

## Marked

Up until now, it had been a long while since I strolled the streets of New York City. I'd wanted to come back here after I left nearly half a century ago. There was a pull to my hometown, though I always harbored the thought that something was wrong with the place. A ridiculous suspicion, no doubt, but a significant one nonetheless. Maybe I'm paranoid.

I returned mostly because of Mark. He was unremittingly mischievous, constantly pulling minor pranks and committing small offenses for which people would say "shame on you" while waving their finger in his face. Upon the closing stages of adolescence he evolved into a more sophisticated delinquent and much later progressed to commit worse – yet elegantly flawless – crimes that I've unfortunately witnessed.

I strive to keep him in check, however futile the attempt may prove to be. Every effort is made to curtail his criminal and violent tendencies because I care for his soul, amid its highly debated existence. I incessantly listen for any mark of his presence, and tonight was no different.

I was standing in an alley. Hidden in the thick fog, I watched as he walked. He was strolling down a deserted street with his head cocked to one side, as if to listen more carefully. His lax gait and pale, expressionless face made his average features look more ominous. The notion reminded me of Stevenson's description of Edward Hyde, where Utterson described him as being physically repulsive without being able to describe anything about his appearance that made him so. It was as if evil itself bled through his features, desperate to be seen. Watching him walk down the street, I could relate to the character of that renowned book.

The low, sharp sound of his black Oxford shoes hitting the concrete spilled through the air like rippling waves on the surface of a pond. His left hand seemed to twitch slightly, as if in an

act of mutiny against the rest of his body. The fingers curled inward and then flexed outward again to express their impatience. His frock coat billowed around his lean figure as a soft wind blew by, covering the suit jacket underneath. Black tailored trousers and a plain black bowtie completed the ensemble, though the commonly worn waistcoat was neglected. He continued walking.

A lost child walked silently down the block about fifteen yards ahead, her red-hair-covered face stricken with terror. Her small beige and white dress was ruffled and slightly wrinkled with lace embroidered into the hem. The girl's red hair was done in smooth curls, made to look as soft copper coils tied with white ribbons. She looked the youngest member of a small family that was financially stable, though none of said family was within earshot or any line of sight. Mark's head abruptly moved an inch to the left and his mouth curved upward slightly. His eyes lazily drifted in the girl's direction, and I followed.

After a minute of stalking his prey, Mark finally closed in on her as his feet slithered to a stop four feet away. The girl, finally noticing his presence, reluctantly turned to her right and looked into Mark's eyes – eyes with only pupils. Then he smiled, flaunting long, pointed canines. She stayed rooted to the spot, paralyzed with fear, as Mark knelt in front of her. The little redheaded girl's eyes widened further as she stared at where his irises should have been. He spoke softly, his voice almost blending with the air.

“Do not worry, little one. It will be over soon.”

He picked her up in his arms, just as a father would his daughter. The girl did not say a word as he pulled her neck toward his mouth.

I closed the distance between Mark and myself in a fraction of a second, slamming into him with the right side of my body. He dropped the girl and I reacted, moving to slip my arms

beneath her as Mark was launched across the street into a brick wall, breaking a section of it in a small puff of dust. She settled into my arms a few feet above the ground, and I knelt to set her down on the concrete.

“Run,” I blurted.

She stood, frozen.

“Go!” I ordered.

She finally ran away in silence, too frightened to scream. I turned back in Mark’s direction, only to find him standing next to me. Mark’s eyes widened a little, green flowing back in around his pupils. He feigned shock but then he smiled the same malicious smile he always did.

“Mark,” I acknowledged.

“Why hello, Michael. I have not seen you in several months. You neither write nor call, nothing. I confess that I am a little hurt. Upset, even,” he shared nonchalantly. He paused. “But it is blood under the bridge, I suppose. I am still pleased to find my older brother walking anight.”

“Mark, that was just a child,” I said, ignoring the strained pleasantries.

“I fail to see the point that you are attempting to make.”

“Have you no decency at -”

“No,” he interrupted with a cordial smile as I kept talking.

“-all? You can’t just go around killing people.”

“I respectfully disagree. We both know that I have an uncanny affinity for that. Recall Whitechapel, London, twelve years ago? I was not dubbed ‘Ripper’ for nothing, though that letter was not mine. But do not be so dramatic, Michael. I was merely bored, then. Now I only kill if I am hungry, or if one foolishly impedes me.”

Mark shifted his weight sideways and slid his legs slightly farther apart. His hands drifted into his pockets, almost as if he were relaxed to the point of boredom.

“It’s not necessary to kill for food,” I said, raising my voice angrily. Mark rolled his eyes dramatically as he tilted his head into the moonlight.

“I am aware. But I have always been one to go above and beyond the normal standards,” he smirked.

“Mark, please,” I implored. “There’s no need for this. You can live like I do.”

