

LILY'S GARDENER

—

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“Life is hard enough with my loans and pay,” I said, while I tiredly squinted at my phone. “But the pandemi-”

“It certainly complicates matters,” my friend cuts in from the other side of the video call. She sagely nods, the bun of sleek black hair on the top of her head bobs with the motion.

“It’s already been six years.” I sighed and pressed my finger tips into my brow, trying to ease the migraine that was ebbing its way across my forehead. “It’s unending.”

Alethia chewed on her cheek, forming a dimple on one side of her tan face. “It’s hard, but um,” she shrugged. “It might be best to assume that it won’t end. Like, stop waiting for a future that will never arrive. You know, adapt,” She said, and paused for a moment to think on her words. “As shitty as that sounds- oof,” she said.

I glanced up into my reflection in the rear-view mirror of my car, “Sorry if I’m being depressing,” I said.

I attempted to smooth down the frazzled strands of my penny brown hair. But when my hand left, my static-laden pixie cut rebelled against my wishes again. I had gotten in and out of my car far too many times today, brushing my head against the headliner every time. I opted to fix something I could change, and took off my wire-rim glasses to clean them on my shirt.

“You’re making ends meet, right?” my friend asked.

“Of course,” I said quickly, waving my hand in a light shooing motion.

The last thing I wanted was for her to be the wonderful person that she is, and send me cash because I made her worry. She could be generous to a fault, and I have enough difficulty accepting gifts as it is without the added concern for my well being.

She lifted an eyebrow, and said, “Not to sound doom and gloom, but I’ve heard about those self driving cars. Might be hard to compete with.”

I nodded, and returned my glasses to my freckled face, “I’ve been applying, someone will get back to me before that becomes an issue.” I said.

I had been applying, but I had only managed a few interviews and got passed over for ‘more qualified candidates’. It would be nice if I could land some remote work, or anything really. For now, I was stuck in the gig-economy delivering fast food to strangers through an app.

She gave me a small smile, “Good. I’ve got to get going, my client wants the rest of his photos rendered. He’s a stickler for getting things quickly,” she said.

I gave her a smile in return, saying, “This was good, talk later?”

Her smile broadened, showing off her pearly whites. “You know it!” she said and hung up.

A moment later, my phone vibrated with a notification. I thumbed the pop up and opened the delivery app. An order request was front and center on my screen. I lightly tapped 'Yes' without a second thought, turned the key in the ignition, and merged back onto the road. Two red dots marked the map, where to pickup and where to drop off.

The order wasn't the usual burger or taco, it was a morning breakfast of egg benedict and an iced coffee. It seemed to me like the sort of thing someone from before the lockdown would stop for on their way to work; apparently even working from home couldn't break that daily ritual. People got their sense of normalcy wherever they could these days, I supposed.

I rolled up to the restaurant, and slipped on a pair of medical gloves and a mask. Another essential employee walked up and brought the goods in through my passenger window, setting them down in the seat. We both wore masks, but we had enough practice at this point with our limited range of expression to trade smiling eyes and a thumbs up. With half of our ability to express emotion covered, using hand signals to communicate how we feel had become ubiquitous.

The worker gave me a small wave and turned to return to the restaurant. Setting the car in reverse, I backed out of the parking lot and continued on my way.

Lily was the name on the order, and her address was a little out of the way. On the border of the city, in the hills, where the slightly well-off sequestered themselves. Living in several story houses with well groomed gardens hidden away from prying eyes by large, trimmed bushes.

The gates of these secluded communities opened for me as a delivery driver, and I could for just a brief moment admire these personal gardens of Eden. The bright colors and delicate structures of manicured gardens are antithetical to the monochromatic, sharp edged concrete infrastructure of the city.

Before the pandemic, forests and beaches didn't call out to me. Now that our movements are restricted; I want nothing more than to be in the open expanse of the wild. It's funny that I never desired freedom when it was freely given to me.

My tires crunched noisily over the gravel drive way that twisted its way to Lily's property. Iproceeding through a short tunnel of tall bushes, the sunlight crisply cutting its way through any break between the foliage. Then the light and blue sky returned in full force upon leaving the tunnel, accentuated by a manicured lawn surrounded by densely populated flower beds. Beyond the bright sunset colors displayed by the arrangement of tulips, daffodils, and bleeding hearts sat a cider orange painted colonial with white trimming. In the spring morning sun the house's colors reminded me of creamsicles. Fond memories washed through my mind, of eating those cool treats on the front steps of my childhood home.

