

There was breathing.

The night breathed back.

Leaves and grass bit back as massive feet, no, paws slammed down and rose from the forest, no, the lawn.

The houses just ahead painted back in black and red shapes.

The distance from the growth was nothing.

The dogs in their fences whimpered and the sound was loud enough in unnatural ears.

There was breathing and the night breathed back.

A bound, a leap and the brick face side of a home was covered.

The glass window showed something small – a child sleeping.

Little eyes opened. A mouth screamed.

There was breath.

The glass broke.

Damian Malachi lifted from his bed. His breathing – heavy. His skin – cold, his body slicked with sweat.

He looked over at the woman lying next to him. Elsa was beautiful enough when she was awake but, asleep, Malachi’s wife was even more attractive. Her almond eyes closed with long lashes that interspersed. Damian smiled, as he caught his breath and brushed Elsa’s cheek. She breathed gently. She could sleep through anything except for the baby’s cry for his “momma.” Now at the window, Damian looked out. His shirtless torso danced over with the bright blue-white of the moon. It showcased his muscular physique. It also brought depth to a large jagged scar across his chest.

Just beyond the end of his home’s backyard was a collection of trees that suddenly felt familiar. The night breathed.

Chicago was a city for big politics, bigger buildings and even more massive businesses. If it was not housing a conglomeration, any high-rise was full of tenants paying overpriced rent. And yet loving it.

In the Windy City's embrace was an infant skyscraper, not quite the height of its brethren. It held the office of literary agency tycoon Miguel Gonsalves. Even if the tycoon title was self-granted and even further self-promoted.

"Damn it, D, you've done it again!" Gonsalves plopped down in the chair across from Malachi. Gonsalves was short in stature but carried himself like a man twenty feet tall. His tan skin and short dark hair had only added to his charm and bravado both in the world of literary business and in multiple conversations with women.

Damian smiled with a raised brow. His fingers rolled the green crystal at the end of his gold necklace. Behind the writer and his agent, a massive multi-inch LCD television was jabbering with a news broadcast. Gonsalves spared little expense in his office and its décor.

"Done what?" he asked. The sun was setting in downtown Chicago. The fleeting light of day gave one last long shine across the glass giants touching the sky. Damian always found this view captivating. But he found Miguel's excitement even more so.

"Written another best seller! I thought you'd peeked with the 'Mummy Mysteries' but now? Your draft for 'The Vampire Killer' just left two publishing houses in a bidding war! How do you do it?" Gonsalves had been Damian's agent, sometime editor, and always friend for almost ten years. He spoke at Damian and Elsa's wedding and was godfather to Bradbury. But Damian could still surprise him.

"Miguel, that's cool, man. Thanks!" Malachi's dark brown eyes shot to the clock behind his friend. "Damn-it! I'm going to be late! Elsa's folks are coming by and I promised I'd be there for dinner!" He snapped up, grabbing his belongings.

"Talk tomorrow, bro?" Malachi slid on his black leather blazer.

Miguel stood up as well, shaking his friend's hand and hugging him simultaneously. "Yeah, for sure, for sure." Gonsalves' gaze stayed on the manuscript before him. He was holding another multi-million dollar project in his hands. "Just don't know how you get these mummies, vampires and crazies down the way you do!"

Damian headed towards the office door. He smiled. "Guess I know monsters."

"...authorities have no leads on the disappearance..."

Malachi turned towards the television. A rather attractive anchorwoman was finishing a story and turning the show over to a round weatherman. Miguel saw his friend's attention shift.

"Sorry, bro," Gonsalves said, "It's about another kid disappearing. I think it's like the second one. Another little boy. Sorry, D, must bring up some bad memories."

Damian nodded. "Yeah, yeah...any more details?"

His agent shook his head. "No. Everyone's just hoping and praying the kids are found safe. You write about monsters but there really are some horrible things out there."

Malachi nodded once again. He looked at the large screen LCD. "Yeah, there are."

###

Elsa Lanchaster Martinez-Malachi said goodbye to her parents. They left the door and, in their typical fashion, exchanged long farewells with details about some upcoming birthday party or baptismal event. As they said their (maybe) final portion of good night, Damian fell back onto the ground, launching a baby boy into the air.

Bradbury Claude Malachi, known as BC to his family, was all of three years old going on twenty-five. He had short dark hair with mom-gobbling curls. His parents had cut his hair infrequently and every time the boy was sheared, Elsa nearly lost consciousness. Now he was being tossed up with great shriek and joy, fresh from dinner and a bath.

Elsa smiled at the sight of her husband and son. "You know he just ate, babe!"

Damian grimaced. "Crap!" He caught the boy who begged for more aerobatics. "Dayee!!! Dayee!!! More, more!!!!"

Malachi smiled wide at his son. "Oh no, boy. No pukey tonight! We just gave you a bath! C'mon, to bed witch!"

"DAYEE! Daddy!" Damian smiled. "Hah, the boy's almost got it!"

Elsa grinned and narrowed her slightly almond eyes. "He says mommy perfectly!" The Malachi's stuck their tongues out at each other.

