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The Road to Redemption

JAYCE THUMBED THROUGH THE SHEAF of well worn bills, keeping Reverend Larkin in her peripheral vision. He didn't look like the picture on the back of his books or the ones on his website, but sleeping in the same clothes for a night or two can do that to you.

"It's all there," he said. As haggard as he looked, his voice was still better suited to the stage or the camera than to the front seat of her pick-up. Easy to see how he persuaded the faithful to empty their pockets into his personal ministry. He was fully Human, though, despite the seductive voice. Jayce had been surprised.

She frowned, staring out the windshield at the rain damp street. He made it sound like a routine job. Point A to point B. All the money up front. But he was entirely too confident for her typical client. What was he doing here? People like him had limousines and entourages, not one Sensitive in a tired truck.

Larkin's money felt like it had passed through too many hands. Jayce wanted to wash hers, though that never prevented the emotional assault. She slipped the bills back in the envelope and shook her head. So many desperate people. As tough as things were around town, Larkin's revival meetings had been SRO. Hard times always seemed to swell church coffers. Something they had in common--both their jobs seemed to be recession-proof.

"I'm sure it is, Mr. Larkin." She emphasized the "Mr" and pretended not to notice his frown.

"That is your fee, Miss Techler, isn't it?"

He stressed the "Miss". For the hundredth time since his call, she wondered how the hell he found out about her. She deliberately put the envelope down on the console between them. He kept his gaze on her face, not the money. For some reason, that bothered her. "Sorry. I can't help you."

Larkin examined his fingernails. "We're both business people, Miss Techler. How much for your services?"

"Take your money," she said, sliding the envelope toward him. Topper would have raised one eyebrow. He wouldn't have had to say a word, but Topper was dead and Jayce wasn't going to give Larkin the chance to make a second impression. "I'm not interested."

That surprised him and Jayce got the sense little surprised Larkin. In her world, his sort of smug complacency got you dead.

He's scared, Jayce. He had to come to you. I bet he's never asked for help before.

She hated it when Topper's voice argued with her. It wasn't fair. His ghost never even hung around long enough to say goodbye, so her own memories were doing a good job haunting her in his place.

Larkin met her eyes with his intense blue gaze. If he wore contact lenses, they were very, very good ones. Even on the run, in rumpled clothes he was charismatic. She could resent him for that alone.

He nodded and tucked the money back in his jacket. "I forgive you and God bless you."

Jayce snorted. "Save it for someone who needs to buy his way into salvation. Me. I know where I stand." There was nothing waiting for her at the end of the line. Not even Topper.

"Then I thank you for your time, Miss Techler."

More polite than she deserved. Jayce squelched a pang of guilt as Larkin placed his hand on the door latch. A tremor danced across her skin. Another followed. Her nerve endings lit up like the sky on the fourth of July. Two trackers, close. Too close. "Shit."

She slammed the shifter into drive and floored it. The engine growled as the truck lurched forward, tires scrabbling for purchase. The passenger door swung open, nearly pulling Larkin along for the ride. Jayce grabbed his other arm by pure reflex and yanked. The door slammed shut.

His composure was as otherworldly as the the forces after him. Why wasn't he more scared? He didn't even ask a single question as she took what must have seemed like crazy, random turns through the mostly abandoned downtown. It didn't matter. Jayce knew where she was. Topper used to tease her she was part homing pigeon.

"Not now," she muttered. Larkin shot her a look, but she just gritted her teeth and kept driving. The back of her neck prickled with warnings. Her instincts took over.

They were still too close.

Larkin hadn't told her it was Suckers. If the Suckers found them, it wouldn't only be Larkin who got drained.

The thrumming slowly faded and then it was gone. Jayce took a deep breath and pulled into the empty parking lot of an abandoned big box store, her hands shaking on the steering wheel. Her pulse pounded in her ears.

Larkin pulled out the thick envelope and leaned over to tuck it behind her window visor. "Thank you."

She put the truck into park but left the key in the ignition. "You son of a bitch. Suckers."

"Would you have left me to them if you'd known?"

Even she wasn't that much of a monster. No matter the good Reverend believed people like her were damned. "Do you have any idea what they do to Sensitives?" He shook his head and she glared at him. "I should charge you double."

"If you can get me safely out of here, I'll see to it that my Church rewards you."

"What will they do, pray over me?" It hadn't worked for her mother, so she doubted Larkin's flock would have any more luck.

"Is that such a terrible thing?"

She wanted to wipe the sincerity off his face. With her fists. "If you do everything I tell you and we're very, very lucky, we might just live through the day."

"I am not afraid of death."

Jayce laughed. Then why was he in her truck? "You're a bad liar Reverend Larkin."