As I pulled up the last few feet, my nostalgia slowly melted away into a strange nagging feeling.

When had I been here before? I thought to myself.

Parking just a few feet from the covered porch, I grabbed the bag of food and the drink in the passenger seat. The app tracking my location had sent the client a notification that I was here; Lily was likely waiting in her foyer for her food.

I looked at the door, the idea of the customer waiting just behind it was always a little unerving. A stranger possibly watching me through the peephole. Me being seen, but never seeing my customer. My imagination weaving terrifying portraits of gaunt figures looming behind their locked doors to fill in the blanks, my imagination could be over-dramatic at times.

Exiting my vehicle, I strode up the wooden steps and placed the food onto a small table next to the door. The screen door had been propped wide open to reveal a stained hardwood door.

While glancing for a doorbell I heard the doorknob turn.

Instinctively, I jumped back a step to maintain distance from the customer. The door opened partway, revealing the home's occupant and my customer.

"Oops, I hope I didn't take you off guard?" a small voice asked politely.

A petite, young woman with wavy copper colored hair and dark eyes looked up at me. She was wearing a floral print fabric mask, but I could see the faint speckling of faded freckles trying to peek out on the bridge of her nose. Her skin took on a pale grey tone in the dim lighting of her home.

She outstretched a slender hand, with perfectly smooth fingers clasping some cash, through the entrance.

"Thank you for the delivery. This is for you." she said and smiled with her eyes.

My ears pricked up at the sound of her voice, it sounded familiar. I didn't dwell on her soft chirping vocal tone for long, my focus was drawn to the crisp twenty dollar waiting for me.

"Thank you, miss," I said, "Do you need me to make change for that?"

Most clients tipped through the app, but I keep some spare dollars in my car just for such an occasion. Of course, I secretly hoped her intention was to offer the bill as is. My mind immediately flipped through the ways that twenty could land into my hand and be hastily thrown at one of many expenses.

She opened the door a little wider, and the hair on the back of my neck prickled. Inside her entrance hallway was decorated with an antiquated fainting couch and beside it a sewing machine table with carnival glass bowls and vases. Assorted flowers, shells, and river rocks filled the various glass vessels.

The décor sent me a wave of déjà vu. The kind of feelings I usually only get in the winter months or when the aroma of slightly burnt drip coffee wafts through the air, like it always did in my grandfather's home.

Lily snapped me back to attention saying, "Please, you guys work so hard. This is the least I can do."

She took a small step closer, seemingly careful to not pass the doorframe. Her black pearl eyes peered at me, as if inviting me inside. Her hand was relaxed but the rest of her seemed tense. It could easily be chalked up to social anxiety, but it was almost like the homey aesthetic of her dwelling was a bubble. The bubble expanding, pressing into her invisible quills, about to pop.

Why was I thinking like this? I thought to myself.

Noticing my eyes had unfocused, I quickly blinked to readjust myself and get back to the task at hand.

“Thank you, miss.” I said and reached for the bill.

My fingertips grazed the paper, and quick as a whip her hand snatched my wrist. With great force I was yanked into the stranger’s foyer.

I let out a short yelp and tried to catch my step so I could pull away.

“Stop! What-” I said, but I was cut short as I was swung to the side.

She shoved her palm against my chest and with a thud I landed on the fainting couch I’d noticed earlier. My back ached from the impact on the vintage hardwood couch frame barely softened by its old upholstery.

The force of being pushed down made the glassware on the table beside the couch wobble and clink. I found myself face to face with my attacker. Lily’s hair flared like the flame of a lit match. The lamp behind her sending streams of light through her hair, creating a halo like aura around her silhouette. Illuminating her outline, but shading her face.

Her shark-like eyes gleamed down at me, she looked anything but angelic.

I desperately grasped above my head, and my hand felt one of the tall cylinder vases. Without a moment’s thought, I grabbed it and swung.

The thick glass base of the vase caught her right on the temple, the juddering crack set my teeth on edge as I felt the impact against her skull. The the carnival glass shattered, spraying glittering pieces everywhere, throwing a few shards in my face.

I could feel a little blood seeping from my cheek where one of the shards had scattered past, heat rushed to surround the wound and a stinging pulse throbbed to tell me I was hurt.

My stomach felt like it had been stuffed with ice, my attacker remained unharmed. She just blinked with slight surprise at my attempt.

