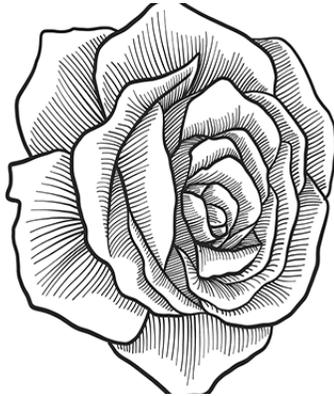


THE
NOT-SO DEAD



SALOME'S STORY

ISAIYAN MORRISON

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THE NOT-SO DEAD

NOVEMBER 5TH, 2019

FAYE' STORY

NOVEMBER 19TH, 2019

MADDY'S STORY

DECEMBER 3RD, 2019

SALOME'S STORY

DECEMBER 17TH, 2019

DUSK'S STORY

DECEMBER 31ST, 2019

TRISTAN'S STORY

JANUARY 14TH, 2020

ESSIE'S STORY

Salome ran her fingers over the blanket on the guest bed. Whirls of patterns stood out, etched upon the fabric like her thoughts of late. Despite the streams of light that fell across her face from the brightness of the day, her thoughts were decidedly less than sunny. Her preparations for an upcoming guest had done little to shake her from the dull stupor that had plagued her as she settled into the life of a married woman.

Errant strands of black hair fell in front of her eyes and she absently pushed them back as she tried to recall where her husband, Percy, had said the fabric beneath her fingers came from. Traveling, or rather, the ability to travel had been one of the few reasons she was happy to marry a man as well off as Percy, but the reality of their marriage was far from glamorous. The familiar light footsteps of their housemaid shook Salome from her thoughts and by the time the woman appeared in the doorway, Salome's face held a more neutral expression.

“Mrs., I have a light lunch prepared for Mr. Percy and his guest.”

Salome nodded. “Thank you, Lucinda.” She gave the woman a small smile before turning to scan the room. Everything appeared to be in place. The pillows were fluffed and propped up to showcase the stitch work on the covers and the blankets were smooth, without a hint of wrinkle. The dressers were polished and free of clutter and the floors had been swept and mopped until they gleamed. The room had a light lemony scent that Salome hoped pleased her husband and his guest. She could smell the faint scent of lunch from down in the kitchen and she knew that Lucinda would have made enough for Salome to fashion their dinner. Being in charge of a house, particularly one as large as the one Percy purchased the day after their wedding, was a challenge for her and one that she often felt ill equipped to handle.

“What are you doing?”

Salome whirled around, startled by Percy's booming voice. His ability to tread softly enough to surprise her even with the creaking floorboards was so far unrivaled. For someone of a substantial weight, Percy still managed to move as stealthily as the cats that often patrolled the property in search of errant mice to glut themselves on. For Salome, it meant feeling a general sense of unease at being caught doing something unbecoming of a millionaire's wife, which she often was. The books and maps of far-off places and cultures had slowly gathered dust in their bookshelves as

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she instead filled her days with the approved activities such as gardening or gathering with the wives of Percy's clients and business partners.

Heart racing wildly, Salome bent her head demurely. "I've set up the room for your guest." At Percy's silence, she hazarded a look up. His dark brown eyes surveyed the room and Salome brushed her hands down over the pleats in her skirt to keep herself from rambling. Percy hated when she spoke at length and out of turn.

"Hm. Have the sheets been cleaned?"

"Yes. I had Lucinda take them to be professionally cleaned rather than using our—"

"Why did you bother having me purchase a washer and dryer if you weren't going to utilize them?" Percy cut in. He stepped further into the room and Salome took a few steps back towards the window without thinking. She saw his eyes narrow and immediately looked down again.

Hoping to salvage things, she continued. "I know how important your friends and clients are, so I wanted to make sure everything was perfect for your guest. Our dryer is wonderful, and I appreciate you purchasing it for our home." She reached out and clenched the windowsill in an effort to steady her legs. Percy seemed to be in a mood, based on his pinched expression. Salome didn't know if it was nerves or something else, but his moods often left her on shaky ground and doubting everything. "I should have time to replace them with others that have been freshly laundered if you would li—"

"Don't bother." His footsteps—audible now even with the pounding of her heart—came closer and she tried to steady her breathing. A hand gripped her chin tightly, bringing her face to meet his. With her heels on, she had to look down a few inches in order to meet eye-to-eye. Surprisingly, Percy had never seemed to have a problem with their difference in height, her being the taller of the two. She was now well aware that her age had drawn him to her, but she often wondered if he had chosen her for her height for some reason.

As she gazed into his muddy brown eyes, her own uncomfortable expression was reflected in them, making her once again aware that this union was not one she wanted but now was unable to find a way out of. Making the best of things had become her mantra and she clung fiercely to it as an owl did to prey. It was often all that propelled her through her

days.

“I really don’t mind changing things, Percy,” she whispered. Her hands gripped her skirt tightly as she waited for him to respond.

