

THE
DAMNED

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ALSO BY RENÉE AHDIEH

The Beautiful

Flame in the Mist

Smoke in the Sun

The Wrath & the Dawn

The Rose & the Dagger

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*To all those who braved new worlds
in search of something more*

And to Victor, always



Every Night and every Morn
Some to Misery are born.
Every Morn and every Night
Some are born to Sweet Delight,
Some are born to Endless Night.

From Songs of Experience
by William Blake

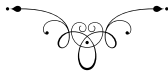




Comme au jeu le joueur têtù,
Comme à la bouteille l'ivrogne,
Comme aux vermines la charogne
—Maudite, maudite sois-tu!

As gamblers to the wheel's bright spell,
As drunkards to their raging thirst,
As corpses to their worms
—Accurst be thou! Oh, be thou damned to hell!

From "Le Vampire"
by Charles Baudelaire



THE AWAKENING



First there is nothing. Only silence. A sea of oblivion. Then flashes of memory take shape. Snippets of sound. The laughter of a loved one, the popping of wood sap in a fireplace, the smell of butter melting across fresh bread.

An image emerges from the chaos, sharpening with each second. A crying young woman—her eyes like emeralds, her hair like spilled ink—leans over him, clutching his bloodstained hand, pleading with him in muffled tones.

Who am I? he wonders.

Dark amusement winds through him.

He is nothing. No one. Nobody.

The scent of blood suffuses his nostrils, intoxicatingly sweet. Like lechosa from a fruit stand in San Juan, its juice dripping down his shirtsleeves.

He becomes hunger. Not a kind of hunger he's ever known before, but an all-consuming void. A dull ache around his dead heart, a blast of bloodlust searing through his veins. It knifes through his stomach like the talons on a bird of prey. Rage builds in his chest. The desire to seek and destroy. To consume life. Let it fill the emptiness within him. Where there was once

a sea of oblivion, there is now a canvas painted red, the color
dripping like rain at his feet, setting his world aflame.

My city. My family. My love.

Who am I?

From the fires of his fury, a name emerges.

Bastien. My name is Sébastien Saint Germain.

BASTIEN



I lie still, my body weightless. Immobile. It feels like I'm locked in a pitch-black room, unable to speak, choking on the smoke of my own folly.

My uncle did this to me once when I was nine. My closest friend, Michael, and I had stolen a box of cigars hand-rolled by an elderly lady from Havana who worked on the corner of Burgundy and Saint Louis. When Uncle Nico caught us smoking them in the alley behind Jacques', he sent Michael home, his voice deathly quiet. Filled with foreboding.

Then my uncle locked me in a hall closet with the box of cigars and a tin of matches. He told me I could not leave until I finished every single one of them.

That was the last time I ever smoked a cigar.

It took me weeks to forgive Uncle Nico. Years to stomach the smell of burning tobacco anywhere in my vicinity. Half a lifetime to understand why he'd felt the need to teach that particular lesson.

I try to swallow this ghost of bile. I fail.

I know what Nicodemus has done. Though the memory is still unclear—fogged by the weakness of my dying body—I

know he has made me into one of them. I am now a vampire, like my uncle before me. Like my mother before me, who faced the final death willingly, her lips stained red and a lifeless body in her arms.

I am a soulless son of Death, cursed to drink the blood of the living until the end of time.

It sounds ridiculous even to me, a boy raised on the truth of monsters. Like a joke told by an unfunny aunt with a penchant for melodrama. A woman who cuts herself on her diamond bracelet and wails as drops of blood trickle onto her silken skirts.

Like that, I am hunger once more. With each pang, I become less human. Less of what I once was and more of what I will forever be. A demon of want, who simply craves more, never to be sated.

White-hot rage chases behind the bloodlust, igniting like a trail of saltpeter from a powder keg. I understand why Uncle Nico did this, though it will take many lifetimes for me to forgive him. Only the direst of circumstances would drive him to turn the last living member of his mortal family—the lone heir to the Saint Germain fortune—into a demon of the Otherworld.

His line has died with me, my human life reaching an all-too-sudden end. This choice must be one of last resort. A voice resonates in my mind. A feminine voice, its echoes tremulous.

Please. Save him. What can I say that will make you save him? Do we have a deal?

When I realize who it is, what she must have done, I howl a silent howl, the sound ringing in the hollows of my lost soul. I cannot think about that now.

My failure will not let me.

