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Opening Extract from...

No Such Thing As Immortality

Written by Sarah Tranter

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No Such Thing as Immortality

Sarah Tranter



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Chapter One

The Bend in the Road

'*Yeeeesssss!!* I just thrashed your anally retentive arse!' James' voice sounded in my head, whilst my ears took in both the roar of his passing car and the snorts of a fast-retreating badger. There were no tail-lights to see, because they weren't on. The potent scent of burning rubber momentarily merged with that of wild honeysuckle as I raced past the hedgerows.

More of James' silent, yet expressive words entered my head. 'How could tonight have *possibly* been more fun had I left you rotting away in that damned tower of yours? Actually, *you* rotting away … okey-dokey, but your car, sat barely touched in the garage – now *that's* a travesty!'

My driving provided the comeback. I calmly lowered my right foot, bringing the speedometer reading to 115 mph, fractionally adjusted the steering wheel to avoid the young shrew skittering across the road, and edged past James' flame-red Lamborghini Aventador on the inside of the country bend.

I grinned. Were I more like James, I would no doubt be punching the air and exclaiming, 'Sweet!' But he did have a point. We had been driving in a similar vein for the past hour, and I would allow there was some amusement in our activity.

'*Shit! Shit! Shit!* I'm glad one of us found that move amusing. Hold that thought though, *sweet* my man, did it zero justice! But …'

He was laughing like a hyena as he passed, and punching the air. '*Yes Yes Yes Yes Yes!*' he gleefully gloated. '*Sweet* back to you, mate! And, on the long straight after the next corner, you ain't going to see me for dust.'

I put my foot down in rise to the challenge – just as an extraordinary metallic crushing sound ripped through my senses.

Instinctively, my foot was off the accelerator and smashing the

brake pedal to the floor – probably *through* the floor with the force applied.

And then there was … eerie silence. I watched the standard-specification airbags inflate as if in slow motion, and found myself absorbed by the thin wisps of smoke that appeared and began their slow, surreal pirouettes through the air before my eyes.

It was my eyes, refocusing on the view through the glass, that brought reality crashing in. On the bend in the road, about one hundred yards before me, a green car, old by the look of its non-metallic paint, was resting on a wooded bank between two trees. Its back end was crumpled, its make indeterminable – but it had clearly been shunted from behind.

Not possible. Absolutely. Not. Possible. There was a moment of unfamiliar confusion …

And then I was engulfed.

I made an involuntary, strangled gasp for air, whilst madly hugging my chest and then clutching my head as searing pain stabbed and sliced and tore its way through it. Sensations were consuming me, *alien sensations* that assaulted in a staggering, *overpowering* rush.

My constantly steady heart rate became frenetic.

Shock and anger – *blinding* anger – ricocheted around my now screaming being, along with God knows what else that made up the accumulative, agonising onslaught.

Uncontrolled, unrestrained, all-consuming emotion that had no right being there … and it was not my own.

I fought. I fought so damned hard, yet was powerless to expel or control it.

'Make it stop!' I silently screamed, again and again and again.

'Nate? Nate? What's happened? *Talk* to me!'

I had no hope of answering James' words, echoing somewhere in my head. I was wholly consumed by what was spiralling completely out of control inside me.

It was the opening of the passenger door, after I do not know how long, that snapped me from the physical stasis my body had evidently retreated to. And then I had no control over the yelp, or the jumping out of my skin and the resultant hitting of my head on the roof of the car. My growl was instinctual, protective … wounded.

James slid into the passenger seat, punctured the airbags with a couple quick stabbing hand movements, and pulled the door shut. There was no relief for me: I had failed to hear his approach.

'Nate?' James' voice was low but audible and undeniably anxious. 'Nate?' he asked again, more forcefully.

I turned slowly to face him, unsure I could complete even this simplest of tasks. He took in my contorted features and, no doubt, the wild, confused agony of my eyes. I saw his momentary shock, before he recovered himself.

'You *crashed*? You bloody well *crashed*? And … and – Jesus, Nate, what *the hell* is going on in your head?'

We stared at each other, and he physically squirmed in his seat at what he saw.

A sound, even I couldn't miss, triggered an instinctive response, and we were both whipping our heads around. It had come from the other car … and there was movement, too.

I found myself watching a foot, clad in a high-heel, kicking the driver's door open. I was involuntarily taking quick, sharp breaths … *surely I couldn't hyperventilate?*

A leg, shrouded in a long black dress or skirt, followed the foot, unwittingly entangling itself in the seat belt that had failed to retract. When the full body of a woman emerged, it was only to then trip and fall into an inelegant heap upon the ground.

Finally making it into an upright position, she instantaneously began to battle through the vegetation separating her from the road. Squealing, yelping and cursing, she tripped over tree roots and wrestled with and through hawthorn and blackberry bushes before sliding down the last half-a-dozen feet of the bank on her

backside. Without losing momentum, she jabbed her right foot back into its slipping shoe, picked herself up, blindly brushed herself down, and started marching across the tarmac in our direction.