His lips twisted into a scowl. “Why? So you can mess that up, too?” He let her chin go as the sound of a car coming up the drive reached them. He fixed her with one last glare before turning away and walking towards the doorway. “And fix your hair. We have appearances to maintain.”

Salome nodded shakily, not moving until the sounds of his footsteps—now audible no doubt because he wanted them to be—reached her ears. She let out the breath she was holding and turned back to the window. The car they had heard was now visible in the driveway and she put a hand up to the window as she peered down, trying to catch a glimpse of the mysterious guest. Percy had been tight-lipped about his friend, citing him as a potential investor but not delving much into their back history. So much of Percy’s life before their courtship and marriage was still an enigma to Salome. It had been a week since Percy’s announcement of this person coming to stay with them for a few days. Guests weren’t a rarity in their home, but Salome was still trying to build her reputation amongst Percy’s friends regarding her party hosting skills, so she tried to make sure she created an environment each guest might enjoy.

This time, her questioning had seemed to backfire, with him growing increasingly agitated with each question until she finally ceased and planned to the best of her ability. Clearly that hadn’t gone too well, based on his reaction.

This is not the life I imagined for myself. The words were kept in her head, but she longed to give them voice. Her attention focused back on the car when the door opened. Sunlight seemed to reflect off the brown-haired man who exited the automobile and Salome squinted against the glare. Compared to her own jet-black hair and Percy’s mousy brown, this man’s seemed to be made of the sun itself and she found herself shifting closer until the tip of her nose brushed against the glass of the window.

The man seemed tall, though after living with Percy, every other man tended to seem tall to her. From her distance, she could somewhat make out an attractively angular jaw and his suit seemed to fit well on his frame, with none of the pudg Percy now sported. He was the type of man women would no doubt swoon over based on looks alone and Salome

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would have probably been one of them before her dreams of a life filled with romance had come crashing down the moment she said 'I do'. Still, she could feel her breath come quicker, fogging up the glass as she strained to see more of his face. The thick glass made it impossible to hear the timber of his voice, but she imagined it was as attractive as the rest of him. When his head tilted towards her, revealing more of his face, Salome felt her muscles tense.

“My goodness; he is gorgeous.” The words slipped from her without conscious thought, though they were truthful. If this was her husband's guest, she was in trouble. “How am I going to be able to talk to him without staring?”

As if having heard her, the man turned to look up at the window she was standing at and Salome had to suck in another breath. Eyes as light as the sky and just as blue stared back at her with what looked to be amusement. It was then her fight or flight instinct kicked in, propelling her away from the window and down the stairs as quickly as she had in her youth on Christmas day. Only this time there were no presents under a tree. There was only temptation in the form of the man who was clearly the man her husband expected.

Percy turned to her, arching an eyebrow at her abrupt appearance. “And Dusk, I want to introduce you to my wife, Salome.”

Dusk? What kind of name is that?

Percy held out a hand to her and Salome dutifully played her part, walking into the curve of Percy's arms and favoring Dusk with what she hoped was a genuine smile. His smile was just as attractive as the rest of him, and when he lifted her outstretched hand to place a soft kiss on the back of it, she had to fight down a shiver of pleasure.

Why am I so affected by him?

Her reaction was confusing and new, nothing like she had ever experienced before, and she didn't know what to do. A glance over at Percy brought her back down and she nodded before gesturing towards the dining room and beckoning the men to sit as she served lunch. As they walked away, she tried not to let her gaze linger on Dusk more than was polite, but it was in vain as their eyes locked one last time and a feeling of something passed between them. Salome forced herself to break her gaze and fled for the kitchen, turning over her wedding ring to remind herself

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of just whose wife she was.



The silence in the house was comforting and Salome felt she could breathe again as she dug her hands into the soft dirt. The greenhouse was often one of her safe havens—a place she could relax and indulge in the only passion Percy had deemed appropriate for a wife of her stature.

Her fingers trailed across the tips of each rose she planted. She brought the peonies to her nose to get a whiff of their exhilarating scent.

Salome sighed in contentment and was gazing at the lilies when the sound of a voice clearing startled her. Her heart pounded as she spun around.

“Percy, I’m so—” Her voice caught when she turned to see it wasn’t her husband in the doorway of the greenhouse, but Dusk. She put a hand to her head, letting out a relieved breath. “Of, Mr. Dusk. I’m sorry.”

He held up his hands. “No need to apologize.” Salome couldn’t help but notice how the knit fabric of his shirt pulled tightly across his wide shoulders. His pants hung loosely on his trim waist and she swallowed hard at the direction her thoughts wanted to skitter in. She glanced up at him from beneath her lashes. His hands were now in his pockets as he leaned against the doorframe.

She bit her lower lip, trying to remember if she had missed something. “Is there something I can help you with?” Percy’s reactions to her previous questions about Dusk’s visit had led her to believe that she wasn’t part of keeping him entertained, but she wondered if perhaps she had misunderstood. “Are you and my husband meeting in here?” She could kick herself for offering, but she didn’t want to be rude.