"I'll deal with you when I get him to bed!" Damian retorted. His wife made a sensual pouted face.

“Ooh, you promise?” At Elsa’s innuendo, Damian smiled and winked.

With that, Bradbury said goodnight to his mother and was hoisted away by his father.

Thirty long minutes later.

“Okay, son, time to go to sleep, okay?” A book had been read. Prayers had been prayed and the nightly rituals were complete. Bradbury was a perfect mix of his parents. He had his mother’s eyes and cheeks. He had a tint of his father’s color and, as Elsa often pointed out, the size of his father’s head. He was stubborn, even for a three year old, and willful. But his heart was big and Bradbury was the most sought after child between the two families.

“Okay, Dayee...” The little boy pulled his blankets up to his neck. Damian smiled and walked away, leaving the boy’s door nearly closed.

The child settled in and yawned. His eyes flickered until they finally shut.

Just beyond his toddler bed and the mounds of stuffed toys was his closet. It was normally full of clothing Elsa could not yet bear to part with and everything he could wear now. But at this moment, with the lights off, the closet was full of blackness. A pitch of darkness that seemed like a pool of ink sitting in the room.

The door to the walk-in aperture moved a bit then stopped. Moved a bit more then stopped once again. Finally, the door pulled itself closed and clicked shut. The closet was now just a white rectangle.

Until a greenish glow grew around it. Pulsated. And the closet began to hum.

As BC slept, the door opened. It creaked. It whined and a sickeningly green light fell over the slumbering child.

And the shadow of something reached out for him.

In the kitchen, the Malachi’s were washing and drying dishes. The couple played and flirted until a scream broke the air.

Damian burst into his son’s room. Elsa caught up. She was breathing heavily while her husband barely showed he had covered the house in the sprint he had ran.

“MOMMY! DAYEE!!! SCARY FACE! SCARY MONSTER!”

“BC, “Damian said, “Where?”

Elsa was consoling her son. The boy pointed to the closet.

Malachi stood and looked into the open and dark closet. He paused and then looked back at his wife, shaking his head after finding nothing.

Elsa smiled and her eyes were filled with teary love. Her cheeks swelled as she smiled. “Baby,” she said softly, “It was just a bad dream. Go back to sleep. Mommy and daddy will be right here.”

Surprisingly, Bradbury accepted the offer and, as his mother held him, fluttered back to sleep. She put him down and the couple left the room.

The child’s room was quiet. It was dark.

Until it simmered to life in sick green coming from the closet.

The door whined open and a shadow reached for young Malachi again.

Another scream sent Elsa and Damian bursting into the room. Bradbury was sitting up screaming.

“MOMMY! DAYEE!!! SCARY FACE! SCARY MONSTER!”

“BC!!! “Damian said, “Where?”

Elsa was consoling her son. The boy pointed to the closet.

Once again, Malachi stood and looked into the open and dark closet. Once again, he saw nothing in the shadows.

“Okay, son, we’ll take care of it.” Damian stood at the edge of the walk-in and cleared his throat. “THIS IS THE LAST TIME WE’LL HAVE YOU BOTHERING US! YOU HEAR?”

Another conversation of consolation from mother to son. Another successful return to slumber. Elsa kissed Bradbury and he returned under his blankets.

Another dark room.

Another green glow.

Another shadow reached.

Bradbury cried out.

Damian came in, this time, by himself. Elsa was in the shower.

The father was visibly angry now.

“You need to know that this is the last time I’m going to put up with this...” he began.

BC looked up at his father with big watery eyes. “But Dayee...why you yelling at me?”

Damian inhaled deeply. Suddenly, he changed. Normally, he was moderate height with an athletic build but now he stretched and widened – skin pulling and bones popping. A green flicker ran over his body like a crackling tide washing over with the same tint as the color from the closet. Suddenly, Damian Malachi was nearly seven feet tall, with football wide shoulders and furred skin. His defined face was gone and something lupine with a skeletal nose had taken its place. A massive blood-red collar adorned the skin-tight black one-piece suit that clung to his rippling muscular body.

“I wasn’t talking to you, son...” The voice was not Damian’s anymore. At least not only his voice. There was something else. Something that howled and growled underneath his words.

What-was-Malachi thrust a muscular clawed arm into the closet’s shadows. He pulled something out of the darkness. He retrieved Bradbury’s monster – by the throat.

“...I was talking to him.”

Damian-not-Damian held the beast up. It was a short stocky creature with large eyes and a mouth of short nail-like teeth. Its hands ended in stubby claws. It sniffed and snarled while the lycanthropic-vampiric creature held it off the ground. It wore a dark suit that was matted in dirt. Its rough bumpy skin rubbed against the man-creature holding it.

“A Sub-Terrorean? They sent a Sub-Terrorean to MY HOUSE? TO MY FAMILY?”

The Malachi-monster pulled the squirming creature close and bared a mouth full of fangs. He hurled the underground dweller back into the closet. Rather than slamming into children’s clothing, hangers and drywall, the bestial hunchback disappeared into a flash of green and then the dark.

