

Helena

Helena was terrified of the dawn. Each morning she lay awake, her tiny hands wringing her blanket as she watched the sunlight approach her bed. She hated it. She didn't trust the way it *slithered* across the floor, devouring everything it touched.

She watched as it passed over her teddybear—the one that Father had angrily snatched from her hands the day before and then over the flowery dress she had been wearing. And then, perfectly on cue, was the sound that always came after the sunlight: the heavy stomping of her Father's workboots.

He looked in at her. His nose was running and his eyes were red. Helena hoped that he was sick, but not so sick that he'd stay home. "I'm going to work," her father said. "I want dinner at twelve. *Wurst.*"

It didn't matter that Helena was barely tall enough to reach the hob, let alone cook on it... Father still insisted that she cook for him every day. Burns covered Helena's wrists and arms from handling pots and pans that were too big for her, but that was the least of the harm he had done to her.

Helena nodded and prayed that he would *turn around* instead of stepping into her bedroom. He remained in the doorway for what seemed like an eternity, consuming her with his sickly eyes. She quivered beneath the blanket and held her breath.

That morning, as soon as he was gone, Helena fled.

She had no idea where she was running to, all that she knew was that she needed to get away. Something had awoken in her during the last few weeks--something akin to the first stirrings of womanhood.

She had decided that it would be better to die alone in the forest than be used by her demon of a father even once more. Helena knew all about demons from the Bible she kept hidden in the cupboard under her shoes. She wasn't religious, but it was the only book of stories that she had ever owned.

Helena ran into the tangled thickets near her house, which was located near a small English village named Dioran. Thin black branches whipped at her as she passed and the pain was intense enough to bring tears to her eyes. But there was something *pure* in the pain, something untainted by the grotesque touch of her Father and she quickly came to revel in it.

Helena stumbled on a rock and a sudden sheet of rain swept through the woods. The entire forest dripped and dark branches protruded between the glossy leaves like javelins. She staggered on, her feet sinking into the mud. She was crying, big heaving sobs that made it difficult to walk, but she kept on.

She had resigned herself to it, Helena realised: what she sought so desperately in the forest was not freedom... but death.

They are the same thing, child, said a whisper through the trees.

It was not much longer before Helena's body gave out. She sank to her knees amidst a bed of ivy. Blood ran in streams from her arms and legs. She wailed into the dirt and thumped it with her fists and only then did she begin to grow afraid, as she began to realise how tall the plants and trees seemed all around her. From the forest floor she could barely see the clouds through the gaps in the foliage.

Helena shivered. At least part of her was regretting her decision, but she knew that it was too late for regrets. Nobody knew where she was and she did not have enough energy to make it home even if she wanted to. Her body began to convulse and she began to claw desperately at the dirt. What she did not expect was for her fingers to discover something buried in the soil beneath her.

Although the rain had stopped, thick droplets still pelted Helena's back as they tumbled down from the forest canopy. She used her hands to scoop out great wet handfuls of dirt and piled them beside her as she sought to reveal whatever it was that was buried beneath her.

She tore away ivy where it dangled in her way and continued to push back the dirt until she revealed a face peering up at her, carved out of stone. The face appeared to be female: thick-lashed and with waves of long hair that coiled around her face like serpents. A long, forked tongue protruded between the lips of the carving and her eyes were dark, sunken pits.

Helena wondered who had left the tablet buried here and how long ago. She was thrilled to have discovered something that nobody else knew about—except for the toads and the gnats.

Feed me, said a voice then, or at least Helena thought those were the words that she heard before her own stomach grumbled and she remembered that she hadn't eaten breakfast that morning.

Why are you running?

"Because I am afraid," Helena told the demon stone. Her body was still shaking and she was deathly pale. Her eyelids were growing heavy and she no longer felt cold. Was this it? She wondered. Was she about to die? Without really thinking about it, her slender fingers continued to pick at the dirt between the grooves in the stone.

Rest, child.

The space she had cleared atop the stone tablet suddenly appeared more inviting than her own bed ever had. Helena crawled onto the stone, pungent earth pressing in on her from all sides. Blood trickled from the dozens of superficial wounds she had sustained and fell to the stone where it gathered in the grooves there.

Helena lowered her head to the carving and surrendered herself to the forest.

When Father got home that afternoon, the first thing he noticed was that the hob was off. "Helena!" He called. "Where's my wurst?"

"In here, Father," called Helena from her bedroom.

Father clenched his teeth and balled both of his hands into fists. He did not open the door to Helena's bedroom with his hands, but struck at it with his foot. The wood splintered and he swore. "What are you doing in here?" he asked her, his eyes bulging grotesquely from his face. "Where... is... my... dinner..."

Helena was sitting on the edge of her bed, with her legs crossed. She did not flinch at the sound of her Father's entry or his raised voice. She did not cower as he was accustomed to her doing. But none of this achieved anything except making him angrier.

"What have you done to yourself?" He asked, because Helena was wearing only a towel. Dozens of scratches and bruises criss-crossed her porcelain skin. "And your *hair*? What have you done to your hair?"