“Oh, yes, what an interesting notion to entertain. Live like my kin, and be the noble predator that inflicts pain on humans but does not kill.” He pretended to think for a few seconds, donning a pensive look before he answered. “No thank you, brother,” he replied with a laugh so cold it seemed to freeze the fog around us. “Why submit myself to a humdrum existence of snacking? Tell me, is it not tiresome to constantly erase the memories of those on whom you feed? You expend an inordinate amount of energy to discover you have done close to nothing to slake your hunger. It is rather ridiculous, really.” He sighed, collecting more words while I refused to speak. “Your chivalrous proposal might have been admirable if you could get a full meal out of it. Alas, this is not the case.”

“Don’t pretend that your joy of killing cedes with satiety.”

His eyes locked onto mine as green dissipated into white once again. He flashed his pearly whites. “I would not dream of it, brother. But let us skip to the part when you attempt to appeal to my nonexistent humanity, shall we?”

My hard and stoic exterior melted to reveal the concern I harbored underneath as I conceded. I exhaled and my shoulders slumped downward.

“When did you become so cold? I remember when all it took was a game of catch to make you happy. Now it’s bloodshed.”

Mark’s mocking expression receded into an empty one. “Why do you brand me the monster? There are horrors in this life much worse than death, Michael.”

“Have you not inflicted them upon the helpless?” I spat the accusation with disappointment sinking into my voice.

“Was I not helpless too, once?” Mark retorted. A flicker of torment flashed within his eyes before being forcibly snuffed out. “So why is it that you give me this speech knowing I was subjected to the worst punishment of all by someone you call family, in front of your very eyes? Do you not remember? I deserved neither the betrayal nor the penalty, and you just stood there and watched.” A humorless laugh crawled its way out of Mark’s throat. “I never had a problem being the middle child till just then. I am sure *your* precious baby brother never even batted an eye.”

I lowered my gaze as the all too familiar memory played behind my eyes. “Then how can you justify causing others the pain you endured?” My voice rose steadily with each word.

My brother’s forehead creased and his eyebrows pulled together in confusion. “I have never done that to anyone,” he quipped, momentarily regaining his trademark calmness. “Sure, I have maimed, murdered and mutilated, but I have never damned a soul to this hollow existence.”

I paused for a moment, confused at his correction. There seemed to be an underlying distinction. “I apologize for condemning you, then,” I retorted sarcastically. “You merely torture and kill innocents, not turn them.”

“Ah, now you get it,” Mark perked up mockingly. The fog had dissipated some and a cool breeze swept through the street, almost as if to mirror Mark’s relaxed exterior. His calm and apathetic attitude was convincing, but I wasn’t fooled.

“You talk of nonexistent humanity, yet you won’t...damn a soul? You care for these people on some level deep down inside, but you masquerade with a cracked façade smeared with the blood of your helpless victims. It isn’t right.”

“So I suppose it is left, then,” he chuckled half-heartedly. “I have no interest in right or wrong. Why should I? There is no Elysium, no eternal paradise for us after death.” His expression waned to a blank one, his voice dropping as he spoke again. “No, I am marked to watch these humans with rancor in my heart, and live forever.”

Green shimmered back into appearance over his scleras. Mark held a far-away look in his eyes as he seemed to stare through me. I knew he was replaying his rebirth in his head. We both were.

It had been a cool night in early September of the year 1722, right before summer’s fingertips caressed the town and bid it adieu with the promise of an autumn breeze. Mark and our brother Vincent had accompanied me to church early before assisting our father, William, well into the evening as the town’s family of blacksmiths. Vincent and I elected to stay behind and close shop as the others left for home. We returned our tools to their rightful places and covered the half-finished wrought iron gate intended for the church’s garden entrance before leaving to head home. The moon lit the town in a pale glow, illuminating the left sides of our bodies as we walked in pleasant silence, save for the sound of our footsteps. I’d been pleasantly ensnared in my own thoughts, oblivious to the fact that the sound of Vince’s footsteps had halted. Upon realizing, I casually turned to find out what made him stop.

His reason for halting was six feet tall with dark brown hair tied back. The scene of a male stranger's mouth on my brother's neck was at first confusing due to its lascivious nature until I saw blood trickle down Vince's skin while my brother's eyes stared with a glazed look. The man came up for air and raised his head in the moonlight to reveal his face. It wasn't a man.

Its face was covered in hard wrinkles, like a road map made of scars. Skin tightened over the bones of his skull in some places. Cheekbones and chin were more defined and blood smeared lips peeled back over teeth sharp like jagged shards of glass. The demon slackened his grip on my brother, who slumped heavily to the ground. It looked at me almost lazily, as if pleasantly full, with white eyes holding only a black dot in the center of each. The veins under them rose and protruded downward, red and vine-like on either side of its nose. A blur of motion clouded my vision. It was suddenly half a foot in front of me, and shock slipped into fear as it disappeared. There was an intense pain at the top of my right shoulder, and then nothing.

I'd found myself alone in a stable after regaining consciousness. I immediately set out to look for Vincent, running along the stalls in the stables until I found him in a corner of the last stall to the right covered in blood. There was a horse beside him, on its side in a puddle of red. It wasn't moving.

