

## The Nameless Girl and the Ageless Boy

She knew she had found him because she could hear singing. Faintly. Ringing through the stone.

It echoed through the great halls of the cathedral soft as a whisper, the same strange melancholy tune. Outside the pale moon stripped the city down to its bones, jagged silhouettes looming out of the gloom and shrouding mist, the darkness casting everything in greys and blacks like a charcoal sketch. Inside it was no different; even the stained-glass windows were bleached of their colour. No wonder the city folk believed it was haunted.

She would surely not help that rumour if anyone were to see her. If anyone had been awake and watching at this hour, they would see a blazing orange light emanating from a dancing flame, cupped tenderly in the gloved hand of a woman with a harsh white face, marked with reddened cheeks and a reddened mouth like a painted porcelain mask. She had ringlets of fair hair, turned golden by the fire, spilling down her back with reckless abandon. It might have been considered girlish and childlike if it wasn't for her sombre black coat and dress, like the mourning robes of a widow. At her hip a gold watch hung from her belt in place of a chatelaine, swinging from a matching chain and embossed with a now worn down and indistinguishable design. The train of her skirt disappeared into the shadows so that it was hard to tell where the former ended and the latter began, and she seemed almost to float through the corridors with the haste at which she moved, her footsteps near silent. There would be no name to put to her face because she was only visiting. There would be no name to give even if someone asked for it, for she didn't have one.

The singing voice led her up flights of steps, back down again, through empty halls and along narrow walkways as she searched for its owner. How long had it been since she'd heard it? Since she'd seen him? She still remembered the first time they'd met, and the exact words he'd said.

"It's been a while, Darling."

The girl – for she was only a girl at the time – turned quickly on her heel to see a young man in the street behind her, mounted atop a horse with a shining mane. He was

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dressed in a rich red doublet with puffed slashed sleeves, a cloak swept artfully over his shoulders and a sword sheathed at his side. His face was angular and sharp, from the hard line of his jaw to the elegant high cheekbones, a soft smile playing on his startlingly red mouth. Golden-brown curls of hair crowned his head beneath a hat that matched his doublet, a fluffy white feather pinned to it. He had to be a lord of some description.

“We’ve never met,” the girl replied, curtsying just to be safe, in case her assumption was true. Her gold watch hung at her hip and she could hear the steady tick, tick, tick of the hands like a pulse. Two more minutes and then she’d disappear. She shouldn’t even be talking to him. She was supposed to appear and disappear, passing seamlessly without notice or acknowledgment; she left neither mark nor memory of herself behind; she was a ghost, invisible, nothingness.

“We have,” he replied, leading his horse closer so that she had to crane her head back to look him in the face, “on multiple occasions. You were older though.” He smiled and leaned down to whisper. “I know what you are, Time Witch.”

Her heart dropped to the pit of her stomach. He chuckled, his smile broadening to show white teeth.

“Don’t worry,” he continued. “I’ve kept your secret for a long time now, friend. You’ve nothing to fear from me.” He glanced at her watch. “From the looks of it you’re going to disappear again in a moment. I do hate it when you do that.”

“What’s your name?” she asked, narrowing her eyes at him. His smile was easy going and yet it was very difficult to trust him. What if he was lying? What if her bitter old professor had cast an enchantment, and this was just another layer of the test?

“Call me Gavrail,” he said, turning his horse to go, “and if that horrible professor of yours asks, the date is 11<sup>th</sup> June 1509. His Majesty is getting married today.”

The world became shimmery as the girl became transparent, like the sunlight was finally breaking a powerful mirage. She had perhaps a few seconds before she was gone, back to her own time, to her dusty classroom where said professor was waiting for her to return and give a report of her Travel.

“When will I see you again?” she asked.

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Gavrail shrugged his shoulders. "That's up to you. Just don't leave it another sixty years, alright? Life gets dull."

She frowned, but before she could ask the street faded away and her classroom materialised in its place.

That had been the first meeting, on the girl's first official Travel as an undergraduate Time Witch. Afterwards she had seen him many times in many *different* times. They had a way of finding each other, no matter what was happening, no matter where they were. Case in point: 1692, Massachusetts. That was also the time, the woman thought with a small smile, that she learned of Gavrail's affliction.

The mob had set fire to the house, smoke billowing upwards in a torrent that blackened the grey sky. The window frames were lit up like the glowing eyes of a demon, and the snarling, screeching crowd surrounding it spat and hurled stones as the accused woman was dragged away, wearing nothing but her ragged white shift, held between two jeering men.

