

Blood Is Forever

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Being a Muslim vampire had its perks, and they were never more clear to Diana than right now, skateboarding down the rough streets of New York in the dazzling brightness of mid afternoon. With each kick-off of her sneakers against the tracts of litter-strewn pavement, her long garments fluttered in the wind, light fabric in black and hunter green billowing behind her. Diana knew that others like her were sleeping now, or playing long-forgotten card games in musty old apartments with the windows drawn, or lounging in dirty underground speakeasies and wistfully recounting the days they had spent drinking real whiskey and rum. All of those activities sounded boring as hell to Diana, which was likely the reason she had so few friends among the older vampires.

She preferred going out in the day, her niqab and long gloves guarding her body and face from the scorching pain of being touched by sunlight. For having no beating heart, she did still rather enjoy the whispers of adrenaline rushing through her as her pennyboard loudly rattled over sewer-covers and potholes, jittering her pointed teeth and sending pleasant breeze across her body. Diana was not the only vampire in New York to wear a niqab. By all accounts, it is close to impossible to be the *only* one of *anything* in New York City. It was near-impossible to distinguish them, though, from the thousands of other Muslims occupying the city, wearing hijabs and niqabs and burqas, and hailing from Africa, East and West Asia, and the Middle East, (Diana still had a tendency to refer to it as Persia, especially since she had been born in "Iran" long before 1935, when it became known as such).

She knew that other Muslim vampires existed though, as did vampires of all religions. Her best friend was Lilah, a Jewish vampire who had been bitten by the wife of a Spanish nobleman when the woman had allowed her to hide from the Spanish inquisitors in her bedroom. When the inquisition reached that house with its crossbows and swords, the noblewoman promised Lilah freedom from the threat of death, and Lilah agreed, the two fleeing the country together as immortals. Lilah still practiced her Judaism, and periodically invited Diana to their shabbat dinners, which were quite pleasant, though lacking in some of the traditional qualities (food, for instance). Of course, Lilah and Diana practiced religion quietly, but the same could not be said for the Catholic vampires, those who had occupied the New York mafia, when it was at its height, and who, before that, had immigrated from Italy after the industrial revolution. For many of those Christian vampires, their turning was a religious revelation, and the flames of their religious fervor were stoked by the blistering and burning that their crucifix necklaces suddenly engraved on their skin. What could prove the existence of a god with more clarity than his symbol suddenly leaving painful marks on the skin of those who disobeyed him? Many of these Italian Catholics still attended mass, making sure to shy away from the crosses at the church doors and silently pray forgiveness from their god for what they had become. Some of the more crazed among them held cultish services in their own churches, mostly abandoned warehouses or

back alleys, in which they would pass around crosses, let their hands marr and burn, as a self-inflicted punishment for their bloodlust.

Diana thought this was all very unnecessary, and, as Lilah had once joked to her, “you think the crucifix shit is bad, just imagine how those Italian Catholics felt when they found out they couldn’t eat garlic.”

The two had laughed over that statement, but Diana could remember the days when she herself had been equally fanatic about her religion. She had spent the first two or three decades after *turning* poring over the Quran, reading and rereading in an attempt to find her place in Islam with her new sharp canines and taste for blood.

Islam has no mention of vampires, no mythical creatures past angels and the odd Jinn, but Diana had found her peace with a passage indicating that there were plenty of Allah’s creations that humans will never discover. As silly as she sometimes thought it to be, she would arrange her meals according to the Islamic calendar. No blood on Ramadan, a good kill on Eid al-adha (which she explained to Lilah as translating, quite literally, to “festival of the sacrifice”), and that would set her full for the next four or so months.

Diana leaned on the back end of her skateboard to stop, the sound of cement scratching against its wooden frame drowned out by the cacophony of cars honking and vendors yelling their wares and the distant rumble of the subway beneath her. The sun was slowly sinking, and though her niqab protected her, she still felt a slight relief, like submerging into a pool on a hot day, as it winked out behind a skyscraper. She held her skateboard under one arm and descended into the subway station, feet dainty and unsure after for so long being off solid ground. The brightness of the city surface gave way to electric lights buzzing with moths and mayflies, and the chaotic bustle of people in every direction made the station navigable by memory only, which Diana had in spades. She took the service entrance into the station, knowing that the automatic main doors would not see her. That had been an alarming realization of being a vampire in the modern era. When she had turned, she was disappointed by no longer being able to see her own face on any mirrored surface, but now, her disappointment had become inconvenience, as every motion-sensing soap dispenser and sink faucet completely ignored her.

Swiping her metrocard, she descended onto the platform, gritting her teeth at some half-whispered statements about her outfit. She had lived in New York for long enough that she was used to insults and paranoid mutterings being thrown at her, and she knew that the mortal Muslims experienced the same treatment.