Helena's hair had always been so blonde that it almost appeared white, but since Father had left this morning she had found some way to dye it the colour of coal.

"I was in the forest," she said simply and did a little shrug with her shoulders. There was something different in her mannerisms. Something *adult*. It reminded him of Helena's mother and he snarled. He pulled at a chest of drawers and the few toys Helena owned were strewn across the floor. His heavy boot crushed the head of her favourite doll, but *still* Helena did not flinch.

"I don't know what you're playing at," said Father. "But I want my dinner on the table *now*."

"I don't *need* to cook for you anymore, Father," said Helena with a smug smile.

"That's it," mumbled Father and took a step towards Helena's bed. He raised his right fist and showed his yellow teeth. The stench of alcohol wafted across her. "I'm going to teach you how to behave."

Their eyes met and they looked into one another. It was at that moment that Helena's father realised that the fear truly was gone from her eyes and had been replaced with something else entirely. There was a *darkness* in her, lingering storm clouds that dwelt in her pupils and crackled with fierce lightning in each iris.

"I'm going to teach *you* how to die," she said.

Father took a step backwards and grimaced. His fist turned into a flat palm that he placed against his chest. "Something's wrong..." he said as he fell to his knees. "Helena... help..."

"Sorry, *Father*," said the little girl on the bed. "Helena's not here right now."

Later, the only police constable in Dioran saw a young girl with black hair standing alone in the centre of the main street, glancing both ways along it as though she was lost.

“Can I help you?” said the officer, but when he saw the vacant look in her eyes he wished that he hadn’t asked.

“Where are... the people?” said Helena. She licked her lips.

“I, uh... Most everyone is in McGrath’s Tavern at this time of day. Are you looking for someone?”

“No,” said the girl. “I’m looking for *everyone*,” she smiled sweetly at the officer--or at least, it was a smile that was *supposed* to be sweet, but had a strangeness about it that made the constable feel even more uncomfortable. Her dark hair danced around her face as she strutted away.

Whenever the door to McGrath’s Tavern opened, everyone inside would immediately put their drinks down and turn in unison to look upon the newcomer.

“Rough day, constable?” said McGrath junior, who had inherited the business from his father ten years ago.

“You wouldn’t know the half of it,” said the constable as he approached the bar. People were already returning to their drinks and conversations, having established that it was one of their own that had entered the pub and not some upstart interloper. “Did anyone else see a little girl outside?”

“Why, are you lookin’ for one?” someone asked and there were a few cackles of drunken laughter.

“What was she, lost?” asked McGrath.

“She could’ve come ‘ome with me,” said one fat, grey-haired old bastard who always sat in the same corner of the pub. Nobody else would have dared to sit on the stool that he used... not that anyone would have ever wanted to.

That comment caused another outburst of laughter from most of the tavern’s patrons. The constable grimaced. “Never mind,” he said. “Give me a pint,” he asked McGrath.

Behind him, the door to the tavern opened again.

There was no blood—only bodies. Sir David Rothschild hadn’t seen anything like it since the entire Court of Crescentworth had been poisoned some seven-hundred years earlier.

“What happened?” Rothschild asked Charlotte Cassaday, who had entered the tavern a few paces behind him.

"I don't know," said the necromancer. "I can't hear them. I can't hear... *anything*."

But then a sound rose in both of their ears that they recognised at once; it was the sound of sobbing. They followed the sound into the kitchen and found Helena there, hiding in a cupboard that was once full of pots and pans.

Kitchen implements were now strewn across the floor and the little girl had squashed herself into the cupboard in their place, her knees pressed up against her face.

"Come out of there," said Rothschild. "Let me help you."

"Don't touch me!" she squealed, but Rothschild had already grabbed her by the ankles and dragged her free. Helena did not fight back; she merely sat limp on the kitchen floor and cried.

"Please," said Rothschild to the girl. "We need you to tell us what happened. You need to tell us what you saw, so that we can stop it from happening again. You're safe now."

"But are *we*?" said Charlotte, who was looking down at the girl with her arms crossed and no small amount of disdain on her pursed red lips.

Rothschild ignored her. He was well-used to Charlotte's sarcastic jibes. He had always assumed that it had something to do with the fact she was a vampire—going without sunlight for more than 50 years clearly took its toll on a person's sense of humour. Although, had he known her when she was still alive, he would have realised that she had *always* been this way.

"Please," Rothschild implored Helena. "Please tell me what happened... *anything*."

The little girl sniffled and wiped her nose with her sleeve. She looked up at Rothschild and her bottom lip quivered. "I killed him," she said through her tears. "I killed Father and now I am all alone."

Rothschild's heart skipped a beat. He knew a thing or two about loneliness and so did Charlotte by the way she went to her knees beside Helena and ran a hand through the girl's long, dark hair. It was unusual for her to display such an act of kindness.

"You're not alone anymore," said Charlotte.

"She's right," said Rothschild. "You have us now. We'll protect you."

"Who... are you?" asked the girl with wide, wet eyes.

"We're Eastcrest," they said in unison.