It is enough to know that I, Sébastien Saint Germain, eighteen-year-old son of a beggar and a thief, have been turned into a member of the Fallen. A race of blood drinkers banished from their rightful place in the Otherworld by their own greed. Creatures of the night embroiled in a centuries-long war with their archenemy, a brotherhood of werewolves.

I try to speak but fail, my throat tight, my eyelids sealed shut. After all, Death is a powerful foe to vanquish.

Fine silk rustles by my ear, a scented breeze coiling through the air. Neroli oil and rose water. The unmistakable perfume of Odette Valmont, one of my dearest friends. For almost ten years, she was a protector in life. Now she is a sister in blood. A vampire, sired by the same maker.

My right thumb twitches in response to her nearness. Still I cannot speak or move freely. Still I am locked in a darkened room, with nothing but a box of cigars and a tin of matches, dread coursing through my veins, hunger tingling on my tongue.

A sigh escapes Odette's lips. "He's beginning to wake." She pauses, pity seeping into her voice. "He'll be furious."

As usual, Odette is not wrong. But there is comfort in my fury. Freedom in knowing I may soon seek release from my rage.

"And well he should be," my uncle says. "This is the most selfish thing I've ever done. If he manages to survive the change, he will come to hate me . . . just as Nigel did."

Nigel. The name alone rekindles my ire. Nigel Fitzroy, the

reason for my untimely demise. He—along with Odette and four other members of my uncle’s vampire progeny—safeguarded me from Nicodemus Saint Germain’s enemies, chief among them those of the Brotherhood. For years Nigel bided his time. Cultivated his plan for revenge on the vampire who snatched him from his home and made him a demon of the night. Under the guise of loyalty, Nigel put into motion a series of events intended to destroy the thing Nicodemus prized most: his living legacy.

I’ve been betrayed before, just as I have betrayed others. It is the way of things when you live among capricious immortals and the many illusionists who hover nearby like flies. Only two years ago, my favorite pastime involved fleecing the Crescent City’s most notorious warlocks of their ill-gotten gains. The worst among their ilk were always so certain that a mere mortal could never best them. It gave me great pleasure to prove them wrong.

But I have never betrayed my family. And I had never been betrayed by a vampire sworn to protect me. Someone I loved as a brother. Memories waver through my mind. Images of laughter and a decade of loyalty. I want to shout and curse. Rail to the heavens, like a demon possessed.

Alas, I know how well God listens to the prayers of the damned.

“I’ll summon the others,” Odette murmurs. “When he wakes, he should see us all united.”

“Leave them be,” Nicodemus replies, “for we are not yet out of the woods.” For the first time, I sense a hint of distress in his

words, there and gone in an instant. “More than a third of my immortal children did not survive the transformation. Many were lost in the first year to the foolishness of immortal youth. This . . . may not work.”

“It *will* work,” Odette says without hesitation.

“Sébastien could succumb to madness, as his mother did,” Nicodemus says. “In her quest to be unmade, Philomène destroyed everything in her path, until there was nothing to be done but put an end to the terror.”

“That is not Bastien’s fate.”

“Don’t be foolish. It very well could be.”

Odette’s response is cool. “A risk you were willing to take.”

“But a risk nonetheless. It was why I refused his sister when she asked me years ago to turn her.” He exhales. “In the end, we lost her to the fire all the same.”

“We will not lose Bastien as we lost Émilie. Nor will he succumb to Philomène’s fate.”

“You speak with such surety, little oracle.” He pauses. “Has your second sight granted you this sense of conviction?”

“No. Years ago, I promised Bastien I would not look into his future. I have not forsaken my word. But I believe in my heart that hope will prevail. It . . . simply must.”

Despite her seemingly unshakable faith, Odette’s worry is a palpable thing. I wish I could reach for her hand. Offer her words of reassurance. But still I am locked within myself, my anger overtaking all else. It turns to ash on my tongue, until all I am left with is *want*. The need to be loved. To be sated. But most of all, the desire to destroy.

Nicodemus says nothing for a time. “We shall see. His wrath will be great, of that there can be no doubt. Sébastien never wanted to become one of us. He bore witness to the cost of the change at an early age.”

My uncle knows me well. His world took my family from me. I think of my parents, who died years ago, trying to keep me safe. I think of my sister, who perished trying to protect me. I think of Celine, the girl I loved in life, who will not remember me.

I have never betrayed anyone I love.

But never is a long time, when you have eternity to consider.

“He may also be grateful,” Odette says. “One day.”

My uncle does not reply.