

Author's Note: This is chapter two of One-Eyed Jack and the Suicide King, and also a stand-alone short story in its own right.

House of the Rising Sun

Elizabeth Bear

Sycorax smiled at me through the mantilla shadowing her eyes: eyes untouched by that smile. She lolled against a wrought-iron railing, one narrow hip thrust out, dyed red hair tumbling out of the black spiderweb of her shawl, looking like a Mac Rebenak song come to life.

The dead quickly grow thin.

She licked her lips with a long pale tongue and even the semblance of amusement fell away. "You're pale, Tribute. No coup tonight?"

"Nothing appealed." Tribute wasn't my real name any more than Sycorax was hers.

She leaned into me, pressed a hand to my throat. Her flesh lay like ice against the chill of my skin. "I told you to hunt."

"I hunted." Backing away, red nails trailing down my chest. I hunted. Hunted and returned emptyhanded. It's as much how you hear the orders as how they're given.

She followed close on my steps, driving me before her. Ragged black chiffon clung and drifted around her calves; she reached up to lace china fingers in the fine hairs at the nape of my neck. Her face against my throat was waxen: too long unfed. "You weaken me on purpose, Tribute. Give me what you have."

She needed me, needed me to feed. Old as she was, she had to have the blood more often and she couldn't take it straight from a human anymore. She needed someone like me to purge the little taints and poisons from it first--and even then, I had to be careful what I brought home. So sensitive, the old.

She caught at my collar, pulled it open with fumbling hands. I leaned down to her--chattel, blood of her blood, no more able to resist her will than her own right hand, commanded to protect and feed her. At least this time, I knew what sort of predator I served, although I had less choice about it.

I figured things out too late, again.

Sycorax curled cold lips back from fangs like a row of perfect icicles, sank her teeth into my flaccid vein and tried to drink. All that pain and desire spiked through me--every time like the first time--and on its heels a hollowness. Sycorax hissed, drew back. She turned her head and spat transparent fluid on the cobbles. I smiled as she turned on me, spreading my hands like Jesus on a hilltop, still backing slowly away. I had made very sure that I had nothing to feed her on.

Petty, I know. And she'd make me pay for it before dawn.

Down the narrow lane, a club's red door swung open and I turned with a predator's eye, attracted to the movement. Spill of light cut like a slice of cake, booted feet crunching on glittering glass. Girls. Laughing, young, drunk. I remembered what that felt like.

I raked a hand through my forelock and looked away, making the mistake of catching Sycorax's

china-blue eye.

"Those," she said, jerking her chin.

I shook my head. "Too easy, baby. Let me get you something more challenging." I used to have an accent--down home Mississippi. Faded by the years, just like everything else. I suspected I sounded pan-European now, like Sycorax; I've put some effort into changing my speech patterns. Her lips, painted pale to match china white skin, curled into a sulk.

"Tribute. After a quarter of a century, you ought to know I mean what I say."

I tugged my collar, glancing down.

"Them." Sycorax twisted a stiletto-heeled boot, crushing the litter of cracked glass against the bricks.

She enjoyed the hunt a little too much. But who but a madwoman would have drained *my* living body and made me hers? Just fetching my corpse from the grave would have taken insane effort.

"I'm hungry," she complained while I sharpened my teeth on my lip to stop a malicious smile.

If I could buy a little time, the girls might make it to the street and I could lose them in the crowds and tangled shadows of the gaslamp district. Footsteps receded down the alley; I spread my hands in protest, cocking my head to one side and giving her the little half-smile that used to work so well on my wife. "Something with a little more fight in it, sweetie."

My wife was a hell of a lot younger than Sycorax. "Those two girls. Bring me their blood, Tribute. That's an order."

And that was the end of the argument. I turned to obey.

"Tribute."

Coming back around slowly, her gaze--catching mine--flat and pale. "Sycorax."

"I could just spike your pretty eyes out on my pinkie finger and eat them, lovely boy," she purred. "Hazel, aren't they?"

"Blue."

She shrugged and made an irritated, dismissive gesture, hands white as wax. "It's so hard to tell in the dark."

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The girls made it to the street before Sycorax ended the discussion, but I had to follow them anyway. I paced my ordained prey, staying to the shadows, the collar of the black leather trenchcoat that Sycorax had picked out for me tugged up to half-hide the outline of my jaw. I never would have bought that coat for myself. You'd think anybody who'd been dead for any time at all would have had enough of blackness and shadows, thank you very much. Sycorax reveled in it. If she were three hundred years younger, she'd have been a gothchick.

It was a good night: nobody turned for a second look.

People are always dying, and human memory is short. In a hundred years, I shall probably be able to walk down any street in the world without raising an eyebrow.

As long as the sun is down.

Sycorax didn't bother to follow. I had no choice but to do as I was bid. It's more than a rule; it's a fact. I expected there were still a few women I knew who would get a kick out of that.

