

“But it cannot be true!” I cried, “They seek to make such a beast of you; but I will not have it, I cannot believe it.”

She looked down and away, clutching one hand in the other in a clear sign of distress. She sat beside me in the garden, lightly upon a little stone bench which lay on the far side of the grounds which my father kept around the castle, and a marvelous oak, and a little pond, which shimmered and reflected in the moonlight, casting odd lights and shadows upon my lovely companion’s face.

“You...perhaps do not know me as you seem to think you do.” She spoke with some difficulty, still not bearing to look at me, to meet my gaze with those wonderful dark eyes which I had so learned to love gazing upon in the months past which we had spent together.

I reached out and took her hand, and she, suppressing an urge to recoil, let me. It was clear in that moment that she wanted to trust me, she wanted to have me, even if all circumstance would separate us, and I could see a hint of that ardour I often saw in her complexion when I knew she was thinking of me.

“I know you. I know you in all the ways that matter; I must believe this. I know your lovely smile, your careful step and how you gaze softly at the sky ever-so often upon our evening walks. I know your bright conversation and the warmth of your company, your light laugh and the fey twinkle in your eye when you speak of something at the dinner-table that you know will bring controversy, I know the warmth of your hands, the beat of your heart. You are my sister, my love, my heart, in all but name. Carmilla, dear, don’t you see I *do* know you, I must.”

She seemed cheered, somewhat, or at least warmed, by my words. She softened perceptibly, her hand lightly squeezing mine with that strength which always seemed so unlikely from a person of her affect.

I hesitated a moment. “You are not the monster they make of you—or, perhaps,” my voice softened, questioning, “If you are, I’m sure you have good cause, none for which I could seek fault in you.”

She leaned against me, then, pressing herself into my shoulder and gripping me tightly as if I was her only flotsam in a dreadful shipwreck, and she would be drowning, lost in the turmoil, if not for my presence. I let her remain there for a moment, sighing into the night air and waiting patiently for the time when life, I knew, would come to my dear friend’s face again. She remained there a moment, but then, seeming somewhat energized in my presence, arose, still leaning close to me but with face now shown, bright eyes with a look of determination shining upon me. She kissed me then, lightly upon the cheek, it seemed to me in gratitude.

“Thank you. Oh, my dear, your words make such life rise within my soul as I never could have believed; I am calm only when I know I can be with you.” She kissed

me again, then threw her pretty arms around my shoulders and lay upon my breast. "Oh, thank you, my dear, dear friend."

Her eyes were then shadowed, but she seemed still quite nervous; and to be true, I was as well. I was glad for my friend's strength, and did not at all want to agitate her, but nevertheless had burning questions heavy upon my mind. And so, after a time, holding her there, and waiting calmly, I asked.

"I am sorry to ask, but, it is unavoidable the things of which they speak; is it true? Is it your presence, your action, that has made me so ill?" I was nervous as I spoke, and it perhaps showed in the waver of my voice, the shivering of my form, perhaps more than nervousness; in fact yes, it was fear, true fear, at the truth of what may be. But, too, I was ready to accept whatever answer may come, in truth had already worked through all the possibilities in my mind, every possible thing she might say, every idea already explored within the dim hours of nights before, lying alone in my bed, seeded within my mind when I had heard my father talking furtively with the Baron and General about my situation, and the situation of the "creature" that besotted the province. Such men! I find it difficult to speak ill against them, perhaps even, it is wrong, for they act only in the way which they see as right, and for the good of all; but for any person to wish such harm upon a woman so lovely as Carmilla must be a sin, enough for one as Satan himself to be thrown out of heaven! It must be! I could not hold any other concept within my mind, no matter how I twisted my thoughts upon themselves in the nights before! It was a sin to kill one such as Carmilla, no matter the truth of her being, no matter her actions!

And so, reader, you must know, my question was not asked in accusation, no, rather the opposite; for accusation is to impose one's own story and interpretation of the events and morals therein upon another, and judge them accordingly, and I sought only in asking to derive her truth of the situation; if the circumstances were true, *why* had she done what she had done? Could she help it, even? If it was her nature, then, is it right to kill a creature simply for acting within its nature? Surely God would not create such a creature as to be immediately judged sinful purely for acting within that which it desires? This was the train of thought with which I sought to question her, to understand her, truly, to see the part of the story which lay within her experience, her view on the situations and her actions therein, if you will.

It seems, thankfully, that she saw such resolve in my words. My voice was soft and gentle, and she looked up on me as I spoke, the moon lighting upon her face and making it seem ever so lovely, and I saw, reflected in her eyes, a sort of understanding, amongst other swirling emotions, deeper than time. She knew I sought only to understand her, and she seemed calmed by this, but still, she took her time in speaking. She lay once more upon my breast and closed her eyes, seeking, it seemed, to listen for

my heartbeat, and listening for a moment before she spoke. When she did speak it was in the gentlest voice imaginable, and slow, with the air of a pastor giving sermon, carefully recited to a rapt audience.

“I am the beast they made of me, in every way.” She spoke in a protracted manner, each word seeming to draw out centuries of anguish, and I was patient in listening, remaining calm and still, with a thoughtful and hopefully loving expression, reserving my reaction for a moment in which it would be appropriate.

“I have preyed on those such as you, whom I desired, for many long years. But I did not bring harm upon them of my own will, I promise this.” She tried to meet my gaze with a determined expression, then turned away once more, preferring the unwavering ground. “It is the inevitable curse of my existence that, forever, I shall kill those I love, simply by virtue of doing what I must to sustain myself. I do not enjoy it. In fact, it is only in purest horror, not sleepwalking but fully conscious, knowing my action but incapable of preventing it, that I draw upon the lifeblood of my victims. Perhaps there is a way in which you could survive. Were it only that I knew it; and I would tell you, my beautiful Laura! But for now I know it not, and live only as a monstrous sinner, destined to murder you for warm blood.”

She spoke at surprising length, given her previous shyness. It seemed it was a speech that had been prepared, and exacted to the syllable, in such way as could only be possible if rehearsed over and over in the back of one’s mind, consequence of the persistent worry and hope of things one might have to, or perhaps get the chance, to say, to the one they love. She looked up at me, with questing eyes, when she was done. She wept, then, and seemed a pitiful thing—not purposefully or manipulatively so—but with total honesty of the soul. She hated her existence, feared what she was, wanted nothing more than to be loved.

And I wanted nothing more to give it to her.

I smiled gently, then, and lay my hand upon her cheek. She blushed at the touch, and seeming exhausted after her speech, relaxed into my palm, sighing.

I let her rest a moment, then said, “No true sinner lacks intention. I can see so clearly within you, and want to believe, that you are motivated only by your truest desire; and maligned by your nature. You deserve more than this, dear heart. Perhaps we can find a way.”

And we mingled then, in shyness and confidence, in fear and warmth, her light held against mine, as the dawn broke, and a future blossomed before us. A difficult future, perhaps, but anything, I realized in that moment, could be conquered, with her hand in mine. And mine in hers.