

# BreWd

A Nocturnal Creatures Short  
Story

Korbyn Blake

"EERILY DARK- A MUST READ" -MORGAN LYRE

Charles life had become an endless loop of monotony. He couldn't help such thoughts, even as his expensive leather shoes trudged over another vent grate along Lexington Avenue. *I wonder if there are alligators down there—better yet—would Nancy miss me if I were eaten by one?* The city's skyscrapers towered overhead casting him in a deep shadow as he passed the last alleyway before the corner of Thirty-fifth. Something sweet and homey caught his attention. He stopped to look around. Hanging from the gothic brick building whose structure tilted to the left and looked more at home in a Tim Burton movie was a sign which read:

BreWd

*Artisinal teas...*

*There are tea shops—*

*then there are tea shops!*

*An artisanal tea shop in the middle of the city?* He could remember a Starbucks chain a few blocks away, but nothing like the sign boasted. *Had the shop always been there? Or had I just never really noticed it? Nancy always says I wouldn't notice if the room were on fire.*

Alleyways in the city always smell of the detritus people leave behind as they bustle through their lives. Charles turned to stare down into the semi-shaded path. The air was clean, warm, sweet, like home when he was eleven. Under all those complex smells, the honeysuckle lingered, but the pungent flower didn't grow wild in the middle of Lexington Avenue. Charles stepped into the alley.

He paused halfway down the narrowing pavement. Late afternoon shadows threw everything into a deeper cold that chilled Charles. He huddled further into his oversized coat as he studied a painted board that promised the shops teas and herbal infusions. Someone had underlined the list with yet another arrow pointing further into the depths of the backstreet. He considered turning back into the bustling city, back to his life, back to his home, back to his Nancy. Honeysuckle and his youth drew Charles farther away from everything he held dear.

The building's stonework turned from a dirty marble white to an ashen gray. Within its stone embrace, a crackled door stood ajar, illuminated under a shining white beam provided by an elaborate, wrought iron lantern hung above. Charles gawked in the pool of light, getting his first look at the viscera of the shop.

On either side of the door, two large glass cases housed many jars, pots, and cups in various colored sizes. Bins of roots, leaves, and beans were interspersed at random between them. The items while homey at first glance appeared disused.

Sweet smelling specters of his youth hit Charles full on, driving him to enter the shop. He pushed the door open and was ushered in by the loud chimes of an old-style bell. The shop's setup forced him to walk between the cases. Strewn throughout the displays were ominous lumps of fur, twigs, and rodent skulls which all peeked out from under bits of straw. Somewhere in the mayhem, Charles thought he saw a pentagram made of bright red string tied to ebony crow feathers.

Again, Charles reconsidered heading back to Nancy. He could not move his feet. But he was lulled by the sweet smells of fresh baking peaches which mingled with the hypnotic, enticing scent flowers. A few feet from where he stood midway down the case, a metal bistro stand was decorated with an elaborate script, *All who enter here be welcomed.*

As he read the sign, his initial fears at the macabre display window seemed to melt away leaving a calm warm contentment instead. "The owners must be into a goth lifestyle," he whispered. Despite himself, the sudden light warmth which filled Charles made him smile as he wandered farther into the shop following his childhood.

The room opened at the end of the cases to rows of shelves, all packed tight with labeled drawers of different sizes. A long countertop ran the length of the far wall. Antiqued dessert trays of various heights under glass domes dotted the black countertop. A lanky fellow stood behind the register cleaning one of the glass tops.

He was pale, with dark facial hair which curved out from under his nose into a thin over waxed mustache, and a Van Dyke beard. A delicate gold chain ran from the rose-tinted monocle that obscured one of his dusty pale blue eyes. His hair seemed short until he turned, replacing the top on its appropriate tray covering a small pea-green biscuit stack. Charles could just make out a string tying back the man's inky mane under his top hat. The man's black on red attire made him look more like a minion of Hades than any barista Charles had ever seen.