The remaining monster turned and looked at his child.

“Bradbury, don’t be scared, son, it’s me, Da---“

Bradbury exploded in a scream. Damian-not-Damian jumped back. His son’s shriek brought in Elsa.

“WHAT’S GOING ON?!?!?!?”

Bradbury pointed to the beast that stood in his father’s place. “COOLEST. THING. EVER!!!!!!!!!! DAYEE!!!!!!!! MONSTER DAYEE!!!!!!!!”

Elsa shook her head. She looked at Damian-not-Damian. Her dark almond eyes to his glowing penlight lupine gaze.

“Well honey,” Mrs. Malachi began, “You said you would tell him one day.”

The wolf-like creature raised an eyebrow.

###

“Authorities continue to search for the missing boy. So far, the investigation has yielded no evidence as to whether or not this is foul play or a child who has wandered off. Sources say there are signs of possible animal involvement. The FBI will be involved as they look to see if there are other disappearances similar to this one. More news after the break.”

The clock on the microwave said “3:15 AM.” The Malachi family sat around the kitchen table.

Elsa wore an oversized hooded sweatshirt.

Bradbury sat in a booster seat.

A large, fanged wolf-creature sat looking at them both.

“You know, you could just change back,” began Elsa.

“NOOOO! MONSTER DAYEE!!!! AWESOME!!!!!” Bradbury bounced in his chair, pounding his hands on the table. He growled with a smile on his face and would’ve woken anyone sleeping in the house if they were not all already awake.

“He won’t let me,” Damian-not-Damian answered back. His voice had an unsettling mixture of alley animal growl and cemetery wind echo.

“He’s a little boy!” Elsa exclaimed.

“MONSTER DAYEE!!!!”

“Okay, son, okay...shhhh...calm down....”

Elsa sighed or yawned or did both. She wiped her face. Exotic and beautiful, even at the crack of the crack of dawn and with the hint of puffy eyes.

“And why am I so calm?” she asked between breaths, “Why am I not hysterical at all this?”

Damian’s fanged slit of a mouth twisted into a possible smile.

“Sorry, honey, it’s because you’ve seen this side of me before.”

“WHAT?” Elsa exclaimed. The boy was still clapping his hands. “WHEN? WHERE? I don’t--
-FINE! We’ll talk about that later! Right now, that little boy is not going to calm down, honey!
He just found out his father is a werewolf---“

“Baby,” the Damian-thing interrupted calmly, “I am not a werewolf---“

Bradbury howled from his booster seat. “DAYEE’S A WOLFMAN!”

Elsa tilted her head slightly. Her bob cut hair waved slightly. “A vampire?”

Damian-thing smacked his forehead with a massive bandaged clawed hand. “What???

No, not a vampire either!”

“DAYEE’S A DRACULA!” Damian-not-Damian snapped into a rigid stare. His eyes burned bright green. His fangs grit. “I-AM-NOT-DRACULA.” And the room trembled. And his family stared in fear.

He exhaled, his sudden swell leaving. His pawed hands raised up in apology. The room’s shake ceased.

A few moments passed. Elsa reached slowly and held her husband’s clawed hand. “Damian, he’s not going to go to bed until you explain it to him. Tell your son a story.”

The bestial creature paused. “Not exactly a kid’s book story, Elsa...”

“Tone it down then, Sweets. You’re the writer.”

The Damian-thing sighed and a growl rumbled out as well.

“Fine. You’re right.” He turned lupine eyes towards the little boy. The irises were pin-light dots set in darkness.

“One quick story, son. And then it’s straight to bed.”

Damian Malachi, all wolf-like and undead, drew in a large breath and let it rumble out.

“Bradbury Claude Malachi. You’re about to learn how your father became...the Monster Man.”

Time had passed and Damian’s story had ended. Despite his excitement, despite the new exposure of his father as a creature, sleep had overtaken Bradbury C. Malachi. The child slumped over in his booster seat. He inflated and deflated with every slight snore. Elsa moved to him, lifted him up gingerly and put him to bed.

She now stood in the kitchen with her husband, still more monster than man. He had spent some time looking through the house. He said he was looking for something. Something else trying to enter the home.

“Well now that we’ve permanently scarred him...” Damian, now mortal again in appearance, looked at his wife. She was watching the coffee maker hiss to life. Dawn was approaching in less time than it was an hour ago.

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“Tell me the full story, not the kid version,” Elsa continued, “I should know this. This part of my husband.”

Damian stroked his wife’s bare shoulder that peeked from the sweat-shirt. “You may wish you didn’t.”

Her almond eyes looked into the dark brown of his. She thought, for a moment, that they had never looked so deep. Or so unknown.

The writer exhaled. “Like I told the baby, it happened twenty years ago. When I was just a kid asleep in his room full of werewolf curtains and Frankenstein piggy banks.”

###

The young boy soared through the air. Screaming.

He saw the darkness hurtling up towards him, the night air whipping past his face. Wind removing breath.

