

# A Perfect Soul

by F.R. Southerland

## Part One

*1567*

The first memory was of sunlight. It streamed in through the window. It was early morning light, from the east, and it framed his mother in an ethereal glow. He watched, thinking her like the angels she told him of.

When she smiled, she seemed even more radiant. "It's an important day," she told him.

He knew that. He just didn't know why.

His mother handed him a slice of the apple she'd been peeling and slicing for a pie. It was tart when he bit into it.

His gaze stayed on the beam of sunlight and how it framed her. She hummed the old familiar song as she worked. The sound of hooves hitting the earth just outside the door made her face light up more. "Go on, then. See who's at the door."

He scrambled on small legs, but it was Father who opened the door, and laughed, and scooped him up into his arms, Father who smelled like the sea and the sun and had been gone for a long time.

He'd come home.

He was three years old.

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*1581*

Marrying for love was foolish. Everyone said so. It made sense, he supposed, but whenever he saw her, the idea of marrying her and having a happy life together overshadowed any sort of sense.

Her name was Elizabeth. There were many other girls considered far more beautiful, but he found her gorgeous. Especially when she smiled in his direction. Her hair was dark, like chestnut, and so were her eyes, though a light shone in them that barely dimmed.

He made up his mind the first time he saw her. He would marry her, even if everyone disapproved.

He was seventeen years old.

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*1583*

They'd been married for a year when their son was born. They named him James, after his father. He was small, didn't make much noise. Elizabeth had struggled during the birth, but she would live. She smiled when she held the tiny babe.

"He's beautiful."

He was. He was proud. They'd made a life, a bright shining life.

Two days later, he watched that life dwindle. He saw it happen, like watching a candle flicker in the breeze and going out. They buried the baby in the church cemetery the next day.

And life for himself and Elizabeth resumed, the light of it somewhat dimmer.

He was nineteen years old, almost twenty.

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*1585*

His father sometimes would jest how his son had the sea in his veins in place of blood. After all, he had been born on a ship, in the midst of a storm no less. It would account for why the rocking of the ship soothed him rather than distressed.

The same could not be said of Elizabeth, who'd been ill since the beginning of the voyage. There had been a few deaths so far, but that was expected at sea, and none of them caused by simple sea sickness. He assured her the journey would only be a few months, then they would arrive in the New World, and she would be well then. It was meant to be a new beginning.

That seemed to placate her. He left her with a kiss, left her to rest below deck, and joined some of the men above. He watched the waves, gentle waves today, and wondered what awaited them once they made land.

"The winds have quieted," a voice beside him said, and he acknowledged the other with a nod and a laugh.

"It won't last long." He pointed out at the clouds. "There's a storm. There'll be wind enough."

The man didn't say much to him after that. It was then he recalled he wasn't sure who he was, and he'd been certain he knew everyone who'd boarded.

He was twenty-one.

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*1589*

The years in the colony had started bad, ended worse. The situation was desperate, dire. There was always hope, hope that a returning fleet would return with food, more people, and they could pull themselves out of the turmoil the New World had given them.

And then the illness began.

It was slow at first—one or two men felt ill, and then it spread, and it spread quickly. Numbers began to dwindle. People died.

That meager hope began to fade. There would be no help. No one was coming. Their journey here had been futile.

It was the end.

His mother died first, then his father. Elizabeth turned to nursing the ill, nursing him when the symptoms began to show. Within in days, she was abed as well, and she went faster than he did.

There wasn't anything to be done. He held her hand. He talked to her. He made promises that he knew wouldn't forget, but meant nothing if she died. The child she carried died inside her.

"I wish... it could've lived."

He watched her die, and felt himself die with her.

Despite his own sickness, he didn't move from her bedside for hours. He kept hold of her hand, long after it had grown cold in death. He didn't move even when he heard footsteps enter the home, the door creaking.

"It was inevitable. They had to die." He recognized the voice. It belonged to the stranger aboard the ship, the one no one else could recall having seen, the one others had simply dismissed as something he imagined.

He drew his back straight, but didn't turn. "What are you? A devil? You only appear when others have died, when no one else can see you, when no one will believe me."

"I am many things. You may think of me as a devil."

"Leave. You're not welcome here." He sniffed. His face was wet with tears.

"But I am. You're dying."

"Are you to take me to hell?" He turned to view the man. The man's eyes were black, void. There was nothing. He felt a thrill of fear, looking at him, but understood that he was right. He was a devil, he was dying...

"No, you're not. Already in hell," he answered his own question. He looked back to Elizabeth's body. The light had gone from her. She was dead, no longer the lively beauty he'd loved. "There's nothing for me here. So do what you will. I never wish to suffer this again. I want it done. Send me to her sooner. I'm ready."

But the devil didn't. The devil just stood, stared, did nothing.

"Do it. Send me to her. Kill me. Take me to where she is or—or else bring her back me. Save her and bring her back to me. Save them all!" He was desperate, beginning, the tears rolling down his face.