My girls staggered somewhat, weaving. One was a blonde, brittle dyed hair and a red beret. The other one had glossy chestnut brown waves and the profile of a little girl. I tracked them through the district toward the ocean, neon glow and littered sidewalks. A door would open and music would issue forth, and it wasn't long before I found myself mouthing the words to one particular song.

There's something gloriously ironic in a man charting a number-one hit twenty-five years after he's dead. *Otis Redding, eat your heart out.*

My quarry paused at an open-air patio where a live band played the blues. Girl singer, open coat and a spill of curls like wicked midnight: performing old standards, the kind I've always loved. *Mama, tell my baby sister, not to do what I have done. I'll spend my life in sin and misery, in the House of the Rising Sun.* A song that was already venerable when Eric Burdon made it famous.

There's all kinds of whoredom, aren't there? And all kinds of bloodsuckers, too.

The singer nailed Amazing Grace a capella like heartbreak, voice sharp and gritty as little Mary Johnson doing Cold, Cold Heart. I caught myself singing along and slashed my tongue with needle teeth before someone could overhear. Still no blood. I hadn't fed in a long time and it hurt more than it should have.

The girls sat down at a table and ordered food. I smelled beer, hot wings, eyewatering garlic. I suddenly very badly wanted a peanut butter sandwich and a milkshake.

Leaning against the high black iron fence, I watched the girls watching the band until a passerby in her fifties turned to get a startled better look at me. I stood up straight and met her gaze directly, giving her the crooked little-kid smile. It almost always works, except on Sycorax.

Trying to hide your face only convinces them they've seen something.

"Sorry," she said, waving me away with a smile. A moment later, she turned back. "You know you look like...."

"People say," I answered, pitching my voice high.

"Amazing." She nodded cheerfully, gave me a wide wondering grin, and continued on her way. I watched her go, chattering with her friends, shaking their heads.

The girls didn't stay for "King of the Road," although I would have liked to hear the version.

Kids.

I almost turned away when they walked past. They stank of garlic-stuffed mushrooms and beer. The reek of the herb knotted my stomach and seared my eyes. I actually tried to take a half-step away before the compulsion Sycorax had laid on me locked my knees and forced me back into pursuit.

They walked arm in arm, skinny twenty-year-olds with fake I.D. and black vinyl miniskirts. Cheap boots, too much eyeliner. The one with the brown hair broke my heart every time she tossed her head, just that way. I let myself drift ahead of them, taking a gamble on where they would cut across the residential neighborhood near the ocean: a dangerous place for girls to be.

I ducked down a side street to cut them off and waited in the dark of an unlit doorway. Sycorax's control permitted that much. I leaned against the wall, scrubbing my face against my hands. It felt like a waxen mask, cold and stiff. My hands weren't much better.

They weren't long. I was unlucky. They picked the better of the two routes through the brownstones, the one I had been able to justify choosing, and just that innocently chose their fate.

The scent of bougainvillea and jacaranda filled the spaces of the night. I watched them skipping from streetlight to streetlight, shadows stretched out behind them, catching up, and then reaching before. The brown-haired one walked a few steps ahead of the bleach-blonde, humming to herself.

I couldn't help it. It wasn't one of my standards, but every blues singer born knows the words to that one. Hell, I used to have a horse by that name.

I picked up the tune.

I had to.

"...they call the Rising Sun. It's been the ruin of many a poor boy. And me, O God, I'm one!"

Their heads snapped up. Twenty, maybe. I was dead before they were born. Gratifying that they recognized my voice.

"Fellas, don't believe what a bad woman tells you--though her eyes be blue, or brown...." I strolled out of the shadows, ducking my head and smiling, letting the words trail away.

The dark-haired girl did a doubletake. She had a lovely nose, pert and turned up. The blonde blinked a couple of times, but I don't think she made the connection. I'd changed my appearance some, and I'd lost a lot of weight.

The stench of garlic on their breath would have thickened my blood in my veins if I had any left. I swallowed hard, remembering all those songs about wandering ghosts and unquiet graves. Ghosts that all seem to want the same thing: revenge, and to lay down and rest.

I smiled wider. *What the lady wants, the lady gets.*

"Oh, wow," the darker girl said. "Do you have any idea how much you look like...."

The street was empty, dark and deserted. I came up under the streetlight, close enough to reach out and touch the tip of that nose if I wanted. I dropped them a look that used to melt hearts, sidelong glance under lowered lashes. "People say," I answered.

And, sick to my stomach, I broke their necks before I fed.

It was the least I could do.

Poison roiled in my belly when I laid them out gently in the light of that streetlamp, in the rich dark covering the waterfront, close enough to smell the sea. I straightened their spines so they wouldn't look so terrible for whoever found them, but at least *they* wouldn't be coming back.

It was happening already: my limbs jerked and shook. My flesh crawled with ripples like fire, my tongue numb as a drunk's. *I'm going back to New Orleans, to wear that ball and chain....*

Not this time. Struggling to smooth each step, to hide the venom flooding my veins, I hurried back to my poor, *hungry* mistress. I stole the brunette's wallet. I stopped and bought breath mints at the all-night

grocery.

I beat Sycorax home.