Heart aching, the girl forced herself to turn away and run towards the house, pushing her way through the throng. They seemed to press in around her, the stench of their unwashed bodies stinging her nose. Their eyes were wide and hateful, spittle flying from their mouths as they shouted obscenities and promises of justice. They paid her no heed; what was she to them but another member of the mob?

She reached the house and hurried in through the open doorway, the hot flames licking at her skirts without burning them. The polluted air was almost thick enough to wade through, and so dark she could barely see a foot in front of her. Not that there was much to see; the woman's belongings were burning up like cinder-wood, splintering and collapsing in on themselves in heaps of char and ash. All except a bookshelf in the back room which stood defiantly amid the inferno, the light dancing on the varnished wood. The printed names on the book spines seemed to glow, calling to the girl. They were what she was after, the

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objective of her assignment. She tried not to think about the fate of their owner as she piled them into her bag.

Outside, the startling cold made her shiver in her coat as she strode quickly across the street to a sheltered side alley, reaching for her pocket watch. The crowd hadn't dispersed; she could see the trailing tail of it marching towards the town centre, following the poor woman and her captors.

From the alley behind her there came a noise that made the hairs on the back of her neck stand up. It was a kind of wet, sucking, slurping sound that made her skin crawl. Turning slowly on her heel, she peered into the alley.

A hunched shadowy shape crouched near the wall, over something else that sprawled across the ground. As her eyes adjusted to the gloom, the shape on the floor became a person and the shape arched over it...

"Gavrail?"

He looked up and his eyes were bright, shining, glowing red. Blood dripped from his open mouth, smeared across his face and splattering the front of his shirt.

She shrieked, recoiling as her hand flew to her mouth. Before she knew it, he was on his feet and gripping her by the shoulders, pinning her back against the wall.

"Please don't scream, Darling; someone will hear you," he said urgently.

"You're a Vampire," she breath back, speaking through the trembling fingers still pressed to her mouth. "That's why you've been alive so long and never changed – but how? Why-?"

"Why?" he echoed, raising an eyebrow. "See that's a long and tragic tale that begins in a now buried town in northern Bulgaria--"

"No, not 'why are you a Vampire'," she snapped, horror forgotten. "Why didn't you tell me? And what are you doing here? This town is hostile enough without random dead bodies turning up."

"I like this town. There's so much to choose from," he said with a sadistic smile. "Inflicting pain on people who do wicked things brings me great joy."

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“Charming. I am taking you home to England, before you get burned at the stake as well.”

The cargo ship swayed with the lull of the sea. They nestled together under a blanket, hidden by the crates of tobacco and other trading wares.

“So, how old are you?”

It doesn't matter. I don't age, and I can't die, so what's the use of knowing the exact number?”

“I suppose.” She curled up tighter against his side. “Though, it's a strange sentiment.”

“Not as strange as not having your own name,” he smiled, then after a pause: “I will name you Darling, because you are the most darling friend I ever had. And I call you Darling often anyway.”

Every moment with him felt like something to cherish. He liked to laugh, and discuss literature, and sing, endlessly sing as he whirled the girl around the ballrooms of his estates (he taught her to waltz in Vienna, in 1783); and rode through open countryside on horseback (he bought her the most beautiful black mare when she met him in Wales on her birthday, in 1450). His favourite song was bleak for someone so cheerful, and yet the woman – now grown up – could have listened to it all day.

The same song carried through the cathedral. Echoing louder as she drew closer to its source.

Eventually she traced it back to an uneven stone slab in the floor; it was icy against her cheeks as she pressed her ear to the cracks, listening. Her heart beat fast in her chest.

Rising again, she removed the glove that held her flame and set it gently on the ground a safe distance away. Then she removed the other glove and pressed her bare white hands to the stone slab. It cracked almost instantly when she touched it, giving way into hundreds of little pieces that she scrambled to pull out, digging through it as if the rubble

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was sand. Sharp fragments cut her fingers, causing blood to well there. The singing stopped immediately. He could smell it.

Her racing heartbeat filled the sudden silence. Soon she had made a hole big enough to reveal the stone sarcophagus in the hollow beneath the floor. It was a simple, unembellished box of sorts, barely deep enough for a person to lie in, with only a large crucifix carved into the lid.

The woman reached inside, digging her fingers into the crack of space available between the lid and wall of the sarcophagus. Taking a deep breath and bracing herself on the floor, she began to prise it open, the stone grinding against itself. Her arm shook violently and for a terrible second, she thought she wasn't strong enough, but then a pair of slender hands appeared and together they hauled the lid off.

She sat back, holding her breath.

Gavrail sat up and cracked his neck.

Then his eyes alighted on her and his mouth curved into a beaming smile.

"It's been a while, Darling."