She was visibly *emanating* pure fury, and I was – *Oh God!* – being consumed by pure fury, being overwhelmed by the emotion I knew, without a doubt, was not my own. My normally highly dependable brain couldn't reach any conclusions in this state, certainly not any conclusions I could remotely trust. But …

'*Nooooo! Dear God! Noooo!*' I whimpered, lowering my head to my hands, vaguely aware of James' horrified glance in my direction.

I made myself raise my head and focus on the girl, who could quite possibly be destroying me. Her ever-approaching march was being regularly broken by stumbles as impractical footwear and inadequate night-vision made her route over the undulations in the country road treacherous. She was accompanying her journey with a fanfare of expletives. I had not heard many of them before; even from James, who prides himself on adopting the gutter vocabulary of the day.

By the time she drew to a stop, no more than six feet away from the car, I was fast reaching the conclusion: I *could* hyperventilate.

Using her whole body, she began to gesture demonstratively, whilst screaming, 'You complete and utter *moron*!' If the onslaught on my senses was anything to go by, she was on the verge of hysteria.

Pointing dramatically towards her eyes, she continued, 'Eyes see! We *humans* have eyes!'

I managed to draw a sharp intake of breath, an action mirrored by James, but with no doubt less effort.

Squinting, she was clearly struggling to see through the dark. Looking broadly in my direction, 'We generally *use* them – to look where we're *effing* going! Why didn't *YOU* use them?!' Taking a

deep breath for more air to fuel her next tirade, she shrieked, 'You *rammed* me off the road!'

Her hysteria was increasing, as was the hysteria racing through me, attempting to destroy my very being. 'Here I am, going about my own miserable life, minding my own sorry business and *you* – you total imbecile – you pitiful excuse for a human being—'

A snarl escaped James.

'—crash straight into me!'

And then she spotted the front of my car. She came closer, running her hands over it to confirm what her eyes were struggling to make out, and then turned to look at what was left of her car, and then back and forth once again. She seemed to be struggling with words, but my whole body was being rocked with what I now innately knew to be *her* ferocious rage – a wrath that continued to grow to monumental proportions.

How could any being survive such volume of emotion?

James unhelpfully added to my panicked thought. 'She should be spontaneously combusting.'

That sent me closer to the precipice. I was in control of nothing and could too easily imagine myself disappearing in a puff of smoke.

'You, you, you … there's hardly a scratch … but you, you – KILLED my car!' Then making a realisation, her next words were almost whispered, 'You could have killed *me*.'

But hardly sparing a pause for vulnerable reflection, she was back to her maddened state and storming over to my door.

I fought the urge to cringe away.

'Get out of the car, you *coward*!' she screeched, and proceeded to hammer frantically on the window with her clenched fists.

I now surrendered to the urge before watching in horror her hands slide across the outside of the door. Unable to find the handle – *thank the Lord for gull-wings* – she finally took a step back. Putting hands on hips, she spoke ominously.

‘Don’t make me come in and get you – I will. I’ll come in and haul your despicable arse out of there if I have to!’ Not a moment passed before she declared, ‘Well – you’ve asked for it!’

Taking a step back, she took aim – and kicked the car as hard as she probably could. I heard the crack, and it *wasn’t* the car door. James and I stared at each other in a state of complete stillness.

A pained, ‘Owwwwwww!’ was audible as it escaped her lips.

Tentatively moving my eyes to track her movements, I observed her hopping and spinning around a couple of times before she ended up at the back of the car, which she evidently needed for support.

I heard her deep, pained intake of air, followed by deliberately slow exhales. She then squeaked, ‘You broke my foot … first my car … now my foot!’

Oh! The relief! The majority of her torturous emotions were subsiding, assuming a lower ebb, presumably as her extreme physical pain became overriding. I breathed deeply several times, experiencing the unfamiliar need for comfort.

Now, feeling fractionally calmer, my instinctive need for self-preservation took over. I *had* to take advantage of this respite and take stock of the situation. I *had* to be rid of this creature.

What were the options? *Kill her!* She clearly wasn’t going away, and I had an overwhelming need to stop the torture inexplicably linked to this girl.

James silently relayed another option. ‘Charm her. Then we are out of here, away from whatever … whatever *the bloody hell* is happening right now!’

James flinched when I looked him in the eye and responded with a ramble in my head. ‘*Okaaaay* … yeeees – perhaps a *little* optimistic. I accept you aren’t yourself, but you can, on odd occasions I grant, be a charming bugger …’ Breaking off, he continued out loud, ‘You know, I have no idea whether I’m getting through to you here. *Bloody hell!* You can’t *kill her*, mate!’

Still attempting to absorb his words, I felt a resurgence of her emotions. My torturer was upset, quite possibly feeling sorry for herself, and my guess was, this was only the beginning of things. There wasn't a hope I could deal with what would be coming my way.

I needed to act whilst I still could. Fumbling – *fumbling?!* – I finally found the handle and pushed the door open. I had to move quickly before it was either too late or … *I lost my nerve?*

I cautiously unfurled my normally athletic frame, checking all the time my limbs were still working.