Something green flashed in front of him. It was like glass. Damian screamed and threw his arms up in front of him. He crashed through and was surrounded by spinning glass, almost stained like church windows. Suddenly he crashed to the ground.

The earth beneath his hands and knees was gray. A dark gray dust that wasn't just dirt but lifelessness. The soil was more like soot from when he saw his dad clean the chimney.

He lifted up and saw the world before him. It wasn't just nighttime, it was a blackness that covered everything.

Malachi looked down. Something was burning on his young chest. He looked down and saw a golden pendant on his chest. It glowed a sick green.

The boy turned and saw a massive wall behind him. As far as he could see, it never ended.

"MOM!!!! DAD!!!!" His voice echoed.

There was nothing around him but what he had seen in books described as a desert. A wasteland of cracked and dried earth stretched out before the young boy from all around him until the end of the horizon. He looked at his hands and then up at the sky.

The world was black and white.

"What? Am I'm dreaming? MOM!!!! DAD!!!!" Damian walked, calling out at the top of his voice for his parents. Tears began to run down his cheeks. His body was cold and getting colder. His t-shirt and pajama bottoms did not keep him warm. The boy stumbled through the colorless wasteland. As he called out, cried out for his parents, for anyone, Malachi walked across a jut of land.

As he called out, cried out, the blackness on both sides of the outcropping suddenly moved. It came alive and something large with wriggling appendages moved from the darkness.

Malachi continued walking until he tripped and fell.

The large mass moved quietly behind him.

Tears ran down Damian's face. He sobbed and sat on his knees.

*The thing reached spindly limbs out towards him.
Wiping his face, Damian stopped when he heard
something softly crunch behind him.*

*He turned and saw it – a giant shadow – it seemed to be blackness moving towards him.
For its size, it moved with a remarkable silence. But as Damian recognized the shape, the eerie
quiet of the thing made sense.*

It was a giant tarantula.

Malachi tried to scream but nothing came out.

*He could not move. Fear gripped him and bound his feet to the ground. Malachi found
some shock to his system and scrambled to his feet.*

He ran.

*Now the colossal beast made sounds. It was some horrid and ear-screeching hiss
coupled with the sounds of cracking timber and falling trees as the spider's massive limbs fell
with its approach. Damian ran.*

*The air was stale, windless and lifeless. There was no smell except from some acidic
aroma from the arachnid behind him. There was no sound of traffic or people anywhere. No
planes overheard. This world was dead and the young boy was being chased by one of its
possible killers.*

*A sweep of a mighty clawed limb sent the boy hurtling through the air. He crashed down
into a pile of dust and dead soil. The grass was dark and felt more like hay than it did greenery.
Damian held his head and his vision cleared with the descending form of a giant, moist mandible
maw as the hellish spider came down for its meal.*

*A figure was suddenly in front of Malachi – standing between the eight-legged hunter and
him. Dark cloth billowed around the person before him. Odd how the air and its accompanying
wind whisked suddenly to life.*

*The cloaked figure held up something – at first, it was just a darkened object but it
quickly pulsated and snapped out a light that stopped the goliath arachnid in its tracks.*

*Damian still was unable to scream. Although the spider's feast was halted, with the light
that appeared to stop it, the true appearance – from dripping mandibles to glistening eight-eyes
– was fully recognizable. It was like looking into some alien god – large and beyond
comprehension.*

“BACK, BEAST! BACK!” The figure screamed and the object held aloft pulsed more and the blinding energy thundered out, sending the tarantula away. It cried out with a horrible sound like a thousand shrieks. Damian fell to his knees, his hands slammed onto his ears.

Suddenly, another cloaked person appeared and held Malachi’s shoulders. He held a large fork-like weapon which crackled with lightning.

“Shhhh, young master, it will be gone soon!”

With that, the 100-foot arachnid stormed off and down the side of the cavern crossed by the bridge.

“This charm has burned out but the beast is gone. Is the boy alright?” The voice came from the taller man. It had an accent and was very formal, very educated. He had a long walking stick that he held as a cane. Given his stance, it was more so for look and class than necessity.

“I believe so, doctor.” The shorter man’s voice had a grunting breath to it.

“We will need to get him into hiding. It is a matter of time before one of the Five arrive.”

“A miracle, doctor! Divine intervention! They do not sense him!” exclaimed the short man.

“No, they sense everything – especially a living mortal.”

Damian looked up at the two men talking about him.

One was tall and thin – the other short and hunched over. They uncovered their hooded faces.

“Fortunately neither of us have been alive for some time.” The taller man was chalk white with penlight eyes and fangs. The shorter figure was a more greenish color and one eye was far larger than the other. His back massively deformed.

Malachi found no scream once again. But he did find he could pass out.

###

“No! No! No!!!!”

“Again? Five nights in a row...”

The little Malachi boy was running, screaming and arms waving, through the night. Scratching branches and dead leaves raked his face. Blood streaked with tears as he cried beyond composure. The golden pendant on his chest glowed green in the jewel set within it. In

this realm of shade, green was the only color which apparently had not bled out into black and white. The necklace bounced as the boy ran wild.

