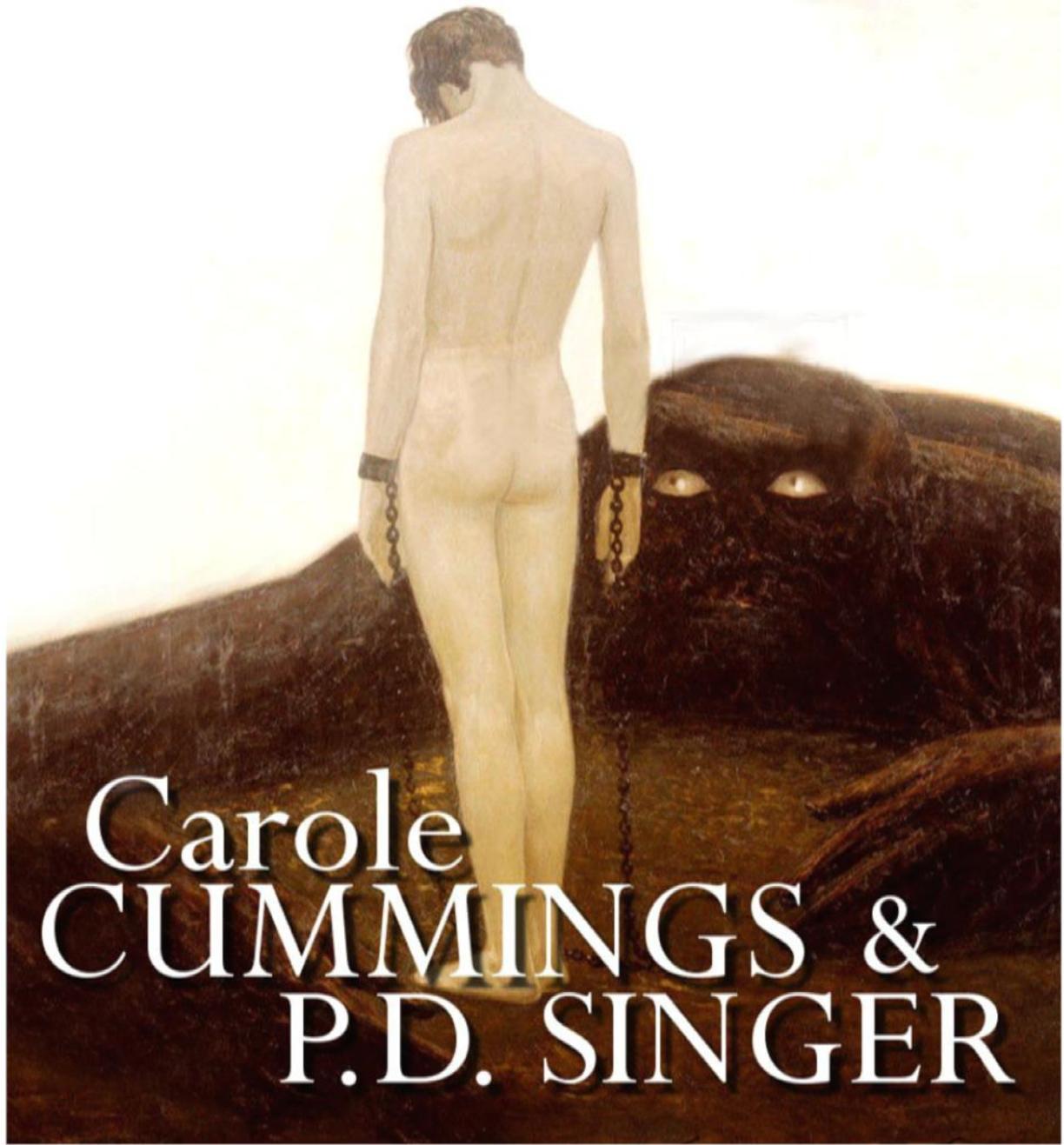


Crepuscule MONSTRUM



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Michael

Cold. He hadn't expected it to be so cold.

The wind was still but the air rimy, heavy in his chest, on his shoulders. The sun hid behind a stratum of silver-gray, its light like old metal and just as cold against his skin. He could almost taste it on his tongue—bitter and sour, with a hard tang that settled behind his teeth and slithered down his backbone.

Or maybe that was just fear.

