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Blood Stained Glass, an excerpt

Bee Bishop

“Irene! Stop being a drag!”

Red lacquered nails and thin fingers reached across the car to grasp the book from Irene’s hand. The palm-sized, tawny leather covered book was snapped shut. Irene didn’t fret; she had memorized the page, paragraph, and line that she had previously been reading.

“*Mon amie*,” Irene scolded gently. “That was not very ladylike. I expected more from one of Hollywood’s best actresses.”

The starlet shrugged and tossed the book across the back seat of the limo carelessly. Geraldine Howard was one of the most fabulous women in the West. Dripping in wealth from her numerous silver screen appearances alongside Monroe, Hepburn, and Taylor, Geraldine was truly an “it-girl” of the time.

“Irene darling,” the starlet cooed. “I’ve invited you to this dance to relax and unwind.”

“I thought you were taking me as a ‘thank you’ for getting your brother cleared of a murder charge?”

“Well, yes of course— that as well. But I imagine a private investigator in such high demand, such as yourself, could use the time to herself.”

Irene sighed, pressing her temple against the window of the limo. The sun had started to set behind the hill and the massive house on top of it. The structure only grew as the limo approached closer and closer.

When the driver had finally stopped and opened the door for the two women, Gerladine handed Irene a mask.

“*C’est quoi?*”

“It’s a masquerade darling. You have to wear it.”

Irene curled her lip at the mask.

“I refuse to wear it.”

“Darling please. It’s the entertainment for the evening.”

“*Non*. I refuse to deceive any person, regardless of what it will be used for.”

Geraldine sighed.

“Still you have to at least have it in your hand.”

With a firm push, she forced the insulting mask into Irene’s hands and stepped out of the car. It was a smooth silk that would cover the area around her eyes and her bridge, edged with a black lace and gold stud arching like eyebrows. With a huff of frustration, Irene stepped out of the car.

“*Et puis zut.*”

The whole point of a masquerade is anonymity. A mask to shield you from the expectations and responsibilities that come with your everyday face.

Geraldine wasn't wearing a mask. Not really. Her whole face was covered by an intricate mask painted a midnight blue with lace gold trim contouring the slopes and curves of her face. Emerald and ruby inlays were stars that glittered in the light with each turn of her head. It was the single most expensive, gaudy, and extravagant mask in the room. Maybe even the whole world.

But that wasn't what gave it away.

What betrayed her identity was the enormous necklace collaring her throat. She had been bragging about it for months, claiming she was "just waiting for the right moment to wear it." The smallest diamonds were the size of dimes and the largest were the size of half-dollars. The diamonds cascaded down her neck like a waterfall and settled heavily on her chest. The end of the necklace dipped below the neckline of her dress. Her dress, of course, was a fine velvet that looked like a forest in the early morning: misty, murky, yet glistening in the light. The blue-green mist on the bodice of the dress swirled into a deep silver on the bottom. Her shoulders dipped and Geraldine was clearly fighting to keep her posture up against the weight of the necklace.

But of course that was only one of two conversations stirring around the party that night. The other one was that 'silly little French detective' — lord forbid any of them try to remember that her parents were from Belgium— 'and all her mannerisms.'

Irene hardly paid attention to any of them. What caught her attention was the silk wrapped woman sitting near the bar. She was puffing smoke through her cigarette holder which was wrapped up in her glove covered hands. She stared at the room with wide eyes, out of her element, and clearly trying to take in as much as she could.

Irene, the tall woman she was, strolled across the room in a few steps. The woman's eyes landed on her immediately.

"*Pardonnez-moi madame,*" Irene started gently. "Would you care for a dance?"

Silk-gown looked her up and down.

"I'm quite alright where I am. 'Mfraid I can't dance."

"Nonsense, everyone can dance, madame," Irene said. "It's whether or not they dance well, that is the question."

The woman gave a short bark of a laugh.

"Well then, I don't dance very well."

"Why don't you let me be the judge of that madame...?"

"Please, *mademoiselle,*" she smiled. "Tiffany Copani."

"Irene Dupin."

"Like the detective from Belgium?"

"*Oui.* The very same."

Tiffany, as if suddenly intrigued, shifted closer. "Is it true that

you once prevented an art theft by creating a fake auction to catch the thieves?”

Irene shrugged. “I believe the papers reported the police caught the thieves that way. I was merely in the same room.”

Tiffany snorted softly.

“Yeah right, like those guys could figure out which way is north with a compass.”

Irene then noticed a ruby necklace around Tiffany’s neck, no bigger than the size of a wedding ring.

“*C’est tres bizarre*, I thought I saw that necklace on another woman this evening.”

Tiffany’s hand shot up to cover the necklace. She pulled on it gently so that she could see it.

