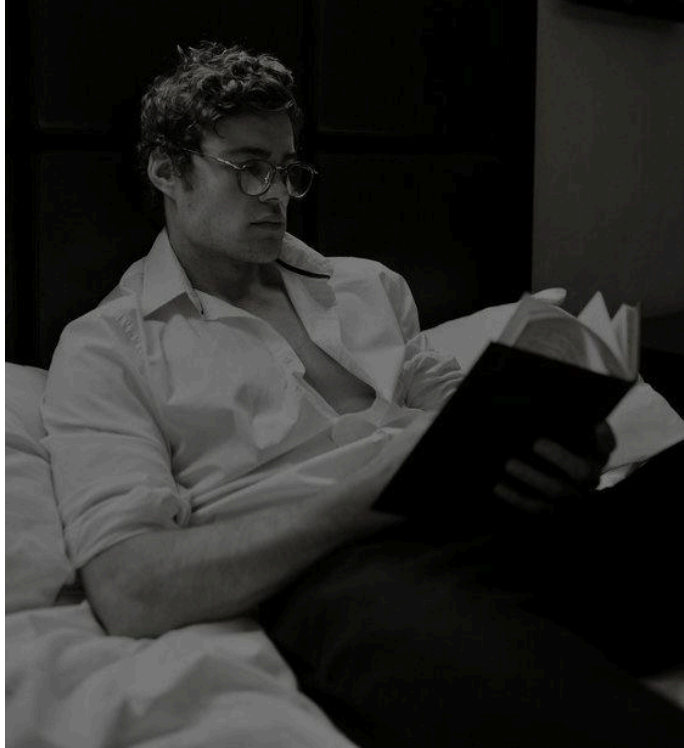


Atlanta by Night

Vincent Hastings



My story is the kind people don't want to read often. I'm not the underdog that overcame so much hardship you root for them the entire way through. I didn't suffer untold trauma. I had no past to run from, secrets to hide. My story is the fantasy most people dream of, but since I'm here, I might as well tell it. Take it for what it's worth. One of the tales of kine accepting kindred life and being willing to give up their humanity. Within reason, of course.

I was born into English nobility. Not that it means as much now in modern times, but with title comes money. Lots of money. And a family estate. One of those larger than life homes that's been around for hundreds of years passed down the line. Too expensive to be a residence full time, so at some point it was opened for tours. I was raised giving tours to strangers who judged my family based on the relics left behind by generations past. Kind of made me sick. Like most of my generation, and those before, I was sent to

boarding school to become a proper Englishman to carry on old stuffy traditions. That was the least of my desires. Though, I didn't rebel like many in my secondary school did. They wanted to prove something by shaming their families and spending their family's money. Waste their lives to prove a point. I did the opposite. I took the schooling and pushed myself to learn. If I was going to eventually go out on my own, I needed knowledge. I made time for equestrian hobbies and cricket like any good chap though. No use exercising the brain only and not the body. I had a small group of good friends in those days and missed them dearly when I decided to go abroad for college. In America. Against my parent's wishes. But I was determined. I told them, how would our history remain if there weren't people focused on its preservation? I actually made a full presentation for them showing why my passion for history was better spent actively studying and curating it instead of giving tours in the family home forever. I also didn't have a lot of time to do it.

Inbreeding in English nobility isn't a secret. They did it for generations. Unfortunately, undoing the poor genetics isn't always easy. My family line has been plagued by ocular degeneration for as long as we've held a title. It skips a generation or two before resurfacing. My father went blind in his 50s. Quite rapidly in fact. Modern science doesn't have an answer yet. A shame, really. I was inflicted with the same disease starting in my 20's, but it seemed to be slower progressing than my father's. Because of the time crunch, I secured my visa and moved to America for school.