The devil smiled, not kind but cruel. Then the devil reached into his chest and ripped out his soul. It was pain upon pain, burning and tearing, everything that wasn't already taken away from him pulled apart.

He caught a glimpse of it, through the pain, a bright white light, placed within a jar, put away. The pain ebbed. His wrist burned, there was a symbol there now, bright red against white skin. He stared, then looked to the devil.

And he understood. He understood it all.

He became a demon that night.

He was twenty-five years old.

## Part Two

1589

They were all dead. Every last person. And he'd been the one to kill them. It had been easy, both to do it, and both morally. He didn't feel anything when he touched the sick and dying; no pity, no guilt.

When the light left them, when he consumed their souls and they filled the void and eased the gnawing hunger inside him, they died.

And he felt nothing.

“This is how you’ll survive now. This is what you’ll do for me,” the devil told him. “Their souls are yours now, and you are mine.”

He looked to him. He understood. “Because you took my soul.”

“Yes.”

He bit his lip, stared at the last man he’d killed. He’d known him. A carpenter. Close with his father, also dead.

The devil continued to speak. “You’ll do what I say, when I say. I gave you another life. You have to repay the debt.”

But he’d never asked for another life. He’d begged to die. He blinked, turned away.

They took the bodies—Elizabeth’s, his mother, his father too—and disposed of them in the sea. It was easy to do. He was strong now, he had power unimaginable—the ability to move from place to place within the blink of an eye.

“Only we will know the truth of what happened here.” The knife scratched. The devil carved something.

He watched, said nothing, waited. When the devil finished, he approached and clamped a strong hand on his shoulder. The grip was biting.

“I am called Thomas. But you will address me as Master. We are soultakers. There are few of us in this world. You do as I say, and you will live long enough to survive it.”

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*1605*

There was no freedom. It didn’t exist. He learned quickly that being a demon, being this kind of demon meant servitude.

His master was cruel. He demanded souls—innocent, pure, children’s souls, virgin’s souls—and his servant was meant to find them, and deliver them to him. It wasn’t a task he did willingly. The first time he failed, it meant imprisonment for weeks, until he begged and pleaded to be released. The hunger was unbearable. He needed to feed. When his master finally deigned to release him, he took souls greedily until sated, and afterwards, he suffered the soul sickness alone and silent.

He didn’t make the mistake of defying his master again.

Not until the children. A small group of them—siblings, with blond hair and bright smiles, unaware just yet of all the evils in the world. Their souls shone brighter than the midday sun, and he couldn’t do it. They were ripe and ready, but he wouldn’t take them.

His punishment that time was a slow, agonizing torture. His fingers were cut away, one by one, knife cutting through flesh and bone. He screamed, and the sound became like a song, intermittently broken apart by the snap of bone.

And when his flesh grew back, whole and new, his master sawed them away again.

The message came through. He understood.

But it didn’t mean he wouldn’t defy and deny his master again.

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1692

The years passed. He refused many times to take souls, or to pass them over. He suffered many punishments—always painful, always twisted and cruel. None of them were as terrible as the isolation.

At first, when his master ignored him, it was a blessing. It was blissful, quiet. He didn't summon him, he didn't have to answer to his demands, there were no souls to deliver. There was nothing but peace, and for the first time, a freedom he'd never tasted before.

The first few years of it, he basked in it. He left Europe and once again traveled to the New World. He found a nice little niche in Salem, Massachusetts and thereabouts—where he sowed seeds of chaos and watched the chaos spread.

He soon became bored of that. He soon began to miss his master's cruelty and demands, and the companionship. He never realized how dependent he'd come to be, that his master had always been there, that he'd had some sort of guide—even if it was never so great. It was a terrible way of thinking—a start to madness, he thought—and he quickly sought to abandon the idea. He didn't need him. He needed no one. He had himself. He had his freedom.

So he traveled. He visited other settlements and colonies, returned to England and Europe and terrorized, briefly, villages and homes. He took souls for himself, collected them, and did not have to share.

And then he sailed.

It seemed inevitable that he'd return to the sea one day. He did it on his own terms, becoming part of a crew of cutthroats and thieves, people whose disposition appealed to his new freedom.

He became a pirate.

For years, he sailed the seas, pillaged and plundered and lived. Decades passed and his master never called for him.

He still found that a profound loss, deep inside.

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1714

When the ship crashed upon the rocks, there were few of the sailors and pirates who survived. He, naturally, was among them. He couldn't die, couldn't drown, couldn't be dashed upon the rocks. So he watched the others die as he sat there upon the rocks, waiting for the storm to pass.

And the sirens sang their song. Mermaids. They lured the men, took them beneath the waves, they drowned them and feasted on their corpses until the water turned red. He wasn't immune to their song, but he was immune to death.

She tried to drown him. He instantly fell in love.

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1720

When the pains in his stomach began, he knew his freedom was over. His master was summoning him, and he would continue to do so until he arrived, or else he'd suffer from continuous torment.