Charles realized he'd been staring. He prepared to apologize as the man turned back to him, but a soft silky feminine voice slid up along his spine then tickled at his ear. "Oh good—Company!"

Charles could feel a hand slither over his shoulder as he turned. He followed the woman's red fingertips up her thin fingers then over the backs of her tiny hands. The woman smiled as Charles looked at her. She was pretty enough, but the longer he looked, the more he felt a certainty mix with the warm feeling that drove him into the shop. She was the most strikingly beautiful woman he had ever seen. His voice failed him as it caught in his throat.

She had a mass of curling sable hair, held into a waterfall of waves by a miniature red and stygian striped top hat. Charles started to pull away only to find himself lost in the emerald of her eyes. Finally, her coy ruby lips brought him some relief allowing him to turn back to the man behind the bar as the woman slipped her hand into his.

"Our first guest of the day," she cooed.

"How can we help you?" The man asked, rolling his blue eyes at the woman. "Please excuse my sister. She finds new people quite intriguing."

The woman's breath tickled Charles' ear, "It's true, I do adore making new friends."

Charles shivered. The sensation helped him regain his wits enough to take a step away from them both. Unsure what to say, he ran his fingers through the thick mane of his hair and scratched at his scalp. A little more desperation than he'd like snuck through his voice, "You specialize in tea infusions?" Charles pointed to the sign behind the register which listed a wild variety of specialties he hadn't heard of before.

"We do," the man replied, tossing a white bar towel over his left shoulder. "What sort of infusion did you have in mind?"

Charles looked over the list, which named off things like Darjeeling, Oolong, and Rooibos. Charles' wife kept a stock of generic Earl Grey or Lipton in the cabinet, but he'd never heard any of the other names before. His co-worker swore by green tea, but the long list of specialties quickly swallowed him.

"Perhaps I can recommend something to stimulate calm, or soothe the nervous system?" the man suggested. "My sister, Lilly, is quite adept at custom infusions."

"Oh, Bael exaggerates! He's the true master brewer in the family." Lilly smiled at Charles as she pressed into his shoulder.

Lilly's attention distracted Charles so that he nodded. "Calming... yes. That sounds, wonderful." The woman's charcoal laced corset demanded more of Charles' attention than he could spare for her brother.

Bael chuckled. "Lilly, be a dear and fetch the valerian. Oh, and red bush."

Lilly made a loud tsk before peeling herself away from her prey. She headed toward the back shelf, which had a red curtain nestled at the far corner that Charles hadn't seen when he first entered.

Bael flashed a bright, sympathetic smile at Charles, before turning to the shelves behind the bar. "You have the look of a man that has a lot on his plate. I hope this helps, but you know even peace comes at sometimes a steep price— right?"

The comment caught Charles off guard. *What did peace have to do with tea? It's not like anyone can just hand out inner peace right? Maybe this guy and his sister have been dipping into more than their tea leaves.* Charles wanted more than anything at that moment to get rid of the consuming abyss his depression had become. *Is it possible to break free from yourself?* Charles stared at Bael's back for a moment. *Could I find that in the bottom of a teacup?*

"I do." But Charles didn't; he just felt he owed the man an answer.

Bael shifted his shoulders. "Even if you might lose those you care for?"

The whole turn of the conversation started to push through the warm fuzziness he'd been feeling since entering the shop. The alarm, and little comfort he felt fought against each other confusing Charles until he grasped for the first thought that might make some sense in the conversation. He desperately tried to latch onto the idea of losing those he cared for, but the notion slipped through him like sand spilling from a pail. Instead, Charles fixated on what he

might have to pay for his tea infusion. "You mean money?" *How overpriced were their herbal infusions?* Charles felt confused.

Bael laughed, which confused Charles even more. Charles knew he couldn't handle his melancholy moods anymore; he knew Nancy couldn't either.

"Oh. Whatever it took," Charles said.