“No. Percy actually got called down to the bank a few minutes ago,” Dusk said gesturing behind him. “He said he would be back in a few hours.”

“Oh.” *That’s a relief.* “Well, is there anything I can get you? Lucinda left

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some devilled eggs and a meat and cheese platter in the refrigerator should you get hungry.” She tried not to stare, but it was difficult now that Dusk was in front of her and Percy was nowhere to be seen. Lunch and dinner the evening before had been difficult enough with Percy there at her side. It hadn’t helped that Dusk had eaten barely anything. Percy had spent part of the night railing Salome on her lack of planning once again and her pointing out that he hadn’t told her what Dusk liked hadn’t helped. Her ears were still ringing.

“I remember you didn’t eat much last night.”

He nodded and gave her a small smile. He almost seemed apologetic. “True, and for that I apologize. Travelling always upsets my stomach for a few days after. If I had known of the trouble you went through to plan and prepare, I would have forced down a few more bites to show my appreciation.”

His apology shocked her. Salome wasn’t used to being apologized to by anyone other than the house staff. Percy had certainly never offered up an apology. She didn’t quite know what to say.

“It’s no trouble at all,” she insisted finally. “I only wish I had known what food you preferred so I could have made it for you, upset stomach or not. Do you have a favorite food?”

Dusk smiled. “No, at least, none that can be made.”

Salome frowned. “I don’t understand.”

He chuckled, stepping into the room and making his way to the lily plant. “It’s no matter. Just know, I do appreciate your efforts to indulge my visit and please accept my apology for creating any disharmony between you and Percy.”

Salome huffed out a breath. Disharmony was nothing new in their home. “Trust me. No apology is necessary.” She stared at the breadth of Dusk’s shoulders and the line of his back. She wanted to reach out to him, a feeling that took her by such surprise that she locked her hands behind her back in fear that they would act without her permission. “I should go.”

“Don’t let me stop you, though I wish you wouldn’t.”

Salome paused in her retreat. “You wish I wouldn’t what?”

Dusk glanced at her over his shoulder. “Go.” He turned slowly and Salome glanced down at his hand as he began to play with the lily plant.

Dusk’s gaze followed hers and he lifted the book in his hands. “Do you

like to garden, Salome?”

She nodded slowly.

“You like flowers?”

“I do.”

“Why?”

She shrugged. “Don’t all women like flowers?”

Dusk arched an eyebrow at her. “Perhaps, but I’m not talking about all women. I’m talking about you.”

His interest was surprising. Percy had never shown interest in what she liked unless it served him in some way. He only allowed her to keep gardening instead of hiring one because of her obvious green thumb. Their garden and yard were the envy of all of Percy’s friends. Keeping up appearances was big in their circle and the outside of their home was part of that.

Salome thought about her answer. “I suppose because of the challenge.” She tried not to let her excitement show on her face when Dusk angled himself towards her. His interest seemed genuine and so it loosened her tongue.

“Challenging? How so?”

“Well, flowers are kind of like people.” At Dusk’s chuckle, Salome smiled. “You laugh, but I’m serious. Think about it. They require food and water. They need the sun, and they will die without it. Plus, plants are temperamental. Too hot or too cold; too much water or too little and you will kill them.” She looked down at her hands. “It’s the same with people. Maybe not with sun or water exactly, but love and care. Too much or too little and things don’t turn out well.”

He nodded, looking at her intently. It was strange to have someone so focused on her, but she couldn’t deny that she liked it.

“So, which is it here?”

“What do you mean?”

He leaned towards her, his blue eyes captivating her and making it impossible to look away. “Which do you suffer from; too much love or not enough?”

The question caught her by surprise. “Oh! I didn’t mean... I wasn’t talking about me.”

“Weren’t you?” His question was asked with no inflection, leaving

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Salome bewildered with how to respond to it. She didn't know what he saw in her gray eyes, but whatever it was had him moving closer to her. Salome knew she should end the conversation and tell him he was being too familiar with her, but his assumption of her lack of care wasn't wrong. Even their short conversation had her reaching out like a flower tilted towards the sun. She had been longing for so long for a connection that now she wanted to sink her teeth in and never let it go.

The feeling was equal parts terrifying and exhilarating. This strange man had come in and brought with him the desires of her youth for sampling something new. It was a dangerous feeling.

"I..." She was still unsure of what to say. On one hand she longed to speak to someone about her loneliness and stifled dreams, but on the other hand it wasn't proper to talk to Dusk in that way. In the face of those conflicting emotions, all she could do was offer a half-truth. "I don't know."

Her answer seemed to amuse him, though it didn't quite seem like he was laughing at her. Dusk leaned away and like that, whatever spell had been weaved between them dissipated, leaving Salome feeling shaken and new. She blinked slowly as if seeing Dusk again for the first time. His blue eyes were no less hypnotizing but seemed to lack the intensity that Salome was sure had been in them moments before.

"You are a fascinating woman, Salome." Dusk stood from the couch. "Percy is a fool for not realizing the jewel he has right under his nose."

