

# ~ Penhale at Sunrise ~

by K. Alexander

**DISCLAIMER** The people in this story are figments of my imagination and belong to me.

## **WARNINGS**

**Violence:** Yes. It's genre-bound and quite gruesome at times, but I sincerely doubt you'll be waking up crying

**Bad language:** Yes. The situation calls for it. Not atrocious, though. I'm not saying anything that you haven't heard before (mostly from me. He he.)

**Disturbing imagery:** Oh yeah. Sure. Once again, it's the genre. It's all a bit crazy and sadistic in the best possible way. But the level of your being disturbed depends on the fragility of your state of mind. Whether you're a sissy, that is ;)

**COMMENTS** I had a very complete and particularly weird little dream one night, and this is it. As I never really do short stories, "*Penhale at Sunrise*" is my equivalent of standing up and going for a brisk walk to clear the cobwebs of the hefty novels I've been working on (forever, it feels like), and though this is a wacky snarky kooky little saunter where I end up biting the postman, I hope you enjoy it.

Constructive criticism welcomed. Find me at: [kalex@webmail.co.za](mailto:kalex@webmail.co.za)

## **18h30**

When Layla Cadogan opened her eyes it was dusty and dark. She had no idea where she was. The air smelled stale, and the surface beneath her was cold and unforgiving. Metal. She was lying on her back. Blinking rapidly she concentrated until her surroundings became more visible and her head a little clearer. Above her the roof of the cubicle (for that's what it seemed to be) was alarmingly low, leaving a space barely high enough to crouch in easily.

Her neck hurt, the lower back of her head where her spine met her skull, as if she'd fallen. A particularly nasty headache squeezed tightly around her forehead. There was a slow burn in her shoulders, gradually spreading down towards her lower back, like a slight sprain or a muscle injury. Uncomfortable, but not unbearable.

She'd been in the bathroom at the shopping centre, she suddenly remembered now, before this. Standing in front of a mirror, fixing her new ruby-red lipstick. Had there been some sort of accident? An earthquake? Was she trapped in the rubble?

Lifting a hand she rubbed at her forehead, encouraged to find that her limbs were still working. Then, slowly, she turned her head. The coldness under her face seemed to sear her cheekbone, and something rough scraped at the sensitive skin. Her throat was dry. At the periphery of her vision was *something*; a mass that attracted her attention for no reason at all. Narrowing her eyes she squinted, until she could make it out in the semi-darkness.

A figure crouched a few feet from her, back turned towards her. A woman, maybe, by the leanness of the body. She seemed to be listening to something.

Frowning, Layla listened too. There was nothing beyond a persistent drip-drip-drip in the background.

Licking her dry dusty lips she called out tentatively.

"Hello?"

The woman did not move or turn towards her. "You are awake." It was not a question, nor did it have an inflection of any kind. She had a thick accent, something sounding vaguely East European.

There was a slight tang of copper in Layla's mouth, and she wondered whether she'd bitten her lip when she fell. Shifting slightly she licked her lips again.

"What happened? Where am I?"

The woman turned her head just a little, showing her profile. She had a sharp nose and a sharp chin, barely visible by means of some faint source of light.

"You are in the pipes."

"In the pipes?" Layla's head throbbed in time with her heartbeat. "I don't understand. Was there an accident?"

"There was no accident." There was a slight lisp to her speech.

Lifting herself to her elbows Layla frowned. "What's going on? What am I doing here?"

"You are lying on the floor."

The answer earned a sharp look from Layla, but the woman showed no sign of joking. Wondering if there was a language barrier Layla tried again.

"How did I get here?"

"I took you."

The simple answer sent a rough shiver down Layla's spine. With a sense of disquiet she stared at the unmoving profile. The woman was too small to have taken her from anywhere. She was almost sure of that. And what would any terrorist want with her? Swallowing, she sat up, almost gagging at the reeling sensation it set off in her head.

"What do you mean? Do you mean you brought me here?"

"I took you and I brought you here." The woman spoke unerringly, as if she were engaging in foreign language classes and repeating a lesson.

"Why? Why did you take me?"

"For me."

Layla wondered whether she could get up and run fast enough. Probably not. The roof was so low, and she had no idea where she was. Slowly she began to work her feet in under her.

"Why for you? What do you mean? What do you want with me?"

"I wanted your blood."

With one foot already almost under her, Layla froze. There was a moment of silence, with nothing but the drip-drip-drip in the background. Then she forced a coarse laugh, one that was so drenched with alarm that it would fool nobody.

"What kind of sick stupid joke is this? Is it Eddie? Trying to scare the shit out of me? Huh? Is it Eddie??"

"I do not know your Eddie."

Somehow the flat accented words could be nothing but the truth. Pushing herself backwards a little Layla watched the woman carefully. She could feel her breath beginning to hitch and her heart begin to flutter.

"Then what?"

The woman turned her head. In the near darkness her eyes were pools of black. Expressionless. Her gaze was so intense that Layla felt as though the woman was staring straight through her. She watched Layla, but said nothing. In the silence Layla could hear her own breathing, jagged and stuttering. Terror was creeping in.

"What the fuck is this? Who *are* you?!"

"I am Mahasti."

The tremors started gradually. Layla could feel her arms shaking under her, threatening to spill her onto the ground. Then the quivering slipped up her shoulders and down into her ribs. The muscles began to tremble and contract; she could feel her breath being pushed from her lungs in uneven bursts. Whether it was the fear, or the cold seeping in, or even shock, she couldn't tell.

"What do you want with me?"

"I have already told you."

