

Vampire Beauty
By Hsiang-An Tseng

There are two types of people in this world, the pretty ones and the ugly ones. I regret coming into this world, born pretty but turned ugly as time went on.

I recalled my encounter yesterday when I ran into an old friend, Laura, who had moved back from the States. I noticed that she had become so much prettier. I told her about my failing marriage, and how my husband was having an affair, and that these days I could only stare at that sheet of paper, wondering if I should sign it. And, even if I did, whether I had the courage to confront him and file for divorce.

I envied her, I must admit it, as she told me how her husband loved her even more now. I wondered how she had kept her beauty. She told me about a place like heaven, where time was resisted and could not draw a single wrinkle on one's face.

“Maybe the secret for saving your love is here,” Laura said, as she passed me the address.

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It was in a back alley; nobody would have spotted the place without a given address. Outside it had a sign reading *Pandora*. It was quite bright on the first floor, and in the corner, there was an empty desk. I looked around — no one there, only posters of... celebrities on the wall behind the desk? No, I moved towards the desk to get a closer look. I spotted Laura's picture on the left corner of the wall. At that moment I heard a voice behind me.

“Hello, you must be Dena. Laura told me you'd visit sometime.”

I turned around and saw a woman walking down the stairs from the second floor. She was dressed in a dark suit with high heels and looked like she was in her early 20s.

“Really? What else did she tell you?” I replied cautiously.

“Ah yes, a broken marriage,” she said, nodding. “We could do a few things about that.”

“Huh? Laura told you about that? I'm confused. Is this marriage counselling?” I demanded.

She burst into laughter. “Marriage counselling? You could say that, but we like to call ourselves Pandoras.”

I frowned and took a step away from her.

“Why don’t you let me help you?” she said, walking towards me. “Let me first introduce myself. My name is Villa. For a very small price, Dena, I could save you from your unfortunate marriage.”

I smirked — just another one trying to rip me off. But I was already drowning in unluckiness. Perhaps this... young woman could bring me some entertainment. “At this point, money is of no importance to me. If you can help, I’ll pay”.

“Very well, I’m sure you won’t be disappointed with our product.” She smiled and pulled out a small glass jar; inside was a red pill. “The first one’s free as a sign of friendship.”

I looked at the jar, then back at her. “You expect me to take a pill from some random nobody? Do I look crazy?”

She looked at me solemnly.

I am crazy. Deep down I heard myself scream and tear myself apart. She was right; my marriage had driven me insane already.

“Consider this a gift”, she said, holding out the jar. I could feel her gaze at me like a snake.

I took the jar, and dropped a pill into the palm of my hand. I was surprised how heavy it was. I looked at the red pill; shiny and beautiful. Rather than oval in shape, it was a perfect sphere. Without another thought I closed my eyes and placed the pill onto my tongue. The sphere melted in my mouth immediately and became a river as it flowed down my throat. It was sweet, and every turn brought joy. I let out a sigh and then tried to open my eyes, but my eyelids were heavy as if glued shut. I was getting dizzy, and before I fainted, I heard Villa say...

Good night.

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I woke up on the couch and sat straight up to check around. The clock on the wall read two in the afternoon.

“Have a nice rest?” I heard her say behind me.

I jumped up and turned to face her.

“Don’t worry,” Villa said. “You slept well, and nothing happened to you. Or should I say, everything happened to you.” She pulled out a mirror from her pocket and handed it to me. “Have a look.”

I was suspicious, but I wanted to know what game she was playing. I took the mirror and looked into it.

Impossible. I looked like time had flowed back a decade. The wrinkles were gone, and my skin was fair again. I touched my face, pinched it; the sting made my nose sour. Then I saw tears suddenly flowing down.

“How...?” I sobbed. I couldn’t take my gaze away from my face. “What is this?”

“Hope.” I looked up and saw her smile. “We named it Asclepius, for the god of medicine, and it cures the patient of time. Unlike cheap and degrading technology that inserts some plastic or takes away some disgusting body parts, the pill allows your body to transform slowly and naturally.”

“Sounds incredible! So it rejuvenates my skin?” I asked.

“That’s only the first stage.” She raised her chin with pride. “As you take more, slowly, you will become even prettier.”

“I don’t understand —”

“Asclepius is derived from embryos that are about to reach four months maturity in the womb. We took the blood from these samples.” My eyes widened in horror, and she quickly raised her hand. “Now calm down — I understand that this sounds shocking. Embryos need to reach five months in order to actually develop consciousness. We are just inducing abortions before that point.”

My wide eyes glared intensely, but I was still thinking about my new, beautiful face.

“You see, even though abortion is illegal, most of the mothers agree on a voluntary basis. There are just so many men out there that place these poor girls in such a condition. We not only provide free abortions, but you could also say we are helping those poor mothers.”

Villa continued, “So, as Asclepius is absorbed in your body, it refreshes your organs, and gradually makes your blood younger. We have certain beauty standards, so as more is consumed, it will make you even...prettier!”