Her lips parted as she gazed up at him. Her tongue darted out to wet them and her eyes widened as she saw him follow her motion.

"And your name," he continued. "What a beautiful name for a beautiful woman."

"My parents named me after my grandmother," she replied. "And you? Dusk? That's an unusual name."

He smiled.

Something was there between them—something that tugged on Salome to know more and move closer. It was Dusk who moved away, nodding to her as he exited the greenhouse and leaving Salome to wonder if all of the tension had only been in her mind.



Salome went through the motions, taking bites of food that she did not taste as the men discussed work she did not understand. Her thoughts had left her off-balance after her encounter with Dusk in the greenhouse. Percy had come home a few hours later and berated her for being lost in her own foolish thoughts for the better part of the day instead of seeing to Dusk's needs. It wasn't until after dinner had come and gone and the men had retired for a nightcap in the library that she had a chance to breath. She had been woken up to Percy pouring himself into bed smelling of whisky and cigarettes, but thankfully, his drunkenness soon had him snoring beside her. Salome was glad. She wasn't sure if she would have been able to handle lying there as he haphazardly thrust between her thighs. Sex between them was never the stuff of romance novels like the ones she had hidden away in the attic. It was as dull and lackluster as the rest of her marriage, leaving her unsatisfied and resentful.

“Salome?”

She blinked quickly, looking up from her plate when she heard her name. Both Percy and Dusk were looking at her with very different expressions on their faces. Dusk looked almost concerned, which was unfamiliar to her. She was far more familiar with the annoyance clearly shown on Percy's face. She set her fork down.

“My apologies.”

Percy narrowed his eyes at her. “Yes, you must forgive my wife, Dusk. She is often prone to frivolous thoughts causing her to neglect her duties.”

Salome clenched her jaw but said nothing. She didn't want to see the look on Dusk's face. Percy's hand came down hard on hers, making her wince slightly in pain.

“I was telling Dusk to save his appetite for dessert.” He squeezed her hand tighter. “Get the dessert and do try to pay more attention to the world around you.”

Salome pulled her hand away and stood. She risked a glance across the table and saw Dusk's gaze centered on her. His expression was blank,

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leaving Salome once again feeling off-balance. She apologized again before hurrying to the kitchen. She paused to take a few calming breaths before she went out. It also gave her time to double-check the dessert. She was extraordinarily proud of herself for it. Normally, Lucinda made a jello dessert for their after-dinner meal, but Salome had wanted to try something different and when she came across the hot milk cake recipe in one of her magazines, she decided to give it a try. She patted down her hair and sent up a little prayer that Dusk would like it.

No, Percy and Dusk. Not just Dusk. She corrected herself, picking up the cake dish and re-entering the dining room. The two men were still discussing something that earlier had gone over Salome's head, but they paused when she set the dish on the table.

"I hope you like it," she said giving Dusk a smile. "The description says it should be light and airy so hopefully it won't upset your stomach."

"I'm sure it will be delightful," he replied. Salome could feel her cheeks grow hot and she quickly ducked back into the kitchen to retrieve the dessert plates and forks. She could only hope that Percy thought her flushed cheeks were from embarrassment and not from Dusk. When she returned to the dining room, Percy's scowl was there to meet her.

"What the hell is this?"

Salome paused briefly before placing the plates and forks on the table. "It's the hot milk cake I mention—"

"We always have a jello cake for dessert. Didn't Lucinda make one?"

She swallowed against the knot in her throat. "No. I told her I would make the dessert tonight." She glanced at Dusk quickly before darting her eyes back to Percy. "I thought since we had a guest, I should make something different."

Percy narrowed his eyes. "You never made anything different for our other parties."

Salome's heart thumped painfully and she felt her breathing speed up as she desperately tried to think of something to say. "Percy, I—"

He held his hand up, cutting her off, and then the phone rang. She didn't speak as she watched Percy stand and leave the room. Her hands trembled slightly as she sat back down in her chair. She couldn't lift her head against the sting of tears. Percy's words shouldn't have hurt as much as they did, but that Dusk had born witness was almost too much to bear.

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Salome sat quietly, her mind locked in her own personal hell of negative thoughts. It wasn't until she heard the scraping sounds of utensils on plates that she hazarded a glance up. Dusk's piercing gaze was on hers as he lifted his hand taking a bite of the milk cake. She raised her head further with an incredulous expression. He chewed his bite slowly and Salome felt something like happiness fill her chest.

"You don't have to eat it, Dusk. I should have just let Lucinda make our normal dessert." Despite her words, Salome was grateful, and she didn't doubt that her expression showed that. Dusk took another bite—a larger one this time, chewing quickly before placing his fork down and leaning across the table. Salome couldn't stop her blush when one of his large hands covered hers.

