

## **skin, breaking beneath your teeth**

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# skin, breaking beneath your teeth

by Anonymous

## Summary

A manor with every room fully furnished, every surface spotless, every treasure out in the open, beckoning. Silence roamed the empty halls, spaces devoid of life.

He should've known it wasn't abandoned, really. Silly him.

Now his heart's gone.

## Notes

the au that nobody asked for but i wrote anyway

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

# Chapter 1

“It’s rather rude to leave without saying goodbye to your host,” a voice says, rising from the darkness. “Or hello, for that matter.”

Ash freezes. The manor should have been empty – he’d checked, as was routine when looting a place, and had turned up with rooms full of silent furniture and fireplaces full of dust. A miracle find, he had thought. Shelter from the storm *and* riches for days, all without needing to threaten people.

How wrong he’d been.

He spins around, a retort rising to his lips, then swallows it.

A man stands at the top of the sweeping staircase like a ghost in the moonlight, one hand skimming the banister, the other tucked leisurely behind his back. Ash had expected a housekeeper, maybe, because that would be the only thing that made sense, but the ruffled silk shirt, fitted pants, and expression of cool assuredness looking down on him exude an entirely different role.

“Who the hell are you?” The words come out more of habit than genuine curiosity, a ploy to buy time.

“I’m Red. Your host,” the man says, slowly gliding down the stairs, and his steps make no sound at all. “The one you tried to steal from.”

“Oh, come on,” Ash laughs. The few things he took should be able to pay for a week or two's worth of food and lodgings, and he'll be on the hunt again. “Don’t be a sore loser about it – you’ve got more of whatever I took, anyway.” His hands find the doorknob behind his back, hidden from Red’s view. “And there’s nothing you can do about it-“ he presses down, leans into the door to swing it open. “- see you later!”

The handle jams. The doors are dead weight behind his back.

His heart stammers in his chest; they had opened so easily hours ago under the thundering storm, extending out like inviting arms to a safe space where the air wasn't liquid.

He tries the handle again, and when it still doesn't move, he turns to face it, shoving it down with both hands. It sinks, but something rattles, and the doors loom unmoving.

“Three candlesticks. A clock. A vase.” Red says. “Not the most egregious, but a transgression nonetheless.”

When Ash spins to face him again, he's already at the bottom of the steps, somehow, even though seconds ago he'd been near the top.

Ash gives up on the door and grabs his crossbow, loaded and pulled back, and levels it with the sight set straight on that crisp white shirt across the foyer.

“You stay right where you are, and I won't have to use this.” Red stalls so he grins, the familiar threat rolling off his tongue. “Is your life really worth a few trinkets? You nobles laze around all day on your vast piles of wealth, it's high time you shared some with us. It's easy - I'll be gone, and you can forget I was ever here.”

His mind spins for a backup plan as his eyes search for hallways, openings, other escapes in the darkness. He's bought some time, but it wouldn't last forever.

Big mistake.

“What's mine is mine,” Red growls, and Ash finds him too close for comfort, a whole foyer's worth of space closed in the fraction he'd taken his eyes off him. “And I *despise* thieves.” He steps, and lunges.

Well, things could've gone less violent.

“I warned you,” Ash narrows his eyes, takes aim, and pulls the trigger.

A hollow, wet thud.

Red sways, staggers back a step, hand going to the bolt stabbing through him. In front of him, a growing stain of crimson eats up white silk. Surprise dusts his expression, brows raising, lips parting a smidge as he looks down. “How... interesting.”

“Didn’t think I’d do it?” Ash crows, spreading his open arm. “I hate to waste a good bolt, but too many of your kind overestimate how much your lives matter to me.” There’s a reason why his exploits were so often successful, and he works solo. It’s simple – leave behind someone shaking their fist at empty air, or leave behind a dead body. Once Red drops and slowly bleeds out in the background, he’ll have this entire place to himself, and from what he’s seen he could be set for years to come.

The mechanism of his crossbow clicks coldly as he levers the string back. “I’m amazed you’re still standing.”

“How interesting,” Red repeats, the sounds caught in his throat. A warning rumble. His eyes, slitted and dark. “Most would’ve run by now.”