Though I didn't want to rely on my family name to carry me, the money helped. My parents offered me an allowance while actively studying. Once I graduated from the Conservation Center of the Institute of Fine Arts at NYU, I would be allotted a sizable trust fund to use as I saw fit and earn my own money with a job. The rest of the estate would become mine upon my father's death. Not something I wished to hurry. Being in the elite circle of New York did benefit me the connections to get interviews in a few more exclusive positions than most people. I wasn't immediately accepted, but I eventually gained employment on the restoration team at the New York Museum of

Natural History. I even got to participate on a Smithsonian project between the two institutions. Truly I was living my dream. I couldn't have asked for more. Except... my eyesight was starting to get worse. The degeneration began becoming more steady. The doctors gave me a year before I was completely blind. It was starting to affect my work and I had to take a sabbatical. I'll admit I spiraled a little. Unable to read or write as I once did made me feel trapped. No amount of money could save me from that feeling of dread and vulnerability. That was when I was visited by a Dr. George Fielding. He was one of the most notorious private collectors of historic books and documents in New York if not the United States. He had heard of my work on a recent project and wanted to hire me to take on the personal task of restoring a grimoire in his collection. I told him as much as I wanted to, I couldn't. I wouldn't be restoring anything ever again. He seemed quite disappointed and spent the evening with me talking about my previous projects and the process I used to preserve antiquated books and texts. The doctor seemed fascinated by it all. When we parted I assumed I'd never hear from him again. I was wrong.

Part 2

I was in the parlor of my personal country estate in upstate New York playing a piano piece by memory when the doorbell chimed. I stopped playing and glanced at the door. My 'butler' had gone home for the evening since I could get myself settled for bed alone still. I had that much dignity left at least.

"Alex, what time is it?" I asked.

"The time is 9:00pm eastern standard time," the AI told me.

"Who is coming by at 9pm without calling first?" I asked and pushed my glasses back as I carefully navigated my steps towards the door. I opened it up and settled my gaze upon

the person's head. I could still see shapes and color even if details were long gone. It was more difficult at night though. "How may I help you this evening?"

"Lord Hastings," came Dr. Fielding's friendly voice.

"Lord Hastings is my father. He's still very much alive," I chuckled and took a step back. "Come in. I wasn't expecting you to return, doctor."

"I'll admit I wasn't sure if I was going to myself. I needed to make some arrangements and permissions first," he said and passed me. His steps were soft across the old wooden floors. He was dressed up. I knew the difference now between dress shoes and casual ones. Amazing what you learned when one sense left for another to be more relied on.

"I'd pour you a drink, but I'd miss the glass," I chuckled and motioned to the bar as I sat down. "Forgive me for not being a good host, but you knew that already. Help yourself."

"Ah, don't fret. I understand and accept the limitations," he chuckled. I could hear him taking full use of the bar. I always kept it stocked for guests. I myself liked a nightcap especially when working on a project and drank socially. What was a host without a bar? Dr Fielding returned to his seat across from me. "Mr. Hastings, I've come to offer you something. Something that will truly change your life. I'm going to tell you things you will believe impossible. If you accept, I think it will greatly impact the world. If you don't, you won't remember this meeting and you'll continue on your current path."

I laughed. "You're sounding like the chap from the Matrix. Red Pill or Blue Pill."

"That's exactly what I'm talking about. But this isn't the Matrix. The world is real. But you only know half of the world. The second half is hidden from you and I care to

enlighten you. To help you join it. To benefit yourself, and to preserve your gift forever. Benefitting myself and my associates in the process,” he said.

I was quiet for a moment as I listened to him. His tone wasn't of a madman playing games. Whatever he was about to tell me he at least believed himself in full. Whether it was real or not would be the true question.

“Normally I'd say pull the other one, but you seem serious,” I said and sat back on the couch, crossing one leg over the other. “Enlighten me to this other world.”