Lilly sauntered by, handing two small jars to her brother. The two worked well together, Charles could just make out them passing items back and forth between them. A plume of steam crested over Bael's top hat followed by a low whistle, then the rustle of paper, and a small tink.

Bael and Lilly turned back toward the countertop. She smiled leaning forward over the counter as Bael placed a silver-rimmed black decorative teacup and saucer before Charles. Again, the floral smell mingled with baked things drew Charles closer to look into the cup.

*Where is that delicious smell coming from?*

"Lilly dear. If you would?" Bael asked. "You see, Charles, the pouring of the infusion is just as important as the vessels used to prepare or consume them. We put thought into the preparation of everything we do here."

*Well, that's thorough of them.* Charles frowned. *Did I introduce myself? Yes, I must have.* Lilly filled the ornate little cup; the floral notes grew so heady, Charles thought he might drown in them.

"Smells... heavenly," Charles admitted. "What is it?"

A deep rich laugh came from Bael. Still grinning, he lifted his eyebrows in a high dramatic arch as he twisted his mustache. "Magic."

The joke put Charles at ease.

"I want you to think about all the things you came here to forget," Lilly said, offering him the cup. "Think about them and imagine they're stacks and stacks of papers. Then I want you to push them all into a closet and close the door."

"It's best if you down the drink as the infusion tastes bitter if left too long to cool," Bael offered. "You're welcome to have a seat."

Charles looked down at the cup as he shrugged. *Why not? It's just a bit of tea.* He looked up to say something, but the pair had vanished. *God that's so strange.* A cold chill ran down Charles' spine, his cup felt warm and so inviting in his hand.

He took a long pull from the cup, the liquid inside spicy with a sweet aftertaste. The infusion was quite good, but on his third drink, something in the sweetness did become bitter. He drained the remaining liquid, and set the cup back onto its saucer.

As he looked around the room, without Lilly's distracting presence, Charles was forced to admit just how creepy the décor was. But this didn't bother him as much as it should have. He wondered why he had taken tea from two strangers? To be that trusting wasn't like him at all. A few minutes passed as he looked over the contents strewn along the bar. The tea warmed him to his core until he felt as if he were floating in a warm pool that he wanted to remain submerged in.

Charles scanned the room, but his hosts were nowhere to be seen. *Goth's! I wish they'd at least left prices displayed.* He left a five on the counter, hoping it would cover the tax, and then headed for home feeling better than he had in years.

Charles paused staring at the matte crackle distressed door of the apartment he shared with his wife. His shoulders slumped forward as his chest rose. He held the breath a moment to steady himself, to ready himself against the storm he feared would be waiting inside. Charles exhaled as he turned his key. The lock gave, and he pushed his way into the duplex that hadn't been a home to him or his wife in years. As he did whenever he came in from work, he took another breath, deposited his keys on a small rack then removed his coat. "Nancy... I'm home."

*Something doesn't feel quite right.* The usual knot of tension in his chest was absent. *Weird.* He moved into the living room.

Nancy stepped up to him, wrapping her arms around his waist to give it a gentle squeeze as she went on her tiptoes to kiss his cheek. "Hi honey, how was your day?"

Charles blinked in surprise, "Long, a little strange, but ok." Unsure of what else to do, he gave his wife a gentle hug before stepping away into the room. Had he done the right thing? Nancy hadn't been intimate with him in any way in years; the gesture was unlike his distant, cold wife.

"Long? How so?" Nancy took his briefcase, setting it on the ottoman.

Charles' eyebrow raised. When he came home, if his wife was there, she ignored him, talked to her mother on the phone, or watched shows on the big screen in the living room.

Charles didn't want to lose this curious more open version of his wife, but most of all, he didn't want to start a fight. He didn't want to tell her an associate was caught sleeping with his secretary. *No point in starting World War III, she won't ever admit she cheated anyway.* He

steered the conversation in a different direction. "Usual workplace politics... How was your day dear?" Charles held his breath.