With the remaining jagged glass tube still held white-knuckled in my hand, I feebly tried to push her away. The body donned in a light blue chiffon sundress holding me there, was as obstinate as a statue.

She grabbed the couch with one hand and pressed me down with the other.

She’s smaller than me, how’s she so strong? I panicked.

“I’ll stab you!” I warned her, as I pointed the jagged glass towards her face.

Her pupils flickered up to look me in the eye, sending cold lightning down my spine and making my head swim.

What the hell is she doing? I thought.

I averted my eyes, her stare making my knees shake and my fingers go numb. She removed the hand she had placed on the couch and reached for her mask. Even with one arm against my chest, I was pinned like a butterfly to a cork board.

Then she let go of my chest for a moment, pulling back a little as her fingers pushed her hair back and traced the edge of her ear. She was taking her mask off. I gasped, and held my breath.

Was she trying to get me sick?

That feeling that had come over me at the door, that something was off. I regretted not interpreting my gut instinct correctly. Despite her size and unassuming appearance, my life is in danger.

I lunge forward and jab the glass into her stomach. I may as well have tried to stab a slab of marble. Dread boiled and steamed between my ears as I looked at the ruined bits of glass that remained in my hand, and then at the torn dress and untouched skin underneath. With a quick flick of her hands, she flung her mask to the floor.

Her face made the rest of the world dissolve in my periphery, no longer able to hold my breath I gulped like a fish out of water.

Her mouth was slightly agape, the corners reached a little too far up her cheeks; much like how the mouth of a snake. Her teeth. Fanged saliva slicked canines extended outwards, passing the confines of her lips.

“Shit...” I breathlessly muttered.

She opened her mouth wider and lunged to sink her teeth into me.

Without thinking I whipped the glass up and with all my strength I jammed it into her gaping maw, holding it open like a tent pole.

The glass cracked and shards broke just to also get trapped between her mandible and palate.

Her eyes went wide as she realized she couldn't bite down with the glass firmly wedged. She reached with one hand to paw at the obstruction and the other slightly lessened its pressure against my body.

Taking advantage of her distraction, I slipped out of her grasp and off the couch. Before she could react I stumbled out of the foyer and into the living room.

I scanned the room, searching for a way out. Just a few paces past a floral print chair and a short end table was another room. I could see a window with sunlight peeking through it.

I sprinted forward, refusing to glance back and risk slowing down. I could hear her steps stomping behind me, sending a rush of adrenaline jolting my muscles into high gear.

As I passed the chair, I tipped over the end table. A half-baked attempt to slow her down. As the table crashed to the floor, I found myself in a kitchen and saw that the source of the sunlight was the back door's window.

I made a beeline for the door. Wrapping my hand around the handle, I turned it and pulled. Then pulled again. It wasn't opening. A cold sweat pooled at my nape as I rattled the handle helplessly. It turned just fine but the door didn't open.

I wasted precious seconds until my eyes trailed up to what I'd missed: a deadbolt. With a rusty clunk I unlocked the deadbolt and turned the doorknob.

Against my best instincts I took a quick peek back, and with the poise of a lioness she jumped into the room. Glass shards still protruded from her mouth grotesquely, like the mandibles of a pray mantis. As she saw me standing in front of the door, she froze, as her gaze locked onto mine. Her dark irises beckoned me to free fall into her black hole pupils.

My mind felt like a driver trapped in a car that had driven into a lake. I couldn't will myself to open the door. Every muscle in my body had been turned to stone with her stare.

Now that I was paralyzed like a deer in headlights, she started clawing at her mouth in desperation, like an animal choking on a chicken bone.

When trying to rip it out didn't work, she squared her shoulders and pulled back a fist, swinging a hard uppercut into her own jaw. The impact sent shards flying, and I cringed as I watched her inevitably swallow some of them.

While I still stood there, helpless, she spit out the last few slivers and took a moment to adjust her jaw, as she was finally able to close her mouth.

Then, with a weary voice, she spoke, "I'm not going to kill you."

I tried to respond, but whatever spell she had me under only let me open and close my mouth uselessly.

Her eyebrows knitted together, "I'm sorry, it isn't supposed to go like this. I've never gotten the same driver twice, till now."

She took a small step forward, sending my heart into a fit. "The more you've been exposed to my influence, the less effect it has," she explained, as she took another step.