Dr. Fielding stood up and moved closer to me. “Take my hand.” I did so and was startled at how cold his skin was. “Now... feel my pulse. You don't need to be a man of medicine to find one.” Again, I did so or... at least tried. I felt his wrist in several spots and couldn't find it. “You're not doing it wrong. It's not there. I haven't had a pulse in... oh 95 years now.”

“Now you're really pulling my leg,” I said and released his wrist. “What are you playing at?”

“I'm not playing, young man. You worked on a tome last year. Do you remember its contents?” he asked me.

“Yes, it was something about... immortality,” I replied slowly. “Come now, doctor. You're not seriously trying to insinuate you've achieved this. No pulse, cold skin...” He was quiet, letting me figure it out for myself. I stood up and walked to the large windows near the piano. “Red Pill, Blue Pill.”

“We're real, Vincent Hastings. Kindred. Or vampires as your kind usually call us. There is an entire world out there full of us. We live among you. Side by side often enough and you never knew. And it has nothing to do with your failing sight,” Dr. Fielding said and

slowly walked up to my side. "I'm telling you because I want to offer you this gift. My clan chooses carefully among the kine. Those who would benefit us. Gifts of knowledge. I admire you and your work. We could use you."

"Become a vampire? Sleep in a coffin and feed from humans?" I asked. "That sounds bloody insane."

"Regain your eyesight. Live among history, restore history. Tomes, books, texts beyond your imagination. There will be sacrifices to your human life, but won't there be anyway? Do you know what you'll do as a blind man before you reach 30? Everything you've worked for, while valid and will last, will remain here in this moment. You can't work as you are," he said and placed his hand upon my shoulder. "Your life isn't meaningless by any stretch of the imagination without sight, but what a shame for such a gift to stop here."

I was silent for long periods staring off into the darkness beyond the window. "Would I really regain my sight?" I asked softly.

"Yes. Your body will heal itself. While you're learning our ways and adjusting, we could say you're having treatment done somewhere. Once you're in control, you can come back. With the notion the cost of your returned sight is sun sensitivity so bad you must work at night. New York is... a night city anyway. The clan will guide you. Teach you how to survive. We're like an elite club with ways to get blood without killing. You can if you wish, but then you lose a source," Dr. Fielding said. He spoke about it so easily. Like he'd planned it all out for me hoping I'd say yes. Here was the blueprint of my life if I accepted and became... a vampire.

"What happens when I don't age?" I asked. "My family..."

“You move around,” he replied simply. “There are ways to stretch out the lifespan of who you are in one place then you move and start again. Should Vincent Hastings have to disappear entirely, an accident can be arranged to cover it. Or you simply age yourself in more subtle ways. Supernatural abilities and blood magics abound within our clan. My boy, there is an answer for everything.”

I sighed heavily and sat down on the piano bench. How could I believe this? It was insanity but he was so... calm and honest. The temptation to get my eyesight back was strong. He was right, my life was still worth something. I could find something to do with myself, but did I want to? Father was stuck in the family home as a relic himself of a time gone by. I didn't want that fate.

“Will you allow me time to get my affairs in order?” I asked softly. “To spin the story?”

“Of course. But I must warn you, if you tell anyone about what I've told you, I will revoke the invitation and you will be killed,” he said seriously, a darker edge coloring his tone.

“You said I could forget,” I said, a little startled.

“If you said no,” Dr. Fielding corrected me. “What I told you must not leave this room. Our hidden world is masked behind the Masquerade. The veil between the living and dead. Should the Masquerade be broken, and the kine know about us, well... there is a lot of cleanup to do. There are rules. Traditions we follow. Not unlike the rules of nobility in your home country. The basic dos and don'ts of kindred life. We will go over all that before you're embraced.”

“Embraced?” I asked.

“Turned into one of us,” he said. “You’re too overwhelmed to take it in now. Will a week suffice?”

I slowly nodded. “Yes. I need to have things set for a long absence. I don’t want anyone to worry about me.”

