mistake.

*WHAM.* Like a powerful mountain cat, he hurtled down from above, using her shock to knock her down and send one of the knives flying away. Frantically pulling herself up, she brought up the knife to attempt a last stand. This ambush couldn't have happened in the church, where the walls could have provided some protection. He'd needed her out in the open, where he could use the trees and his speed to his advantage.

He advanced in a slow, leisurely way, knowing that this was check, and his victory was practically assured. She tried to stand as defiant and proud as she could, but fear caused her to tremble uncontrollably. His voice cut across the black-and-white silence. "Oh dear, whatever could be frightening you so? Could it be that you've finally realized what a fool you were to come here? You can tell that your death stands before you, can't you? Another one dead for the villagers to mourn. And what will your friends think? Or your family? They must--"

At these words, Ellison screamed and charged her tormentor. Her fear was consumed by anger and grief, lending her extra strength in her reckless attack. In his shock, the vampire only just managed to sidestep each blow and more than a few left shallow cuts anyway. After suffering several of these nicks, the vampire caught her knife by the blade and, ignoring the blood now gushing from his hand, yanked it out of her grasp and threw it away. In one powerful blow, he sent her flying across the moonlit churchyard. She hit the remains of a gravestone hard.

Her head spun. When her vision at last cleared, she found the vampire's face right in front of hers. She tried to struggle, to twist away in some last defiance, but her energy was all but spent. One of his cold, pale hands held her head tightly, forcing her too stare deep into his eyes. Her body went limp. The vampire stood. Ellison's eyes were still open, and she tried to move, to crawl away somehow, but her limbs refused to respond. She was completely at the vampire's mercy. She felt her throat catch in a silent wail of terror and frustration. Seeing her expression, the vampire snickered.

“Checkmate, my dear. I’ve won; we both know that. Now the only question is what to do with you. You’ve kept me from dining tonight, so to make you my meal would be appropriate. Somehow, though, I don’t think that is quite right. I’ve charmed you, so I could always make you serve me... But it is possible, though incredibly difficult, to break free of charm. And that simply would not do! Of course...” His smile became even colder and crueler, if such a thing was possible, and his eyes glinted maliciously. “Wouldn’t it be fitting for the foolish little hunter to learn her lesson for by becoming what she hunted? You would live so long, always knowing that not only did you fail, you became a pawn of the darkness you wished so much to rid the world of! A perfect way to teach to regret crossing me, isn’t it? It’s wonderful!” The vampire clapped his hands gleefully.

The little bit of anger and hope Ellison had left vanished. Despair overwhelmed her. She had wanted to honor her Master’s memory and avenge her family, but she couldn’t have failed worse. She had tried, so foolishly, to play the hero, but now she would be villain. She couldn’t protect anyone. By doing what she had, she was just sealing the fates of the many people who would now probably die at her hands. She remembered her Master and aunt, and what little she could about her parents. She would never join them now. The darkness was going to eat her alive, swallow her very soul... Hot tears welled up in her eyes and quietly trickled down her face.

“Oh? You’re crying over your defeat? How weak. I’d have thought you were above that.” The vampire bent down to examine her. As he looked at her despairing face, a hazy memory floated across the surface of his thoughts. He frowned and mentally reached out to catch it, uncertain of its origin or importance.

*He was kneeling, hands bound, at the feet of a tall, hard looking man. The man shook his head as the terrified boy asked some silent question. “I can’t let you leave now.” the man said, and the boy cried out as he realized what the man meant. The man lunged forward, fangs gleaming, and the boy screamed. There was a faded recollection of pain, and of the world fading. And at the edge of the blackness, “One day you’ll recall this as a gift, and thank me.”*

The vampire stumbled back from the girl, and looked at her again. On the surface she seemed plain, but it there was a kind of warmth around her, like the gentle rays of the sun. “I’m

sorry.” he whispered. “I’m sorry... I shouldn’t have hurt you. I never chose to be like this. Someone else chose for me. It would be wrong for me to force this fate onto you...”

His voice had gotten softer and quieter. Ellison looked up, or she would have, wondering at this startling change of demeanor. “Be free,” he said softly, and suddenly she could move again. “I’ll leave, okay? Right now. I’ll fly away as far as I can tonight and tomorrow too, and the people here will never have to worry about me again.” The vampire started walking towards the edge of the graves.

“Wait!” Ellison called out. “Why? Why are you letting me go?”

The vampire stopped, and when he turned around, there was a touch of sorrow in his eyes. “You’re like the sun at dawn, burning away the mists that came with the night. It brings back memories I thought had vanished like the light of some distant sunset...” he stared at the fading stars with a tragic smile. Almost to himself he added, “Please, don’t ever let that light fade.” With that he leapt into the air and became a crow, swiftly speeding off into the vanishing blackness.

As the pale, genuine light of dawn stole over the horizon, the feeble rays of the new day’s sun illuminated a deep, dense forest. Near the edge of it, a bruised and exhausted young girl stumbled down a trail into a tiny almost deserted town. The fearful, oppressed air of the town seemed to have vanished with the night, and after hearing the news, the mayor declared a day of celebration in the girl’s honor. He offered her the huge reward, but she refused to accept it, asking that it be put towards helping the town rebuild. The people were puzzled but grateful, and the next day the girl left. She had much to see, learn, and do. Far away a crow was settling into an abandoned tower, carefully peering out at the sunlight from a dark corner before fleeing to the cellar. The people of Sleepy Oaks began the difficult work of rebuilding their once prosperous town.

So with the light of dawn came new memories and hopes for everyone, and the end of one story became the beginning of many more. The town of Sleepy Oaks slowly grew into a prosperous city under the careful guidance of Captain Fletcher and Mayor Greene. Young Ellison worked hard to truly, honestly perfect her trade, and over the years grew into a great warrior and hero. The melancholy ruins which had once been the scene of a girl’s waking nightmare lost their aura of despair, and eventually flowers began to bloom in them and they

became a different girl's secret garden. As for a certain crow, he seemed to fade out of existence, and no one saw him after Ellison was spared in the ruins. And so what seemed the end of one venture simply set the stage for another, but that's a story for another time...