"I stand by what I said yesterday, Salome. Percy is a fool not to realize what he has right under his nose." He squeezed her hand lightly and against Salome's best judgment, she turned her hand over to clasp his. She saw his eyes widen slightly and she felt a little thrill at her own daring. It was a dangerous game she was playing, and she knew it. Dusk had to have known it too, but she couldn't help but reach out to the warmth she had been missing. Dusk was a flame and she was drawn in, unwilling to fight against the pull. Before she was ready, Dusk pulled away, sitting back in his chair and lifting his fork again right as Percy rounded the corner and stepped back into the dining room. Salome could feel his eyes on her, but she looked back down at her plate, knowing that her eyes would have betrayed her.

"Dusk, Mr. Needlemyer needs us to meet him tonight. Something about a rogue individual backing out of the deal at the eleventh hour." Percy's voice sounded strangely devoid of emotion and that made Salome finally look up. The only time his voice sounded like that was when he was angry and trying to hide it. She tried to regain some semblance of normalcy.

"Is everything okay?" Salome asked, looking between the two men. Her eyes lingered on Dusk as he took the final bite of his slice of cake before standing. She felt a sliver of pride at how quickly he had finished the cake regardless of whether it was truly good or if he were just humoring her. When her gaze landed back on Percy, his eyes were narrowed and something unnamed swirled in them. "Percy?"

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He strode over to her, abruptly gripping the back of her neck. It was a hold Salome was used to, but the strength of his hold made her wince and she followed his guidance to stand. His other arm wrapped tightly around her waist pulling her uncomfortably close to him. Percy's stomach pushed into hers and she sucked in a startled breath when his lips landed painfully on hers. It wasn't like they didn't kiss. Salome performed her wifely duties as needed, though she rarely felt fulfilled from them. Kissing Percy usually didn't make her feel anything, but now it made her feel embarrassed and unclean at having Dusk there watching. She brought her hands up to Percy's chest, but she froze, unsure of whether she should pull him close or push him away. Instead, she went limp and closed her eyes tightly hoping it would be over soon.

When Percy finally pulled back, Salome opened her eyes and forced a smile on her face. She brushed her hands shakily over his shoulders in a parody of affection.

"Be careful," she croaked out having to swallow again to make her voice work fully. "Will you be back tonight?"

Percy's eyes were still narrowed as he stared at her. "Probably not until late." He gave her neck one final painful squeeze before releasing her with a slight push. He turned and gestured at the table. "Clean up this mess. I sent Lucinda home for the night since she wasn't needed."

Salome swallowed hard and nodded. She forced herself not to glance over at Dusk while Percy's gaze was still on her. In the guise of following directions immediately, she turned to the table and began gathering her own dishes to take into the kitchen. She heard Percy and Dusk talking briefly and looked up from beneath her eyelashes. Both men's backs were turned as they exited the room, Dusk bringing up the rear. But before they turned the corner, Dusk looked back at Salome over his shoulder. When the men finally disappeared and she heard the front door close and lock, she let out the breath she had been holding and sank back down in her chair. Whatever this was she felt for Dusk was growing more and more present by the day and she wasn't sure how to hide the burgeoning feelings when she didn't completely understand them herself.



Breakfast was quiet, putting Salome on edge. The evening before, she had finally given up waiting for them men to return around midnight and had fallen into a fitful sleep rousing slightly when the bed dipped from Percy joining her. Normally, he would pull her into a tight embrace as they slept and while Salome never really enjoyed it, that he hadn't the night before was slightly concerning. She hadn't smelt any alcohol on him though, and she hadn't wanted to make him angry, so she had simply forced herself to relax and fallen back to sleep. His silence had carried into the morning as Lucinda served breakfast and Salome tried not to vibrate out of her seat with anxiety. The silence was oppressive, and Salome couldn't deal with it anymore.

"So how was your evening?" she asked carefully. "You got back pretty late."

Percy grunted. "It was fine."

"Was it a big problem?"

"No."

She nodded trying not to feel hurt at his monosyllabic answer. "I could have packed you some of the cake to bring last night so you guys had something to eat while you worked."

He glanced over at her. "Why?"

She shrugged. "Just for a late-night snack."

"You've never bothered to make me one before."

"I've packed you a lunch—"

"No," Percy interrupted loudly. "You haven't made me a damn thing. Lucinda packs lunch. Lucinda puts in desserts or snacks. You have not taken interest in doing any of that for me, so why bother now?" Salome shrank into her seat at the accusation in his tone and averted her gaze.

"I didn't want to risk putting something in that you might not like."

"Well you certainly don't seem to have that same fear now. So, what changed, huh? Is it because of him?"

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She looked up in shock. "Who? Dusk?"

Percy scowled. "Yes, him. Dusk. You haven't taken interest in doing anything other than gardening since you got here. All of a sudden he shows up and you want to make desserts and ask about my fucking night."

Salome stood up trying not to let it show how off balance she was. "I've always been interested. This has nothing to do with Dusk." She gathered her plate and utensils in shaking hands and carried them to the kitchen. She worked hard to school her face into a more neutral expression even as her thoughts raced. She had been trying so hard to not let her emerging feelings for Dusk show and she thought she had been hiding them well. This wasn't the first time Percy had shown his jealousy over her talking with another man, but it was the first time the jealousy was warranted. Salome didn't know what to do with that.