Van Helsing and Igor watched from not-too-far away.

“Shall I get him again, doctor?” the hunchback asked, bouncing and somersaulting in place.

Van Helsing shook his head. “No, I’ll get him this time.” And with his last word still in the arm, the doctor twisted and shape-shifted into a dark, winged shape. With a mighty gust of leathern membrane, the man-bat took to the air.

Damian huffed and puffed as he ran until suddenly he crashed into something. Wiping his face, the little boy looked up into a dark form turning into a pillar of mist and then into a man – the lean man with the burning eyes.

“Young man,” he whispered, leaning in, his fangs glinted in the moonlight, “We have things to discuss.”

Damian’s face twisted as tears flowed again and he held his face sobbing. The necklace below his face throbbed and simmered. Its emerald coloring the only illumination in this world of black and white.

“Where am I? I want to go home!”

Damian huddled around a fire. It crackled in what seemed like an endless night. The burning embers died as they reached up into swallowing darkness. A blanket shrouded the boy’s shoulders. It was gray. Or possibly bright red if there was any color in this wasteland.

Standing next to the flames was the tall, chalk white man. Crouched by the fire pit was the hunchback. He bobbed as the kindling crackled in the light.

“At least you have stopped screaming,” began the tall man. “This world is called Sanctuary. We once called it Earth. Our Earth, not that different from yours, Damian Malachi. Except your world is thriving, alive. Ours ---“ The immortal man waved his arm back and the boy looked – everything was seemingly gray, some areas only showing vitality with black and white. The ground was like sift less sand more so than dirt – nearly ash and soot. Buildings seemed to lean rather than stand straight and trees were leafless and twisted.

The sky was dark and where there should have been a sun there was only a moon – large and looming. It knew this world while Damian Malachi did not.

“Who --- who are you?”

The taller man sighed. He shook his head and the glasses on his nose reflected softly the bright penlights he had for eyes. “We have been over this before but we will do so again. My name was...is Abraham. Abraham Van Helsing.”

“He is the Doctor...” said the shorter, hunched man.

Abraham sighed. “I was once a doctor. This is Igor, my assistant”

The hunchback bowed as gracefully as he could. A large bible was held close in an arm that was smaller and more twisted than the other. As the shorter man stood as well as he could, there was a third figure.

A giant in size, some ten feet tall; it lumbered from the night just beyond the fire’s light. It never moved without the cloak that covered it.

“That is Carradine,” Van Helsing added.

“Carradine,” the massive man echoed. There was something childlike, obedient about the goliath; something servile in the voice.

The doctor focused solemnly on the Malachi boy.

“Sometime during the 1880s and thru the 1950s, monsters rose and waged war on mankind. Some of humanity fled and some stayed to fight. But in the end, the things from myths and horror won. Our world paid the price – the very life of the places and people tainted by the undead and the accursed became victims to their presence. Whole continents lost their vitality. Eventually everything fell and only we, the creatures of nightmares remained.”

Malachi frowned up slightly. “Are you crazy?”

Van Helsing nodded grimly and his mouth parted. His sharpened teeth glinted in the moonlight and the fire’s flicker. “We have been for quite some time. Our whole world has lost its mind.”

“I want to go! This is a bad dream!” The pendant on the boy’s necklace danced with his sudden irritation. It flickered and pulsated. At closer inspection, it was almost a perfect oval shape of metal. It had ridges that were partially hidden, the metal folded in around itself. In the middle of the oval, was a green crystal. And Damian had looked at it every night before he faded off to sleep. And moments like this, when he sobbed aloud.

Igor moved in towards the weeping child, Damian almost pulled back. The hunchback put his hands up in reassurance and he resettled the blanket on the boy’s shoulders. Igor patted Damian on the shoulders softly.

“This is a nightmare, Mr. Malachi,” Van Helsing stated, “The world is split into several types of creatures – The Lupos, shape-shifters cursed by the werewolf’s bite; the Icthys, long thought extinct amphibious dwellers of the waters; the Bolted, patch worked from cadavers and reawakened by lightning; the Dusted, mummified followers of the awakened Egyptian king and lastly, the Nosferatu, bitten and dead but still walking and thirsting for blood.”

“What about the others, Doctor?”

“Yes, yes, you are correct Igor. After this realm became accursed, many foul and vile presences came to roost. There are the giant ants that plague desert regions. You have met the gargantuan spider that hunts near the Lugosian Gate. There are also the underground Sub-Terroreans, the murderous Space Men who orbit the skies and the Phantom, but no one has seen him in centuries.”

Carradine stood a giant. Silent. Hooded. Hidden.

“Avoid the waters,” the doctor additionally instructed, “Some of them are deceiving and will dissolve you before you know you are being eaten.”

Tears welled up in Malachi's eyes. He buried his face in his folded arms. He fondled the newfound necklace that had joined him as he flew through the air and green glass to arrive in this land. "Why am I here?"