Merrick wanted to shiver, but didn't want to have to hear the discordant chitter of black iron that would remind him that he was no initiate here, no volunteer walking willingly into the jaws of Fate. He'd fought the chains like a feral beast.

Prisoner.

Sacrifice.

Tithe.

Even his kin had cast their tiles against him when his name had been called from the deeping Stygian hollows of the mountain. *Better to lose a useless third son, his father had told him coldly, than to suffer the wrath of Crepuscule.*

That last had been hushed. Even Merrick's bold, swart father was afraid to say the name too loudly.

A subtle rumble settled beneath Merrick's bare feet, wending up to his gut before he realized it came from around him. No; beneath him. Not inside him. Not of him. Not panicked imagination, and not too-real nightmare.

Writhing, almost. A worming crawl. Small rocks and debris slid loose and grazed the tor with tiny little clacks and rattles. The sound of approaching terror, slouch-slithering toward him on its belly, bringing with it every fear and dread-filled conjecture that had flittered through Merrick's mind since they'd clapped the irons around his wrists and dragged him up the mountain's flank.

Torment.

Violation.

And then, when he was all used up, broken or perhaps even dead—*Please, let me die first*—then, perhaps....

Merrick couldn't even think the words, let alone force them from his spitless mouth: *Please, don't let it eat me.*

Snacking on his limbs, crunching on his bones.... Could there be a worse fate?

Yes, his mind supplied, tooth-jarring panic in his own tremulous voice. *You could still be alive when it takes the first bite.*

And that only after thousands of other horrors for which Merrick had no name, no capacity to fathom.

He couldn't help the shudder this time, and the disharmony of the chains was like biting metal. His skin prickled cold, a knot of profound fear settling too tight in his belly.

His back was straight and his shoulders jutted at a proud angle as he watched the long, talon-like fingers crest the crag at his feet, but he could not straighten his neck from its shameful bend. He watched out of the corner of his eye; to look away was both desperate want and anathema.

Black and *dark*—ill-matched words for the complete void of light that drooped its way toward him. *Pitch*, perhaps. *Sunless*. *Lightless*. Merrick had not the words to put a name to it. Only 'Crepuscule' and now he supposed he knew why the monstrosity had been named so.

The lamps of its eyes blinked bilious yellow, dragging over Merrick's skin like a crawling march of vile insects, lingering for so long that Merrick could swear the stare had a physical weight.

Oh God.

Lust.

Merrick's mind caromed out into shocked imaginings, already feeling the touch, his body reacting in ways that made him judder, fingers flexing and wrists twisting inside their bits of iron. Traitorous, incongruous... oh God—was this arousal?

Was he a monster too?

Its maw was nearly shapeless, smaller than Merrick had thought, but he didn't doubt it could stretch, widen, *gape* to accommodate its chosen meals, and the flashing hint of wicked teeth only ramped up his dread. It smacked its awful lips, pulled them into a horrible twist of a smile, and then....

Wait.

Did it just... *chuckle*?

Merrick blinked, cut his glance more firmly sideways, but its smile curled into a stomach-turning grin, so he shut his eyes tight.

“Um,” it said, voice jagged against Merrick’s skin, shattering over him like broken glass. “Mikey? I’m sorry, I forgot my line.”

Merrick’s eyes clamped tighter, hands fisting. Goddamnit.

Deep breath.

“My name isn’t Mikey.”

“Right, Merrick, sorry.” A pause, a shift, then: “And what’s mine again?”

Bloody goddamn rotten stupid—

Unbelievable. A hundred bucks on eBay right down the drain.

Merr— Oh, what was the point?

Michael’s shoulders slumped, and he opened his eyes. No great, dark beast, but a wide, muscular frame that pulled a slant of shadows from the dim light and bent it to every curve and contour; no awful yellow eyes that pored over him with lust and intent, but hazel-blue, blinking at him with sincere chagrin. At least it *looked* sincere.

Michael sighed. “Crepuscule.”

“Crepuscule, yeah.” A nod. “Did you tell me what that means?”

“It means ‘twilight’, Jake.” Michael wormed his hands out of the cuffs with something he suspected was a pout. It *should* be a pout. He *deserved* to pout, damn it. He’d worked *so hard* to set the mood. “Crepuscule Monstrum”. As in ‘twilight monster’.”

Jake blinked up at him from his crouch on the floor. “Isn’t that Latin?”

“Yeah, so?”