How ironic, she thought, that so many assumed her niqab made her a monster, when in reality it was her sharp teeth and bloodless veins. It was painful, sometimes, when they told her that she did not belong, not knowing how right they were. Or when she caught them jeering at a mortal in a hijab, but could not bring herself to intervene, knowing that while their claims were false of the mortal girl, she could not say the same of herself.

The train screeched its way into the station, and the noise could have made Diana’s mouth water, with its eerie similarity to the screams of a victim before a kill. She swore under

her breath, having not realized it had been so long since she'd fed. Counting back, her last meal had been four and a half months back, and she had been skimming by, trying not to think about her growing hunger pangs, distracting herself with pleasant skateboard rides and roaming the streets with Lilah at night. The time had gotten away from her, though, and she would need another meal soon.

With a hiss, the subway doors opened, and Diana stepped inside, jostled by dozens of people around her and struggling not to accidentally hit someone with the back end of her skateboard, which had happened more times than she'd care to admit. The seats filled up quickly, but Diana did not mind, instead standing against a metal pole that, had she been human, she would not have wanted to touch for fear of germs. She propped her skateboard up on the bridge of her foot, pulling out her phone and typing out a quick message to Zana, letting her know she would be home soon. Zana was her sister, and they had remained through the years as close as before they were turned, though Diana avoided thinking about that time in her life.

Zana texted back almost instantly with her usual texting etiquette, her response consisting of only a heart emoji followed by a fanged smiley face and a thumbs-up. Diana rolled her eyes at how childish her sister still acted, though, she supposed, in a city where the only older role model she had was Diana, it made sense she would want to regain her childhood in her interactions with her older sister. With everyone else, Zana was standoffish and proud, to the point of being rude, and occasionally those traits got her into trouble.

An ugly laugh caused Diana to look up from her phone, and see a pair of twenty-something men sitting widely across a trio of seats, both wearing basketball shorts and once-white wife-beaters, bare arms teeming with muscles. One had on a ripped denim jacket, and the other was sporting a red baseball cap that Diana had seen too many people wear. One of the men spoke up.

"Hey, dude I gotta mail some letters, do you know where the nearest mailbox is?" he snorted and Diana glared. She'd heard this one before.

"Man I dunno, oh wait, there's a mail slot right here." he pointed his calloused hand at her, and she glared at them coldly from the slot in her veil that they were mocking. The one with the red hat stood up, grabbing a newspaper someone had left on the seat, and moving it towards her face, as though he were about to slide it into a mailbox. Diana slapped his hand away, hard, and he sat back down, laughing along with his friend.

"Ow, you bitch, what was that for?" he chortled through his words, and the one in the denim jacket widened his eyes, pretending to be scared, his hand shooting out to clap his companion's shoulder.

"Jack, oh my god you shouldn't have said that! What if she has a fucking bomb under her burqa?" he snorted and Diana feigned deafness, turning to look at the orange ticker telling her she had one stop until she could get off and leave these assholes behind. "Jack" spoke again.

"Hm, I wanna take off her burqa, you know. Just to see if there's a bomb. I bet she's sexy under that shit." he turned to his friend. "I know you were thinking it, Ryan, I bet she wants it."

“Dude, no way. I don’t fuck terrorists.” they both laughed, and Jack responded, noticing the way Diana’s eyes flared with anger.

“Nah, girl, I’d fuck the Isis right outta you.” He winked exaggeratedly and Diana flipped him off with one gloved hand, not turning to look at him. Her eyes were trained on the window, as her station got closer and closer and-

The doors wheezed open and Diana couldn’t get out soon enough. The men on the train reminded her too much of the men who had come into her home back in Sari, on that night that she had forever changed.

It was 1913, and Ottoman, British, and Russian forces had invaded her city, and the home that she shared with her sister and brother and their parents.

They spoke in hushed tones at the kitchen table, eating the closest thing to a traditional dinner that Diana’s mom could assemble from what little stores they had remaining. Though it was left unspoken in the heavy air above the table, all of them were worried about the war at their doorstep, and their fear of starvation held no candle to the fear they had of what might happen to Diana’s father if he had to go out into the city to buy more food.

An aggressive knock sounded at their door, and it sounded like a cannon to Diana. Her mother shut her eyes and let out a breath, and her father took a moment before very slowly standing up and pulling his chair back, stalling against the inevitable. Diana could not see the door from her seat at the table, and she stared intently at Zana’s face, across from her.