“They’ll worry, but less if you plan for a decent recovery time after this ‘experimental surgery’,” he nodded. “Mr. Hastings, thank you for being... a gentleman about listening to what I had to say. You won’t believe some of the reactions we get.”

“I can imagine,” I said. “What you’re saying sounds crazy, but your conviction is honest. I’m fascinated and utterly terrified.”

I couldn’t see his smile but I knew he had. “Then you understand the gravity of this choice. All the more confidence I have in you making it. I’ll return in a week. Good evening to you. Keep the Masquerade. All will be known soon enough.”

Before I could say goodnight, he was gone. As if he’d never been there at all. His glass remained on the table though. The only indication I hadn’t hallucinated it all. I removed my glasses and buried my face into my hands. What was I doing? Was I mad? Maybe. But madly intrigued as well. My life was going to change drastically one way or another. Why not attempt to make the best of this offer?

Part 3

I spent the next week wrapping up my human life. Making sure my finances were in order and had things arranged ‘should the worst happen’ for my horses. I’d started telling my friends about the procedure and the risks. Some understood while others asked why I was willing to do something so dangerous. I told them it was easy. Either I

got my sight back, or I ended up blind quicker than expected. The plan was to be gone for a month then return to resume my life though I would be different. The Tremere chantry would train me at their estate so I was ready to be a socially acceptable vampire. Under the guise of recovery of course. Once I was back in my home, I would 'take it easy' and slowly begin to receive guests and go out supervised at a distance. It was shocking how precise this plan was. They'd thought it all out before approaching me. Kind of creepy.

I had dinners with friends and went to my favorite places even though I couldn't see them. Friends took pictures in hopes once I recovered I would have those moments. They didn't realize my request for the photos was to remember the sun and my last week as a human. It was scary to think about, but the more I prepared the more comfortable I was with the idea. It wasn't just about my sight. It was about my legacy and my skills to preserve history. I didn't want to lose a lifetime of what I had learned just to become an old dusty relic in my family estate in England like every other man in our family had for generations.

When the night came, Dr. Fielding arrived with the reagent of the Tremere in New York. Lord [Ephrain Wainwright](#) oversaw the Annex at the Kenilworth. A 13-story apartment building in French Second Empire style, the Kenilworth is without a doubt the largest chantry of the New York network. The building itself has 42 "apartments", variously converted into sunproofed havens, libraries, lounges, laboratories and rooms in which to entertain those rare visitors who find themselves at this facility. The Kenilworth overlooks Central Park and the nearby Gryphon bookstore provides occasional rare books and esoteric tomes. The chantry's proximity to the American Museum of Natural History and the New York Historical Society also yields interesting artifacts from time to time, and the more socially graceful among the Kenilworth Tremere maintain contact with representatives of these organizations. It was naturally the best place for me.

“Ah, so this is our newest acolyte,” Lord Wainwright said.

“Soon to be,” Dr. Fielding said. “Have you everything in place? Reassured all your loved ones?”

“Yes,” I replied as I stood by the window with my hands in my pockets. “I’ve said my subtle goodbyes. I know for some... it was probably the last I’ll see them given my new hours of operation.”

“I don’t like to pry into personal affairs when it comes to romance-” he started to say but I shook my head.

“No need. My girlfriend and I broke up a couple months ago. She wasn’t ready to be a nurse to a blind man,” I said softly. “Not that I blamed her. A 25 year old socialite with an up and coming career as a fashion editor having to make sure her partner wasn’t dead at home having fallen over something? No, I wasn’t going to hold her back. I’m just glad she was honest when we talked about it. Wonderful girl. She’ll make the next man very happy.”

“Good. Nothing to hold you back then,” Wainwright said with a subtle huff to his tone. I could tell he was uptight and to the law in thinking. Old school British school master type. I knew it well from my boarding school days. “Well, get on with it. We have the night to get him settled and we’re wasting it blabbering.”

“I understand the process, but how would you like to...” I said and turned around.