He smiled at her and it erased days of worry and fatigue from his face. The man was charming. But she had known that. No one got to be where he was without the ability to manipulate and dazzle. "I didn't say I was ready to meet my maker today," he said, his too-blue

eyes twinkling with unexpected humor. "But my soul is pure and my heart light."

Jayce shook her head. She figured he was just a snake oil salesman, selling a particularly caustic flavor of snake oil. But now it looked like he was drinking the stuff. As long as he didn't expect her to take a sip too.

"We have a long day ahead of us. The rain will only slow us down on the road. Not them. How badly do they want you?"

"Does it matter?"

Jayce wanted to scream, but she just gripped the steering wheel harder. "Answer the question."

He sat up taller and fixed her in his gaze. "The Lord called upon me to baptize the demons. In His name."

"You what?" Her instincts screamed it was time to run. Just leave him the truck and her gear and get the hell out. "Do you have any idea what you've done?"

"Yes. The Lord's work. I don't expect you to understand."

How could he be so damned calm? "Demons." Jayce shook her head again. Well, if any of the Old Bloods were demons, the Suckers fit the profile. "I should break both your legs and leave you for them as a peace offering."

"I don't believe you would do that."

"After you just singlehandedly demolished the treaties?" It had only been six years since the last of the Blood Wars ended. Not that anyone would call the current situation peace. Not with the Suckers at the top of the heap.

He kept his gaze on her face. "Even so," Larkin said.

"And what makes me so trustworthy? I've heard your gospel of purity." And Jayce didn't see how she fit into any of his definitions of the word.

"The Lord led me to you. He wishes you to be redeemed."

"Get out of my truck. Now."

He turned in his seat to face her directly, remorse in his expression. "I think it's too late for that, child."

A shiver of revulsion rippled through her. "Don't ever call me that again. Just get out."

"They marked me." He unbuttoned the top three buttons of his wrinkled shirt. Two puncture

wounds puckered the flesh just above his collarbone. "Already, my blood and sweat run with abomination."

Jayce closed her eyes and pounded her hands against the steering wheel. "Why aren't you dead yet?"

"My faith is my rock. My Lord my redeemer."

"And Sucker poison is busy tenderizing all your cells. Idiot, you're a walking, talking oven stuffer roast." Why hadn't she sensed it? It wouldn't be long before they descended on him, following the scent coded in their injected saliva. She had to get rid of him before they found her too.

"The Lord will cure me."

Jayce laughed, but the coffee curdled in her stomach. "Before or after the Suckers finish you off?"

He smiled and the hands that buttoned up his shirt were rock steady. It was more than she could have managed. "The Lord will cure me, with a little help from my flock. That's why I need you, Miss Techler." He handed me a business card. "You must get me here within the next. . ." He glanced down at his wristwatch. It was one of the expensive ones. And probably the real deal. ". . . ten hours."

CleanSweep Labs. There was a logo of a broom, an address, but no phone number. Redemption, Oregon. Well, that was fitting. "How about the nearest hospital?" If they caught it early enough, a total transfusion and a bone marrow transplant might give him a fighting change. It was experimental and expensive, but Jayce figured the church would pony up. Larkin was their public face. The sooner she could deliver him somewhere safe, the sooner she could decontaminate her truck.

Larkin shook his head. "My mission is there."

Mission. He was also a lunatic. A lunatic trying to ignite a new Holy War. Baptizing Suckers. The symbols of the Reverend's faith would infuriate them. And a rational Sucker was bad enough.

Money or no money, Larkin gave her little choice. As long as he was in her care, in her truck, she shared his risk. But he was right about one thing. she wouldn't abandon anyone to the Suckers. Not even the fanatic who killed Topper.

Jayce tore out of the empty parking lot, her truck's wheels kicking up gravel in a rooster tail. She was a damned Sensitive, not some ninja. Mostly what she did was keep folks who were on the run under the radar until they got from point A to point B. Humans, Old Bloods, or Mixed Bloods. What happened after that wasn't her concern. It made use of her talents and she guessed she represented something like neutral ground. And until now, she'd managed to keep clear of the Suckers. Of all the Old Bloods, they never looked for her services, and she never looked for them. It was an agreement that kept her alive so far.

"Why don't you get some sleep," Jayce said, keeping her eyes on the road. "Best case scenario, we've got few hours of drive time ahead of us."

"You are not what I expected."

She snorted. As if most Humans could tell that there were monsters in their midst. That was her job. Her mother never told her who or what her father was, but his Old Blood ran through her veins. And for whatever reason, it tangled with her mother's genetic pattern to make Jayce a Sensitive.

Larkin closed his eyes and Jayce exhaled slowly. She would ensure his safe passage, but she didn't have to talk to him.

"THANK YOU FOR LETTING ME SLEEP."

She shrugged. The quiet had been a blessing.

"Where are we?"

"About forty miles away." They had made decent time.

