

Star

By

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She stood staring at the faint green of pre-dawn glow, her back to the restored grave. A great yearning griped her heart for the sunrise, while her body trembled with dread. She could not remember her name. An acrid flavor rose in her throat from the russet turmoil in her gut. She remembered the blood – the feasting on the blood in the lumpish body. Why had she done that? Why was she not dead? Why was she dead?

She remembered a cold night on a road by a stream. Her heart was broken, her love abandoned. Sounds of a carriage receding into black rejection faded away into the darkness. A pale, round, face swam up from the chill blackness of the river to hover beside the road. Watery, blue eyes gazed with pathos. “Estela,” the little man called. That was her name. He felt her despair. Without another word, he commiserated her abandonment. He was so short, so slight – not a hair on his shining crown – and yet he drew her to him, arms spread wide to embrace her. “Beware the Peddler Curtiss!” the gypsy woman had warned her days before, but she felt no threat from the little man, only comfort, until his arms cinched tight about her waist and his teeth sank into her vein. Together, they floated above the river, until he dropped her drained to the bitter water below.

She should have died in the water, died in the box, but here she stood. Cursed she was, most certainly cursed from all humankind, and she was not human. No, nothing animate or vital dwelt within the husk that moved at her command. - no warmth, no pulse, no breath, no hope. Hope? Hope for what? Salvation?

Something moved in the moonlit hedge that bordered the church yard she had blankly been staring into. A twisted, stunted, sapling tree swayed without wind, then began to separate from its neighbors of the hedge. The snag became a man, or at least the suggestion of a man, as it shambled out into the cemetery. "Salvation is a road you will never travel," the Black Stick declared. Estela fell to her knees. Despair was watery blues eyes suspended over a black river. It was a hunger, not a sympathy. It was the infliction of damnation. The Black Stick rumbled a laugh like stones rolling into a well. "Beware the Peddler! He sells you membership to the Forsaken." he hissed.

She wanted to crawl back into the grave, the coffin, and wait for the comfort of death.

"You are Nosferatu, the undead. No comfort may hold you," groaned the voice above her, closer now.

Estela looked up to find the Black Stick leaning over her. He was a shriveled husk of a man in ancient black cloth.

"Curse you, you are so pretty!" he snarled and spat to the ground at her side. "So much lifelike still, you fresh ones. So many memories return!" He slapped her aside two lengths of her body with a mere flinch of his black stick arm.

She coughed up the brown blood in the cold grass where she landed.

"*Do not waste it!*" he shrieked. "You will need it to stay strong and serve me. There will *never* be enough!"

Estela tried to crawl away on the cold grass. The Black Stick gestured with his hand a sign to flatten and she slammed prostrate into the dew. He looked toward the East and growled low. "The Sun comes. We must take shelter. I will call your Maker to guide you."

“Leave me to the Sun,” Estela sobbed, “Though it terrifies me somehow.”

In two strides, the Stick stood beside her, snatched her up by the golden locks, and twisted her face to the Moon. “There! Reflected in the Moon! The only sunlight that you may ever see again. Gaze there and despair.”

“Where are the stars? I do not see any stars,” she babbled.

He clutched her head so hard in his iron fingers she was sure her skull would burst. “Stars! You bring back the vision of stars to me, you cursed little slut! Of course there are no stars! Only the ghost of the Sun on the face of the Moon, are we allowed. *None*, other than the dream of what we are denied forever, shall we see again.” He dropped her to the ground. “*Stars*, you stab me with the memory of stars.”

A voice spoke low from the high north side of the church yard, “I am here, Cudgel.”

“Hurry Peddler, take this hideous worm from me and hide it from the light before I crush it out, pretty as it is. She will bring me many victims before her beauty fades.” The little, bald man stepped up to the crumpled woman and helped her to her feet. He turned her face so that he might look at her straight on with his watery eyes. Pressing a finger to his lips, he turned to lead her away. “Wait!” the Black Stick commanded. The woman Estela is gone. You must have a new name because you are something new. I name you Star, so that every time I meet you again I will despise you afresh for the memory you returned to me. Star you shall be. Get her away Curtiss.” With that pronouncement, the Stick reduced to a tiny, black dot, wavering in the lightning sky, and then fluttered off toward the darkest part of the retreating night.

“His name is Cudgel – not Black Stick. You will feel his thoughts more clearly as time passes. They will rip like a claw,” Curtiss explained as he led Star up the slope of the

churchyard toward the northwest. “Hurry!” he urged, dragging her up the rise and over the little ridge into remaining gloom of the night.

This side of the hill remained in shadow, although the sky brightened rapidly above them. Unfamiliar fear rode on Star’s shoulders to hurry her along to wherever sanctuary might be. They stopped at the base of a large beech tree and circled to the other side of its nine foot girth. A ‘V’ shaped cavern opened at its roots.

“You shall rest in there. The tree is hollow,” he directed. He laughed bitterly. “I wouldn’t call it rest though. ‘Rest’ is another word you will lose understanding of. ‘Waiting’ is closer to the wretched condition you will endure while you hide from the Sun. You have fed tonight, so you may not suffer so badly during your first confinement, if you haven’t puked all of that lovely blood out onto the ground foolishly. You’ll learn to keep you mouth closed, no matter how hard he strikes you. That big fellow you drained was *bloated* with blood! I could barely remain in the forest, the urge was so strong to come and snatch him away from you. I should have taken the other one, but the Cudgel wanted him gone.”

She stooped down to peer into the little cavern. “There isn’t room,” she whined.

Curtiss grabbed her by the back of the neck with an astounding strength that she remembered from the river. Shoving her face toward the hole, he commanded, “In, you little bitch! The Sun comes for me too. I haven’t any time for your foolishness.”

She could feel his mind driving his thoughts into her head like nails. Star collapsed onto her belly and her hands clawed into the opening at *his* will. They dragged her upward like a grub worming its way into the crevasse between the rotted wood. Her flesh

became malleable to the contours of the irregular cavity in the beech. Malleable was far from comfortable.

“Stay there until I call you,” Curtiss thought to her rather than spoke. With that final command, he hurried away across the dark, wooded, ravine to a hickory with a similar cavity, located halfway up the opposite slope. He too wriggled inside, just as the glow of the Sun struck gold to the uppermost limbs of the hickory’s crown.