“Neck, wrist...” I rolled up my sleeves as Dr. Fielding approached me.

“No, the neck is better. The point is to drain you and the vein there is quicker. There will be a moment of pain then... well.. I’ll let you imagine the rest,” he chuckled.

“Naturally, you’ll want to struggle towards the end. Try not to.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” I said slowly and unbuttoned my shirt halfway. I had a moment’s hesitation and he waited for it. I think his patience was what fully convinced me. Dr. Fielding was a man of his word. The Tremere wanted me for my skills and what I could offer their clan. There was no coercion or bad intent. The whole process had been meticulous. No one would go through all that just to screw me over now. “I’m ready.”

He stepped closer and embraced me. Literally and figuratively. He was right about everything. There was the initial pain then... I’d hate to admit the amount of pleasure that bite caused. He gorged himself on my blood. Drinking so deeply I started to feel the chill of death creeping into my limbs inch by inch. Again, he was right. I wanted to fight him off, but I did my best not to. As my strength left me, Dr. Fielding laid me down on the floor. My sight was now completely gone. All I knew was darkness and cold.

“Help me..” I gasped out.

“Don’t fear death, my boy, it’s only the beginning. Feed and live,” he said gently as if talking to a child scared of a nightmare. He pressed his open wrist to my mouth and I drank from him until my life faded from my body leaving me nothing but a corpse on the floor of my home. Time of death, 10:31pm April 15th 2002.

Part 4

I opened my eyes and for the first time in over a year I could see the clock across the room. Slowly I scanned my surroundings and realized I was on the couch. Dr. Fielding sat across on the opposite couch looking very differently to what I had in my head. The man was the spitting image of a 1920’s mob boss. Well dressed in a high fashioned suit, but with that vintage dark hair that made him seem out of his era. Beside him was... a dwarf. Lord Wainwright was for sure not what I expected. But it was in that moment I

realized, I was actually seeing them. I could see everything. I could.. hear everything. The wind outside, the rustle of greenery, the house settling, the clock ticking, the rustle of clothes, the cars in the distance on the road. Then the scents... A long string of incoherent words left my lips as I covered my ears for a moment trying to settle myself.

“Easy,” Dr. Fielding said with a smile. “It’s a lot to get used to. Especially since your senses were failing as a mortal. You’ll get your bearings.”

“Soon I hope. We need to go once he’s fed,” Lord Wainwright said. His Irish accent more noticeable now than before.

“While we do prefer fresh, you’ll start on this for now,” Dr. Fielding opened a small cooler and pulled out a medical blood bag. Right, I forgot the diet. No eating... only blood. I was so fortunate to have had a week to go to all my favorite restaurants and have my best meals. The bills had been worth it to have those moments with my friends. He offered it to me with a knowing look. “This is below the baseline of acceptable blood, but it’s easier to start this way the first few nights. Then we’ll switch you to fresh in a controlled setting.”

I took the bag and almost wished I couldn’t see it. “May I pour this out into a glass?”

“Of course,” he said and watched me walk over to the bar and empty part of it into a whiskey glass. I released a slow breath and took a drink not realizing how delicious it was going to be. The word that slipped out was unseemly to me, but nothing else really came close to describing my surprise. I tossed back the rest almost like a shot and Dr. Fielding roared with laughter. “Now that’s a kindred’s way of acceptance!”

I was almost ashamed of my response, but having been prepared for it I guess I skipped the initial shock of ‘what am I, what happened to me’. The rest of the bag was poured out and finished a little more slowly though it had been tempting to drain.

“Well, now that we have that out of the way, it’s time to return,” Lord Wainwright said and hopped off the couch. “The driver is waiting. You have much to learn, Mr. Hastings.”

Dr. Fielding motioned me ahead. I grabbed my packed bags at the door and secured the house. My butler and grounds keeper would make sure all was well while I was away. I would miss this place, but it was only temporary. My unlife was just beginning.