“Well....” Jake tilted his head. “The painting.... *Gefühl Der Abhängigkeit* — that’s German. So was the artist. If we’re doing that painting, shouldn’t we be doing something....” He shrugged. “...I dunno, German?”

A technicality? Really? *Now?* Michael could’ve clocked him.

“The painting’s freaky,” he snapped, really irritated now, and *so* not in the mood anymore. He threw the cuffs at Jake, hard enough to hurt, but Jake just ducked out of their trajectory. Fucker. “*You’re* the one who wanted to role-play,” Michael barked as he

snapped up a robe and stomped to the bedroom door, “If you’re not going to take it seriously, I’m not buying you another print of *anything*, ever again.”

“Mikey—”

“Save it,” Michael growled as he headed down the hall and to the living room and the TV, now that his planned entertainment had fallen through. Thank God for Jon Stewart. “A hundred bucks on eBay,” he muttered and clicked the remote. “Happy fucking birthday, Jake. Dumbass.”

Jake

Stealing a glance at the print Michael had bought him for his birthday, Jake wondered again what made the crouching monster's expression so dopey. Maybe it was trying to remember what it was supposed to do next, much the way he was.

He'd left his script in the bedroom. Michael's lips were moving without sound—he had to be telling himself the story as he'd spun it out for the two of them to role-play. Knowing him, it had a lot more text than what he'd written down for Jake. Standing there naked and half erect, Michael—no, he had a game-name, what was it?—with his cuffs and chains, looked a great deal more like his counterpart in the print than Jake did. He was trying to look like a flattened chocolate cake with claws, really he was, but how scary was that?

Terrifying, apparently, because Michael swallowed convulsively and swayed in place. Jake was supposed to do something about now... No, the monster was—he had a game-name too, and it would not stick in his mind, although the stupid variants sure did, and those didn't inspire much fear. It probably wasn't time yet, but he growled experimentally. Okay, that worked; Michael's cock filled a little more, rising a little farther into the slightly chill air. His lover was really getting off on this whole “sacrifice to the monster” scenario, testing his bonds, fighting invisible handlers who'd shoved him into the desolate lair, and at last standing with his head bowed, waiting for his gruesome fate.

Right, Jake was supposed to provide the gruesome fate. Except it wouldn't be so gruesome after all, aside from any stains they might leave but... He had to chuckle, and now he was really out of his role. He needed some help. “Um, Mikey? I'm sorry, I forgot my line.”

Wrong, oh wrong, he should have just punted and hoped he could follow along with whatever was going on in Michael's head, because this cave had to be on a

mountain-top the way things went downhill so fast. One minute he was growling and watching Michael get aroused, the next minute he was dodging projectiles and watching all prospects of a good time flounce down the hall.

Jake retrieved the cuffs from halfway under the bed. Yes, he was the one who wanted to role-play, but Michael always made things so damned *complicated*. Jake would have been fine with “buy a ‘stranger’ a latte” or “dance with a ‘stranger’ at the club.” The print was separate, just something he’d liked looking at. How was he supposed to remember an entire mythology and names in Latin that he didn’t understand when all the blood in his brain had rushed straight south when Michael, okay, *Merrick*, was standing there waiting to be eaten?

Jake couldn’t deny that Michael’s aura of submission was erotic. If he hadn’t gone and muffed his dialog, he’d have *Merrick* down on the floor already, to sniff, to lick, perchance to bite... Dang, he had remembered more of his lines than he’d thought. Looking once more at the cuffs in his hand, the three yards of chain dribbling to the carpet, he wondered if Michael could be persuaded to remember too.

He’d never had to study for sex before, and every time he’d looked at the script, his mind had slipped over the strange words. Thinking of himself as *Crepuscule*, with or without *Monstrum*, had turned it to Creepy, which made him laugh, or Crappy, which had offended him. And any more complicated lines? Forget it. This was *his* fantasy—why was he doing the equivalent of summer stock with a hard-on?

Yappy TV voices penetrated the closed door between them. Fuck that.

His birthday, his fantasy, and Jake would damned well revise his lines to something he could remember while buried balls-deep in his lover. His sacrifice. His prey.

Slamming through the door, Jake rewrote himself to Michael’s vision, but not, this time, from Michael’s point of view.

Stalking down the hallway made Michael jump against the cushions, and his mouth opened in silent protest when Jake drove one hand, fingers splayed into two claws, against the television’s off button. Not troubling to look at the dying screen, Jake showed his teeth, neither knowing nor caring if Michael/Merrick could see anything beyond his bulk against the fading light. Wasn’t that what he’d wanted: the darkness and the fear?