“How come the government hasn’t done something?” I was anxious. All this was illegal and something I had never heard of before.

“Oh don’t worry, everyone does it willingly. We rarely have problems, and if we do...” She gave a chuckle. “We’re everywhere... anywhere.”

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I walked home numb. It felt surreal. All I knew was that I had a jar of three more Asclepius in my bag, each costing five thousand dollars. Villa told me that I should take a pill once a week. Then, if not taken, the aging would return. It was a nice trade: money for beauty. After all, I had nothing but money. I entered my apartment building, arrived at my door, and was about to scan myself in.

“You look happy today.”

I turned around and saw Lilly standing behind me; she had a wide smile on her face. She was beautiful as well, with fair skin, and gorgeous eyes. Oh, those big eyes sparkled, and I envied them. Lilly was my neighbor, and her husband used to work for my husband’s company. Lilly and I had become very close because of this. She often invited me over for lunch. Her husband would dutifully return for dinner every night... unlike mine.

“I am happy,” I replied. “I see you’re in a good mood as well. Clearly something is up. Wanna share?”

“Ha! Sis, you really know me. Well I went to the hospital today for a check-up.” Her smile beamed as she put her hands on her stomach. “I’m pregnant!”

Pregnant! Of course! *Her* husband comes home every night. I immediately thought about my man, that man, going to bed with his whore. He thought I didn’t know: men always underestimate the wisdom of their partner.

“Congratulations!” I hugged her. I was genuinely happy for her. She’d been trying to get pregnant for two years, but it seemed like there had been some problems. “Take good care of you and the baby.”

She smiled and said, “Thanks. You *do* look prettier today.”

“I went to a spa,” I said quickly, walking to my door. “Have to go prepare dinner now. So happy for you! Do tell me more soon.”

She nodded and closed her door as well.

Over the next few weeks, I took the Asclepius and felt better than ever. Each day I could see myself getting prettier. I had flipped my navigation in the river of time from growing older to growing younger. My husband had been away on an extended

business trip... That was partly true, but I certainly knew what he was doing apart from work. One day, I would get that whore, and make her feel the pain I was feeling.

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My husband returned from his trip, and I quickly prepared dinner. He didn't know I was aware of his secret. I placed the dishes on the dining table, and he went to the kitchen and grabbed a bottle of wine. We drank and ate together.

We hadn't drunk together for a long time. I felt dizzy, and his face was red and hot.

"Babe..." he said, "It must've been a while, but I think you've gotten prettier." Then he looked down. "Sexier."

He tried to kiss me, but I dodged him and walked to clear the dishes.

"I'll go take a shower," I told him. Walking to the bathroom, I felt his gaze on my body, up and down. I let myself grin. It was a victory.

We ended up in bed together.

He acted as though everything was normal. Not for me. Thinking that he also lay on another woman, panting and moving, made me feel uncomfortable. Men are such a strange animals. Out of the bed they have their suits and ties, dressed as a gentlemen. But in bed, when they see us naked, they're all the same. They control the former to achieve the latter. Men are all the same.

"I love you," he said when he finished. He laid beside me and promptly slept. He didn't really care how I felt, but I was still touched.

I couldn't remember the last time I had heard this. Tears fell from my eyes, and I understood why. I loved him, and had loved him all along. I also hated him, but it was my deep love that fed this greed and hatred. I looked at him, and rested my palms on his cheek.

I love you too.

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After a month, I returned to the shop, and Villa introduced me to their premium membership. It was quite pricey, but it didn't matter; I was desperately thirsty for beauty. Being a member, I could meet and chat with similar 'beings' in the Pandora membership monthly meeting. I was dying to share my thoughts on this hectic experience. But above all, with premium membership I could make special requests.

"You can give a specific order," Villa explained. "Bigger eyes, redder lips, fairer hair..." She listed out organs as her fingers touched my face, and it gave me a shiver. Then she suddenly laid her hands on my chest and laughed. "This could be larger as well. You can bring in pictures if you want, and we can try to find identical samples to make you even better."

I felt a chill as Villa's hands swept across my skin, but I was feeling ecstatic as I considered new options.

I went to the premium membership meeting later that month, and I came to realize why Laura had led me to Pandora. We were all wounded women licking each other's scars. All coming here to flip our lives. A woman called Yoyo spoke to the group. She was like me, betrayed by her husband, but now she had full control over him. I wondered how and asked her for some tips.

"Lure him in." She smiled as she drank wine from a tall glass. "Men are like crabs; a simple bait and they blindly dive into the cage. But their brains are only so big, and once they're in, they don't know the way out. By then —" she looked at me, "You can do whatever you want to that toy, and he won't dare to make a sound."

Lure him. Bait him. Control him.

These three instructions echoed in my mind throughout the month. I decided to ask Villa for some more Asclepius. I took one pill every two days, and before I knew it, I looked even prettier than ever. My man was so amused that he came home every night waiting for me in bed. He couldn't possibly leave me now, oh yes, he was surely baited and trapped.

After a month I decided to put my cards on the table.

