

Chapter 1: A Hot Commodity

The first time I ever cried, my mother dropped me in disgust. A nurse, he dove to the cold tiled floor to catch me as security cuffed her to the hospital bed, all according to the police reports filed on my birthday. To get all charges waived, she gladly revoked custody of me. I wizened up as much as a newborn can, and I never cried again.

It's like I just knew I was soft, squishy, and too weak to fend for myself. I adapted. I evolved into a happy, bubbly, unbothered baby. I'm forty now. Still can't cry unless gasping with laughs.

In my medical records, the natal nurse wrote,

"I have to check on her twice as often as the others. She's a sweet baby girl. But she never tells me if anything's wrong. Not if she's hungry, not if her diaper's full. MRI scans showed no brain damage. She's just a chubby, cheery baby I guess."

In his dusty cubicle probably, my social worker scribbled:

"Black children can be harder to place when the poorer white neighborhood nearby supplies us with plenty more orphaned babes, but her gummy smile just might melt through some of the prejudice."

My gummy smile proved ineffective. Humans are hard to please.

As affluent white couple after couple entered my bright yellow walled nursery and saw me beneath the rosy cheeked, beaming sun my foster father had painted, I'm sure I reached up with grubby hands. I spit up little bubbles. I was cute as hell I just know.

None of them chose me though.

I received only one adoption bid. It was from an unmarried woman. My foster, a priest named Father Dave, submitted the following evaluation after her initial.

"May the Lord forgive me for allowing Ms. Zee into my home. A computer ran background check isn't enough to ward off evil. The system didn't even flag that Ms.

Zee works for a franchise of amusement parks on an island that not even the Lord has known. I won't have another child be groomed into hospitality.

If I must board the wicked woman's cruise ship to christen the place myself, I will. There are alternative lifestyles, and there are traffickers. This Ms. Zee may be something worse.

The woman insisted upon visiting at night. Dusk was our compromise. Her knock was soft and her footsteps soundless. Her handshake cold and no pulse in her wrist. I swear it. When I asked that she take off her sunglasses and dark stain spotted trench, she obliged. A turtleneck and slacks were beneath, but Lord only knows what else she was still hiding.

Her photo ID matched, yes. She had a beautiful face, but that didn't fool me. As she spoke, her voice was deep and accented. Fangs peeked from under her upper lip. She had the nerve to creep into the nursery and flash those fangs at the baby, playing some sick game of peek-a-boo that I stopped right away.

Our little angel did not cry. No, our baby girl giggled as always. In the face of evil, she laughed, knowing already that God has her back. She'll be a good Christian woman someday.

Ms. Zee, on the other hand? Well, she can't really be the adoption agency's top recommendation. We can't really go through with this. The Devil is in that woman."

If you ever read this, Father Dave, I know you tried your best, but Zee and I were a match made for hell.

Biblical beings aside though, humans had the heaviest hand in Ms. Zee's child trafficking rink. They backed Zee with more and more crypto currency as her little operation grew, proving itself to be quite the investment.

Trafficking was just a side hustle for Zee, initially. She meant only to acquire the most dedicated of employees for her amusement parks.

She bargained with parents of sick kids, promising them a cure with only one major side effect—blood thirst. I mean, technically, vampirism does grant eternal healing.

She charmed adoption agencies, promising to declutter their overfilled foster homes of the hard to place, the throwaways. Vampirism has always been a way to recycle flesh.

She marketed Vampirism as a solution and a gift. Though, no gifts are given for free, especially those given by the Devil. Yes, the horned Devil in love with 666 and pentagrams. That very Devil made the first vampire and every vampire thereafter.

Zee's bedeviled little scheme developed into a government supported placement program for troubled kids worldwide.

Father, I'm sorry. I'm forty yet so much younger than others like me. I'm forty and their poster child.

The vampire Zee shipped us kids off to a Devil-made hideaway island far from the coast of any human country. Well, the island used to be hidden away, for a thousand years in fact, till a World War I submarine found the coast via sonar pulse in the 1920's. Since then, a hundred thousand cruise ships have docked the island's port, bringing ten million humans per year.

Like the contraband we would've been if not for her endorsements, Zee planted all us children in a lake sized crater on her island known as the Blister

The Blister's high rocky rose around us, unscalable like an over-the-top child-proof play pin. The Blister's soft bottom was our clay filled sandbox for kinetic learning. A sandbox that doubled as our beds. It tripled as our place of burial so a very efficient use of land.

The eternal sun on that island tanned tourists on its beaches. No sick kid needed the additional potential for skin cancer, though. The rays weren't good for the Blister's clay either. The heat would've baked the red soil, t. Then we wouldn't have been able to play, build, lay, write, or draw in it allthe clay.

So, to keep all moisture in and us safe from UV-radiation, a tarp stretched over the Blister, giving it its name. The tarp was made of skin, so we called it the skin sky. .

Sometimes, the skin sky rained blood, softening our clay into mud. Digging was easier then, y and finding rocks was easiest.

Rocks are how I made friends growing up.