In some ways, that may have been better.

Both fearing and anticipating a reprimand, he went to him.

He found Thomas covered in blood, a sword in hand.

Eyes immediately widened. A force unseen and not his own pushed him back. He fell to his knees onto the wet earth. When he lifted his hands, they were red with still warm blood.

Red dripped from the sharp tip of the sword. Thomas the devil lifted it, brought it to his servant's throat.

This was the torture he'd been expecting. He'd cut him, pierce him, behead him and he would heal and still live and he would endure more. The press of this blade, however, the empty void of his master's eyes was different. This wasn't a punishment, this wasn't a torture...

It was a warning.

"Your brothers and sisters are dead. The others of our kind. I have slain them and taken their power."

"But we can't die. We're immortal." He laughed and it had a strangled, terrified cadence.

"Ah. There's one thing that can do away with us permanently, one thing easily enough obtained, but rare and secretive and it will certainly kill you."

His master wasn't one to jest or play games and the blackness of his demonic gaze spoke more than his words did.

It became hard to breath. The smell of blood and earth surrounded him. "And you mean to kill me, like you did with them?"

His master's lips curved into a pitiless smile. "And lose my favorite servant?" He dug the point of the blade just slightly into the soft flesh at his throat—only a nick—and it bled. And remained. It didn't heal.

He brought up a hand, feeling the blood, the slight wound. And the realization made him go cold.

And then, the warning. "If you defy me again as you have before, I will."

He had no reason to disbelieve him.

### Part Three

*1745*

He did as he asked. He did what his master wanted. He collected the souls, he killed the innocent, and over time, he hardened himself.

"The soulless aren't meant to feel," Thomas told him.

"Then why do we?"

His answer was a hard blow that knocked him off his feet. He tasted blood and he laughed.

"You don't know the answer, do you? And it infuriates you."

The next blow shattered bone. Somehow, he still managed to grin, to challenge, to ignore the death threat from years ago. The bones mended, the flesh healed. He knew his master would kill him if he continued, but that was all part of the fun.

And maybe a final death would mean a final freedom.

But his master wouldn't give him up. He liked having someone to torture and hurt and crush beneath his boot. Someone he could use for his own pleasures and cast aside when he no longer needed him. Someone who was completely his, completely beneath his rule. A slave.

It was the prolonged suffering he liked. Death would be too easy.

So he challenged. Provocation and anger was all he had left.

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*1759*

Sleep did not come so easily to him, but he did slumber. He never dreamed, but when he woke, there was a fleeting feeling that something had gripped him tightly as he slept and would not let go. The woman in bed beside him wasn't so affected, so he left her and went out to the streets.

Darkness and nothing but. At this hour, the humans slept.

But there was something there, something tangible and real and it had drawn him out. And it had fled, leaving him to wonder just what and why.

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*1777*

There was a girl with a familiar face. He followed her for days before he realized what was making her so familiar to him.

Dark hair. Dark eyes. A smile that brightened her entire face. When she turned to look at him, when the realization came, it was as if the dead had returned.

Elizabeth.

His breath caught. He was frozen. Her aura was so bright, so good, so innocent.

Please, please don't let him see her. Please don't let him want her. He didn't dare look behind him, to where his master spoke with a shop owner. He kept his gaze on her.

She wasn't Elizabeth, he told himself. Elizabeth was dead. She'd been dead two hundred years.

Her smile turned concerned. "Do I know you, sir?"

He shook his head. "No." The word was strangled leaving his mouth. "No, you are mistaken." He turned away and quickly retreated.

It wasn't her. She was dead. He'd have to remember that.

It would be easier, less painful, if he'd cut out his own heart instead of having it ripped from his chest at the sight of her.

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*1814*

It wasn't the first time he'd spilled blood—it certainly wouldn't be the last. It was still warm on his hands, wet. It hadn't even been necessary, after all, the man was already dead. He'd taken his soul, put it in a nice little bottle, at his master's request.

But there was something about spilling the blood that felt good, that made it real. He prized the blood now drying on his hands.

He rubbed his fingers together. The blood turned tacky beneath his touch.

A loud gasp, glass shattering, drew his attention to the doorway. The woman who stood in the middle of it was young—not a child, but a woman—with an aura that shone brightly through the darkness. She moved forward, crouching by the dead man. “Matthew? Matthew?!”

By now, he should’ve been gone. Either kill the woman, or leave her to her grief. He didn’t. Instead, he stayed, he watched her clutch at Matthew’s corpse, watched her mourn and scream. He wasn’t sure why he stayed, why he felt the need.

When she lifted her red-rimmed eyes and glared at him, he saw the flash of anger consume her aura. It brightened, turned red, and surrounded her in a blazing heat.

Well, that was something.

“Why?” Her voice was tight, released through clenched teeth. Her fingers curled tightly in the bloodied fabric of the corpse’s shirt, and she didn’t let go, only tightened her grip.

“S’what I do, love.”