"It was alright. Nothing exciting at the office, just reports and more reports." Nancy smiled. "Dinner will be ready in five minutes." She patted Charles on the shoulder before she headed for the kitchen. "I need to check on the chicken."

Charles jaw began to drop. He snapped it shut. Nancy cooked? He couldn't remember the last time he'd had a meal that she had prepared. He sat on the couch staring at the blank television screen. Who was the woman in the kitchen and what had she done with Nancy?

He blinked shaking his head as he started to relax into the cushions of his couch. This version of his home life was something he'd wished for, hoped for, but not what he came home to. The tension he hadn't even realized was present from the base of his skull down through his spine began to seep away.

Charles felt a weight shift along the couch seat beside him as a hand slithered along his shoulder then moved over his right pectoral muscle. He turned only to find Lilly, and not his wife leaning closer. He half slid, half jumped off of the couch to stand before the woman. "What the hell?"

Charles could hear Nancy as she worked in the kitchen.

Lilly laughed, overly pleased with his reaction. "Hello, Charlie."

He looked around the apartment, quickly trying to decide how she'd gotten in. *How the hell am I going to explain her to Nancey?* He knew he couldn't.

"Ssshhh!" Charles pressed his finger to his mouth and hissed, "My wife's in the kitchen! What are you doing here? How did you get in!"

Bael leaned forward in his chair. "Nice to see you too, Charles."

Charles jumped giving a little squeak, "How- What?"

"Don't be that way, Charlie." Lilly began to pout.

Bael showed Charles his hands as if the gesture would reassure the man. "You left the door open," he explained.

Charles looked to the hall, trying to remember if he had in fact done so. He didn't think he had, and moreover, he didn't recall hearing the door close a second time, "Do you often walk into strangers' homes?"

"You left this at the shop." Lilly handed Charles a supple brown wallet, his wallet.

Charles took it. "Oh. Thank you."

"We've also come to make you an offer." Bael stood then wandered to the mantle looking over its pictures. "Your wife is attractive, what a fortunate man you are."

Charles' cheeks began to color.

Lilly glared at her brother, crossing her arms over her corset. "Yes, pretty." She hissed.

Bael laughed shaking his head, "Don't mind Lilly, Charles. Jealousy is in her nature. When any other female gains more attention for their beauty than she does, my sister becomes intolerable."

Charles started to move toward the hallway to show his guests out. "I'm sorry. I don't know what kind of business you think I'm in, but I don't think I can help you."

"Oh, I don't know about that." Bael looked amused as he watched the man. He removed the picture from the mantle, tracing his long pale fingers over Nancy's picture. "You know it's rude of us not to say hello to the woman of the house."

Lilly peeked over her brother's shoulder. Her face contorted into a hideous version of her distracting face. "Yes. Rude." Lilly spat out.

The two made Charles uncomfortable. "I... I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you two to leave." Charles motioned toward the door. "I'm sorry, but you've come at a bad time, you see."

"Five more minutes Charlie," Nancy called from the kitchen.

"Not at all." Bael replaced the picture on the mantle. "It was rude of us to come unannounced. We wished to return your property. Thank you for the payment by the way. Most people would have just left."

"I'm no thief, you served me, it was the least I could do."

Lilly moved toward Charles, her stilettos tapping out an angry rhythm on the tile as she walked. "We like helping our new friends. Did the tea help?"

The warmth he felt earlier in the shop swirled around him like a hug from the inside. The sensation was so wonderful Charles smiled. Had the release of his tension been because of the tea? It couldn't be possible, and yet, could it? "Yes, I think it did."

"Good, then perhaps you have a moment to hear my proposal after all," Bael countered.

Were the two working him? Charles couldn't tell. Honeysuckle blossomed through his thoughts choking down any worries before they could take further shape. What harm would it do to hear them out? He nodded at Bael too caught up in the smell to answer.

Lilly's fingers roamed over the back of Charles' shoulder, making his head loll in a full circle of movement. He sighed as he looked at Bael. Lilly leaned closer so that Charles could feel her lips fluttering along his jaw just below his left earlobe. His knees began to tremble and give out. What was wrong with his legs?