She placed her dishes in the sink and braced herself against the counter. She took in a deep breath trying to calm her emotions. The sound of the door behind her slamming into the wall made her jump and she whirled around in time to see Percy bearing down on her with his own plate in his hands.

"I wasn't done fucking talking to you," he bellowed, voice bouncing off the walls.

She put her hands up. "I'm sorry, Percy. It's just you weren't making sense."

"I wasn't making sense?" He yelled out, eyes wide and wild. His face was red as he spit out his words. Salome opened her mouth to respond but yelped instead when he threw the plates in the sink beside her. The plates shattered, making her cry out in fear. She tried to move away, but before she could take more than a step away, Percy grabbed her arms in a rough grip.

"Who the fuck do you think you are?" He shook her hard. Salome's legs trembled as she tried to think quickly. Her brain was in panic mode and she couldn't do more than let out a pained whimper. Never before had she been grabbed like this, hard enough to bruise.

"Percy, please." Her plea fell on deaf ears as he pushed her back until the counter dug painfully into her lower back.

"Percy please what?" He snarled. "Please don't tell you what a shit wife you are? Don't tell you that I see how you look at Dusk? I'm not stupid

nor am I fucking blind.” He shook her harshly again. “You don’t know what he is.”

Fear, real fear, skirted up Salome’s spine. Percy had been dismissive and negligent before, but he had never been violent with her.

“You have no idea what I do to protect you; to protect the world, from them.” He laughed at her, though the sound was far from amused. “And here you are, falling for that thing. You are my fucking wife, do you understand me?”

“Percy, I—”

“Do you understand me?!”

Salome nodded even as she felt hot tracks of tears racing down her face. “Yes. Yes, I understand.”

“Good. It’s time you learned your place,” he spit out, letting go of her arms and reaching up. Salome winced and cowered slightly until his hands cupped her cheeks. She looked into his eyes, disgusted at the possession she saw there. He pulled her face to his in a kiss that was more a hard press of his teeth against her lips than anything else. There was no affection, no love. It left Salome feeling hollow and shaken. This was not what she imagined for her life and now she was trapped. Percy pulled away, lips turned up in a cruel imitation of a smile. He pushed her face away and turned his back to her.

“It doesn’t matter. That creature will be dead before midnight; tonight. Now, clean up this kitchen and go fix your face.” He didn’t give her time to comment before leaving the kitchen.

Salome leaned against the counter until she heard the front door open and close and Percy’s car start up. Only when she heard the sounds of it pulling down the drive did she allow herself to take a sobbing breath in before sinking to the floor. She was horrified and in shock, unable to understand how this had started. Percy’s words confused her and she contemplated exactly what they meant.

Them? Thing? He spoke as if Dusk wasn’t human and that he planned to kill him, tonight.

She wasn’t sure how long she sat on the floor but slowly she became aware of someone calling her name. Salome tried to focus her gaze and slowly Dusk’s concerned face came into view. He was perched down beside her.

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“Salome, God, are you okay?”

“Dusk?” She whispered. It took her a few moments to come back into herself. She let him help her up until she was standing somewhat steadily on her own. “What? I’m fine.” It was automatic for her now to answer that way. The fight had drained out of her.

He gave her a look of disbelief. “Salome, there is no way that anything that just happened is okay. You are not fine.”

Her lower lip trembled but she forced herself to calm. Falling apart wouldn’t help her figure out what to do. “I—”

“Don’t lie to me, please.” His request was earnest enough to make her pause on the lie. Truthfully, she wasn’t fine. Nothing about any of this was okay.

“I...I’m not okay,” she finally admitted. It was hard to say that—hard to say that she was frightened and confused. She was expecting a nod, some verbal acknowledgment of what she had just admitted. What Salome wasn’t expecting was to be enveloped in strong arms. This embrace was nothing like the violence that Percy had touched her with.

That’s when she noticed his skin was as cold as ice.

“He said some terribly horrible things...about you.”

“What did he say?”

“It didn’t sound right. He didn’t make any sense. He called you a thing and he said you’d be dead before midnight.”

“He knows?” His eyes stared off in the distance. “He must have always known.” He then turned back to her. “I’m so sorry, Salome. You deserve so much more than this,” he said softly. His voice was so steady and sure that Salome couldn’t even try to deny it.

“I’ve never heard him threaten anyone like that before, besides myself.”

Salome tried to fight the pull. Percy’s words were still ringing in her ears and they made her flush hot and cold with fear. But Dusk’s hold was everything Percy’s was not. She didn’t feel trapped. Salome felt supported and cherished in ways she had always hoped but had never gotten. It made a quiet sob of relief tear from her throat. She didn’t even try to stop herself from reacting, returning Dusk’s hold by putting her arms around his back and pulling him tight against her.

“It’s...it’s complicated,” he spoke. “It shouldn’t involve you.”

“He threatened you.”

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“I know. But believe me, it’s not the first time that they have.”

“I don’t understand.” She buried her face in his chest and let herself breathe deeply.