James was in my head again. 'Option two, Nate. Option two. Charm the pants off her!'

I grimaced at his crassness, but then any hope of rational thinking and behaviour disappeared: I could smell blood.

Now I was tottering on the edge of a gaping abyss, and this girl was pushing me closer to its crumbling lip. *Option One.* It *was* going to be option one.

'No, Nate. NOT an option!' sounded silently in my head.

I hesitated, fighting to rediscover my restraint, but couldn't begin to think rationally. Yet, if I didn't take care of things, I … I … simply didn't know what would become of me.

With head down, I took an agonisingly slow step *away* from where I knew the girl to be, fighting all the time the raw need that now coursed through me. I rested my quaking hands on the black, highly polished surface of the car's bonnet. I refused to look through the windscreen to meet James' eyes, or to venture a glance at the source of my torture.

I could hear the girl's rapid breathing and racing heart beat. Her earlier upset emotions were being replaced by something else, something I had no hope of identifying – but I *could* feel her uncertainty and, at its edge, a slow, creeping fear.

And she should fear! She clearly possessed no commonsense at all, no urge for self-preservation. Completely alone in the back of beyond, in the early hours of the morning – I could be *anyone*.

Shaking my now pounding head, I thought just how bad her luck was.

Her uneasiness was growing. I couldn't afford to be overwhelmed again. I stepped back from the car, head still down, and began to walk its length. I had no idea what I looked like and was far from sure my eyes were as I needed them to be. The moon was behind the clouds, but I cursed the light coming from the car with its open gull-wing door. I would have closed it … had I been psychologically strong enough to be shut outside with this torturous creature.

I concentrated on my movements, stopping … not too close to make restraint impossible? I was either hedging my bets or hoping for a miracle, I just didn't know.

Slowly raising my face, I looked at the girl properly for the first time.

She was quite bewitching, which scrambled my mind further. Her strawberry-blonde hair was loose and hung in long waves; her heart-shaped face held a pair of huge green eyes and I could plainly see a splattering of the lightest of freckles across her small pert nose; her lips were full, perhaps slightly too large for her face, but highly pleasing nonetheless; her complexion was pale, probably paler than usual, due to the pain she was in.

I imagined it would normally possess a becoming blood-filled blush.

And then I saw the blood; the scent of which was already bombarding my senses. I was trying not to inhale, but had no control over the periodic gasps for air my body shouldn't, but seemed to, need. The blood was oozing from a wound to the forehead below her hairline … and I was transfixed. It was taboo. I had made it taboo. But being taboo made it all the more attractive. A primal compulsion rose within me and its strength was beyond—

'DO NOT do this!' James' soundless yell rang through my head.

But I wasn't myself tonight … or perhaps I was? I could justify

this. I needed to eliminate the cause of my pain and anguish and her blood would be the most wonderful bonus; it would be the ultimate comfort. I imagined myself relishing in its warmth, its oh so sweet aroma and, what I knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, would be, its exquisite taste. I would devour every last drop and still want more.

James silently cried, 'You are better than this – think what it would do to Elizabeth!'

He was playing his trump card. The mention of my sister caused a momentary hesitation and my gaze dropped to the girl's eyes. Her look of pained confusion was clear … and I could *feel* it.

As our eyes held, she gasped and took a rapid step back. Landing heavily on her damaged foot, she cried out in pain. That terrible sound ricocheted through me. She started to tumble towards the ground.

And I was there.

She gasped again when my hands encircled her waist, stopping her fall. The racing beat of her heart was getting louder and louder as it boomed seductively in my head; it was in perfect time with the pulse that was now so visible under the delectably thin, penetrable skin of her throat. She was mine.

But her eyes … They momentarily intruded into my blissful state of anticipation. How would they look in death? I dropped my hands at lightning speed, even before she was quite steady. It still wasn't soon enough to stop the shocking warmth they had felt from channelling up through my arms to course through my body.

The depths of her eyes were fixed on mine. *They would haunt me until the end of time.*

It was I that now took a rapid step back, my whole body trembling. Her eyes refused to release me from their penetrating – was it inquisitive? – gaze. And I refused to release my own, knowing her eyes were the only thing saving her from the basest of my instincts.

Somehow I managed to take another step back.

And then I was at the open door. I wrenched myself away and dived, probably too fast, into the car. For once I was going to take James' advice. He handed me my calling-card and pen. I heard his silent voice again, 'You are doing great. Give her Morley's details. He'll sort it.'

Swallowing hard, I attempted composure, before forcing myself to duck back out of the car. I had no idea whether I could talk, whether my voice would hold steady. There was only one way to find out. Our eyes locked once again.

'I must offer you my sincerest apology.' It didn't sound like me. My voice lacked its normal timbre and seemed strained, but I was talking through a jaw now locked on its own accord, and my whole body was trembling. 'The responsibility for the accident is all mine. These are my particulars …'

Ever so tentatively, I moved my eyes away and, using the roof of the car as a rest, wrote on the back of the card the name and number of Richard Morley, the solicitor who handles so much of our day-to-day business. My hand was violently shaking and my normally neat script, a scrawl.