My fingertips buzzed, my hands were clammy, but if I focused I could slightly squeeze. I need just enough control and I could open the door.

"If I intended to end your life, I would have done it the first time." She said, as she cautiously approached.

"You can feel it, can't you? That you've been here before?" she asked.

She put her hands up, open palmed. "I wouldn't normally feed on delivery drivers so often, but the quarantine has really limited my options," she said, and grimaced.

“Please just calm down. You survived last time, didn’t you? I’ll even pay you extra.” she offered.

I tried to shake my head, but I could barely move my neck. She frowned, circling closer.

“This could even be a regular thing. I know how little you guys make. You could live comfortably with what I’d pay you.” she said.

“You wouldn’t have to struggle to survive.” she said.

I have to look away, If can manage to just take my eyes off of her, I can escape. Almost within her arms reach, I was running out of time. My vision blurred as her psychic influence washed over my mind, everything but her face going fuzzy, like I was in a dream. She took another step forward.

“Goose! Get back here!” a man’s voice shouted from outside.

The hypnotic link stretched like a rubber band and snapped as Lily’s head whipped to look out her window towards the disruption, and the numbness left my hands.

As fast as I could, I yanked open the door and jumped outside; sprinting towards the noise.

“Wait!” I heard her yell behind me.

No way was I going to let her catch me. I trampled the delicate flower beds to get to the very back of her property. The man’s voice echoed ahead just behind the tall bushes forming an wall around the whole of the property.

“Goose! Stop!” Zeroing in on the bushes, I dumped the last dregs of my desperate energy into pushing forward.

My lungs and legs burned; I wondered if I would escape the vicious bloodsucker, only to die of a heart attack.

As I closed in on the bushes, I searched for a way through them.

The shrubbery began to shake, I skidded to a stop, just as a black blur shot out at me. It’s body collided with mine, limbs flailing in the air and knocking me to the ground. It pressed down on my chest, while a saliva soaked maw excitedly sniffed and investigated my face.

The large black dog looked down at me curiously, panting heavily and blowing dog breath straight into my nostrils.

“Goose! Where are you, boy? Get back here!” The man’s voice commanded from somewhere in the distance.

Pushing myself up on one arm, I turned my head back towards Lily’s house, but I could see no sign of her. The pleasant cottage sat there, as idyllic as when I’d first seen it.

Pushing Goose off of me, I sat up and gave a sidelong glance to the giant hairball with a lulling tongue. He reached out one paw to pat at my leg in hopes of obtaining affection.



I peeked at the house, while I rubbed the canine's ears. I took a moment to catch my breath and calm down.

He leaned into my hand, "I hope you're here to help." I said to the drooling hound.

He panted happily in response.

I considered whether I should try pushing through the bushes, but I can't just leave my car here. I could call the cops, but what would I tell them? At best, they'd come and interview the harmless looking woman and conclude I was a crazy person. Or worse, she'd just kill them as well as me.

After my unsuccessful attempt to fight her, I had little faith that bullets could stop her. I let out a long sigh, causing Goose to worriedly wag his tail and push his head into my chest. I had to make an effort to not be knocked over again. This huge lug looked more akin to a black bear than a dog.

I felt a bit safer with this random guard dog with me, and decided to lean into the feeling.

"Do you think you could escort me to my car?" I asked.

He pulled back, perked his ears, and tilted his head in response. At least he was listening, and I could pretend, for a moment, that he understood.

Standing up, I looked back at the house and planned my route around and to the driveway. I cautiously took a few steps closer, hoping to see a glimpse of my car parked in front.

Glancing back at Goose, I patted my thigh to get his attention. He galloped over happily, and I hoped that meant he wouldn't run off, like he did from his owner.

I started with a light jog, flicking my eyes from the house to the dog. Luckily, Goose seemed happy to tag along; likely just seeing this as an exciting adventure with a friendly stranger.

Giving the building a wide berth, we jumped through her garden. I scanned the windows of the house for Lily's figure, but saw nothing.

A low growling rolled out of Gooses throat and I looked down to see him placing himself between me and Lily's domicile as we ran. His hackles stood on end, and his lips pulled back to replace his goofy grin with a vicious sneer.

I couldn't see her, but apparently he could sense her.

"Good boy." I said.

We turned the corner and my silver sedan came into view. Our feet crunched over the gravel driveway and I flung open the driver's door and the back passenger door for Goose. He hopped right in and I shut the door.