“Shhh, don’t worry. I promise you, he will never treat you like this ever again.”

“But he’s right.” The worst part was that she knew it was true. “These feelings I have for you...I am his wife.” She pulled away slightly and peered up at him, trying to gage his reaction to her honesty.

Salome expected him to let her go and back away with apologies about her not being his type. That would have been the sane response. Instead, Salome found her lips covered in a kiss that turned her world on its axis. Her gasp of surprise was swallowed by his lips as they moved over hers and he took advantage of her parted lips, his tongue sweeping in and making Salome’s eyes slam shut with the feeling. This kiss was nothing like she had ever had and everything that she had previously dreamed of. His hand rested on the side of her neck, his thumb brushing the line of her jaw and making her shiver.

A feeling of want so strong Salome would have collapsed if not for the strong arm around her waist ripped through her, burning away all thought of stopping. Dusk’s tongue tangled with hers and they pressed together until not even a puff of air could come between them. Salome could have happily died with his lips on hers, so she was startled when they suddenly disappeared, leaving her clutching air and stumbling slightly.

“Wha—” Salome’s voice died when he pulled away.

He moved and stood beside the refrigerator and that’s when she noticed his crimson red eyes trained on her and intricate red lines on his forearm and his cheeks. At first, she wanted to scream, but the thought of his lips brushing up against hers again pushed her fear aside. She licked her lips and groaned internally at the hint of Dusk she could still taste on them.

“I’m sorry.” He covered his mouth. “I didn’t—”

“What are you?” She brushed her fingers over her lips, shivering slightly at how sensitive they were.

He hurried out of the room.

She had a lot to think about, though she knew that the kiss would be the thought dominating her mind for the coming days before Dusk left.

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Salome glanced up at the clock again, noting the late hour. Other than the craziness of the morning, the day had gone by uneventfully, leaving her with one too many hours to agonize over Percy's behavior and fantasize about her and Dusk's kiss. Absently she brushed her fingers over her lips again. They weren't as sensitive as they had been that morning, but she could still feel the phantom press of his lips against hers. Even more, she knew without a doubt that she wanted that feeling again.

She had fallen for the man without even realizing it and if that kiss was any indication, it seemed he felt the same way too. But what could be done about it? Salome was married, and not just to anyone. She didn't have any money to leave Percy, and even if she did, there was still no guarantee that Dusk would take her with him. She didn't even know where he called home.

She didn't even know if he was human.

His appearance didn't frighten her. It did the exact opposite. It made her curious.

With a sigh, she stared at the empty chairs next to and across from her. After Dusk had left, neither he nor Percy had returned. She spent most of the day replaying the hottest kiss she had ever been a part of in her life. She pondered what would have happened had he not pulled away. Would they have taken things further?

"Right. Enough of that," she said to herself, standing up from the table. She had sent Lucinda home when it didn't appear the men were coming for dinner. She carried her plate and utensils into the kitchen, placing them in the sink and turning on the water. There were two plates of food in the stove in case Percy or Dusk came back and wanted to eat, so she might as well go ahead and clean up her own mess.

The sound of the front door banging open startled her, but when she heard Percy's familiar grumbling, she relaxed slightly, ignoring the pang of disappointment. She focused on the water as his footsteps grew louder and the door to the kitchen was opened.

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“Welcome home,” Salome called out trying to sound like her old self. “There is a plate for you in the stove if you’re hungry.”

She heard a snort and turned to look at him over her shoulder. Percy was leaning against the wall, but his gaze was trained on her. She noticed a small opened gash on his forehead and dried blood on the front of his shirt. In his right hand he held a crossbow.

Salome covered her mouth, unsure of what she was looking at.

“Does it look like I’m hungry?” Percy’s words were slurred. He pushed off the wall and slowly staggered towards her. Salome forced herself not to react to the taunt.

“What happened? Are you alright?”

“Like you care.” He sneered.

“Percy, tell me.”

“I killed it.” He stumbled closer. “I killed that damn wraith.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Were you not listening earlier today?!” he raised his voice. “That thing; Dusk. That’s what he is. A damn wraith.”

Salome turned, wrinkling her nose as the scent of blood wafted over her. “You also must have hit your head. Maybe I should call a doctor.” She was expecting him to slur out more insults or accusations, but not for him to lunge for her, grabbing her around the neck.

“Do you know what I do for a living?”

“Percy, stop.” Salome brought her hands up to grip his wrists as real fear shot down her spine.

“I asked you a question. Do you know?”

“No. Percy, please.”

“I work for The Brotherhood as a researcher. I research demonic creatures,” he said in a low growl. “But you wouldn’t know that because you spend all day in this house, doing absolutely nothing!”

“You’re hurting me.”

“I’m hurting you?” He rumbled, leaning in until his face drew close. “You hurt me when you fell for that thing.” His voice was yelling by the time he finished his last word.

Salome gasped when his grip tightened and she tried to pull his hand away. She started to panic when his hand didn’t budge. “Percy, let me go!”