He tears the bolt from his chest. Blood rolls from sharp metal to rough wood. With a crack, the whole thing snaps in his fist. He tosses it behind his back, where it clatters and skitters off into darkness.

Ash stares, speechless. His mouth feels dry.

Red is sizing him up like he’s prey, and he gets a vague notion that he’s being given an opportunity to flee.

But where has he ever gotten by fleeing?

Adrenaline sings through his veins. He lifts his chin, defiant, and in a single motion, flips a bolt into his hand, nocks it, fires.

Red catches it.

“What a shame,” he says, and smiles wide, and Ash realises with a sinking heart that he never had a chance at all. “It would’ve been more entertaining if you ran.”

*Vampire.*

As if triggered by thought alone, the house floods with light, candles, lamps, creaking chandelier above flickering to life. The sharp teeth that might have been a simple trick of shadows now shine like razors, definitely real, as real as the panic settling in.

He'd heard stories of monsters lurking in the dark, around bends in lonely roads, in dusty castles in the mountains. He hadn't thought they were *real*.

Red plucks the crossbow from his grip and there goes his only weapon shattered into splinters on the marble floor. The thought crosses his mind that maybe he'd be let go if he returned what he stole, but the immediate next thought is who does he think he's kidding? The real prize that Red wants is his hammering heart, his rushing blood, the enticing heat pulsing beneath his skin.

He's slammed into the door by hands closing around his wrists, a blur before his eyes. Hard wood digs into his spine, sending pain needling through his bones and bursting through his skull where it collides.

It's unfortunate, but inhuman strength is no joke - he kicks and flails through the dizziness to no avail.

"Keep still. It'll hurt less that way." Red says it gently, as if he really cares, as if he hadn't just nearly broken Ash's wrists by holding them too tight.

Ash snarls. Like hell he will. He strains harder, twisting, turning, doing everything in his power to keep his neck from being still and exposed for an easy bite. He'd rather break himself apart than let this *thing* in front of him drain him dry.

To his surprise, Red lets go. The follow through from his last struggle has him stumbling.

"I'm serious. You'll end up hurting yourself," Red says, tilting his head, an expression of faint remorse softening his features. His voice has softened

too, into something bashful. “Unlike some others I know, I dislike making a mess. If you will, just let me- Look at me, please.”

The skittish part of Ash's brain screams "trap, run" on repeat, and he hesitates shoulders drawn, hands hovering over his neck for a scrap of protection. The sudden change in behaviour gives him whiplash, and no, he can't be fooled this easily, he needs to run, he needs to escape.

Until by some unknown force, he looks. He really looks, meets Red's eyes with his own, and feels his breath catch at what he sees.

Red's beautiful.

It's a strange thought to have now of all times, his mind registers, but that thought too quickly vanishes into mental fog. He's staring, unmoving, unable to take his eyes away.

How did he not notice earlier? Maybe it's the new lighting, the golden candlelight painting strokes of the prettiest face he's ever seen, long lashes, dark eyes, soft lips.

Something flutters in his chest.

There's a faint pulsing in the background, somewhere.

“There's nothing to be afraid of, little thief,” Red's closer and Ash can't believe it, what luck he must have to be the only one receiving attention from something so angelic. Even his voice is silken smooth, a pleasure to the ear.

A touch on his shoulder, cold. Fingers press into his neck, light as a feather.

The pulsing is getting louder, overpowering.

Annoying, Ash thinks. It's ruining the experience.

Red leans in. “Relax, and it'll be over soon.”

Nails scrape against skin. Searching. Testing.

Ash shivers.

And it's as if he's been doused in cold water, clarity crashing back to him. He realises he had dropped his hands. He realises he had gone slack, waiting, obedient.

Blood rushes through his ears, loud, and he matches it to the pulsing sound from before, now pounding frantically with no haze to mute it.

“Fuck you, you monster.” He yanks his head to the side, *away*, and lashes out, not even bothering to curl his hands into fists. No target - it's enough for him to catch on anything, clothing, flesh, anything he can scratch and maim and tear. Eyes, hopefully, so he can claw out Red's eyes and prevent him from doing whatever that was ever again.