Leaping into the driver's seat and slamming my door, I searched my pockets for the keys. Whipping them out, I jammed them into the ignition and turned the engine on. The car burst to life and I set it into reverse.

Stomping the gas, Goose and I flew down her driveway and spun the car around on the residential street. Punching it into drive, I drove like a mad-woman out of that neighborhood. I could hear Goose scrambling for stable footing in the back.

“Sorry boy.” I muttered.

I parked the car on the side of the road once we were several blocks away. I leaned my seat back and sat there trying to comprehend what just happened. I felt a wet spot on my face and reached up to touch it. I was the cut on my face.

That glass had definitely had been sharp, but Lily’s skin may as well have been carved out of stone. What I’d just encountered in that house was impossible. My mind didn’t want to accept it.

A vampire.

I didn’t know that for sure, but she ticked all the boxes for ‘vampire’. Did that mean all manner of monsters from myth were real? Ghouls and demons, were these things real? I felt like I was in free-fall, as the world revealed itself to be much more terrifying than I previously understood. I wondered what works of fiction I was familiar with came closest to describing reality now, and prayed it wasn’t H.P. Lovecraft.

Some soft whines behind reminded me that I wasn’t alone.

Goose’s tag had his owner’s phone number, and I gave it a call. I mostly told the truth, that I’d run into him after doing a delivery and that he’d gotten into my car. I left out the more disturbing details.

Goose’s owner showed up, a middle aged man in slacks and polo shirt, he knew well enough to stay six feet back as I got out of my car.

I worried that Goose would slip away again like the drooling goof he was, but this guy seemed confident as he just squatted down with arms wide open. The canine galloped to his master with tail helicoptering excitedly, jumping on him and covering the man in wet kisses.

For a moment I considered confiding in this stranger what I’d been through. My hands were still shaking, pretending things were normal almost physically hurt. But I didn’t see any good that could come of breaking my silence.

I waved goodbye to my four legged savior and drove off. I headed straight home to my tiny apartment and, feeling all too exhausted, I collapsed into bed.

I dreamt of snakes coiled round flower bouquets and rain drops made of carnival glass.

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The way life just went on after that encounter seemed a little surreal at first, but in hindsight it was disturbing how easily I slipped back into making deliveries as if nothing had happened.

For the first few days after the incident, I dreaded accepting orders fearing her address would pop up. I did some research on local crime reports, missing persons, and rumors about mysterious happenings, but nothing I found was conclusive.

There weren't more unexplained missing people in my area, or bodies showing up drained of blood.

After a few weeks, I pushed my discovery to the back of mind. I still paid my rent and my student loans, living paycheck to paycheck.

Some months passed and the app I delivered for slowly made their self-driving cars more and more common. Sleek new vehicles with little compartments to hold food, which were almost never late.

The orders came like a drip-feed, as the AI revolution made its way into the gig economy. The benefit to companies was two-fold, less employees to pay and less liability from those employees getting hurt or spreading contagion.

Finding a new job in the quarantine economy was easier said than done without a fresh wave of automation removing jobs by the thousands every month. When someone finds a job, they hold onto it for dear life. If you are bucked off the work horse you'll have a hell of a time getting back on, and every other cowboy is going to fight you to sit on that saddle.

Even if it's the mangiest horse in the manger.

It started out with automated systems springing up to compete with the rest of us. The nanosecond an order popped up on the app, it'd instantly be taken by a self driving car if any of them were available nearby.

Trying to hold out against them was futile. A human being had to pick up their phone and think about whether they could make a delivery before accepting it, and might make mistakes if they tried to rush it. If the Deep Blue chess computer could beat the world champion in 1996, there's no doubt AI can beat the average joe in modern times.

My gig work became barely enough to pay rent. I was running late on my school loan payments, and notices began piling up in my email.

I'd sit in my car, waiting for an order. Then I'd see them, those sleek vehicles with bright decals exclaiming Self Driving. No orders on my screen, yet they were being loaded up for a delivery by restaurant workers. We were being replaced, and they didn't even give us the courtesy of announcing it.

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"We haven't gotten your full payment." My landlord stated over the phone.

My stomach churned with shame, "I'm so sorry, I need just a little more time to get the rest." I said.

He let out a long breath, "You have until next month's rent to pay that and what you left out this month." He paused for a moment, "Otherwise, I take no pleasure in it, but I will begin the eviction process."