"Lillith. Be a dear. Stop playing with Charles." Bael frowned.

"Awww. You ruin all of my fun," she frowned at Bael as she left her arm draping around Charles' shoulders, playing with his tie instead.

Bael snapped his fingers. The sound reverberated through the apartment. As it bounced along the walls of the living room, Charles could feel the warmth within him drain away. It left behind a world-weary sack of bones held together by a skin suit. Had he always been this tired? A pan in the kitchen crashed to the floor.

"Charles! Don't tell me you've had me slaving away on this god forsaken food, and you're not even decent enough to eat it!" Nancy yelled.

Charles realized then, the last hour and a half of peace, even this version of his life at home with Nancy had all been due to the tea. The sensation of breaching the warm water of his pool to enter back into this harsh reality staggered him. Burned chicken accosted Charles' nose. "What-" He began.

"The tea made you... made it all better for a time didn't it?" Bael asked.

Lily-Lilith gave a small chiming laugh.

Charles frowned. "Yes but-

"You could have it back you know." Lilith leaned into Charles' shoulder, nuzzling his neck.

"Charles get your lazy ass in here!" Nancy screamed at the wall, while glass and silver tinkled against each other.

Bael growled. "Enough Lilith! You know the rules."

His sister stepped away from Charles, her lower lip trembling in an alluring pout.

Charles blinked as his brain tried in desperation to make sense of what had happened. "I think you two should leave now."

"Very well," Bael offered. "But should you decide you'd rather have the sweet loving version of your wife, or the comfort of a fulfilled life, call us. We can help you, Charles, if you let us."

Lilith stepped between Charles and her brother. "Please let me help you."

Charles started to find his anger then. *What had they done to him? How could something like tea have affected him, and Nancy so?* He could already feel himself missing the warmth of his little mental pool as the last bits of it left him. He hated that feeling of missing something so much that he almost wanted to ask the two strangers to stay. *This isn't right! This isn't who I am! It wasn't even real!*

"No. It's time for you to go." Charles started down the hall, intending to show the two the door. As he opened it, he turned back toward the living room. The two were gone.

Bael's voice wafted through Charles mind, "We'll be waiting."

Charles' skin crawled as he shut the door. "When hell freezes over."

Lilith's laugh echoed through his troubled mind as Charles entered the kitchen. He tried to ignore it. Nancy stood with her arms braced on either side of the stove top counter; her shoulders were hunched over a pan still hot with steam. *I should say something, but what?*

Nancy let out a long breath. This would be bad. Charles slipped into his chair trying to think of something, anything, to say to his wife. Nancy's back went rigid as she straightened to pick up the skillet, and turned around.

Charles remembered her in better times; she was pretty. She always would be, but over the years she'd become more reserved, and sad. Her eyes, though, they told Charles everything she never said. Her once beautiful pools of blue and gold splashed orbs now stared an icy lance through him as she carried the pan to the table.

Charles swallowed hard, waiting for the gale that was sure to come. Nancy placed the pan, full of two breasts of chicken parmesan nestled on pasta, between their place settings. Behind her, a kettle on the stove gave off a high-pitched call. Nancy removed a cup and saucer from the cabinet before pulling the kettle from the burner.

With trepidation, he moved a portion of the food onto his plate. He wasn't hungry, but to save himself from his wife's temper, he decided it would be the wiser move. "It looks delicious," Charles offered.

"It's probably overcooked," Nancy replied as she poured the contents of the kettle into her cup before drifting back to the table to sit with her husband.

Charles didn't watch his wife, instead, he dissected the chicken on his plate. Sometimes it was better not to look into the pit, but this too made him feel terrible. The knot in his chest wormed deeper into that familiar place it had resided in for so many years. He wanted to look at Nancy, he wanted to talk to her, but every time he tried, their relationship devolved further.