Three things happened very quickly then. Diana’s father, with a mumbled greeting, opened the door. Zana’s face transformed, from eyebrows furled and lips drawn tight in worry, to brows raised in shock and mouth open in a scream. The piercing crack of a gunshot rang out and Diana’s head whipped around just in time to see her father collapse with a shout that became muffled into bloody gurgles. Diana’s scream joined that of her sister, and their mother let out a cry before running to drape herself in her long silks over her husband’s body, already wailing and sobbing prayers over him by the time her chair hit the ground from her abrupt movement. Diana was barely collected enough to look up and see the two men now standing in the open doorway, one still holding out the gun that had just killed her father, though the smile on his face made it look as though he was just offering the family a gift.

The man turned and spoke to his companion, in a language Diana had never heard before, and he had the audacity to laugh, which was too much for Diana’s younger brother Aso, only twelve, who ran forward to stand in front of his sobbing mother, and with the reckless confidence and anger of a child, slapped the barrel of the pistol away from its target. The men laughed, and the one not holding the gun spoke in broken Farsi.

“This boy has fire. Let him believe he can run from fate for a little longer.” The man with the pistol let its point fall to the floor. He chuckled.

“Alright.” his Farsi was fluent. “Run like the wind, child.”

It was then that Diana recognized the armed man. He lived a few houses down, had eaten dinner with them at times, and discussed politics and faith with her father. She knew his children, had watched over them for pocket change a few times. Seeing him here shocked the breath from her lungs, and she wanted to scream, to set upon him with her teeth and nails and punish him for betraying his people. Instead, she locked eyes with Aso, who was staring at her with his wide eyes, and croaked “run. RUN!” her voice raised to a commanding tone and Aso, processing the order before its contents, was out the door and down the sandy street. The neighbor turned and fired a shot into the air behind him, laughing as he cried out and put on a burst of speed, hands over his head as though that would guard him from a bullet.

The men advanced farther into the room with more foreign conversation, and Diana rose from her chair, but a gesture from her neighbor’s gun made her sit right back down. The door shut behind the two intruders and Diana’s mother rose from her crouched position, eyes seething behind her burqa. The foreign man spoke as though she wasn’t there, saying something to his companion and pointing at her. The neighbor seemed upset by this, and spoke back in the foreign tongue, waving his arm towards Diana and her sister. The foreign man laughed and responded in Farsi.

“I pay you, I get first choice. Only fair.” The sentence made little sense to the teenaged Diana, but her mother suddenly barked out a series of words Diana had never heard her say before, and likely would have been slapped for repeating. The neighbor looked at her with disgust in his eyes, while the foreign one smiled in amusement.

Something hardened in her mother’s eyes, and she sauntered towards the armed man, silks stiffening with blood. Behind her back, she moved her hands in a sign for Zana and Diana to run, towards the back door. Time seemed to slow down again, as Zana’s hand enveloped Diana’s, yanking her towards the other end of the kitchen. Her feet were paralyzed, though, and she could only watch in horror as her mother laid her delicate hands on the gun, still pointed at her. She pressed herself towards the barrel, until it was touching the silk masking her breasts. With deft hands, she pulled the trigger. Diana shrieked in distress, even as her mind struggled to comprehend what had happened and why. Zana’s hand squeezed hers, grounding her, and the two sprinted towards the back door. With speed that seemed uncanny, the foreign man was suddenly in front of them, and hit Zana with a backhand that set her reeling. As she fell to the floor, the man zeroed in on Diana, his mouth stretching into an inhuman grin. With a single, snakelike movement, he spun Diana around and forced his arm against her throat, cutting off her air supply. Diana retched, her nails scraping against her captor’s arm. Her former neighbor smiled, and Diana’s rage heightened as he kicked aside the body of her mother and walked towards them.

“It seems like we have a perfect arrangement.” he spoke, unconcerned. The foreigner laughed.

“Perhaps, but I would rather have both to myself. You can leave now, your services are no longer needed.” he spoke in perfect Farsi. The neighbor’s eyes widened, but his eyebrows furrowed and he pointed his gun towards Diana and the man still holding her by the neck. The foreigner merely laughed, and when the other man pulled the trigger, Diana did not even see him, he was so fast as he whipped her out of the way, deflected the bullet on a long knife he drew from his belt, and then threw the knife in a perfect spiral. By the time Diana’s eyes could catch up, her neighbor was kneeling, eyes shocked, with the hilt of the knife protruding from his neck.

“He was bothersome anyway.” the foreigner muttered in Farsi. Turning to Zana, he threw Diana to the floor in front of her, where she lay, coughing and rasping, her vision outlined with black spots. The man laughed, the scene horrific, a kitchen full of warm, bloodied corpses and two girls who were too young to yet fully understand death, and far too young to understand what would happen in the next hours.

“Now where should we start.”

Diana could not bear to recall, even a hundred years later, what had happened next, but the feeling remained with her, the stench of man and metallic blood and the sound of her own screams, the slipperiness surrounding her body as her own blood and vomit mixed with the man’s sweat and ecstasy, and after he had disappeared, the wet warmth as she clung to her sister, both sobbing, until they came to the awful realization that they were both still alive, and a second realization, that they were no longer as human as they once were.

