

THE DEVIL'S OWN

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In the moment of my creation, I felt electricity.

That line conjures visions of Frankenstein's monster chained in the laboratory, of sparking electrodes and thunder storms and pyrotechnics. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Electricity—the ebb and flow of current, the gentle aliveness that filled me when my mistress first sanded down the roughness of my baked clay features with her power tools—was my initial sensation. Later, as she air-brushed the details of my perfect enamel face and delicate enamel hands, when she neatly etched my secret name to the back of my head, I tingled with awareness. It filled me with a buoyant energy that made me want to leap and shout. Electricity is one of the primal elements, and Elena Berman chained it to her will when she brought me forth from shapelessness.

Let me describe Elena. She was young as humans go, no more than twenty or twenty-one, with golden blond hair, blue eyes, and a honeyed complexion. You would not know her for a witch when you looked at her, but she was one. She had a dark magic in her hands and heart and voice, and it showed as a single blemish on her throat—the devil's kiss, some call it, as if a demon had pressed his lips to that very spot.

Amidst the process of my creation, she would sometimes put me down and leave me alone on her workroom table for a day or more. Gradually my awareness would fade until I was little more than the sum of my parts: clay and straw, cloth and one small locket of her hair.

On the night of my completion, she dressed me as a doll in a frilly white dress, with shiny white shoes, tiny stockings, and a sun bonnet of pink and white. My white porcelain face shone; my wide blue eyes regarded her unblinkingly. Then she took me to the window and held me up to the moon, whispered thrice the secret name she had carved in the back of my head, and invoked the powers of darkness.

“Come forth, little girl, come forth!” she cried.

She cast me down toward the floor. For an instant I thought I would shatter on the tiles, ruined and dead forever, but instead I landed on my feet and felt my knees give almost gently. When I touched my face with warm, trem-bling fingers, I felt the flesh of my nose, my lips, my eyes, and my ears. I was real. She had made me live. I hardly dared breathe. When I did, it felt wonderful.

“Korina,” she said, and she knelt and hugged me to her. “My darling Korina.”

“What do you want of me?” I asked softly. “How may I serve you, mistress?”

She held me at arm's length and looked deeply into my eyes. “You are not here to serve anyone,” she said. “I wanted a daughter, and you will be she. I will teach you all I know. We will be a family.”

“I already know all that you know,” I said. “I am part of you.” I touched my hair, as golden as her own because it was her own. “Remember the lock you gave me?”

“Korina,” she said, “I want to show you all that I have seen, to make you laugh with joy at the sunrise, to build you a doll house and watch you run and play and skip and dance in the sunlight.”

“Why would I do those things?” I asked, a little scorn-fully. “I am not a child, mistress. Command and I will serve you.”

“Then I command you to be a child!”

“I cannot change my nature, mistress. You might as well command me to be the wind or the rain or the darkness outside.”

“Please . . .” she whispered. I could see tears welling up in her eyes, and I could not help but be moved by them. “I have done so much, given so much, for you already.”

I bowed my head. “I will try . . . Mother.”

Over the next few months I strived to forget all that I knew and become the perfect child. I dutifully went through the motions of playing with the dolls and stuffed animals she bought, holding pretend tea parties on the lawn or in the sitting room. I met other girls—insipid creatures, truly—and ran and jumped and skipped and hop-scotched with them, skinning my knees and elbows, getting dirty from mud pies, and doing all the things that six-year-olds do. One night we even had a pajama party, and Elena baked cookies and brownies all day in preparation. Seeing the joy on her face made it worth the boredom and suffering. These were the things she remembered from her own childhood, I realized, and reliving them from the role of parent made her feel young again inside, where the devil’s blackness coiled around her heart.

With some surprise I realized she had become a witch to create me. Physically she could never have children of her own, I knew; she had been in an accident when she was sixteen, and the doctors had removed her womb. When she had promised her firstborn for a witch’s power, she knew she had nothing to fear.

One fall evening, when the weather had grown chill, she took me aside and said we would be going to a special place.

“I know, Mother,” I said. “It is All Hallow’s Eve. Tonight is the Witch’s Sabbath.”

She dressed us both in black, and we drove downtown in her large blood-colored Cadillac. Elena’s coven always rented out a large meeting hall for their meetings, and tonight was no different. As we walked to it from the park-ing lot, I saw half a dozen other witches strolling ahead of us, one with a huge slit-eyed Siamese cat perched on her shoulders. When the cat’s yellow eyes met mine, there was a shock of mutual recognition. We were both made creatures, akin to one another.

Like a dutiful child, I took Elena’s hand as we neared the meeting hall. I knew she liked little gestures like that. We went in and found seats in the large circle of folding chairs surrounding a small black altar.

The head of the coven was an old man named Patrick Smith. He wore black robes with an inverted gold crucifix around his neck, and when he saw us he came right over.

“My dear Elena,” he said, “I see you’ve brought a guest tonight.”

“This is my daughter, Korina,” she said. “Korina, this is Mr. Smith.”