The red of her aura punctuated with black, with white, with a multitude of colors as fear and realization came to her. He knew she saw what he was, saw the black-eyed stare. And she feared it.

“Demon. Monster.” Her words were a hiss.

He liked that, having it acknowledged. It certainly beat lying. “That’s right.”

He expected more fear. A scream. Something. Instead, her eyes narrowed into more of a glare. Her body shook with rage.

“You will not get away with this.”

The laughter bubbled out of him before he could stop it. Shock registered on the woman’s face, then renewed anger. “You will not!” she declared again.

He turned with another laugh. It seemed very unlikely she would.

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*1816*

There was enjoyment in being hunted, he learned. Nothing could kill him—save for the one thing his master threatened, but that seemed a very dim possibility. They tried the usual things. Holy water did nothing but make him wet. Salt wasn’t the deterrent they’d hoped. Silver did nothing more than cut like any steel. It healed over instantly.

His master had warned him once about provoking demon hunters or vampire slayers or any other such warriors for good. Some were smarter than they appeared.

But he’d only warned him once. He doubted his master particularly cared if he met his end at the hands of one of these men or women. As if they could even touch him.

The past two years had been trial enough of that. One failed attempt after another, finally made him wonder what the fuss was about. Just who had he wronged so terribly this time? Oh, there were a few humans who came to mind—the woman who’d vowed revenge on him just a few years prior seemed the most likely candidate.

At least she was giving it her best, and that was impressive to him.

In the long run, he concluded it didn’t matter. They’d never touch him, no matter what came at him.



And he was confident—perhaps too much so—when he lured the most recent hunter on his trail into the church.

It was a trap.

That was new. He realized it too late when he found he couldn't move. The binding symbols—there were so many of them, multiple energies and magics and forces combined together just to hold him.

His master had never warned him what to expect if the hunters happened to be witches.

He did a quick count. Thirteen. A decent coven. A powerful coven. One of them stepped forward, and he recognized her.

So he'd been right. It was the vengeful woman, the one who sobbed over Matthew.

Her words were a whispered hiss, a curse, an angry testimony. He didn't hear much of it. He was watching the witches, his head whipping to and fro, watching the magic take on a tangible form, their souls combined as their powers grew and took shape and became one mass of concentrated energy.

He'd never seen anything like it.

He screamed. He raged. He pushed back with his own power but it did nothing. The woman bared her teeth at him in a smile, a grimace.

The explosion of power rocked right through him. The light was the brightest thing he'd ever seen—pure white and blinding. There was no escape from it. It tore him apart, from the outside in, light working its way through his pores and deep down into the pit where his soul had once been.

He couldn't say how long that torment lasted, how long he was blind, deaf, dumb, dead. Clarity began to return to him. The pain subsided. He was whole again. Alive.

And surrounded entirely by a cold, suffocating darkness. The darkness touched him. It too was alive.

He didn't know where he was. The darkness was inky. Even holding a hand to his face a short distance away produced no sight.

No not alive, he realized. Existing. Lost.

Something in the darkness moved against him and he laughed, then he cried, and finally he screamed as it began to devour him.

## Part Four

### *Unknown (1816-2013)*

Living darkness. He'd never known anything like it. It was alive, breathing—at least, he thought he could feel a cold breeze brush across the back of his neck, against his arm, his face from time to time. Panting.

He knew it had teeth. He felt it tear into his skin, pull away flesh. And a tongue. It lapped at his blood.

It tried, over and over to devour him, but he simply wouldn't die. Perhaps now he only existed as a constant meal for this creature. It would never need to hunt, or be fed again, not when it had a source right there. Not as long as it had him.

That was bad for him. Good for the creature.

He measured time by how often it fed. Minutes, hours, days—they no longer existed. There was just pain and no pain, alive and dead, and all the terrible in-betweens.

The in-betweens became longer. The darkness feasted on him less and less, until it was not at all and that was when he lost all sense of time.

There wasn't anything to occupy him there, only his thoughts. He thought of the witches who had tricked him. Their faces were all a blur, their chanting overlapping. He could still smell the incense in the church—or perhaps that was just damp earth and blood. Maybe the darkness had its own scent.

He thought of his master, of his cruel smile and all the pain it inflicted, and he found himself longing for the simplicity and familiarity of that. His master would eventually summon him. He'd bring him out of this. In time, he thought of him as his eventual salvation. He damned him. Maybe he'd save him too.

He thought of Elizabeth. Her smile. That was the only light he could find in the darkness.

The darkness moved around him. It slithered around his arms and legs. He leaned back into it, closed his eyes. If he imagined it, it was almost an embrace.

Hunger gnawed at him. He hadn't consumed a soul in a long time. He felt weaker, starved. He clawed at the earth, at his own face. He'd never gone so long without feeding. He couldn't stand it.

The coldness long ago numbed him. His joints were stiff, fingers cramped together. He craved warmth, craved the air, craved the light. He craved touch, and people, and life.