My breath hitched. "I understand," I replied, "I'll have the money."

I had no idea how. I hung up and threw my phone into the car's passenger seat. The rims of my eyes stung with the exasperated tears beginning to well up, blurring my vision. I was in my car, sitting in the abandoned parking lot of what before the pandemic was a high school. Schooling had become strictly online, and now these collections of classrooms were left as empty as my bank account.

The despair was creeping up my guts like poison ivy, growing and flowering into bright bursts of self hatred.

“Why can’t I make this work!” I screamed, slamming my hands against my steering wheel.

“Fuck!” I choked, “I don’t want to live in my car!”

Orders weren’t coming in, my job applications were going nowhere. Where was I going to get the money? I was already donating plasma, but max two donations a week for so little at this point wouldn’t help. Those donation centers were so popular with desperate people, it meant waiting hours and often being turned away as the massive supply overwhelmed the demand.

Every time, I dreaded the needles, the cold and clammy lightheadedness afterwards. The idea of giving up my vital fluids, just to barely keep myself going for another week, seemed less appetizing every time I thought about doing it.

It was just another way that I didn’t have any value as a person in this brave new world, all that counted was the product my body could produce.

Like the click of a gas burner sparking, a pervasive thought ignited in my mind.

What if my blood could buy more than my next meal? I thought.

My heart began to race, as the disbelief that I could seriously think of such a thing throbbed between my temples. Turning on my car, I whipped out of the parking lot.

“How am I this dumb? This is my solution?” I argued with myself.

I sharply rounded a corner and countered my question with “At this point, what better options do I have?”

Fuck it. I wasn’t going to change my decision.

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A few minutes of driving found me standing in front of that creamsicle house. I left my car door wide open with the engine on, pointed at the road and ready to speed out of here if necessary. I remember how she had remained in her house, how she didn’t give chase when I escaped, and I didn’t want to have this conversation at a disadvantage. We were going to do this my way.

I leaned over and blared my car’s horn. The sharp bellow echoed around me and the birds who were cheerfully chirping away a moment ago fell silent. The moments ticked past slowly like the drip of a leaky faucet as I stared at the front door.

I considered whether I should honk again when finally, the door opened a little. The hairs on the back of my neck stood on end as my eyes registered the small face peeking out. Those dark eyes staring out, reflecting the red of my taillights. She wasn’t wearing a mask, and this time the protruding fangs and the inhuman lines of her jaw that I saw before were hidden.

She looked normal. For a moment, I doubted my memory of the attack. I could feel my legs itching to run. It took all of my will power to just stand in place.

“Hey.” I loudly greeted, slowly lifting my hand in a wave.

She opened the door a little wider, her full frame shown in the shade of the porch.

“Um, Hey,” She replied.

Her brow was furrowed in confusion, and she scanned her yard suspiciously. I frantically tried to come up with what to say, ideas for different approaches jumped around in my mind like a pack of pop-rocks.

Without thinking I blurted out, “I came alone.”

Her eyes narrowed, “Why would you say that?” she said.

Heat rushed to my face in embarrassment, “I want to talk terms,” I said.

“Like this? Me on my porch and you at your car, yelling at each other?” She asked, “What’s your phone number?”

We traded numbers, she stood in her doorway and I sat halfway in my running car while we started the call. It felt a little awkward, staring at each other from a distance, discussing details of exchange like hostage negotiations on TV.

“So,” She spoke softly, her expression seemed more curious than anything else, “You’re taking me up on my offer?”

I nodded, “A one time offer for a lump sum,” I said, trying to sound confident.

She nodded back, “May I ask why this can’t be a recurrent deal?” she coolly responded.

It was my turn to frown, “No,” I replied.

She shrugged, “Alright,” she said.

Thinking for a moment, she then asked, “What can I do to make you feel safe in this transaction?”

I wanted to say not kill me, but I opted for a different answer.

“Well for one thing, is it necessary for you to go for the jugular?” I asked.

“The jugular makes the process faster, but I am open to suggestions.” She said.

I rested my freehand on my steering wheel and leaned back, “What about risk of infection?” I said.

She tilted her head, “Risk of catching the world’s plague, or vampirism?” she asked.

The World’s Plague that’s an interesting thing to call it, makes it sound so distant.

“Both are a concern.” I said.

She closed her eyes and solemnly nodded saying, "I am incapable of spreading both."

She turned to look at her garden, "If it were as easy to spread my condition as it is depicted in legend, there would be far more of us roaming the world."