'… call and all necessary arrangements to rectify matters will be made.'

I re-met the gaze I knew to still be trained on me. I held the card out at full stretch, positioned between the tips of my two longest fingers. I left it to the girl to hobble forward the necessary paces. She had to use the car for support and her progress was clearly painful. I found myself wincing. But I *had* to remain rooted to the spot.

She cautiously took the card and I snatched my arm back. 'Nathaniel Gray,' she said quietly, reading out loud my name, printed in an elegant typeface upon the front of the card. Her voice was no longer in screaming-mode and sounded soft and melodic, albeit pained. For a bewildered moment, I thought I had handed her someone else's calling-card. But no, that was my

name … it just didn't sound like my own when said through her lips.

'Again, please accept my sincerest apologies,' I managed to choke out, before turning away to re-enter the car. *I could do this. I* could *do this.*

Her voice, both indignant and fragile, cried out, 'You can't just *leave* me here!'

I spoke the words that sounded in my head. 'We will organise a car and driver to collect you and take you wherever you need to go.'

'*London?* I'm on my way home to London!' she cried incredulously. 'If you hadn't noticed, this is deepest, darkest, absolutely *never* to be visited again, Derbyshire!'

'The car will take you wherever you need.'

I made it into the driver's seat. I was nearly there but needed to be far away.

With a note of finality, reaching for the key in the ignition, I said, 'You may wish to get your head seen to.'

And then *vrroooom*. It wasn't the car firing up. My body was burning as red-hot fury scorched through me. There wasn't the tiniest part of me that didn't seem to be consumed.

'I should get *my* head seen to! Just who do you think you are, Nathaniel Gray? You nearly kill me, you break my foot, you're preparing to drive off into the night, leaving me alone – and you think I should get *my* head seen to? You—'

Startled, I turned to look at her. She had tried to stamp her foot and forgotten the impracticalities of that action with a fracture and tears now streamed down her face. The feeling of emotional hurt just ploughed in on top of the rage, and this time the physical pain did nothing to lessen it: I was sinking.

Her hands, swiping away the tears, were in the process of revealing blood; it was dark, she couldn't be sure, but a couple more swipes were confirming the discovery. I felt the dawning, and heard in the softest whisper, 'Ah! My head seen to … That's

why it's hurting … Hurting … lots.'

And then she was gone.

Her emotions drained from me like plugs had been pulled from the soles of my feet … and with them, the savage thirst for her blood.

I watched her legs buckle and she was falling. I was there, under her, breaking her fall before she hit the tarmac.

Her warm, soft, painfully fragile body was still cradled in my arms when James joined me.

'Nate – what *the hell* do you think you're doing?'

I met his bewildered eyes and answered, in a choked, deathly quiet hiss, 'I have absolutely no idea.'

Chapter Two
The Aftermath

'We have a situation Freddie and need you to sort the cars … You wouldn't believe me … You'll see for yourself when you get here.' James snapped his mobile shut and returned his attention to me. 'You have to let me take her, Nate.'

My grip on the girl tightened.

'I agree she needs to go to a hospital, and you don't need to remind me she's bleeding, but you are in no fit state to do this. I mean … *Jesus!* You are *so* not yourself! Her torture may have stopped, but your eyes … Your eyes look like a wounded puppy dog's!'

There was no wonder. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't stop the flashback.

Another dark road and I was cradling in my arms another fragile human girl – my beloved sister. Her twenty-three-year-old body had been drained of blood and she was barely breathing. *'Elizabeth? Elizabeth? Wake up – they are gone. You can wake up now, sweetheart.'* The human terror and the pain … and I was *feeling* it.

'Nate? Nate – *Bloody hell!* Stop it! Stop it *now*!'

James had intruded upon my personal agonies then, too. *'Nathaniel – is that you? Does she live?'* But his voice had sounded very different. Back then it had been …

… human, groggy, pained …

'Nate? *Nate!*'

I was being shaken and finally focused back to the present. James looked at me aghast. I had been too preoccupied to keep him out of my head.

'You couldn't stop or control *that*?' he choked out, before recovering some control of himself.

I slowly shook my head and looked down at the girl now in my

arms. The fears for her health— No … *my* fears for her health. *My* guilt. *My* shame. Her torture had stopped, but for the first time in nearly two centuries, I had *no* control over what I was feeling. I was completely unable to quash or dampen the terrifying sensations spiralling unchecked through me.

'*Jesus … Nate …!*'

There was panic in James' voice. But I couldn't let myself contemplate the full implications of what I was currently experiencing. It had to be temporary … a blip … it *had* to be … because if it wasn't …?

'You need to get back to Ridings – NOW! You're right – it's got to be temporary. But you need to be away from this girl. It must be her!'

I clutched her even tighter.