He snuck a glance as his wife set her teacup down before joining him at the table. That was a step in the right direction. She almost never cooked or ate with him. Charles took a bite of his chicken, grinding the piece down with his teeth until there was nothing left. The silence between the two dragged on as Nancy sipped her tea.

The familiar smell of Earl Grey wafted toward Charles. He looked down at his plate, turning his attention to the pasta, before looking back at his wife. He still itched to say something, anything to kill the silence. Nancy's finger toyed with the lip of her cup. Charles sat completely still staring at his wife.

The cup was black and decorated with intricate silver patterns on the lip. He couldn't see the saucer, but he had a very good idea of what would be on it. Charles clamped his mouth shut, letting the pasta fall back to his plate. He looked at his wife. "New cup?" He asked.

"No." Nancy shifted in her seat.

Charles could see the wheels in her head turning as imaginary wafts of steam poured from her ears. He'd said the wrong thing. He hurried to mend his mistake. "Aren't you going to eat?"

"No," she repeated, taking another sip of her tea.

It was just a teacup. She could've gotten it anywhere. He wondered how to defuse his wife, but decided that the building distance between them might be his best mode of survival. "I'm sorry you cooked all this food, and you're not even hungry. I'll clean up."

Nancy's chair scraped across the floor as she flew out of the seat knocking it over. "You'll clean up? Do you have any idea what day it is? No, of course, YOU don't!"

The movement had startled Charles. He'd expected a blow-up, but nothing like this. Nancy stormed out of the room. He could hear the bedroom door close with a deafening finality behind her.

Charles' temples began to throb in a way that made him want to vomit up the chicken he'd just tried to choke down. *What about today was so important? What have I forgotten?* Charles felt terrible about the prospect of forgetting something so big, that it could make Nancy so upset. *It isn't her birthday, or our anniversary.* He was diligent about remembering those days.

He refrigerated the leftovers then tidied up the kitchen. While he worked, his mind wandered over the events with his wife, his life, and the strangers he'd met. *What the hell am I*

*doing? Am I so screwed up that I can't be of use even to my wife?* All his crushing self-doubts and deprecations reared hitting him with vicious force.

Charles was hyper-aware of this, and yet he could not rescue himself from the ever-growing abyss swirling within. It consumed him from the inside until he could not bear it. Charles flung the rag back on the sink then walked into the living room.

Nancy's sobs quieted as her hushed voice spoke to someone. This drew his attention to the bedroom door, to the room they no longer shared. Charles could make out a few words here and there. The implication was plain enough. Nancy was through with him.

This made the darkness gnawing at Charles bite down harder. He'd failed. He hung his head slumping into the cushions of his couch, staring at the mute toned carpet at his feet. "You win," he whispered to the thing devouring him. "I hope you're happy."

A hand tilted Charles' chin up to meet a smiling face. "There there, lost lamb," Lillith cooed running her fingers through Charles' hair.

Charles was too broken to even protest the woman's presence. He wanted to cry, to scream, to rage, to fight, to do something, anything against that darkness in himself. But the darkness wouldn't allow it. A tear spilled from his left eye, then rolled down his cheek to splash hot against his hand.

Lilith smoothed the tear trail away with the back of her thumb. "Now none of that." She smiled. "You don't want to feel that way anymore, now do you?"

Her smile was gentle enough, coaxing enough, that Charles nodded his agreement. *How could anyone want to feel that way?* The years had taken their toll chipping him away. "No..." He shook. "No more. Please no more."

"Good for you." Lilith played with a strand of his hair.

"What," Charles stuttered, "do I have to do?" He tried hard not to cry like a baby.

"Please, tell me." He hated the pleading sound of his voice.

Lilith held out her hand, as if to offer it to Charles. He started to reach for it but stopped as she rotated her wrist. The small cup sat poised on its saucer in her hand. She offered it to him. Charles' voice caught in his throat. "How can tea fix all of this?"

"It's not just tea, Charlie." Lilith chided him. "It's a choice. It's always been your choice."