The darkness slid again. It whispered.

*Listen. Do you hear us?*

“No. I hear nothing. See nothing.” He lifted his head, blinking into the dark.

*He hears us. He hears us.* The whispers went on around him. *What do we do? What do we do?*

“Leave me alone,” he answered for them. “Leave me alone or let me die. Save me. Kill me.” He started to laugh. And the laughter didn't stop.

The shadows whispered, incoherent. They slipped away, left him laughing. He laughed until he cried. And then he didn't stop crying.

He might've cried for days. He may have screamed, but the shadows swallowed up the sound of his voice. When he tried to speak again, there was no sound. No sight. No sound.

He stopped thinking, or else his thoughts made no sense. He stopped breathing, or else his lungs would collapse. At one point, he felt the crushing weight of the darkness around him, breaking and crunching his bones. He couldn't breathe. The cold filtered in through the cracks in his skin. It penetrated his organs. It chilled his blood.

They whispered again.

When he could speak again, he told them everything. He told them about Elizabeth, about his master, about the souls he'd taken, about even the minute details of long existence. The shadows never spoke, they didn't whisper back, but he was certain they were listening.

Even if they weren't, he kept talking.

He talked, and talked, until he was hoarse again. And when he ran out of words, he sang. When he ran out of songs, he laughed. Then he cried. Then he screamed.

Only after the silence returned did the whispers come back. When they did, he cried in relief. He wasn't alone.

Slowly, he began to understand more of the darkness. The darkness was singular and legion. It was nothing and everything. It was insatiable; it hungered, longed to feed. It had been so for eternity, since the beginning of time, for as long as darkness existed. He came to understand it, just as it understood him.

Sometimes, he talked. Sometimes they did. Most of the time, there was silence. And the silence was worse than anything. Worse even than the whispers that began to sound like taunts and laughter. No, they weren't there for him. They didn't make him feel less alone. They reminded him he was alone.

Back and forth. Back and forth. That's where his mind went. Alone. Not alone. Alone again.

If he could die and be free of the torture, he would. The shadows helped. They tried to break him again. They tried to devour him.

It didn't work.

His master never summoned him, though he thought he heard his laughter among the shadows.

There was no salvation. No one came for him. No one saved him.

He crawled through the darkness. He didn't move for lifetimes. The hunger, the weakness, the isolation left him a shell.

The shadows pulled him to sit up. The shadows held him. The shadows whispered to him.

"Let go. Let go. Let go."

They didn't let go.

He didn't have the strength to fight, but he tried. There wasn't much to grab onto, to push against, but he tried. Screaming, he fought and he fought hard and in the end the shadows...

...the shadows relented. The shadows backed away. They stopped their whispers and their laughter and the following silence seemed stunned.

He stood. He stared through the darkness. "Show me. I want to know. Everything."

The shadows, the darkness didn't respond.

"Show me!"

*Show him. Show him.*

They grabbed him, they pulled him in. And this time, even as damaged as he was, he listened. Even if it was the last of his strength, he listened, and he learned.

He adapted to the shadows and they to him. He learned how to move them, to make them do what he will. They resisted at first, but soon gave in. The shadows joined with him. There were times when he didn't think they existed apart from the other.

And, in time—in what passed for time—he learned that he was more than demon, more than shadow, more than anything.

Light. For the first time there was light—real light. And air? Air! He breathed it in, gasping, his lungs working for what felt like the first time in years, lifetimes.

And he could see. Buildings. Strange sights. Hard ground. He gasped for breath, panting, and stared at the changed world around him. He didn't know where he was, when he was, what he was.

There was only one thought, one coherent and singular idea that he couldn't let go of—freedom. He was free. He was alive and he was free.

His laughter started and didn't stop. And the shadows pooled around him and they laughed too.

## Part Five

*2013 - March*

It was a struggle to form his thoughts into cohesion. Light. Too much light. And the sound. The sound was just noise. Why was there so much noise? It was difficult to make sense of everything he experienced, not when he'd been used to the darkness and shadows for so long, not when everything assailed him at once.

His throat burned from too much laughter, but the sound had stopped so he could listen, take in the unfamiliar noise.

He struggled to his feet. The ground was cold, and hard. The shadows clung to him, wrapping around his arms and legs and torso. He stumbled, footsteps uneven, and fell. He was too weak to stand. Whatever this place was, whatever the time, there was only one thought that dominated his mind—even stronger than the notion of his new freedom.

Feed.

He blinked rapidly, gaze searching. There, in the building nearby. The souls were so bright and colorful that they burned through the walls. Some were pure, others not so much, but it didn't matter. He was so hungry. He'd take anything.

Slowly, he walked toward the light, his feet dragging. Within a few minutes, he found a strength within him he wasn't aware he still possessed.

The shadows pulled away from him. They retreated to crevasses and corners, the places where they pooled the darkest. He could still hear their whispers.

He heard singing too, but not from them. From within the walls. He opened the doors and he stared.