“You're so obstinate.” It's only partially a complaint, in a voice that has changed, all traces of sympathy gone. The sharp edge that he'd first addressed Ash with is present; each word makes the air bleed. “Let's do this the hard way, then.”

Not if Ash has anything to say about it.

He bites his lip. Hard.

The taste of iron, hot and heady, floods his mouth. Something dribbles out the corner. It hurts, he overdid it, but it's the least of his problems right now.

Red halts, gaze flicking to his lips, transfixed, and there's the opening.

Ash yanks a bolt from his quiver. Sidesteps so he can see the doorknob, then lodges the bolt between it and the door, levering with all his strength.

An amused chuckle ripples in Red's throat, but nonetheless he's shaking his head as if to clear it. “That won't work.”

Ash knows. He knows, so when Red pounces and the door handle doesn't move and his bolt snaps in half, leaving him with a broken piece of wood – he drives his shoulder forward and stabs the spike into Red's chest, straight for the heart.

Red gasps, lurching back as if he'd been burnt. "How-" He claws at the protrusion, words going strident, strained. "How *dare* you?" Drops pitter-patter to the floor, forming a trail as he struggles a few more steps back. "What have you *done*?"

The wood darkens with blood.

Ash's lungs heave. There isn't enough air in here for him to consume. Yet all the same, he manages between wheezes, "a stake through the heart. I've heard- I've heard somewhere that it does the trick." A laugh catches in his throat, broken, and he wants to let loose, but his chest feels like it's going to collapse. "Serves you right." The light in the room wavers, candles shivering, flickering.

It went smoother than expected. A relief.

"No-!" Red sinks to a knee, head hanging, reaching a trembling hand for Ash. "I have been slain!"

It's hard to resist the urge to reach out and hit the hand away just to rub it in, spit on his misfortune, but Ash decides against it in the end. Who knew what other tricks vampires had up their sleeves; he might be dragged down as well however that may be. He can gloat later.

So he watches, looks down on Red, waiting for him to keel over, to go still. Then he'd leave.

Take his plundered loot and run.

This place is cursed enough as is – he isn't going to wait around to see if some other creature shows up.

"That's the line, isn't it?"

Ash tenses.

Red looks up, grin splitting his face. The stake lays soaked on the ground, removed and discarded like the first crossbow bolt. "You missed."

Ash opens his mouth. To swear, to say *something*, but the air is forced out of him as he finds himself pinned to the door for the second time tonight. Red's got two of his hands in his one, pulled above his head high enough to restrain his movement. His other hand grips Ash's chin, tilting his head up to expose his throat.

It's futile, but Ash still squirms, trying to make the most of his limited range in this position. It can't end like this.

"Now, for the long awaited..." Red dips in, fangs flashing.

Ash squeezes his eyes shut.

Teeth snap, a crisp, clean *snick*.

He waits, holding his breath. The pain will come, and then the heat, and then the sticky wetness pouring down his shoulders. His heart is going to crack a rib with how hard it's beating, fear and anticipation as one.

Nothing.

"You're scared," Red says, hairs away from his neck. The breaths of air displaced by his speech ripple against Ash's pulse. He's snickering. "I hear that beautiful heart of yours fighting for life."

"No shit." People had always said his impulsiveness would get him killed one day. "You're going to kill me."

"I'm not going to kill you."

"Liar." He growls. His wrists burn. The bones in his spine are going to be ground flat against the door. "Get on with it."

"No," Red draws back in a rustle of fabric, a smile playing on his lips. "I think I'll keep you around."

Ash doesn't believe him for a second, but it's not like he can do anything. He settles on turning his head away, not looking at the face of the monster to take his life.

*A beautiful face*, his mind supplies out of nowhere, the traitorous thing.

Something soft dabs at his lips. He flinches at first, then stills when he finds it's a handkerchief carefully wiping the blood from his self-inflicted wound.

"I told you that you'd end up hurting yourself."

"Whose fault is that?" He can't help it.

"You intrigue me." Red murmurs, head tilting. Silence, as he contemplates. "Perhaps I can be a thief as well." He traces a circle into Ash's chest, the touch light against the heavy pounding of the heart within. "Let's start with this."

His nails – claws – slice all too easily through the fabric of Ash's shirt, scoring into the skin below. It stings.