The vampire looked up at the large moon. "There is a woman you must meet. She believes that you will save our world...and yours. Until then, the portal which led you here is closed. Until then, you cannot return home."

Damian frowned, his sorrow now turned to anger, to rage. "What??? I'm a nine year old boy!"

Van Helsing spoke. He tried not to show the elongated canines in his mouth. "Not for long."

###

Time had passed since the human boy's arrival. He had done what no adult could have - accepted and adapted to a world of monsters. The doctor and the hunchback would train him. Van Helsing's walking stick would tap and Malachi would do pull-ups or somersaults. The cane would strike the ground and Malachi would run sprints over and over or lift rocks from pile to pile.

Day in and day out. There was the double-tap of Van Helsing's cane and Damian would run. The cane would tap twice, Damian would jump. He would learn to move, live and push his body in ways no child of a civilized world ever would need to.

But Sanctuary was a world where civilization fell long ago.

When Malachi wasn't learning physical lessons, he was taught those of the mind and the soul. He read massive books and learned lessons as if still in school, as if still at home. Igor, despite the appearance of a diminished mind, was quite brilliant. He taught lessons of mathematics and science, literature and writing.

While other children were in schools and on playgrounds, Damian Malachi wrote with chalk on cave walls or on paper in burned out houses. He ran and jumped over ravines and spiked traps.

Damian accepted, adapted and adjusted. But, for far

too many nights, just before drifting off to sleep, the Malachi boy would find his tears for his parents, his home and his world.

Unbeknownst to him, the Doctor, with his supernatural senses, would listen to his young charge weep.

And the necklace would burn bright with the boy's sorrow.

###

Time had passed. With the moon always being present, it was easy to forget how many days had slipped behind. Nearest he could recall, Damian had been trapped in the black and white world of monsters for over a year at least.

"Where are we?" Damian, Van Helsing, Igor and Carradine stood at the outskirts of a small settlement. There were tents and places where fires looked like they once burned high. There were wagons and mounds of hay. But there were no people. No sounds of adults talking or children laughing. No whinny of horses or music from the instruments laying in the grass. There was one lone wagon where light, small and flickering, showed through the glass windows.

"We are here for you to meet the woman who sent for you."

Before long, Damian found himself shuttled off towards the wagon. He looked around and the training he learned in tracking kicked in. There were no clear footprints by the door, only signs of an old battle. Sporadically, however, there were markings he recognized from the doctor's lessons – paw prints. Big ones.

Before long, Damian was now inside the wagon. The door closed behind him and he was sitting on a little wooden stool. A short table was in front of him and an old, very old woman was perched on the other side. She looked wooden. She looked dead. Still as if ready for the grave.

"Hi?" squeaked out Damian.

The Gypsy sat silent. The boy sat in the small room with the old woman. Her home was like a shop. Made of wood and aged scents unmistakable but indescribable, the little hovel was barely lit by the candles around the woman's chair. Tokens of odd creation hung from the walls - feathered dream-catchers, talismans with claws, glass eyes staring from their forever death. These things and more kept Damian Malachi company.

Malachi sat a little longer. The old gypsy did not move.

He narrowed one eye, squinting his look at her. Nothing.

Damian pulled back, squatting on the little stool where he sat. He got bored, tired and his nine-year-oldness reared its little head. He stuck his fingers in his ears and waved at the still woman. He stuck his tongue out and rolled back his eyes.

When he looked at the old gypsy, with his tongue out and foolish face, she was now looking back at him.

He slowly slid his hands back down to his side. If his mother or father were there, they would have had his hide.

The Gypsy might be them to it.

“This is him.” Her voice was aged. Cracked. Like something from centuries ago and forgotten twice as long. Damian leaned back from the scary voice of the collection of wrinkles, bandana and bangle jewelry.

“It is,” said Van Helsing who was now behind the boy.

“Doc?” Damian whispered. “Who is she?”

The undead man smiled. His fangs showed slightly. “Damian Malachi, this is the Gypsy. She is the elder of this village.” The boy turned and the old woman nodded slightly and slowly in either greeting or acknowledgement.

“Sit, boy,” she said, commanded, croaked like an old frog. She reached out to him and there was a chocolate bar in her hand. Malachi dove for it, finding it as delicious as anything he had eaten back home. Home – he thought – wherever that was.

“It began with the Lord of the Nosferatu - Dracula,” and with that, The Gypsy began a tale. “The English tried but they could not stop him. The sky had cracked with a falling star of green death, it lodged itself in the vampire. This was a shard of the Walestone – an item of great power, same as that around your neck. Dracula rose and took his revenge. Those who tried to stop him felt his wrath.”

Van Helsing’s head lowered. A dark tear fell from his eye.

“Then as the Count’s evil spread, the scientist’s revived creation rampaged once again. Soon, the Werewolf ran through my land. He spread slaughter and his woe throughout the gypsies and others who once called this place home.”

“The Fish-man survived the fire and steel used to kill him. He plunged into his murky depths and returned with all of his peoples. The land lost its modern life and descended back into times long lost.”