Larkin looked out the window. "The Interstate would be faster."

"Shut up and let me do my job." She was sticking to secondary roads for as long as she could. "If the Suckers decide to consider your little stunt an act of war, they can compel the Human authorities to help them. The Interstates have traffic cameras."

She saw him nod in her peripheral vision.

He fell silent and Jayce forced her shoulders to relax. The wipers swept the light rain from the windshield with a comforting rhythm. So far, so good. The sooner she could deliver him to

the lab, the better. There were only a few cars on the road and none that seemed to be trailing them. She glanced at her speedometer and eased her foot off the accelerator. Getting picked up for speeding would be just plain stupid.

"Were you baptized, Miss Techler?"

"Give it a rest, Reverend. There's no TV cameras here." The man was famous for mass blessings and baptisms where the would-be faithful could buy their soul insurance.

"You probably won't believe me, but I preferred the little church I headed in Peterboro."

She struggled to keep her voice even. "Reverend Larkin, I really don't care if you like to dress up in a clown suit and preach to circus elephants." God, that was something Topper might have said. He could always make her laugh, especially when she was angry. She gripped the steering wheel tight enough to turn both sets of knuckles white. "Why would you give a rat's ass what I think? I'm a Mixer. One of the damned who have broken souls. That's why God has cursed us, right?"

After a long pause, his voice was soft and full of pity. It was the last thing Jayce wanted.

"God loves us all, Miss Techler."

Sure. Except if you're a monster or a freak. According to Larkin's beliefs, the Old Bloods had no souls, so maybe she was better off in his theology. Broken could be fixed, right?

"Leave me the hell alone." Her voice was shrill in the confines of the truck. "I don't believe in God and your church has just started a war that could bury us all."

"Is there nothing you have faith in?" Larkin spoke with the same smooth resonance as he did in his broadcasts.

She let the miles slide by, chewing on his question. "Faith. Nothing you would understand." Topper had believed in her, and for a short while with him, she had even believed in herself. But he had been killed for his belief, shot by a man whose faith said Topper was better off dead than loving her.

Flashing lights ahead caught her eye. Shit. There was something she believed in. No situation was so bad it couldn't get worse.

Jayce eased off the accelerator, glancing for a side road. Going through local towns was risky, but stopping for a road block would be worse. One sniff and any Sucker for miles around would flock to them like buzzards to road kill. At least no one knew where they were headed.

There were just too many small roads to cover them all. And as long as she kept moving North they should be okay.

The turn signal sounded like a clock's ticking.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"You either trust me or you don't, Larkin." She wasn't going to explain herself. Not to him.

"I trust in the Lord and He brought me to you."

She rolled her eyes. "Did the Lord tell you how stupid it was to piss off the Suckers?"

He shrugged and winced as the fabric of his shirt rubbed up against the wound beneath. It must hurt like hell, but he didn't complain. She shook her head. Maybe his god did protect fools and children. "I can't believe you got out of there alive." It was hard not to admire Larkin, at least a little bit. "There aren't too many people I know who would go against the Suckers alone."

"I wasn't alone."

The placid expression on his face didn't change, but Jayce felt a shudder ripple through her. "You left someone behind?" If she hadn't been worried about being trailed, she would have slammed on the truck's breaks and turned around.

"They are martyrs now. God has rewarded their faith," he said, in his even, implacable voice.

She stopped the truck then, not caring who might be watching. "You walked into a nest of Suckers. Okay. It's crazy, but it's your funeral." She swallowed hard, past the lump in her throat. "But you got a bunch of people killed. That's murder. And the last time I read the ten commandments, murder was right up there, near the top." Marked or no, she wanted him out of her truck and out of her life. She'd deal with the Suckers later. Somehow. "Take your blood money. The lab is less than 10 miles from here. Even if you have to walk, you should get there before the last of your hours is up."

Larkin nodded, ignoring the envelope. "Never doubt the Lord has plans for you, Jayce Techler." He reached his hand out and she met it with hers, automatically. As their hands clasped together, a jolt of wrongness jumped from his palm to hers. She jerked her hand away as if she had burned herself.

"I can taste it on you." She shuddered. A metallic tang grated against her nerves.

"Did you not realize, Miss Techler?"

She shook her head.

"There was a reason they let me get out of there alive".

"You knew." The blood drained from her face. "You knew they would try to turn you."

"Yes. We have failed before, but I was too great an opportunity for them to pass up."

The great Reverend Larkin, turned into a pawn of the Suckers. Jayce shivered. "We?"

"The treaty you believe I have broken has never been honored by the Suckers." Larkin hadn't answered her question.