It was a church. The congregation wasn't large—perhaps a dozen or so people. There had been thirteen the night the witches banished him. He remembered that.

White-hot anger boiled inside him. He released it with a harsh cry, a scream. Someone else screamed too, then others.

He tore all their souls at once. He'd used such a method before—had never considered himself capable. Perhaps it was because he was starved, or maybe it was because the shadows had given him strength where souls could not. Whatever the case, he absorbed them all, felt the power grow within him, and felt himself return to something more than a broken shell. With the souls he absorbed memories, and knowledge, and the bits and pieces of the last two centuries that he'd lost. Not everything, but enough.

Afterwards, he felt more like himself. He had much to see, do, learn. He couldn't wait. For the first time, freedom was his, and he wanted to stay on top.

He let the shadows have the corpses. They'd starved too, after all.

The world outside the church was brighter now, clearer, and he observed things with more understanding. There was much to see, and much to do, and more souls to take.

The first man he encountered died like those in the church, but before the shadows could take him, he made sure to empty his pockets. He found a wallet, keys, money, and a name.

Well, he needed a new one, after all. He palmed the keys, grinned, and sought out the address to see where this Dylan Matherson lived.

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### *2013 – July*

Books, magazines, comics, newspapers—they piled up in his spacious flat. Dylan Matherson, as it turned out, was a business owner of comic books and graphic novels, and he had an apartment above the shop. It wasn't too hard to assume his name and business. Apparently, he'd been something of a loner. A recluse. He had no friends.

And this Dylan was starting to closely follow behind.

But his solitude and reclusiveness had a purpose. He had to study this new world. He needed to acclimate to the changes of the past two hundred years.

So he read everything. He watched everything. He experienced everything he could from within the apartment. But that wasn't enough. It was time for him to venture out. To apply his new knowledge on the waiting world.

He liked it. Liked what 2013 had to give. It was like an entirely new place, with new technology and none of the servitude or oppression of the last centuries he'd spent with his master. There was no sign of the elder soultaker. Maybe he'd died. Maybe the same witches that had banished him had done the same of his master.

Dylan could hope.

He didn't dwell on it and instead focused on how much he enjoyed the modern age, how much he liked having his freedom.

The shadows agreed. They liked it here, too.

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### *2013 – August*

"I'm glad this place is open again. I was starting to think the owner had sold the place out and they were going to move in another fucking Starbucks. What happened to him?"

He flipped through the comic in front of him idly, his gaze on the woman across the counter from him. Her plump features looked Asian, but her accent was completely American. And her soul was vibrant. He liked her.

"Ah, he died. Shame, I know, but m'in charge now."

"Yeah? Who're you?"

"Dylan Matherson."

She laughed. "Right, that was the other dude's name."

"Yeah, an' s'my name too."

She looked incredulous, and he flashed her a grin. Rolling her eyes, the woman didn't miss a beat.

"Whatever. You hiring right now?"

He barely considered it. "I might be."

"Then I might need a job." She adjusted the bag at her side, stared him down.

“Your name?”

“Carla. Carla Carlyle.”

His grin widened. “Brilliant, Carla Carlyle. Welcome to the Other Realm Comics. You’re hired.”

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*2013 – November*

There were other worlds.

It shouldn’t have come as a shock to him. After all, some demons were said to have come from a rift, a divide, from one dimension to another. And, he’d spend the last couple of centuries in a hell world of darkness and shadows.

Maybe it was only surprising because he found himself within one. It had become common for him to move from place to place through the shadows, with their help. They’d guide him from one destination to the other easily enough. It was a first that he wound up in another world.

He laughed, delighted. “This is new, I like this. You’re brilliant, you know.”

The shadows whispered and laughed too.

Now that he knew he could move between them, as he wanted—through time itself—there was nothing that could hold him back.

Freedom—true freedom—was finally his.

## Part Six

*2014 – May*

He settled in easily to his new life. And it was a good life. Very good. He traveled a lot—mostly to new worlds. Everything was fascinating, an adventure, a discovery. The shop and the flat above it became home—or at least the closest to a home he could ever remember having.

It came with a cat, or the cat came with the apartment. In either case, the white, fluffy feline began to show up shortly after he began to make the place his own. She came in one day through the window off the fire escape and never left. He named her Spooky, for her white fur and the silent way she moved around the flat, like a ghost.

Spooky was a constant in his life, always there when he came back home from one of his dimensional travels. A comfort.

He pet the top of her head as he flipped through channels on TV, winding down from the day—from the last place he visited. A world where technology ran everything and robots outnumbered people. Television seemed so simple by comparison. Give it another century or so, he thought, amused.

And as he settled on a program, he felt it. The familiar tightening in his gut of someone summoning, but more than that—he sensed him.

His eyes widened. His breath caught. He swore his heart stopped.

His master.

He could sense him. He was close. He was seeking him out. After all this time, he was finally coming to reclaim him, to wrench away his hard-won freedom, to destroy all that he'd built in the last year.