The young boy unconsciously held himself and trembled slightly. It was part the chill in these abandoned woods and the small wagon. Pots and pans hung around Damian, each covered in a layer of dust. As the Gypsy told the tale of the world’s demise, these abandoned cooking tools were like objects of the old ways and life lost long ago.

“Finally, the long dead Egyptian returned from beyond the grasp of his gods. He defied those who rose to stop him; he stole a vessel for his resurrected queen and spread his biblical plagues throughout the lands.”

Van Helsing reflexively tapped his cane. Damian snapped his attention towards his mentor. Also another reflex from untold nights of training under the rhythm of the doctor’s walking stick. “After the Five connected and began to wield the power of the Walestone, it was not long after that they built armies. Victims of their curses fell in line and attacked. Towns fell and soon after, cities. By the time the civilized world and its leaders caught wind, it was too late. Ignorance and doubt had to be beaten before oak stakes and silver bullets would be passed out to soldiers on the battlefield. Soon, the world fell.”

“Did everyone...die?” Damian’s voice broke and he cleared his voice mid-sentence.

“We saved who we could,” Van Helsing continued, “With the stone’s arrival, portals of travel came alive. With the mind of a great scientist, we manipulated the portals to other places, other worlds. Some stayed to fight the evil, to buy time while the surviving populations ran. The Five are bound to this place. Though they yearn to, Dracula and his cabal cannot use the portals to leave...yet.”

Malachi wiped his eyes. “...like me...” he said. The Gypsy woman gave him a wrinkled look.

“These are the monsters that you played with in your world, in your room at night. These are toys and books to you. Here - these are horrors, these are murderers to us.”

Damian was on the verge of full tears. “I don’t want monsters anymore!” And he hopped off the stool and ran outside.

###

Malachi had tired from his outburst. He now walked to the edge of the abandoned camp. Igor led him towards some of the toys that resided in the dirt. Their owners were long gone and the lifeless soot of Sanctuary had settled on them decades over. Van Helsing watched the boy and the deformed lab assistant. The flickering candlelight of the gypsy woman's home gave a veil of shadow to the undead man's eyes.

"Your burdens are heavier than usual, Abraham," the old woman began.

Van Helsing sighed. He often forgot he no longer breathed and needed to suck in the night's air to make noise. His clawed hands rubbed the top of the cane – its crown was some type of black onyx. In life, it had been a nervous reflex of intense thought when he taught university or hunted the undead. In his unlife, the doctor did the same thing for the same reason. "This whole thing...this prophecy...the things we have had to do! The things we have allowed to happen! Even if he survives the test, the power Damian will get...he will be cursed ---!"

"Gifted," interjected The Gypsy, "He will have more abilities at his fingertips than any of THEM put together! He will return this world ---"

"NO!!" Van Helsing roared, his eyes burned and the night swirled in response to his anger, "Do not make this sound as if we are doing this child a favor! And this was never about revitalizing our home....this whole idea is about REVENGE."

The Gypsy was silent for a moment. "You have lost your perspective, immortal," she replied. "You have spent too much time with the boy. He is needed."

"Exactly," Abraham hissed, his fangs bared and the walking stick clutched. "He-is-a-boy."

A howl came out from the woods around the camp. The moon, as in all of Sanctuary, looked fuller than ever. The Gypsy's eyes were now aglow with lupine striations pulling from the pupil.

"Not for long," she answered. And her head fell back and the old woman howled in response to the night's call.

Van Helsing returned to watching Damian.

“Where are we?”

Days perhaps weeks had passed since the meeting with the Gypsy. And Damian’s rigorous training had continued, night in and night out. Now the trio stood in a clearing surrounded by tall trees waving their angry leaves in the Sanctuary wind. The grass was flat, nearly stamped out. Around the trees was a row of tall bushes and all of it was cast in unnerving darkness. More so than anywhere else in this long dead world.

“Wait here. Igor and I will circle around and find out what’s following us. Stay here, Damian. You’ll...be fine.” With that, the Doctor and the Hunchback were gone.

Malachi stood in the dark clearing. Blackness was around him in thickness so great he could not see past the trees.

The woods moved. The shadows came alive. Ten year old Damian Malachi stood surrounded. These were the creatures from his parents’ television. These were the things from his toy collection and posters up on walls. These were monsters and unlike those on his dresser and toy chest; these were real.

“D-d-doctor?” There was nothing that came back. No answer back from the Dutchman.

“Igor?” Equal silence returned his call. But there were sounds - just not those of would-be saviors.

There was a growling growling to his left. Damian turned and saw two wolf-like creatures crouched over and moving with massive limbs and claws. They were taking their time approaching; moonlight set fires in their bright lupine eyes.

There was a hissing sound to his right. Malachi turned to see two pale, red-eyed things, a man and a woman. They bared clenched teeth at the boy and he saw long fangs shine with wetness. They reached out to him with sharp fingers. The two were floating towards him and his throat. Damian felt something hit him. Yet it was not the night’s denizens surrounding him. It was something else. Something altogether different. This blow was not from his right or left but from inside.