One cut. Two. "X marks the spot."

Ash snarls, "let go of me."

"My pleasure." The weight on his wrists vanishes and he stumbles blindly, lightheaded.

"I look forward to seeing you later," Red says, a mocking twist on Ash's earlier words.

"You will see me *never*," Ash collapses back into the door, knees buckling.

The world spins, goes dark, and the last thing he sees before he goes under is that damned smile, sharp teeth and all.

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Ash wakes up in a tangle of sheets, clutching at his chest.

It takes a moment, but slowly his surroundings become clear, faded wood walls, scruffy green rug, worn-down dresser in a corner with a vase of wilting flowers on top. It's the room he'd managed to nab above the tavern

in the town he'd been passing through, the one he thought he'd left before getting caught up in the storm.

Everything is just as he remembered. His hair tie, on the short drawer by the bed. His hunting knife, tucked under his pillow. His travelling supplies lay heaped by the door, all wrapped up in brown sacks.

Was it all a nightmare?

He flips the scratchy blankets aside, sweeping his hair back to sit up to the window, peering outside.

The glass is streaked with trails of droplets, and the earth below is spotted with muddy puddles drowning out patches of grass. His horse pokes its nose out from under the eaves of the shed, chewing at the freshly watered green. The sounds of people bustling to and fro along the paved street rise into the new morning. Another day, more carts and carriages and travellers leaving their mark on the world.

A nightmare, then.

He shivers. It's freezing.

Well, it makes sense. It rained last night. The temperature dropped.

He reaches for the bolt of the window; some fresh air would chase away the lingering darkness.

His breath does not fog on the glass.

That's silly, he chuckles to himself. He probably tossed and turned and threw off the blanket last night, and as a result, his body cooled significantly. Not a problem. Maybe not very healthy, but completely normal. Rubbing at his arms, he curls up and pulls the blanket around his shoulders, waiting for the warmth to return.

Yet, the longer he waits, the colder he feels. It's no longer a chill from the outside, seeping into his body. The chill originates from the inside, deeper than skin and flesh and bone – something is missing.

It can't be.

He grabs his wrist, fingers digging into his pulse, except he *has* no pulse.

It can't be. It doesn't work that way.

He presses his palm to his chest. Nothing beats against his touch.

No.

Reaching into the collar of his shirt, skimming across skin, he finds it.

A scar, raised flesh, in the shape of an X just below his clavicle, listing left.

It's impossible, it's not even big enough, how is this-

The blankets fall in an airy *whump* to the floor as he stumbles out of bed, scrambling over to his bags by the door. He throws open a flap. Gold. Crystal. Pale porcelain.

Three candlesticks. A clock. A vase.

*Fuck.*

## Chapter 2

### Chapter Notes

some worldbuilding and other information if you look hard enough

red isn't in this chapter, sorry boys

A better man would have cut his costs and called it there, finding things to do that are more worth his time than returning to challenge a vampire, but Ash is not a better man and likes his petty revenge with a side of life endangerment. On top of that, after all that happened, he's fairly certain he can elevate "petty revenge" into "righteous retribution".

So.

He's got a heart to steal back, and a monster to kill.

--

The way the physician looks at him makes him uneasy.

It started when they first laid hands on him, making a vague comment about how cold his body temperature was before going on to poke and prod and search for something he couldn't pinpoint. His eyes, then his mouth, then his hands.

"My heart's gone," Ash says. The small crackling fire in the burner nearby, light dancing in the reflections of stoppered bottles and ointment jars, supplies him with a little warmth. He's learnt that sunshine and fireplaces do wonders for his chill.

"I see." They're holding his wrist, two fingers pressed to the pulse point. They drop his hand and tap his shoulder. "Lift your head."

He does, they take his head to turn it this way and that, and he shivers, the phantom feeling of nails *right there* rising from his memory. He flinches.

They draw back.

“Hmm,” they say, and squint at him, lips thinned, arms crossed.

Ash fidgets.

“When did this... issue, begin?”

He thinks back, picking through murky images and shadowed recollections. Sometime after midnight, most likely. There had been moonlight, and then Red, and then blood, and then a door against his back and hands on his wrists and teeth snapping at his neck – Ash shakes his head vehemently, purging the flood of images.