Now crouching down beside me, he spoke gently. I couldn't recall him ever having used that tone with me in this existence. 'Nate, look into my head. I'm no threat to her. I'm in control. You … you … Too much is going on with you right now and we can't risk— I'm going to take her to the hospital and *you* are going home – *now!*'

I knew he was talking sense; an unusual occurrence in itself. But why was letting her go so hard? She would be safe with James. I could see that in his head, whereas … I couldn't make any sense at all out of my own.

Somehow, I let James gently pull the girl from me. As he stood there, holding her in his arms, I had an overwhelming urge to snatch her back – and tear *him* to pieces. But he was gone. She was gone.

I was only vaguely aware of the whoosh of air as Frederick arrived. I was evidently still sat in the road. I was meant to be going home.

'Nate?' I finally looked up, but quickly looked away at the horror so visible on his face.

'I am well,' I said, as calmly as I could. 'Thank you for your

assistance in … sorting matters.'

'Do you want to talk?' he asked silently.

I shook my head and took to the air.

The sun was rising. Not an issue in itself but only now was I flying over the outer reaches of my estate. I had clearly flown aimlessly throughout the night. My focus had been on purging, *desperate, futile* attempts at purging, because nothing had shifted the emotions – my emotions – now raging so painfully and unchecked through me.

As I flew over some of the eleven thousand acres of landscaped parks, lakes, woods and moors, I picked up the anxious voices of Elizabeth and Madeleine a few miles away. They must have cut their shopping trip to London short. And rather than sounding from their own estate properties, they were in the main house. And Frederick was there, too; he had evidently done what needed to be done.

But there was no James.

I pictured him standing there with the bewitching girl in his arms … and wanted to tear him to shreds all over again.

He should be back. I ranged out, but he was not at his farmstead to the north. There was nothing. He was evidently too far away for me to get into his head. Retrieving my phone, I pressed speed-dial: voicemail. *Damn it – where was he?*

I immediately lowered a veil over my thoughts. The others had sensed my presence and I couldn't allow them into my head. It was not a good place to be and my little sister was worried enough.

'Nathaniel? Nate? Speak to me, please …'

I ignored Elizabeth's desperate, silent plea. I couldn't provide her with the reassurance she needed, not whilst I was incapable of reassuring myself. I blocked her out. I blocked them all out.

The implications had begun to sink in and … *terror*. That's what I was now *feeling* for Christ's sake! *My terror.* And I

shouldn't be feeling it. I shouldn't *have* to feel a damned thing. Emotion was a struggle enough when human, and now I lacked even the physiology to deal with it.

I frantically tried to dispel the latest of the torturous flashbacks that had plagued me all night. I managed to make it to the main house, entering through the open window at the top of my tower, before crash-landing to the floor.

No, please, not this one …

Slumped on the wide elm floorboards, I was again that twelve-year-old mortal boy, discovering his mother on her deathbed.

'Mama? Mama? Wake up, Mama. I beg of you!' I sobbed and frantically shook her. She had to wake up. She had to. I needed her. My baby sister needed her. I was on her bed, trying to pry her eyelids open. My tears falling all over her face. 'Mama? Mama? Please, Mama. Please!'

It felt like hours before I was able to slowly unfurl my arms from around my chest. I was never meant to have to go there again. After my mother's death I had been most commonly described as cold, aloof, detached. Only Elizabeth, and occasionally James, had ever managed to get under my defences. But now, in a form in which I shouldn't have to feel, a form designed to house a more extreme version of my mortal personality, I wanted to weep. But that ability was no longer mine.

I took a deep shaky breath, hoping for comfort. But instead, there was more uncontrolled, non-expellable emotion. In amongst the vying horrors, one was currently screaming louder than the rest.

Worry.

Worry for the girl. Worry … for Rowan Locke.

I had gathered her name from James' head after he had taken her from me. He had found her driving licence: Rowan Locke. Born: April 29th, 1977. Address: Flat 3, 212 Barclay Road, Hammersmith, London. A deep growl resonated from my throat.

He thought she looked pretty in the photograph. I *should* have shredded him.

And where the hell was he?

I braved tuning in to the others. I knew I would be the topic of conversation, but perhaps James had reported in? They appeared to be in conference in the drawing room. At least they knew better than to disturb me in my tower.

'How *the blazes* can a vampire crash a car?' Frederick was not beating about the bush, as was typical. I would never have matched his brash personality to my genteel little sister's. But the strength of their one-hundred-and-sixty-five-year marriage had proved me wrong.

'That's a *very* good question …' Madeleine murmured. 'In four hundred years, I've seen nothing like it …' It was the first time I had *ever* heard her worried. 'I would suggest, however, that crashing the car is presently the least of Nate's concerns. If he's feeling again …?'

'But he *can't* be!' Frederick roared. 'I know what I saw – but it's a *defining* power, for fuck's sake! It's second only to *immortality!* We CONTROL whatever extent we choose to feel. How else could we remain sane over the years?' It was an argument he regularly used with Elizabeth, who only utilised the power reluctantly – why, I had never understood – but as a result, she remained the most human of us all.