In a far off pyramid, a sarcophagus slid open.

A king was waking.

Malachi fell to his knees. The blow was like a massive fist, a giant punch from within his body. Instead of one strike, it repeated. Again and again like a drum - his heart was crashing against his ribs. His lungs were swelling and pushing out all the air around him.

*Under a full moon, a forest exploded.
A feral force of primal power howled to life.*

Damian's skin tingled and then burned with an unknown crawling like a thousand bites pulling on his flesh.

*In an isolated castle, lightning crackled and struck a tower.
A scientist's nightmare was coming to life.*

He looked down through the pain. His eyes felt as if they were pushing out from his skull and with the fading light in his vision, he saw the necklace on his chest change. The chained item he gained crashing through some jewel in the sky, the small metal and green crystalline talisman he could not get rid of - opened. Light danced inside of it and exploded. Damian tried to cover his eyes but his body would not respond.

*In an exotic swamp, water bubbled and erupted in a geyser.
An ancient beast returned from fossilized dreams.*

Then it was over. Malachi felt no more discomfort. He rose up from the ground and saw the werewolves and the vampires do something he could not imagine - they took a step back. The boy's body, as he knew it, was gone. He looked down with new eyes and a vision that was layered in multiple phases of perception. His ears gave him every sound of Sanctuary's night. His hands were now large and paw-like. Fur covered his body save for where it was shrouded in the wrappings of old bandage and a tight black body-suit. The necklace was gone and a gold bat-like emblem protruded from his chest.

With his new clawed hands, Damian felt his face. He had a large head with pointed ears, a mane of fine fur and a snout. His nose elongated to a point and consisted of two skeletal slits. Malachi's eyes set back in his face - and they burned with green power – emerald, like the only color in Sanctuary, green like that of the necklace.

“---what?” And the voice was not Damian's pre-pubescent pitch. It was deeper, doubled and had an echo to it that rumbled.

The werewolves leapt at him and instinct kicked in. The boy-turned-monster spun out of their attack. He was a blur in movement. With massive claws, he reached and caught the creatures in mid-leap and hurled them against nearby trees. They howled out as the trees broke in their impact. The two lupine creatures did not return. The remaining other one looked at what used to be a boy and then scampered off.

The vampires hissed and billowed up towards Malachi-not-Malachi in a furious row of smoke and flap of bat wings. Damian himself spun into a pillar of dark mist and hurtled into the approaching night-children. The meeting was explosive and the wolf-bat-bone creature Damian had become solidified in victory. He returned to form in spinning motion and threw both vampires into the far off distance of the woody shadows.

The entity that had taken the place of Damian's body fell to its knees. It panted, it breathed and it exhaled slowly. With the last breath, the massive form returned to that of the young boy.

“Doctor,” came a familiar voice from the side, “It is HIM!” Damian wiped sweat from his brow. His body ached as he turned to see Igor standing next to Van Helsing. The doctor's burning eyes were wide open. His mouth slightly agape.

“My God...” whispered the Dutchman, “It is him.”

Malachi looked at his mentors. He suddenly frowned.

“You left me here!”

Damian leapt and he transformed again. When he landed, the massive beast he had become had returned. This time, it held both the doctor and the hunchback by the throat and several feet off the ground.

“D-Damian...lis---listen to me---!” The words struggled out as Van Helsing's throat was being crushed by the young boy in his newfound form. There was fury in his amber eyes. His jaws whined with the clenching of fangs and maw together.

Igor was doing his best to pull the doctor loose but to no avail. “Master Damian!” the hunchback pleaded. “No! No! Vengeance is mine sayeth the Lord!”

“YOU LEFT ME,” the monster formerly known as Damian Malachi growled. His claws were digging into the doctor. Sooner than later, Van Helsing would die again.

“You---you---leave me---no choice---Sorry, D--D--Dam---” With his apology still fresh in the air, the Dutchman flicked a sharp nail across one of his fingers and smacked the lupine face of Malachi’s transformed body.

Damian dropped Abraham Van Helsing. It was more from shock than from the slap. Malachi flicked Igor off to the side.

“You slapped me?” The creature rumbled, “You almost got me killed and now you-slap-me?” Mighty paws slammed into the ground as Malachi stormed his way over to the undead doctor.

“There was no other way, Damian,” Van Helsing huffed, holding his throat. “For our kind and anyone with our traits, the blood is the life...it is also...the past.” Abraham held up his hand and showed Damian the slit where he had cut himself. His palm oozed blood - the same crimson liquid that ran down the snout of Malachi and into his mouth. The slap was a delivery. The blood - information.

“Learn, Damian,” Van Helsing whispered as the monster before him blinked and staggered. It fell to its knees.

“Ungh....” Malachi groaned, holding his head, closing his eyes. “What did---you---what did you do to me? What’s happening?”

Van Helsing sighed. He approached the struggling Malachi, slowly. But he still approached. He placed a hand on the trembling massive back.

“You’re learning.”

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