Panic set in. He needed to run. He had to make himself scarce.

Spooky Cat uttered a surprised meow when he moved her aside. He stood, he paced, he racked his brain. In the end, it was instinct that won out.

He grabbed a shadow, opened it, and stepped in. The television continued to play as the bewildered cat stared at the spot where her owner had just been and meowed once more.

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### *2014 – July*

Edaros was probably, by far, one of the best dimensions he experienced. Demons were the dominant species and how could he not like that? It was easy to assimilate himself into the culture, to make friends, and even find a lover.

Time passed faster there than on Earth. He learned that the hard way after a month spent in Edaros equaled barely half a day at home. That wasn't enough time. He could still sense his master, and if he could sense him, then his master could sense him as well.

Here, in this other world, he found sanctuary. His master couldn't find him here. It wasn't so bad here. He could stay here indefinitely.

"You won't stay here." Sara rolled onto her side as she observed him. In many ways, she reminded him of Elizabeth—the dark hair and eyes and delicate frame, but beyond that she was as from the woman as could be.

"What makes you say that?"

"Because you don't belong here." She said it so casually, with such confidence that he couldn't really disbelieve her.

Her lips pulled into a tight smile as she leaned up and cupped his face. She peered into his eyes. "And you do not run. You will face him."

"And die," he murmured.

"Perhaps, but it will be on your terms and you will go with a fight. There's honor in that."

His responding chuckle was dry, humorless.

Her long, lacquered nails pinched the skin of his face sharply and he winced. "Stop being a coward," she told him. "You'll do what you have to do."

He wished he could've blamed her persuasion on her natural demonic abilities to manipulate others, but he wasn't a human or a lesser demon. No, what Sara did was make sense.

He knew what he had to do, and he'd do it too. Even if it meant he died.

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### *2014 – August*

"Do you know how long you've been gone? Where the fuck were you?"

He just shook his head and ignored Carla's interrogation. "I've got to get ready. And you've got to leave."

“What are you talking about?” She turned, eyes following him as he moved erratically around the flat. She’d shown up to the feed the cat, and Spooky was too intent on eating to take note that her real master was back. “You leave without a damn word. I’ve been taking care of the cat and now you’re taking off again?”

“No, no. M’not. You are. S’not safe.”

She huffed, and before she could protest again, he was in her face, invading her personal space. Her aura spiked with sudden fear and he knew she wouldn’t refuse.

“S’a demon thing, love. Best make yourself scarce. And take the cat too.” He gave Spooky a small amount of affection before he handed the animal over.

He could still feel him. His master. He was close. Powerful. Bloody hell.

“Just go. Now.”

Carla gave him an incredulous look as she back out the door and left the flat. From the window, he watched, seeing her cross the street with the white cat looking over her shoulder. He let out a breath. He wasn’t ready. He would never be ready.

“You are a very difficult demon to find.”

Fuck.

He didn’t have much of choice. Ready or not.

Nervous laughter bubbled out of him. “Seems I’ve always been difficult, one way or the other.”

“I cannot argue with that.”

He finally turned to look at his master, at the same youthful but cruel face. His gaze swept over him. He took in the sword resting at his side—the same one he’d used to kill the other soultakers years ago, a weapon that could and would end their immortality for certain.

“M’sorry, I didn’t call. Didn’t write,” he began, words insincere, and flashed a grin that held more confidence than he felt.

His master’s stony expression didn’t change. “Where were you? I summoned you many times. The past two centuries—”

“—were hell. I know.” He kept his grin. “I was outta town. Outta this world, even.”

His master took that in, digesting the information. Dark eyes rolled. “You always did have delusions.”

“Maybe more of them now, but I digress.” Despite the tension, the danger of the situation, the fact his master could strike him down at any second, he edged forward. “You’re here to kill me. Really kill me this time. No torture for me, old man, yeah?”

“A promise is a promise.”

“Threat, more like.”

“All the same.” The sword turned. Light caught it, reflecting from it. Shiny.

The shadows had pooled into the corners, the darkness concentrated. He knew they were watching. They were quiet—no whispers from them. “I guess you should get it over with.” The bravado he presented was fake.

His master saw through it, and laughed. And he didn’t hesitate. The sword swung lightning fast.

Right at him.



## Part Seven

*2014 - August*

Dylan's eyes widened and he leaped back, the edge of it hitting the sleeve of his coat and tearing right through it. He toppled over a chair and hit the floor. His master advanced, drawing the sword for another swing.

The shadows, watching, went into action. Their inky darkness turned solid, tangible. They gripped at his master's arms and ankles and would about him. Puzzlement crept over his face, his eyes too widened in surprise.

Dylan righted himself. "No. No! He's mine! This is my fight!"

The shadows whispered, confused, uncertain, but they released their grip and pulled back. His master stood tall, fingers gripped the hilt of the sword. Knuckles turned white.

It was his fight, he said. He had to follow through on his words. He'd have to fight.