“Last night?” He offers.

“Hmm.” He really doesn’t like the way they stare at him, too scrutinizing.

Coming here was already a huge risk: thieves like him were better off suffering and dealing with their own wounds and ailments if they didn’t want to get caught, but if there was anyone who knew about hearts and matters relating to the body, it had to be a physician. Until last night he hadn’t even been aware that hearts could be stolen without killing the previous holder. All he wants is a scrap of information, anything he can build a plan of action off.

“So- is there anything I can do?”

The physician clasps their hands together. “I’ve never seen a case like yours before. I can’t believe you’re still alive.”

Those were Ash’s thoughts exactly when he had woken up with a coldness in his chest, stillness in his veins. The words being said out loud, nonetheless, form a tangle in his stomach.

At least he’s not a vampire, that much he knows. No fangs, no cravings for blood, no supernatural abilities, no urge to be an insufferable dick – and maybe the last one isn’t strictly a vampire trait but the one vampire he knew was one and he’s bitter, dammit.

“Here.” Glass clinks as the physician moves a table of supplies, opening up a space closer to the burner. “Keep yourself warm – I think I have an idea. Don’t go anywhere, just- just sit tight.”

It takes a considerable amount of self-control for Ash not to bolt right then and there before the door closes.

That manner of speech is one he knows too well for the physician to hide away successfully under a reassuring smile and falsely sympathetic words. It’s the same kind of tone, regardless of words, used by people he’s held at the tip of his arrows as they tried to stall for time, call for guards, or attempt a counterattack.

Usually, he’d shoot and get out, but there’s nobody to shoot at, he has yet to replace his crossbow, and a physician isn’t the type of person he’d shoot.

He has no idea why they’ve gone to get backup, but he isn’t going to sit around and find out.

There’s a window in the back of the small office he’s in that swings out with a light push once he undoes the latch. He plucks some rolls of bandages from a box nearby – small price for trying to trap him – and clambers on to the table, using it as a footstep to vault over the frame into the dingy back alley outside.

It was a bad idea, he concludes, to waste his already meager and rapidly depleting supply of money on a visit such as this. His boots splash into puddles of grimy water as he runs.

Till is waiting for him at the corner of the square he left him at, and neighs softly at Ash’s anxiety. Ash glances around. No sign of the physician or anyone looking like they’d be after a thief, just townspeople going about their day.

“Wait a little longer,” He tells Till, patting him on the nose. “I’ll be back.”

There’s one more place he has to try.

--

The scholar's guild is quiet.

The back window gives him a bit more trouble than the physician's – it's higher, narrower that he has to squeeze in, and locked, which means he had to pry it open with his knife, but when it closes behind him, the sounds of the outside world cut off.

He stands in the back of a archive dimly lit by lamps hung up along the arching ceiling. Muffled conversation echoes back to him through the shelves. At the front, there must be a study area for those who have access to this place.

Soft footsteps approach. He ducks into a pool of shadows behind a corner as someone passes.

He tries not to think about the last time he had been in a place like this, rows on rows of shelves soaked in the smell of leather and paper and ink, without having to hold his breath, hide his steps, and watch for the shadows of people around corners.

Once all signs of movement subside, he creeps out of his hiding spot to examine his surroundings. Books. Books all around, big and small, thick and thin, crumbling at the seams and newly bound. The urge to pick one up and start flipping through comes upon him, but he resists it just long enough-

There, small painted in gold letters along the wooden edge. *History*. And on the next shelf over, *Medicine*.

Medicine sounds like a good place to start, but it's a broad category, and the shelves show no sign of other markings. It's all down to luck here.

A few randomly selected books and hiding from people later, he begins to feel discouraged. A lot of them were manuscripts of herbs and chemicals and medical procedures, pages of drawings and diagrams and long, long paragraphs of description that he has to squint at to see. The darkness didn't

help at all. The few anatomy books he found contained a mess of complicated words he didn't understand, and among those he did understand regarding the heart, it was clear that the heart was meant to be whole and healthy *inside* of the owner's body, crucial to life.

The chill is settling back into his veins. There's no source of warmth in these aisles. He clenches his fists, rubs his arms, and hurries on.