I curated a collection of every mineral, every crystal. No kids were allowed to see my collection unless they promised to be my friend. It's the only way I knew to make them, by offering something.

[CHAPTER BREAK]

A new child was delivered into the Blister one day. He had no eyebrows, no hair on his head.

I was six. He was seven.

He curled up under a blanket in a clay chair sculpted to fit his bony frame. He sat high up in the liminal space between the skin sky and clay. The Blister was like an excavated catacomb.

All the halls and rooms we roamed were tunnels and pits carved into the crater bottom. Our caretakers had to lunge from clay wall to clay wall. They literally watched over us.

The sickest of kids needed to be in close reach of the caretakers. That's why I had to scramble up a hallway wall to jump and tap at the new kid's foot. Like he was to the Devil, the kid was fresh meat to me.

I targeted the sickest of kids to pawn off my friendship. They were too weak to dig for themselves, never knowing just how many rocks lay in the clay. They never knew that the special rocks I offered to show weren't so special. I was no crook, just an opportunist, okay?

I jumped to tap the new kid's foot, again. Clay came crumbling down. Yet, no caretaker told me off as he blinked awake.

"Psst, wanna see something cool?" I loudly whispered.

"Hmm? Oh, uh, sure."

With a much larger rock, I cracked my geode open for him. Shards whizzed by as I turned my head. Somehow the crystals inside the geode and my face remained intact. The crystals sparkled gray.

"They match your eyes," I held them up as he peered down, "Be my friend and you can have it. Be my friend, and I can bring you a rock every eternal."

The sun never set on the island, so there was no night to distinguish day. The days were eternal and referred to as such.

"Really?"

"Yes, really. What's your name?"

"Danil."

“I’m Zulta, and I’ll be your friend till you die,” I paused, thinking as hard as a clot-headed six year old human can, “Or wait, no--you know what? Even after that, I’ll be your friend forever.”

We didn’t seal that deal with blood, but there’d be plenty of bloody handshakes to come.

With my rocks and his vantage point hghup in that clay chair, Danil and I started a business. A stoning business.

When one of our claymates built a clay castle too big to break down during clean up time, Danil and I hurled our rocks. We could raze it all before a caretaker even noticed. Or when a claymate wrote something naughty on their handwriting practice tablet? We would quickly smash it to pieces before a caretaker could read it.

What we charged for each stoning? The privilege to be called a friend. I wasn’t great at business back then.

“This one’s nice and flat,” Danil said as I passed him the smoothest rock I’d dug up that eternal.

He’d been there a whole human month.

“Hurry up and unbury me so we can go toss it.”

“Don’t rush me,” I huffed, “I’ve got you and everyone else to unbury first.”

A mound of clay dirt piled behind me as I scraped away. Each scrape heated up the cool Earth, softening the hole I dug above Danil’s chest.

We slept in the Earth because the Devil was in the Earth. He took our measurements as we dreamed to plan our bodies’ rework, to plan how much flesh He’d need to remake us into vampires.

Each burial plot for each child was called a clay cot. Clay cots lined our sleeping pit in rows. My claymates’ heads poked out the ground in rows, clay masks packed over their eyes to bring complete darkness.

Clay crumbs were still stuck in my tear ducts. Crumbs were in my ears. Our caretakers had us pack them every sleep time, forcing complete silence upon us. Most of my claymates enjoyed the quiet. I hated it. It made me feel left out because what if I missed someone coughing, someone whimpering through a bad dream, someone snoring away.

So I wouldn't miss a thing, I only ever packed one ear full. The other ear I packed super loose. I'd shake my head when the caretakers were away, the clay falling away and the sounds of sleep time coming back to me.

I was always listening and last to sleep. Last to sleep, and—

"You're first to wake?" Danil was asking me.

I was usually second. Usually, someone else helped me to untuck everyone.

"Healthiest has to be."

"That's Shwetha, not you."

Two cots were already dug up. One was mine. The other, Shwetha's. It should've been tidied up, all the clay packed back in and smoothed out. But the clay was in a heap to the side of her hole. Sticky blood pooled where she had laid. Sticky blood that Shwetha had coughed up during sleep time.

Shwetha's coughs had woken me up, no one able to hear them but me. She had gurgled only to choke. She had choked only to stop breathing entirely.

"They bit her," I told Danil, my hand grabbing at my neck and pinching at my pulse in memory. "She'll be a vampire, and unless she becomes a caretaker, she won't be back."

"How do you know that?"

"Don't worry about it."

I wasn't supposed to know how they let Shwetha bleed out. The trickle had quieted to nothing. Then a few caretakers had squished through our sleeping pit, heaving a heavy pot high, its contents sloshing. They had poured the sloshing stuff down her throat. They spilled only a drop.

As I looked over at her empty cot several human hours later, Danil unable to lift his head and see with me, the drop sparkled like no crystal I'd ever seen. It was a drop of Shwetha's new blood. Blood that the Devil was dissolved in.

It was how He wormed His way inside to start taking us apart. It's how He rebuilt and eternally repairs us.

We owe him our bodies back for all the work. And at the rate I've hurt myself, I'll never pay my body off.