'But out of all of us … why Nate?' *Oh, Elizabeth, sweetheart.* She continued in an unsteady voice, 'He's *always* needed to protect himself. He uses the power too much … I mean, we all know that. Sometimes I haven't even known if my brother has been behind that cold shell … but … *Oh, my God! Without it?*'

This was too much. I was barely holding it together as it was. I abruptly tuned out and snatched the phone from my pocket. Calling James' number again, I sank to the Persian rug in the centre of the room. Waiting for connection, I lay back and looked up through my tower's glass roof. This room doubled as an

observatory, and in this position I was used to viewing the night sky, spotting planets and constellations invisible to even the most powerful of human-invented telescopes, but today, the sun was overhead. I checked my, now antique, Rolex wrist-watch … nearly ten hours had passed since he had taken her from me. And it felt like an eternity. Where *the hell* was he?

Straight to voicemail. What if something had gone wrong? Had her condition worsened? Her heartbeat had been strong but … *what if he had lost control?* It was with a roar that I leapt up and hurled my phone across the room. It smashed into the wall above the fireplace, narrowly missing *Starry Night* – or at least *my* version of *Starry Night.* The version Vincent had painted not from memory and as seen through the bars of an asylum window but whilst under the night sky as we discussed religion, death and immortality. The Elizabethan stone wall held, but the phone turned to crumbs and dust.

Focusing for a moment on *Starry Night over Saint-Remy,* I realised I was viewing it differently. I had thought I understood it, had been in receipt of the necessary insight. That I had understood him that night. But now I was seeing new logic to the brush strokes … I forced myself to look away. *Was I on the edge of madness?* Such fresh illumination of that which had been viewed pretty much daily over the past one-hundred-and-twenty-three years, provided little reassurance.

There was no question my secret masterpiece had been an obsession of mine. And until last night, I had considered obsessive tendencies to be my kind's only weakness. But nothing was as it was. Until last night, I had not considered myself … a monster.

I was pacing like a caged … *monster*, when I started picking up James' thoughts. *Why was there nothing in them on Rowan Locke?* I attempted to calm my erratically pounding heart. He was coming straight to me. As he approached the window, I stepped aside to let him enter.

James didn't speak, choosing instead to snap his sunglasses off and silently observe me. His head remained only full of concern for me, and I was too scared to ask what I wanted to know. *Needed* to know.

'She's going to be fine,' he finally relayed.

I held my head in my hands and calmed myself for a moment, before looking squarely into his eyes. He deliberately thought through everything that had happened at the hospital, and all the conversations he had had both with the doctors, and overheard. After quickly digesting them, I acknowledged I was done with a slight nod, before silently communicating, 'But she remains unconscious!'

She hadn't even woken up yet. How badly had I hurt her head? *What if she never woke up?*

'There's no evidence of permanent damage, Nate. Knowing you'd want her to have the best treatment possible, I flew her straight down to a London hospital and *persuaded* the country's foremost neurologist to fly back from a conference in Belgium to take her case over. All the nurses were charmed by my presence, too, so she couldn't be in better, more attentive hands. She's just not quite ready to wake up. But she *will* get better. She will *not* die from her injuries.'

I reached out and hugged him, an out-of-character action that no doubt worried him. But he hugged me back, and we held each other in silence, until I felt strong enough to move away.

The friendship between James and me had crossed both existences. James had once been my closest of mortal friends. Perhaps my only true mortal friend. It was a friendship inevitably forged by our mothers, for we were chalk and cheese. Yet our mothers' closeness, which saw James as a regular fixture at Ridings throughout our early childhoods, had forged something that would now likely continue into near eternity. Our relationship was volatile – our schooldays being particularly interesting. And it was even more so now with our exaggerated personality traits

ensuring the accentuation of our differences. But that also applied to the depth of our relationship and to our understanding of the other.

'Thank you, James.'

'I'm not going to say it was a pleasure … *Bloody Hell!* I couldn't risk being spotted flying back in broad daylight and didn't have my car, so opted for the "*high*-speed" train rather than the horror of the car Morley came up with at short notice. You exist and learn. It's been a really shit day, Nate. Oh – did I forget the hour after hour in a human *hospital*!'

Generally, we were all pretty much comfortable around humans. Indeed much of the staff at Ridings were human: Mrs Dawes, the present housekeeper, and her handful of privacy-respecting cleaners, and then there were the tens of ground staff.

Unquestionably, James was the most practised of us all though. He was regularly out partying the night away with mortals and immortals alike. He had always been that way. During our long ago stint at humanity, he had had to drag me kicking and screaming to balls …

Come to think of it – it was *he* who had dragged me out last night!

James shifted his feet awkwardly. 'You know, I've really worked up an appetite. I reckon we'd both benefit from some black pudding.'

He was evidently changing the subject. And in my current reflective state, it worked. I found myself thinking of how black pudding had once been my salvation. Or at least our simplified version of it: neat and straight from the pig. We dispensed with the other ingredients such as oats and seasoning traditionally added to pigs' blood to create that particular human recipe.