"I know you're having an affair with your secretary," I told him after dinner.

He froze and then gave an awkward laugh. "Who? Amy and I? Babe, you know me, I love you!" He sweated.

For a moment my heart softened, but then it echoed. *Lure him. Bait him. Control him.* If I backed down now, I was never going to win. I shook and said

“I saw your texts, and I also took pictures. You were too careless from the start.”

His smile faded. I immediately put forward that sheet of paper that had tortured me for ages. A divorce.

“Sign it, and I’ll file it. You can go live with Amy, and I can get my life back.” That was a lie. What did I have left without him? I gritted my teeth and said, “I’m leaving you.”

He rose, looking pale. “Please.” He looked at me, and I’d never felt him so fragile. I shook my head. Didn’t say a word, just stared at him.

“Please.” He bent down as he said it again. I shook my head and pushed the paper forward to him.

He started weeping and begging me to not leave. I kept shaking my head until he asked me how he could redeem his love for me, and only me.

I made him promise that day. Fire Amy, and make sure there would be no second Amy. He promised me, no, he swore that day to give me his loyalty.

Finally, I felt like a princess.

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When I woke up the next day, he had already left. But he had left a note saying he would return home that night. I smiled.

As I left home, I saw Lilly in the hallway, her stomach bigger than before.

“Three months?” I asked.

“Yes.” Her smile beamed.

“Boy or girl?”

She shrugged. “Going to find out today!”

I looked at her face and found her prettier than ever. Even brighter than me, especially her eyes. Oh those bright sparkling eyes.

“Well, good luck!” I said. “Do let me know the good news.”

She nodded and walked away singing softly.

As I walked away, I couldn't erase her eyes from my mind. Before I knew it, I was at Pandora. Villa was waiting there.

"You come for something?"

I pulled out my phone with a picture of Lilly and pointed at her eyes.

"What a beauty." Villa's eyes widened. "Her eyes are beautiful." Then she looked at me and nodded. "We could get you something similar."

I smiled in relief.

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Villa contacted me a week later saying that she had found the right sample and that the pills were ready. I took them regularly. After two weeks, I woke up in the morning and looked into my bedroom mirror. My eyes were just like Lilly's! My eyes glowed as they reflected the beam of lights. They were round in a natural way, and each time my pupils moved, it was as if they could talk by themselves.

"Brilliant," I whispered. I couldn't hold myself from admiring the miracle of Asclepius. Within five months my life had transformed completely.

I was interrupted by a thud outside the apartment. At first I thought it was some visitors, but then I heard a soft moan. It was weak and trembling, like someone was in trouble. I cautiously walked to the front door. I opened it and saw a woman sitting there, sobbing and trembling. Her long hair was untidy and covered her face.

I wanted to look away, but she seemed so pitiful. "Are you alright?" I asked.

The woman stopped sobbing and looked up at me. The first thing that caught me were her eyes, red and swollen from tears. Those eyes that were usually big and bright.

"Lilly!" I gasped as I quickly walked by to help her up. "What happened?"

She shut her eyes in anguish when she heard my question. Her face was all pale, and she looked so much older. I panicked and held her right hand. "Sis, what's wrong?"

"Everything..." She shook her head. "Nothing's right. Everything is gone." Tears started flowing again.

I stood there for a while, not knowing what to say. I had never seen Lilly like this. She had always been positive and vibrant. Even in my dark times, she would put a smile on my face. Then I spotted her left hand on her belly.

“You came back from the hospital?”

She nodded slowly.

“Gone.” She sighed, then suddenly tightened my hand. “She’s gone! Everything’s gone! How do I tell my husband? That I lost the baby? I don’t even know how I lost her! I —”

She started panting as she spat out those words, but I could no longer hear. For a moment my mind was a complete blank. My eyes started feeling itchy as if they were fighting to crawl out of my face. Her words were like venom choking me.

Was this just a coincidence? I took a deep breath.

“When did this happen?” I asked nervously.

Lilly didn’t notice my change of tone. “I don’t understand — everything was alright. I went for a check two weeks ago and the doctor gave me a series of tests. He said everything was fine. And I have been so careful. But today he told me my baby was...” She closed her eyes and could not say the word.

My heart sank as I realized what had happened. I hadn’t received eyes like Lilly’s; I had taken her daughter’s eyes, with the price of her life.

“I’m so sorry,” I said with a faint tremble in my voice. Lilly might have thought it was empathy, but it was the guilt of a shameless murderer. A vampire that devoured her baby for beauty.

We stayed silent for a while.

“Sis, would you mind if I rest alone for today?”

I shook my head. “Not at all.”

I helped her to her front door. She smiled. It was a heart-breaking smile. I could see through her eyes that her soul had shattered. But she still forced that smile to comfort me, to make me not worry, to tell me she’s okay.

Only it stabbed through me. Little did she know that her precious kindness was wrongly spent on the one who had destroyed her life.

I returned to my mirror and looked into it. Instead of admiration, I felt disgust.

There are two types of people in this world, the pretty ones and the ugly ones.