“Ah well, it’s a very common necklace,” she said. “I should take it off before Ms. Patterson gets upset.”

A crash sounded from the other side of the room and Irene looked over to see a tall man, his face red and pruneish, as he shouted at Geraldine.

“You stupid bitch! You’re going to regret this!”

Two of the waitstaff forced him off of Geraldine, who barely looked flustered against the threats.

“I mean it! You’re going to wish you stayed out of it and didn’t see anything! I’ll cut your eyes out of your dead body if I have to!” With that final threat, and four more waitstaff, the man was pushed out of the room.

“*C’est qui?*”

“That’s Eugene Newbold,” Tiffany answered. “Big Hollywood hot-shot. He makes good movies but has the worst attitude I’ve ever seen. Rumor has it, he’s cheating on his wife. If he gets caught, that puts him in hot water. His father-in-law runs the studio he works for and I doubt he’s going to want to keep him around.”

Irene studied Geraldine closely. She didn’t seem worried about the foul-tempered man spewing threats. She nonchalantly looked around the room without a care in the world.

“She is not scared of him?” Irene asked.

“Who’s to say?” Tiffany responded. “Geraldine Howard’s known for keeping her cool.”

Irene turned to glance quickly at Tiffany.

“How do you know so much about these things? You are not accumulated in this crowd so why do you know so many things?”

Tiffany seemed startled at the question but shrugged.

“I just hear things. That’s all.”

C’est des conneries. But Irene let it go for now. By the time she looked

by at Geraldine, something had clearly changed with her. Her face was stark and her eyes wide. If Irene looked closer, she could see Geraldine's hands shaking ever so slightly. If Irene narrowed her eyes enough, she could catch the glimpse of the back waitstaff uniform swiftly walking away from Geraldine.

"Well I must go," Tiffany said. "It was lovely meeting you Ms. Dupin."

"S'il vous plait mademoiselle, Irene."

Tiffany sent her a suggestively wicked grin. "Irene. Good evening."

As Tiffany darted off, Geraldine quickly walked up to Irene.

"Can you believe the nerves of some people?" she spat. "Absolutely atrocious."

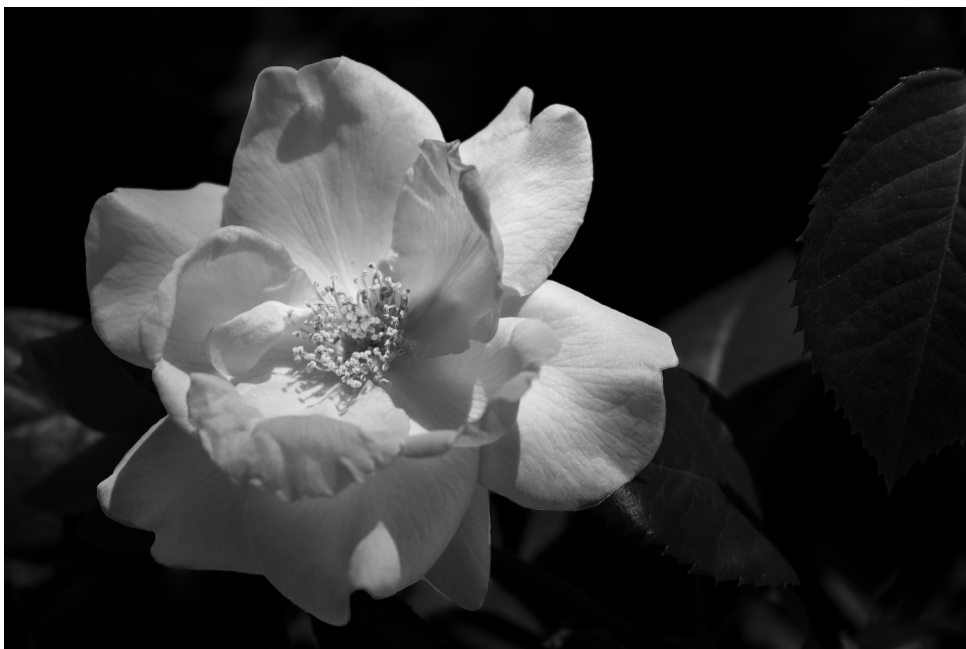
"You are talking about Monsior Newbold?"

Geraldine shot a look at Tiffany, seeming pleasantly startled for the first time in the evening.

"Eugene? Oh no, I can handle him."

"C'est vrai? He was screaming very loudly earlier. And I have heard he has an attitude that is... oh-how do you say? Très affreux."

"Ha!" Geraldine's laugh was harsh and hyena-like. "He's about as harmful as a new born baby. Believe me, Irene darling. I can handle him."



Devona Barnes. *Faith*. Digital photograph