I had been terrified and painfully vulnerable then, too. Flung from my panicked horse on that dark coach road, I had been unconscious in a sodden ditch whilst Elizabeth and James were attacked. Then, I had found myself in a living nightmare, too. But

black pudding, the result of my desperately human quest to find a non-human alternative to Elizabeth and James' new dietary requirements, had saved me … saved us.

What could possibly be my salvation now? Two centuries on, no longer meant to be struggling with human weaknesses …

Yet, I found myself again desperate, vulnerable, unprotected.

'I still can't believe *you*, the Earl of Ridings, smuggled those walking, snorting pigs up the back staircase in the dead of night so we'd have black pudding on tap. But Nate – giving them a *guest room*? When Mrs Reynolds opened that door …'

I stopped hearing him. I dropped to my knees in agony. Confusion, anger, hurt, hatred and God knows what else were consuming me – and they weren't mine. *Oh, God – they were so much worse than mine.* She was back. How could she be back? She wasn't anywhere near me!

James was on his knees by my side. He held my face in his hands and spoke in a calm voice that belied the look in his eyes, 'It'll be easier this time. It will screw with you but you *can* do this. Here or your study?'

He read my answer, and then I was on the chaise on the ground floor of my tower.

It was a long time before I was able to take in my surroundings again.

'Why?' I asked shakily, seven hours, thirty-nine minutes and twenty-two hellish seconds later.

There was a pause whilst James seemed to consider how to answer, or even *whether* to answer. Sighing, he finally spoke. 'I called the hospital. Rowan Locke regained consciousness. It appears you – for the moment at least – experience her *conscious* feelings and emotions. Whilst we thought that part of your torture was at an end, it was simply her unconscious or sleeping. She's obviously sleeping again now. And it clearly has nothing to do with whether or not you are in her presence.' He added

quietly, 'I should have let you kill her.'

I was completely and utterly numb and didn't feel able to move my frozen limbs. Her *conscious* feelings? So throughout Rowan Locke's *waking* hours, I would be in hell? My own emotions were bad enough … but *hers*? I wasn't strong enough for this.

James let me be for several minutes before coming to sit at my side. 'We are going to sort out a way to best deal with this.'

I shakily moved to my favourite red leather chair by the blazing fire; I felt in need of warmth. Clumsily, I knocked from the reading table my latest acquisition for the library: a first edition of Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote*. Eighteen are known to exist; this was number nineteen. I had been sat reading it before James' hare-brained driving scheme had destroyed my existence.

When my limbs, at least, felt warmed, I asked again, '*Why?*' James looked confused. 'Not why it happened again, but why it happened *at all*. Why *me*? Why not you? Why this particular form of such targeted torture? And why this girl?'

I saw her in my mind's eye again … bewitching. I remembered the warmth that had channelled through my whole body as I sat cradling her, and how bereft and cold to the core I had felt when James took her from my arms. And then there were her eyes …

'You forget another "why", Nate. With everything she's doing to you, why are you thinking of her in the way that you are?'

I was taken aback. I was concerned for her well-being … It was only right, after I had nearly killed her. I recovered myself in an instant. Leaping from my seat, I roared thunderously and fixed James with a furious glare; he didn't so much as flinch. I provided my response at a decibel level only our kind could achieve. 'That is ridiculous! Completely … utterly *RIDICULOUS*! Any excuse! You and your one-track bloody mind! Pathetic James! Pathetic!' I spun around to face the fire, leaning with both hands on the mantle, and attempted to calm myself down.

He chuckled and muttered, at the opposite end of the decibel spectrum to that which I had used, 'I do believe I hit a nerve.'

I was instantaneously before him – and this time I had the satisfaction of seeing him cringe.

'Okay, enough,' he conceded, raising his hands to indicate surrender. 'I was just checking your senses weren't buggered up – your hearing seems well up to par.'

I found myself letting out an exasperated growl, and stalked to the window. He was infuriating when he was like this. Night had fallen again. It hadn't even been twenty-four hours since I had been introduced to my own personal hell … and Rowan Locke.

Several minutes passed before I asked, 'Do you have any answers to my *whys*, James?'

'If we knew *why,* we wouldn't have let it happen.'

'Does she know what she is doing to me?' I murmured. My instinct was saying no … but I wasn't on best form.

James took a moment to respond. 'I honestly don't think she does. But whether conscious or unconscious, the fact remains: this girl is torturing you.'

'Talk!' I growled. 'Advise me of the best way of dealing with this – because I have not the remotest idea. You, no doubt, have had more opportunity for considering things over the last few hours than I.'

I couldn't believe I was in such a desperate state of mind to, yet again, be relying on James. It was such role reversal, and it didn't come easily.

James raised his eyebrows at my thought before plunging straight in at the deep end. 'The most obvious solution is to kill her.'