She sounded a little melancholic about this fact, in a way maybe she's been living in a kind of quarantine herself; just much longer.

"How do I make sure you can't just hold me hostage in there?" I asked.

Her eyebrows shot up like two startled caterpillars, "I know better than to do that!" she squeaked.

I jumped a little at the sudden change in tone. She clearly noticed her sudden reaction and cleared her throat, trying to recover from momentary embarrassment.

She then composed herself, and said, "If it makes you feel better, send a close friend a text about getting a special order from a client, and make plans to talk to them later tonight. If you go missing, your phone's GPS will point authorities right here. And I've invested too much in this home to throw it away that easily."

"Good Idea." I said.

I felt a little embarrassed that my rush over here had stopped me from considering that precaution.

"I don't want to harm you, or take your freedom away," She stated plainly. "I'd much rather this be something you'd consider doing again."

I ignored that last bit pointedly.

Thinking back to our last encounter, I asked, "What about that hypnotism thing?"

She shook her head, "It's like I said before, the human mind adapts to what I do fairly quickly. It's a very useful trick the first time, but you've been exposed enough that its effect is greatly diminished."

She lifted up a palm in a questioning gesture, "Besides, if you could be entranced long term, why would I bargain with you?" she said.

"Maybe I'm not in the area of effect?" I offered.

She shook her head again, and said, "All I need is eye contact. I could do it right now. I'll demonstrate if you want."

"That... won't be necessary," I answered.

It was good to know she couldn't just turn me into a drooling slave.

I sighed, pinching the bridge of my nose. I said, "Okay, we have a deal."

Her posture straightened and a small smile spread across her lips, "Fantastic!" she said. "I'll send the money now."

Before I could interrupt, she lowered her smartphone from her ear and began thumbing at the screen. A moment later my phone pinged with a cash transfer. I looked down at the screen, saw the long line of zeros, and it felt like my eyebrows were going to fly off my forehead.

Lily seeing my reaction, she gave a concerned look. She and I brought our phones back to our ears.

“I’m sorry, was that not enough?” she frantically asked. “I should have asked how much you wanted,” she said.

I was dumbfounded, I wouldn’t have to worry about rent for several months with this. And she hadn’t even got my blood yet. I could drive away, right now, and I don’t think she could do anything to stop me.

I stammered into the phone saying, “I-It’s fine! I’m just surprised, it’s a little more than what I was going to ask for.”

Feeling indebted to a vampire was not what I was planning.

“So you aren’t unhappy with it?” She asked.

I could hear the anticipation in her tone. There’s no getting out of this now.

“This is good,” I said. “So how should we go about this?”

“Do you want to come in?” She asked, while gesturing at her door.

My mind flashed back to when she had pulled me violently into her home. I tried to push those thoughts down, and ignore the sick feeling left in my stomach.

“Sure, one moment.” I said and hung up.

Stuffing my phone into my pocket, I put my hand around the keys in the ignition, for a moment considering whether I should flake. I glanced up at Lily waiting for me patiently. With a deep breath and a heavy sigh, I turned off the engine.

...

She sat me down in her rustic living room, in the floral print chair I had sprinted past several months ago. Lily then brought me a glass of water and a warm english muffin from the kitchen, she sat them down on the end table next to the chair.

“Just in case you feel a little faint afterwards.” She said and nodded towards the food.

“Thanks.” I replied, squeezing the arms of the chair to ease my anxiety.

The last thing I needed was to pass out. An odd question popped into my head.

“Weird question, did you actually eat the eggs benedict I delivered last time?”

She walked back into the kitchen to pick up one of the wooden chairs positioned around the dinner table.

“I put it in my compost bin.” she answered, as she lifted up and carried the chair back.

I leaned forward a little, my curiosity piqued. “So you don’t eat?” I asked.

She shrugged, “I can, but food is wasted on me. I give my deliveries to my garden in the form of mulch.” she said.

Now that I got a good look around the room, there were floral prints everywhere; the wall paper, the doily on the end table, and the rug below my feet. Assorted pots sat on shelves and hung from the ceiling, brimming with foliage.

“You really like plants, huh?” I commented.

“They’re pretty great.” She said quietly, as she placed the kitchen chair in front of me and sat down.

“What’s your favorite?” I asked.