Deep down, Jayce knew that. She knew also the Blood Wars had been as much a power struggle amongst the Old Bloods as between them and the Humans. In the end, the Old Bloods understood the odds were on the Human's side in sheer population alone and there had been somewhat of a truce since. The Shifters spent too much time fighting one another for dominance to be a major threat, and the Sidhe wanted nothing more than their perfect isolation. The Suckers had little difficulty replenishing their numbers lost in the war. It made them the main threat. "I don't understand. Why are you doing this?"

He paused for a long moment before speaking softly. "Have you never risked everything for something you loved?"

Once upon a time, she would have given anything for Topper. And in the end, he had given his life for hers.

He's not such a bad sort, Jayce. Even if he is a religious nut job.

That was Topper. He loved channel flipping and watching the televangelists. Even when they had denounced mixed relationships. Their relationship.

"There are members of my flock that have been taken by the Suckers. Some have been turned. They have been stolen from the hand of God and I have been given this task to redeem them. If I don't get to the lab, it will have been for nothing." Larkin met her gaze with his and she was the one to blink and look away. "What will you do now?"

Jayce buried her head in her hands and laughed until tears streamed down her face. She couldn't help it. No matter what path she chose, the universe was mocking her. Leave the Reverend by the side of the road and in a matter of hours, he would no longer be entirely Human. And she'd be the first one he'd come after.

Take him to his destination, and if he survived, he'd start a crusade. It wouldn't be only against the Suckers, but it would spread to any who carried the Old Blood. Including her.

He closed his eyes. At first, she thought he might be praying. As if that would do him any good now, with Sucker poison fighting for control. Sweat beaded his forehead and his cheeks were flushed. Jayce didn't need to touch him to know he was burning up.

"There isn't much time," Larkin said. "Once the fever sets in, the next stage is convulsions followed by a brief coma. After that, it will be too late." His voice was steady. He could have been commenting on the weather.

Jayce wanted to scream at him, to roll him out of the truck and keep on driving. "What if we don't make it in time?"

"Take this." He handed a padded envelope over to her. "Open it."

Frowning, she unsealed it and pulled out a plain leather knife pouch. She slid the slim silver blade partway free. It was not much larger than a letter opener, but much, much sharper. Her hands shook and the envelope rustled, too loud in the confined space. "What do you think I am?"

He studied her for a few minutes before answering. "God's hand." His eyes slid shut again.

Jayce set it down in the cup holder with shaking hands. Her best weapons were movement and caution. She was a damned Sensitive. He had to know how much using that knife would hurt her.

A reflection in the rearview mirror caught her eye. A smear of color against the rain. Larkin stiffened, looking to Jayce and the knife. A car approached where they were parked. It slowed as it came even with them, stopping in front of the truck, blocking them in. Larkin hadn't moved, but he was whispering the Lord's Prayer. Her mother had made her memorize it as a child. Before she realized her own daughter was a freak and threw her out.

A tall man walked toward them, his yellow slicker so bright it hurt her eyes. Even before she saw the holster, she already pegged him as a cop. He had the measured walk and the confident swagger. Jayce rolled down the window, her body tensing. If he was a Sucker, she couldn't tell. There was already too much of it pouring off Larkin.

"You folks need any help?"

Her hand strayed toward the knife and she jerked it back to the steering wheel. What was she going to do. Stab some local cop? She might as well just turn damned thing on herself and take the damage directly. "Just taking a breather. It's been a long trip."

He nodded, dark hair plastered to his head by the rain. "It's not real safe to stop on the side of

the road, ma'am."

Jayce smiled. Suckers would never call their food 'ma'am'.

"There's a place in the next town with pretty good coffee. The pie's not bad either."

"Thanks," Jayce said. She took a deep breath. A strong musky maleness poured off him. It was more than a scent she took in with her ordinary senses. She doubted Larkin would be able to tell what she could. "You live around here?"

"All my life." He smiled and there was no hidden tension in the set of his lips or in his shoulders. Just a local sheriff, stopping to help someone on the road. What were the odds in her messed up world? She nodded. Lucky bastard.

"If you stop at the coffee shop, tell 'em Officer Milo sent you."

Jayce watched the young Were as he walked back to his car with the odd, animal grace they all shared. His car eased back onto the road and drove away. She wondered what his Human mother thought the first time he changed. Maybe things were different here. The pang of jealousy didn't surprise her. It was an old pain.

"Still think our souls are broken, Reverend Larkin?"

His lips had stilled. His eyes were moving back and forth in a jagged rhythm through closed lids. Tremors moved through his body, jerking his limbs.

Not broken. Never broken. Topper's voice whispered through memories she had struggled for so long to suppress. The pain of loss lodged in her chest like the bullet that killed him. But it wasn't Larkin's fault.

And it wasn't hers, either.

Tears streamed down her face like the raindrops on the windshield as she started up the truck again.



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This story was released December, 2012

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You can also read along with her first draft process of [DERELICT](#), her SF novel in progress.