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“You are the wife of a Brotherhood researcher,” he roared in her face, nails digging into the skin of her neck. “Falling for a creature like him is like a slap in the face!”

With a cry of pain, Salome fought again to get free, raking her own nails over the skin of his arm. Percy shouted and let her go briefly. Before Salome could get her legs working, his hand came down on her left cheek with a hard crack. Bright hot pain bloomed across her face as she stumbled with the force of the blow and fell to the floor.

“I’ve been hunting that thing down for years and you almost ruined it.”

“I’m sorry! I didn’t know!” The pain and shock stole her breath and she covered her cheek with her hand as tears ran in rivulets down her cheeks. Never had she been hit before. She gazed up, not understanding the man she saw above her. Percy’s nostrils flared and his hands were curled into tight fists. The panic Salome felt exploded into full on fight or flight, and she tried to gather her legs underneath her.

A heavy weight fell on her then and she struggled against it, twisting and turning against it and the floor. Fingers slid in her hair, gripping and jerking her head back painfully. Another blow rained down on her other cheek, this time with knuckles to amplify the hit. Sharper pain bloomed and she shut her eyes as she cried out.

“Percy, don’t!” Her plea went unanswered and she reached up to find anything that could help her escape. “Stop, please!”

“You’ll learn,” he screamed out, wrenching her onto her back this time and hitting her in the chest. Salome’s breath whistled out of her as bright spots darted in front of her eyes. She brought her knee up, connecting with a soft mound of flesh. Percy’s shout of pain was followed by a release of the pressure. Wasting no time, Salome pushed to her feet and rushed towards the back door. Her face was in pain and her chest hurt with each breath, but she fought against it. Her hand gripped the doorknob right as something hard connected with the back of her skull, pitching her forward. Her nose and forehead connected with the doorframe and her vision went multi-colored as she fell.

She groaned in pain, bringing her hand up to feel the back of her head. She opened her eyes, unable to focus but seeing the crimson stain on her fingers. She knew there was blood on her face, but she couldn’t get things straight. Her head throbbed, stealing her breath, but before she could try

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again, Percy fell onto her once again and gripped her throat, squeezing tightly.

“Percy,” she gasped.

“You want to be one? You can die like one!”

She only had a moment to groan when she saw him raise his other hand and the light caught on something sharp and metallic. Sharp burning pain radiated upward and had her screaming as the tip of his arrow laced through her side. Her back arched as she tried to get away from it. It hurt just as much when he pulled it out, raising it up again. This time she could see it was stained with her blood.

Words failed her as she felt liquid rush from her side. Everywhere was nothing but pain and fear. Dark spots began to fill Salome’s vision as she gasped for breath against the hold on her throat. There was no hope. Percy was wild eyed above her, lips curled in a snarl as he ranted.

“You are mine. I’ll kill you before I let that thing turn you.”

She went limp as the hopelessness of it washed over her. Percy was going to kill her, and she couldn’t stop him. Already she felt less pain than before, and she was colder. She closed her eyes, not wanting to see anymore and braced for what she hoped would be the final pain before death. Suddenly, the hold on her throat was ripped away and a new sound reached her ears.

“You! I killed you!” Salome could hear Percy yell and then scream before being cut off abruptly by a wet sound. Her head lulled to the side and she opened her eyes, unsure of what she was seeing. Nothing mattered now. She was dying, and that was it. She caught sight of her savior and let out a pained whimper of surprise. The other person turned, revealing himself to be a crimson-stained Dusk. His hands and face were covered in blood and this time his red eyes burned with a strange inner fire that she had never seen.

She let out a tortured breath as her body spasmed and was quickly swept into Dusk’s arms. The movement jostled her, making Salome cry out in pain.

“I’m sorry,” Dusk said, hand reaching over to cover her side. “I should have gotten here quicker. I didn’t think he wou—”

“Hurts,” Salome whispered.

“I know.” He leaned over kissing her forehead. “This is all my fault. I

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put you in harm's way by coming here." He brushed his thumb over her cheek, smearing blood. "I came here to kill him but I didn't know! I didn't know he was married."

Salome tried to lift her hand to touch his cheek but the pain was too much.

"I can help you but only if you agree. Do you want me to help you?"

She replied in a raspy voice, "Yes," before finally closing her eyes. She didn't understand what he meant, but she was happy to spend her last few moments in his arms.

She felt Dusk's body shift before his lips pressed against hers, for what she felt would be the final time. Then she felt her body began to grow weak and pressure increase as he started to suck violently.

He pulled back. "It'll be just a few moments."

She whined when her throat and tongue began to tingle with the strange warmth spreading through her.

"It'll pass," he whispered, "and you'll feel so much better."

Salome's muscles clamped down and she opened her eyes gaze instinctively, finding Dusk's. Everything seemed too bright now and her blood ran hot then cold. She wanted to ask him what was happening, but whatever was in her throat felt good.

When she tried to lift her hand to touch his face again, she saw dark veins pulsating underneath her now pale skin.

THE NOT-SO DEAD



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