But it was alive. Just barely, but I could somehow hear its slowing heartbeat from where I stood. The overwhelming emptiness in my stomach seemed to take control of me and everything in sight suddenly became vivid before I lunged. I blindly gorged on what little of the life-sustaining red remained in the horse. In a panic, I staggered out of the stables, followed by Vincent, who dreaded being left alone. With home in mind, we picked up the pace and were astonished by the speed with which we'd inadvertently moved. Home appeared after a blur of colors and shapes, with Mark standing outside the house. A smile lit his face at the sight of his

brothers. I returned it in kind, and watched my brother walk to greet me. He was then halted abruptly by a familiar figure moving in a blur. My eyes adjusted to the speed to find Vincent tearing into Mark's flesh. I watched, paralyzed with horror, as one of my brothers drained the life from the other. Mark unceremoniously slumped to the ground in a heap, dying. Vincent's eyes went wide, and he stumbled backward at the sight of his brother. He turned to me with tears in his eyes at the realization of his actions. I couldn't move.

I watched in a stupor as Vincent knelt at Mark's side and wildly searched the sky for forgiveness. Mark's heartbeat was rapidly slowing down, and Vincent resigned to do the only thing he could. We knew what we had become. The town's pubs were always awash with stories of the undead, those who prey on humans and roam the night in search of blood. Some were said to let their victims live so that they could feed on them later, so they always had a meal. They were stronger than ten men and could move faster than the eye could see. They had no souls and could smell the fear of the innocent. They were the embodiment of darkness. They – we – were vampires.

We heard stories of the process, how one became a creature of the night. It was simple, yet didn't happen often (supposedly for fear of future competition for food). Undead blood was the key. Vincent retrieved the blade he always kept on him since he was twelve from his pocket, and slashed his left wrist open. Blood poured from the gash liberally and he covered Mark's slackened mouth with his wrist. Blood seeped into his system, and his heart stopped beating.

Two and a half minutes went by as Vincent and I stayed rooted to the spot, met by the smell of food wafting from inside our home. The townspeople normally kept to themselves this late, and so Vincent and I were alone outside with our dead brother. Then Mark opened his eyes.



I looked at my brother through the dissipating fog. The pain of silence was unbearable, and so I destroyed it.

“Vincent has regretted every moment since.”

A snarl crept across his face as a vicious growl ripped through his lips at the sound of our little brother’s name. “It is not recompense enough.”

“When will you forgive him for turning you?” My throat released the question in much softer a tone than intended.

“When he is dead. And if our paths have the misfortune of crossing again, I will rip his throat out myself,” whispered Mark with calm anger.

“I just want to know why,” I deadpanned. “You love being what we are. You love the power and the superiority. So why the hell would you hate him for turning you? You should be thanking your brother.”

Fury exploded through Mark, manifesting in his facial features as the demon within showed itself once more.

“*Thanking him?*” he hissed loudly, eyes narrowing into slits. “Our baby brother chose to drain me in a bout of uncontrollable thirst, and as I lay dying in front of the two of you, I forgave him! Life was slipping away from me, and I was ready to die with no qualms.” He stopped abruptly. The pain in his eyes was so evident that I felt tortured just to watch. I knew there was something missing. He finally continued.

“Can you fathom what it is like to have paradise ripped from you with the promise of never seeing it again? *Can you, brother?* For mere seconds, I was bathed in a precious brightness that felt like life *itself*, a warm pureness of immeasurable peace and serenity. I loved you and forgave

you with endless contentment and a longing to watch over the two of you.” His voice dropped to barely a whisper. “And I awoke in darkness.”

Silence wrapped around us again, like an uncomfortable blanket. I couldn’t respond. My jaw relaxed and the words I wanted to say wouldn’t come. All I could do was look at my brother and accept the truth that he had withheld for nearly two hundred years. Mark spoke again, and as his normal visage came back into view I got a glimpse of my twenty year old brother and former best friend.

“But do not pity me, brother. Pity those too selfish to let go.”

He turned to amble away, watching me as he walked slowly across the street and into the fog. His silhouette disappeared in a blur.

I didn’t have it in me to follow him. Instead I walked home, from outside Central Park to Chambers street. I got to my apartment and opened the door to scan the living room, searching for my youngest brother. He was sitting on the couch, where I knew he’d be.

“Hello, Vince,” I said as I passed by him into the living room and sat on the couch.

“Michael,” he responded kindly.

“Where’d you go?”

“To a comely little pub in the French quarter with Henry and Elisa in New Orleans,” said Vince.

“Were you drinking?”

“No. But what does it matter? I’m over eighteen.”

“True, but the only people who know that are those two and your brothers. To everyone else you’re only seventeen. You must be careful.”

“That’s why we went to New Orleans,” Vince replied smugly. “But whatever you say.”

“Drinking isn’t that great anyway.”

“Which one of us are you trying to convince?”

We looked at each other and laughed. I clapped him on the back then went to my room, stopping to look at the clock on the armoire. It read three minutes before two. Vince sighed heavily and walked to his room, closing the door behind him. It pained me to look at Vince differently, but I had no choice. The light of the full moon shined through my window, illuminating the far wall in a pale glow. I stretched out on my bed sleepily, wondering if Vincent had the smallest inkling of what he had done to his older brother.