Skateboard under her arm once more, Diana walked quickly now, through the now-dark alleys that she recognized as being close to home.

At first, she thought she was imagining the noises behind her, but as she carefully stepped, heel-toe-heel-toe, quieting her movements just as she did when she stalked her prey, she heard voices, and her unnaturally attuned ears picked up bits of a conversation.

“Okay dude I don’t know if i’m still up for this.” The voice was Ryan’s, from the subway. Diana cursed under her breath. Jack, she assumed, responded in an angry whisper.

“Don’t be a pussy. You were the one who suggested this.”

“Yeah, I know, but what if someone catches us?”

“This is New York, dickwad, no one gives a shit. And the bitch is Muslim too, people give even less of a shit. Hell, I bet she’s an illegal immigrant too, so its not like she’s going to go to the police.”

“Ah fuck, ok. Been too long since I got some anyway.”

Diana seethed silently, and in her mind she heard the subway screech again, or maybe it wasn’t really the subway this time. She could sense the warmth of them close by, and so she stopped, shrouding herself in the shadowed walls of the alley, sending out a quick text while she waited for the two men to come closer. Ryan came into view first, and seemed to look around for her, confused, before his eyes alighted on her leaning against the wall, on her phone. He smiled, and walked towards her.

“Hey baby.” he smirked, and something told Diana that Jack was going to be coming from the other direction. So they had flanked her, which would have been a good strategy if not for her uncanny senses. Diana’s eyes flickered up to Ryan and she put on a show of gasping in fear, backing away from him, and into Jack’s wide chest, where he had emerged from the alley behind her. Jack chuckled, and Diana turned to face him, stepping back. Not looking behind her, she arced her left arm, still holding her skateboard, around her, hearing a fleshy crack followed by a pained exhale as the board hit Ryan between the ribs, winding him. Diana dropped her splintered skateboard and her fists flew towards Jack’s nose in quick succession, so fast they both seemed shocked when Jack caught both her wrists in his large hands. His mouth twisted into a smile as he registered what had happened, and before Diana could react, he nodded behind her and Ryan grabbed her niqab, yanking it backwards.

His hand had not only grabbed her veil, though, but a fair amount of her hair as well, and as he yanked, Diana’s head jerked back but the niqab stayed on, dislodging only slightly and revealing a few strands of her long black hair.

Diana’s eyes flashed, and she surged forward, kneeling Jack in the crotch and then elbowing him in the throat when he let go of her wrists in pain. She whipped back and roundhouse kicked Ryan in the ribs, right where her skateboard had hit him seconds before. Remembering the skateboard, she picked it up again and brought it down on Jack’s skull. The board broke completely in half at the impact, and Jack was out cold. She turned on Ryan and pinned him to the brick wall of the alley, her vampiric strength funneling through her. She let her gaze move towards his neck and whispered *bismillahi wa 'ala baraka-tillah*, before slowly pulling her niqab away from her mouth.

“The fuck does that mean?” Ryan said, feigning confidence through his fear. He lurched but was unable to remove himself from the wall. “You fucking al-queda bitch, what are you playing at-”

She cut him off with a delicate laugh.

“I just said grace. I always do that before a meal.”

Before Ryan had a chance to comprehend what she had said, Diana sank her teeth into the fleshy junction between his shoulder and jaw, having to bite down harder than usual to break through his muscular neck. The warm blood flowed into her watering mouth, and Ryan’s squirms against her slowed and then stopped.

His blood tasted the same, she mused to herself, the same as any other human, untainted by his deeds. She inhaled long drags of his blood, banishing any disgust she felt with herself for her vile actions, which was somehow easier with Ryan than with most of her other victims, whose names she would never learn.

“I got your text.” A voice rang out from behind her as Diana took one final draft of metallic nectar. She turned, smiling, and let Ryan’s lifeless body collapse at the base of the wall.

“Zana, oh my beautiful sister, come here.” her voice, which spoke in her native Farsi now, was relieved, and the other woman stepped forward into Diana’s embrace. The two looked like vague echoes of each other, with the same facial structure, long, delicate noses, dark eyes, and full lips, but Diana’s hair was black while Zana’s was pale brown, and Zana’s skin was shades lighter. Zana also stood taller than her older sister, by a decent amount.

“I brought you a meal.” Diana choked out, suddenly emotional. She couldn’t cry, no vampire could, but her eyes stung and the sanguine taste in her mouth turned foul. Zana pulled away, holding Diana at arms length by her shoulders, and staring at her with as much love as she could hold in her long-lashed eyes.

“Thank you.” she murmured, whispered a prayer, and turned to eat.