“How do you do,” I said, standing and curtsying.

“What’s a charming child,” he said with a smile that I found rather too toothy and rather too quick. “May I borrow her some night?”

Before Elena could reply, I said, “That would be nice, sir, but I must warn you that I cannot be handled too roughly. I am only clay and straw and a little bit of magic.”

“Ah,” he said, and he seemed to lose interest. He forced another toothy smile. “We may have an important guest tonight,” he said. “Do not be surprised if things run a little longer than usual.”

“Of course,” Elena said. “We have no other plans.”

“Good, good.” He moved on to greet another witch, an elderly man with only one arm.

Elena looked at me. “Thank you,” she whispered.

“I only said what you would have, Mother,” I replied.

Then the lights dimmed. The ceremony was about to begin. I sat in my seat, folded my hands in my lap, and gazed at the altar along with everyone else.

Beginning the black mass, Patrick Smith knelt and offered himself to the powers of darkness, and all the witches joined in chanting the final words. I had memories of countless similar ceremonies, all seen through Elena’s eyes before my creation, and found nothing unusual in his actions. But when a strange sulfuric smell filled the air and a darkness gathered over our heads, I knew tonight was going to be extraordinary.

The lights suddenly went out. A red glow suffused the room. Patrick Smith had moved aside, I now saw, and in his place stood a huge hairy naked creature with the body of a man and the legs of a goat.

Slowly the creature paced around the circle of chanters, and as he drew near I found myself staring at his crotch and the wickedly barbed member that swayed between his legs at my eye level.

“Your firstborn,” I heard him grunt to Elena, “by right will be mine.”

“She is a golum,” Elena said.

He shook his head, and every other part of him shook as well, left to right and back. I swallowed and felt Elena tense beside me. He reached out his hand and, trembling, she took it. I knew, as did she, that there could be no escape from this creature, not here, not tonight of all nights when his powers were strongest—when she had promised herself to him.

He led her to the altar, stripped off her clothes, and began pawing at her body. Elena sobbed briefly, then slumped forward and grew silent. The creature began to grunt, clawing at her back, thrusting itself forward again and again.

I felt a wave of cold rage go through me. The witches’ chanting grew louder and more intense. That monstrous creature screamed in raw animal pleasure. Elena sobbed. I couldn’t just watch, I thought. How could I? Elena was my mother. I felt it in my heart.

Leaping to my feet, I launched myself forward. The creature arched its neck and hissed at me, showing its wickedly forked tongue. I began pummeling it with my fists, kicking it with my feet, screaming, “Get off her! Get off her!”

Backhanded, it slapped me across the face. I flew across the room, hit the wall hard, and heard the sound of my clay head breaking.

I slumped to the floor. Through unblinking painted eyes I could only watch as the creature threw back its head and laughed.

The red glow vanished. When the lights flickered back to life, Patrick Smith moved forward to take his

place before the altar. He covered my mother's body with a blanket, then picked her up. Others—I couldn't see who because I could no longer turn my head—picked up the pieces of my broken body and laid me all upon my mother's chest.

Smith carried us out to my mother's car and drove us home. I heard my mother moan once as she lay in the back seat, but she otherwise made no move. She might have been in shock. Broken, I could only slump in the front seat and stare into the dashboard.

Smith let himself into our house with my mother's key, carried us both upstairs to her bedroom and stretched us out on the bed. He made no effort to clean my mother up, though he arranged my pieces in their proper order next to her. Shaking his head, he left her covered with his blanket. I heard the front door slam and we were alone.

I tried to turn, to tell my mother how I felt, to comfort her as best I could, but of course I could do nothing. I was clay and cloth and straw once more. Even the lock of her hair had fallen out.

Sometime later, toward dawn, she stirred and opened her eyes. She seemed to be in a daze as she sat up. She pulled the blanket more closely around her shoulders and looked around in confusion.

“Korina—” she called.

Then she saw me, and I could tell she remembered. She picked me up and cradled me in her arms. The broken pieces of my head grated together.

“My poor, poor daughter,” she murmured over and over, rocking me gently. “My poor, poor daughter.”

Sometime later she rose, cleaned herself up, dressed in a robe, and carried me out to her workshop. There she put me back together as best she could with glue and string and wire, but I could tell I would never be the same again. That afternoon she sat me in the chair in the corner of her bedroom like a doll.

She left me there.

* * *

Without her touch, without her magic, I can feel the force of my life beginning to ebb like an outgoing tide. Each day I see and hear and understand a little less. Perhaps I have lasted so long because she made and loved me so well, or because I loved her so much.

It has been eight months now since the coven met on Halloween. My mother no longer practices magic, but the mark on her throat refuses to fade, and each morning the huge swell of her belly grows a little greater.

Her firstborn will truly be the devil's own, born of magic and evil and darkness.

I will not last long enough to see him. He is an intruder, a usurper, stealing my mother even as my life was stolen from me. Perhaps it is one last petty childishness, yet I cannot help but feel that she will never love him as she did me. And in that one small fact I find a little comfort.