He saw the look on my face, and held up his hand so I would let him finish. 'You need to tell me why not. It seems to be the only sure-fire way of stopping this. It wouldn't need to be you. Any one of us would do this to end your torment – even Elizabeth. So if it's the irrepressible guilt of doing it yourself, let one of us. You need to seriously think about it, Nate. How can you *possibly* continue like this?'

So that is how they had spent their recent hours: working out how to kill her. And I had thought it was only I who had become a monster.

'That's not fair,' James snarled. 'None of us *want* to do it – but we don't feel we have a choice. And you should take a moment to reflect on what Elizabeth's offering here. It should show you just how worried she is about you. This would affect her more than anyone.'

'Get out of my head!' I snarled back. I knew what they were proposing to do was for me, and I didn't need James to remind me of the significance of Elizabeth's offer. I had bloody well been there when she had made her first and only human kill. And it had been my fault. I was supposed to have been looking after her, but had failed to spot the glaringly obvious. The black pudding solution had come too late to save Elizabeth's conscience. Yet no matter their motivation, it didn't make what they were suggesting any more acceptable. Yes, I needed the torture to end … but it *felt* bad enough that I had nearly killed Rowan Locke by accident, and she was lying in a hospital bed, broken because of me.

James cleared his throat and put his finger up as if seeking permission to speak. I raised my right eyebrow.

'The broken foot was *nothing* to do with you – the temper on that girl! That was *her* fault!' He obviously hadn't got out of my head.

'James! She only kicked the car because *I* failed to get out of the damned thing. The answer is NO!'

'You really aren't thinking logically or remotely sensibly at the moment. We all consider it to be the best course of action. It has to be in your best interests.'

'No, it is not!' I squeezed my eyes shut as an image of her eyes – lifeless – flashed before me. Merely the thought of her death caused an excruciating assault of guilt and grief. I knew James had seen it, so added warningly, 'Do *not* read anything into that! After my performance last night, I simply want her safe and well.

I would challenge you, in my position, to want anything else.'

'And you think to be tortured by her during her every waking moment is an *option*? In your bloody position, I'd take her out myself! This is all connected to *her*, Nate. All of it. With her out of the picture, you'll get your power back, and will never need to feel anything you don't want to, ever again!'

'I do not know what I think!' I cried. I seemed incapable of making any cool, calculated decision when the waters were so muddied by sentiment. I tried to come up with something that sounded sensible – when sensible was the last description that could be currently applied to me. 'That course of action is premature. If we find her to be doing this to me on purpose, although God knows how and for what reason, then we can revisit the option. But no, not now. And I want a promise that none of you will act against my wishes.'

James sighed and shook his head. 'I told them, you know. I knew you wouldn't bloody well go for it. *But would they listen?* So … we move to Plan B.'

The relief flooded through me. *An alternative!*

'Because you refuse to be sensible, and we don't yet know why the hell this has happened, so can't remedy it, we need to look at avoidance … Let's go!' James was off the chaise and at the door in a flash.

I was even more confused, and his head gave me no clues. 'James?'

Shaking his head dramatically and clearly annoyed, he groaned. 'The things I do for you! We are going to the other side of the world, to see just how far away you have to be to escape that vicious streak of hers!'

I was pretty lost for words, but had to admit it was a good idea … a *very* good idea. I was at his side in less than a blink of an eye.

He gave me a broad smile, which I was beginning to feel like matching. 'Freddie's got the jet on standby, my new games

console is on board – so let's get to the airfield. *I'm* driving, though!'

This could be the answer. I even had a property in Australia, which doubled as a highly profitable enterprise; its fifteen-thousand acre vineyard churning out some of the best-selling Australian wines in the human world. Not the ideal choice though … I grimaced, recalling the viciousness of the sun and its impact on our sensitive eyes and our pale skin – and the difficulty of blending in with the tanned locals. But then there was the taste of kangaroo blood. I hadn't had that for half a century or so.

But there was one thing I needed to do first.

'*NO!*' James roared. He was obviously still not out of my head. His face was instantly six inches from mine.

'James – you need to bear with me. I have to see her, to reassure myself she is getting better. I feel an inordinate degree of guilt and remorse for hurting her – and for the way I acted.' I shuddered at the recollection. 'I need to apologise … and getting some answers would be good, too.'

'But you *know* she's okay!' James spat out. 'Look what she did to you when she woke up. Believe me, now is *not* the time to be honourable! As for answers – leave it to *us* to find them. *You* simply need to get as far away from her as possible, as quickly as possible.'

I shook my head. 'I need to see her, James.'

And therein lay the problem. Yes, I wanted to apologise. Yes, I wanted answers. But no matter how much I attempted to deny it, I felt drawn to this woman. The most sensible reaction was to flee. But I didn't yet feel able to do so.

And there was something else plaguing my mind. I didn't want Rowan Locke to think badly of me. I couldn't fathom the reasons … I had never before been bothered by what people thought of me. But I found myself bothered now. I had experienced hatred in her feelings today and I worried it was felt towards me. I didn't want her to hate me. I knew I wasn't acting

in my best interests, or hers.

But I needed to see Rowan Locke.

To be continued …

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