If he can't find anything about his heart, then the least he can do is look up something about vampires, hopefully an easier method of extermination that doesn't involve getting up close and personal with a stake.

Labels blur by, dimly glinting. *Botany. Alchemy. Mathematics.* What are vampires even categorized under? *Commerce. Craftsmanship.* There seems to be no system to the order of categories, so he can only go one by one.

Doubling back twice, evading a whole group of scholars, he arrives at *Fables*. There are significantly less books here, and they're all so old he finds his frigid fingers covered in dust as he skims through.

He's not sure what he expected.

The books are about all sorts of fairy tales and creatures from fae to witches to underworld monsters. Barely anything is about vampires, maybe a few pages here and there describing them, but it's nothing he hasn't heard before. Sharp teeth. Blood drinkers. Can't be reflected in silver. Can only be killed using a wooden stake. Then there are the snippets in loopy, crazy handwriting that makes about as much sense as the content it describes: vampires can fly. They're old and crooked and shriveled up. You can cook them.

He slides the books back with a low sigh, shoulders drooping from both the cold and dejection. Hours, gone just like that, and even if he did find anything, would he be willing to try? Tales are fickle; anything could be warped from retellings and exaggerations, and he only has one chance.

Red had let him go once, for whatever reason, but there's no telling if there would be a second time.

The cold forces a shiver down his nerves. He's done here.

--

Till bumps him in the chest when he sees him. It's late afternoon with the sun glittering off the wet rooves of houses, roadside signs slick with lingering rain.

"Kept you waiting, didn't I?" Ash scratches him behind the ears, then unloops the reins from the post. "Let's go."

Till bumps him again. His ears flick, and he paws at the ground.

Ash's hands tighten on the reins. Carefully, with an air of nonchalance, he turns to look for what could have set off Till's senses – Till had a nose for the law and other threats.

He doesn't have to wait long.

Across the road a group of men come around the corner, dark capes and large brimmed hats, heavy crossbows and swords at their sides. Ash counts at least four knives strapped to their chests, then a couple of wooden sheathes beneath those. These aren't guards; they look like hunters, mercenaries.

The group crosses the square, converging with more people dressed the same way, clustered at a doorway.

"That's everyone back," one of them says. "We've combed the streets for a few hours now, and there's no sign of this man you say escaped from your office. Do you take us for fools?"

The distressed responding voice sounds very familiar.

They're talking about him.

"Yep, time to go," Ash mutters to Till, and dips his head, hiding behind the bulk of Till's body as he heads the opposite direction.

He pulls up his hood and picks up the pace.

From behind the wind twists a last few words into his ear – “vampire”, and “hunt”.

Oh.

For the second time today,

*Fuck.*

--

He’s gotten out of places quickly before, fleeing a falling body or a squad of guards hot on his heels, and while none of that is happening this time, it still feels that way as he rides away from the village, Till’s hooves thundering on the earth.

The wooden sheathes he saw were stakes. Those were vampire hunters. They had to be, because there’s no other explanation for why they would’ve been talking about vampires to the physician that had looked at him so weirdly for not having a heart.

His head feels light. The world is cracking open, revealing a whole new facet he never knew existed before, first vampires and now those that hunt them. He could be wrong and he’d misheard and he’s being paranoid, but it’s better safe than sorry. Every thief knows that.

Maybe he should’ve stayed behind, shown them that he wasn’t a vampire, and then used them to face Red, gain an advantage with the people who looked like they knew what they were doing.

But then, they might not believe him and put a stake through him before he could prove anything. And even if they did believe him, they would become competition with him in killing Red.

That’s the important part. Red dies by *his* hand. Not anyone else’s. The plan he has in mind is definitely disrupted by the discovery of hunters, but he’ll find a way to make it work. He always does.

First, he needs to get back to Red, and fast.

He's not a lot of things, but persistent he is, so while he has no idea where or even how far away Red's mansion is, if he'd gotten there once by running around blindly in a storm, he could do it again.

## End Notes

welcome to guy gets his heart stolen and tries to steal it back, the trainwreck of a fic that'll end in everything going up in flames (read: unplanned)

watch me grind out a multichap fic as i outline and plan for another, longer multichap fic

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