And he did. He wasn't prepared; he had no weapons, but he made do with deflecting attacks and using furniture and other things as weapons. He fared well, but the sight of the deadly blade coming at him was a terrible sight and one slip up could be his end.

Maybe claiming this was his fight was the wrong course of action. He could've used a little help.

Neither of them lacked in stamina, neither of them tired out. It was a fight that, in theory, could quite literally go on forever. But he didn't want to spend the rest of forever fighting.

He'd rather spend it alive.

It was inevitable. One of them was bound to make a mistake, and when he stumbled, he left himself open. The blade came down, it sliced through his shoulder, bifurcating through both chest and back, dividing his torso. The pain was hot. He cried out, then screamed.

A foot planted firmly against his back gave leverage for his master to jerk the weapon from his flesh, shoving him to the floor simultaneous.

The wound didn't heal. By now, it should've. The flesh should've been whole and clean, but instead it gaped. His arm hung nearly useless at his side when he shifted. He held to it, blood pouring through his fingers.

This is it. This is it.

If he was going to die, he wanted to face him. He wanted him to see his face, to show him he wasn't going down so easily. It wasn't much of an act of defiance, but it was all he had.

When he saw his master's cruel smile, and the blade hit his chest, he knew that was it. The end.

And then the shadows surrounded him. The shadows took him over. They held him together, they strengthened him. With one last push, with all his energy and theirs combined, he pushed his master back. The force sent him stumbling, his grip on the sword slipping.

The shadows seized it and Dylan found it heavy in his good arm. And he didn't hesitate or let the pain stop him. He swung it. It hit against the throat. It cut through flesh and bone and before his former master's head hit the floor, the elder soultaker was dust.

And he collapsed just as the dust settled on the hardwood floor.

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*2014 – September*

It was a month or more before he felt like himself again. Healing was a slow process. The weapon hadn't done much for him, and he'd bled out quite a bit. He came to find out that he didn't miss mortal healing one bit.

It left a nasty scar, a jagged and ugly thing that would always be there as a reminder. He didn't like it, even if it meant he'd survived. It just meant he came very close to not.

The sword was almost an ugly reminder, but he feared destroying it. Dead, he'd learned, did not always stay dead. He wanted it for security. The shadows were all too happy to hold it for him. Just in case.

He owed the shadows more than he could say, but he never said anything to them about it, and they never asked. They fell into the same harmony as before.

When Carla returned with Spooky, she never asked why his place looked like a tornado had ripped through. She just quietly returned the cat and resumed managing the Other Realm comics. She had every right to be nosy, but he was thankful she wasn't. It might've been too much to explain, and he was tired of it all. Just so tired.

There was an emptiness now that hadn't been there before, even with his missing soul. It took him days to sort it out, just what it was.

It was one of the last places he wanted to go, but he sought out his master's secret places, the stores where he kept the souls that had been collected over the years. They were all his now—those his master had taken, those he'd taken for his master, all those of the soultakers his master had murdered. Hundreds upon hundreds of them. Perhaps thousands.

There was only one in particular that found it, and it called to him. It shone with a dull sheen—not as bright as those surrounding it, dull and ugly. But it was his soul. Thomas had taken it all those years ago, when he first made him into a demon, and now it was his again.

He stared at it, for an hour—maybe three—before he decided it was better left alone. He could endure the emptiness for now. His soul wasn't that important.

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*2015 – February*

The holidays had rolled by with the usual hectic celebrations and things were turning quiet again. Perhaps for the better, he thought. The shadows walked behind him as he crossed the street and entered the comics shop, entered the backroom, and headed for his flat.

Once there, he gave Spooky a perfunctory scratch behind the ears as he passed by. Standing in front of the closet door, Dylan gave it three knocks in rapid succession. He waited a minute longer than opened it.

The vast hallway welcomed him. The manor was still largely unfurnished, but most of his collections had already been moved into it. It would be a great home one day—just, perhaps, not his. The doorway had been a genius idea—a bridge between dimensions, accessed only by those who had the key. And it made it much easier to travel, on those days when the shadows refused to help him. They were stubborn these days, but nothing truly out of the ordinary.

Sara greeted him at the second floor landing. “You were gone longer that time,” she stated in her usual, disinterested way.

“It wasn’t that long.”

“Was it?” When she turned, he immediately saw the light shimmering from her midsection, from the bump of her belly that was absolutely, undeniably pregnant. He stared. Blinked. Tilted his head. Still, he didn’t full process it. A child. His child. A child with a soul?

Sara’s lips pulled into a smirk. “Your life is changing. Maybe you shouldn’t make yourself so scarce.” A simple suggestion, but a truly important one, he thought.

A grin broke over his face. “M’life’s always been changin’,” he countered. “This time, s’for the better.”

And Dylan couldn’t help but feel that was incredibly true. It had been a long life so far, with ups and downs, but for the first time he was free, and he was happy, and he was prepared to hold onto that for as long as he could.

*The End*

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