"My choice?"

"Yes." Lilith patted Charles' head in a mock show of reassurance. "You can choose to let things stay as they are and die a little more every day as you consume yourself or..."

*Lilith was right.* The darkness he felt wasn't a thing inside him... it was him. *How do you rescue yourself from a demon when you're it?* He pulled back from the woman. "Or?"

"You can choose to save what's left of yourself... give yourself peace." Lilith placed the steaming cup on the coffee table before him.

Charles found it hard to keep the skepticism from his voice. "So what? I drink this and everything is better?"

Lilith rolled her eyes. "Mortals... Tomorrows are always different, Charlie."

The roundabout way she talked started to grate on Charles' nerves. *Couldn't women ever be straight forward?* "I don't understand."

"Bael told you he could offer you peace. But magic comes with a price Charlie, and a fiver doesn't cut it." She wandered over to the mantle, removing the picture of his wife. She traced her long fingers over its glass surface.

"What the hell does that mean?" he spat, desperate to keep his voice down as he could still hear Nancy sobbing.

Lilith's playful flirting demeanor changed into something lithe and far more predatory.

She sauntered back over to him, picture in hand. "Let me make this as simple as I can, Charlie."

Charles felt his mouth go dry as he watched Lilith place the picture next to the cup.

Nancy's happy smiling wedding photo looked back at him. "Either you pay for your peace and drink, or Bael takes payment from your wife."

Charles' stoked the anger which burned within him into a fine red rage. "No. You leave her out of this!" He stood, running for the bedroom door.

Lilith shook her head watching him first turn the knob, then knock harder and harder. "Nancy! Nancy, open up!"

When Charles' wife didn't respond he turned on Lilith. "What have you done!" he demanded. He began to bang on the door, rattling the frame. "Nancy!"

Lilith shook her head. "I've done nothing. You wanted free from yourself at any cost remember, Charlie, baby? You should know I was rooting for you."

Nancy didn't respond. Charles slumped against the doorjamb, heaving in great deep breaths. His palm slid down the wood of the door that would not budge. "Rooting for me, baby?" He glared at Lilith, trying to burn a hole through her.

"Charlie, come on. You're running out of time. If you don't make your choice it'll be too late to save her." Lilith stood her ground placing her hands on the swell of her hips.

*I have to help her, even if she hates me. I have to save her. None of this is Nancey's fault. Can I live with myself if she is hurt because of me?* No. Charles knew if he went down that road he'd never recover. He wasn't a hero, but he couldn't let Nancy suffer for his mistake. "How do I save my wife?"

Lilith moved along the backside of the coffee table, motioning Charles to it. "Drink."

He pushed away from the doorframe, and came back to the couch, flopping onto its cushions. The once inviting scent of honeysuckle drowned him in a bitter-sweet sea of nostalgic loss that made him sick to his stomach. He reached for the cup, lifting it and the saucer. "If I do?" "You mean what will happen to you?" She shook her head. "Do you care?"

*She has a point.* Charles realized he hadn't cared what might happen to him for a long time. If he had, he would not have gone to their shop to begin with, or he might not have driven himself to that point. "No."

Charles looked to the door then tipped the cup, drinking its contents in one gulp. At first, the liquid was smooth, warm even, slithering this way and that down into the depths of his stomach. But then the bitter after bite sunk its teeth in. Charles placed the cup and saucer back on the table before leaning back in the couch. He let his eyes close against the burn, half fluttering open in time with his heartbeat.

The comfortable warmth he felt enveloped in earlier at the shop rose from the tip of his toes in a flooding instant. His eyes fluttered again. He could see, and feel Lilith press her body into his, straddling his thighs as she leaned closer. A movement to the side caught his attention. His eyes darted from the woman, to his left. Bael loomed large into view. Charles' eyes closed a final time. He felt his heart slow, his life fleeting as it was, began to drain away from him like someone taking their late afternoon tea. Charles found his peace.