I could feel a cold sweat developing on the back of my neck. The nervousness was getting to me and talking eased it slightly. Her eyes flickered to mine and then behind me. She pointed and I turned to look, there was a large window on the other end of the room. The window had a plant growing on the outside of it in long delicate vines.

“Ivy?” I guessed.

“Gloriosa Modesta” she replied. “A type of climbing lily. In the summer it goes into full bloom, with these long clementine petaled flowers.”

“Oh, so it bloomed not too long ago?” I said.

I turned back to her, she was smiling. Still gazing at the window, she nodded and seemed lost in thought. I took the glass of water in my hand and idly sipped. Her eyes flickered to me.

“Was it those automated cars that drove you to me?” she asked.

I choked for a split second while swallowing my water, and placed the cup down.

“What?” I said.

She shrugged and said, “I was just assuming that you were having just as much difficulty getting deliveries, as I was getting delivery drivers.”



Lily sighed, "That is unfortunate. I hope that what I paid you helps get you back on your feet."

She looked down at my arm with a hungry, predatory focus.

"Are you ready?" she asked.

"Sure." I said and leaned back, squeezing my eyes shut.

I could feel her cool fingers carefully wrap around my arm and lift it up to her mouth. Then before I could even count down to three, she bit down. Instinctively I flinched, clenched my jaw and pressed my feet hard into the floor. I unthinkingly tried to yank my arm away as her fangs dug into my flesh, but luckily Lily's iron grip held me tight, or else her fangs would have torn down the length of my forearm.

It felt like being pierced by two hot wires, and then it turned cold. A numbness grew from my elbow and radiated out into my whole arm. My breathing slowed and my heart stopped punching against my ribcage. A calm euphoria dissolved at the base of my skull and melted like wax down my spine.

This wasn't what blood loss felt like, was it? I thought.

A few long moments passed. Without looking, I couldn't tell if she was still drinking from me. I didn't want to know.

"You'll feel a bit drowsy for a minute," Lily explained.

I realized this meant she'd finally pulled away.

"Feeding has a sedative effect," she said.

With my eyes still closed, I mumbled, "Makes sense."

This felt like taking Nyquil while you're as sick as a dog and the you can't fight the chemical sleep. I'm not sure if I fell asleep, but when I opened my eyes I felt well rested. I sat up a little and the world spun, gripping my head I then glanced down at my arm. I saw she had already bandaged it.

Remembering the food, I started picking at the muffin, being careful not to move my head anywhere too quickly. As I chewed I thought over the turn my life had taken.

And hey, I was still alive. I thought and smiled to myself.

I glanced at Lily who was dusting some of the potted plants that hung from the ceiling. Because of her height she had to stand on a step ladder to reach up, from this perspective she seemed like anybody else; just another human, living her life.

"Hey, uh thanks." I said.

She jumped a little at the sound of my voice, almost toppling off of the step ladder. She caught herself and, with a flustered look, peeked at me.

Her eyes narrowed with confusion. "Why would you say that?" she asked.

"You're doing me a huge favor," I answered sheepishly, "So thanks."

She look baffled for a moment and stepped off the ladder.

"I did you a favor?" she shook her head and laughed, "Society stuck you between being homeless or being food for a monster, and you're thanking me?"

I shrugged, "I don't know. The word monster seems a little harsh to me," I said.

I lightly patted the bandage on my arm, "At this point I'm considering this gig work, like my deliveries."

She raised an eyebrow, "That doesn't sound like a terribly healthy perspective," she said.

"Neither is calling yourself a monster." I pointed out.

"True enough." She replied, turning back to her plants.

I took a big bite out of the muffin, quickly chewed and stuffed the food into my cheek so I could speak.

"I hope I'm not being rude to ask-" I began to say.

"You're wondering how old I am?" She interrupted me.

I swallowed, "You're psychic too?" I asked.

I could see a small smirk play across her lips, "No, you're just predictable," she said.

She thought for a moment and corrected herself, "Except for when you're telling a deadly bloodsucking being that you've shown up alone to their lair, and that you're thankful to them for drinking your blood."

She wagged her pointer finger saying, "As much as I appreciate it personally, that is very odd."

I chuckled. It had been forever since I'd interacted with anyone in person like this.

Would it really be so bad to make a living like this? And... maybe make a friend? I thought.

"How about a different question then?" I queried.

She tilted her head curiously and replied, "Hmm?"

"Do you have a job opening for a gardener?" I asked.

She grinned, showing the tips of her pointed fangs.