Rippling toward the couch—*Rrrrr*, as Jake had translated his name into the language spoken by that which men had dubbed *Crepuscule*, did nothing so mundane as to walk—let him watch his victim shrink against the armrest, eyes narrowed in... Good. Those eyes should be wide with fear or closed in resignation. Trapping one of Merrick’s fugitive hands against the upholstery, he *snicked* the cuff closed. Foolish humans, he’d have a word with them about securing next year’s offering. Perhaps by eating one of the priests.

“Jake, what are you doing?” Michael demanded, but the puling of men meant nothing to *him*. He reached for *Merrick’s* other hand, first diving for the escapee and then leaning his weight on Merrick’s chest with one knee to capture it with another *snick*. Two quick bights of chain around the end table trapped his prey to be tasted at leisure.

“Jake!” his prey gasped, but what silly words humans used. *He* had no use for them, nor for this foolish source of light, so unnecessary for one with his great yellow lanterns of eyes. Yes, that had been in the script, but the flash of pride in remembering was quickly lost in the lush male scent of his prey’s skin and the banishment of electricity. He inhaled deeply through his nose.

He let “*Rrrr*” trickle from his throat, the only sign he would give to tell this bound delicacy who or what it was that had taken him. “*Rrrr*,” he repeated, this time into the soft skin at Merrick’s neck, that so-thin covering that kept the red life contained until, or unless, he, Cra—, no, Cre—, no, *Rrrr* chose to let it out. Merrick swallowed hard, his Adam’s apple dancing against his captor’s lips, but bravely did not shrink away.

“*Rrrr*” meant “you’re a valiant one” this time, but he said nothing more, for his tongue darted out to sample the fear, mixed with so many other things. Salt, sweat, a bit of lust, which he chose to examine with his carefully clawed hands, drawing Merrick’s erect cock through the single gap he’d created, then wrapping his talons carefully around the prize. Biting down into the ridge of muscle of Merrick’s side would keep him from thinking he’d be let off with nuzzles—the small yip was most satisfactory.

His prey was quiet now—only the harsh rasp of air going in and out demonstrated that the sacrifice had not already died of fright. Nibbling, licking, now and then biting, for the wall of muscle defining Merrick’s beautiful belly would not keep out fangs, he still did not rend. The life he needed pointed out at him from Merrick’s groin.

Sliding lower, he breathed against Merrick's cock, the stiffness against his palm proving Merrick had rejoined him in the rite. A flick of the tongue against the first salt droplets that were his by right and custom brought a small whimper from behind him in the dark, but no matter, for he would enjoy what was his to take.

Mindful of the fangs, he slid his mouth over his prey's stiff cock, letting his tongue dance and slide. The restraints holding Merrick's hands above his head did not keep his hips still—he bucked and thrust into the place he'd feared to enter, and it was not fright that made him cry out when he spurted his sacrifice.

“*Rrrr*,” the dark monster repeated, asserting his mastery and his satisfaction, and “*rrr*” again with every nip against sweet flesh and with every thrust of his pelvis against the one who would never resist him again. One *rrr* for jamming himself against Merrick's firm thigh and another for scraping against the wiry hairs on his belly, and then “*ahhh*” for coming upward far enough to plunge into the warm cavern of Merrick's mouth.

His claws entwined in Merrick's fingers, he pumped between the heated lips that did not utter ‘*nay*’ but instead said, ‘*yes, oh yes*’ with every wet stroke. There in the darkness that was their grotto he completed the rite, the guttural cry erupting from deep within even as his seed poured down Merrick's throat.

Slowly he recovered, remembering that once he was Jake, and would be again. As Jake he thought to unclip the cuffs, rubbing Merrick's wrists and bestowing kisses to make up for the fear. It was as the monster that he slid one muscular arm under Merrick's knees to carry him deeper into the cavern where the bed waited. Sliding beneath the covers, he turned his lover to spoon into the curve of his body. Merrick would be Michael again in the morning, but not now, with his arms folded to his chest and his wrists captured in strong hands in lieu of metal cuffs.

“So you liked that after—” Michael started to say, but was cut off with an “*Rrrrr*,” and a tiny reach of lips to the soft skin behind the exposed shell of ear.

“*Rrrr*,” he said again, and that was all he would say until the sun returned to chase the crepuscular shadows away.

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