"What kind of fucked up game is this?" Layla was inching backwards; her heels were drumming

on the metal floor making hollow sounds, but she didn't care. The woman didn't appear to, either. Her dark gaze dropped to the source of the sound and then lifted back up again. There was no expression on her face. Somehow this was more menacing to Layla than anger would have been.

"Let me go. Please?" She had to force the plea past the lump in her throat that was threatening to suffocate her.

Mahasti cocked her head. "Where do you want to go?" Her gaze was deep and direct.

"I want to go back to where I was. Where you found me."

"You want to go back to the bathroom."

"Yes!"

"You can go." Mahasti turned her back on Layla again. "I am not preventing you."

Disbelievingly Layla watched the narrow back with apprehension. "You won't keep me?"

"I am finished with you."

The words sent another tremor through Layla's limbs. Taking a deep breath she drew her legs in under her, ready to stand. Pins and needles suddenly flashed through them, and with a quickly hidden grimace Layla flexed her toes furtively to get rid of the painful sensation.

"You won't stop me?"

"I will not stop you." Mahasti cast a blank look over her shoulder. "You will die tomorrow."

Layla felt like crying. She had no idea of what was happening, and nothing seemed to make it any clearer. Ignoring the prickling feeling in her feet, she hoisted herself up onto them, ready to flee. "Excuse me?"

"You will die outside. Penhale will come."

Backwards, millimeter by millimeter. Careful not to make too much noise. Keep the crazy woman talking so that she won't notice the movement.

"Penhale?"

She'd forgotten. Mahasti did not answer non-specific questions. The woman shot her that blank look again, a look that took in her slowly shifting feet and then looked away without interest. Chancing a quick look over her shoulder Layla tried to gauge the route. The sight of a dead end suddenly clarified her surroundings, though it did much more to obscure any reason why or how she would be there in the first place.

The pipes. She was in a ventilation shaft. And the only way out was past Mahasti.

As if reading her thoughts the woman looked around again, casting her a blank stare.

Nervously Layla crouched down, trying to gauge her escape route. The woman had said that she would not stop her, but perhaps she was playing with her, knowing that Layla would have to get past her to get out. Perhaps if she kept talking she could find a method to get Mahasti out of her way.

"I don't know how to get out."

Mahasti turned her back on Layla. Whatever question had been implied, she had not understood. Or had chosen not to answer. Layla tried again.

"You said you wanted my ... blood."

Once again, no response from Mahasti.

"What were you going to do with it? A ritual or something?"

Now the woman's head turned slightly. "I drank it. There was not a ritual."

A shaky nervous laugh escaped from Layla's lips. "What are you, a member of some satanic cult or something?"

"No."

The simple answers were really starting to grate her nerves. Clenching her jaw Layla inched forward. "Then what? What are you supposed to be? A massive fucking bat? A vampire?"

"I have been called that."

"What - a *vampire*?"

"Vampyr." Mahasti nodded slightly. "I have been called that."

"Don't be fucking ridiculous." Fear and cold made Layla brash. "It's the product of a fucked up mind. You're just some Goth weirdo with delusions of grandeur. Vampires don't exist."

The woman looked at her steadily. "I am in front of you."

"And let me guess. You've bitten me, and now I'm one of you." With a sarcastic snicker Layla lifted her hand to her neck. "Where the hell do you..." Her hand connected with her neck, with a warm wet slick column, and as she touched it she could feel the gaping slashes where pieces of flesh had been torn away underneath the seeping liquid. A dull roar rushed through her head. With a small smothered gasp she fell backwards, her hand still on her neck.

"What the fuck did you **do** to me?!"

"I have already told you."

"I'm going to... shit... I need a hospital... I have to have this..." Now the shock was setting in properly. Against her neck her hand started shaking, pushing at the wounds painfully.

"In an hour it will be healed."

"Like hell it will!"

"In an hour it will be healed."

Layla glared at Mahasti. "You fucking **freak**! I don't know what you're playing at, but you won't get away with it. I'll bring people. I'll bring the cops, I promise you." Then she remembered that the other woman crouched squarely in her way. With an unsteady hand she pulled up the collar of her shirt and pressed it against her neck, attempting to staunch the flow of blood. "I'm going to get out of here. You're not going to stop me."

"I am not going to stop you." Mahasti repeated herself impassively. "Penhale will find you."

"What the fuck is Penhale?"

"Penhale is the other one."

"The other one like you?"

"No. You are like me..."

"I am not like you! You're a fucking *crazy* person!"

The woman waited for Layla to finish, and then continued as if she had not been interrupted. "... but Penhale is unlike me. Penhale is unlike others."

Grinding her teeth Layla pushed herself up again. "You know what? I'm sick and fucking tired of this. The whole talking in riddles thing and the sick fucking Goth thing. Okay? I just want to go home."

"You can go. You will not make it. Penhale will be waiting."

"And what will this Penhale do when he or she or it finds me, you crazy druggie freak?"

"He will turn you. *Zonbi*."

"Oh. Right. Of course." Layla barked a brusque laugh. "This just gets better and better. I tell you

what. I'm just going to go. Whatever you want to do to me you'd better do. It's better than bleeding to death up here."

There was a coldness creeping up her body. Loss of blood, probably. Shock. Her heartbeat was irregular - she could hear it thumping, missing a beat, fluttering wildly in her chest like a wounded bird. The hand clamped around her neck was cold. Her fingertips were icy. Licking her lips she forced her feet forward. They would not obey. Panic rose in her, blooming hotly in her veins. She was too cold, too shocked, and too slow. She wasn't going to make it.

When her legs folded under her she collapsed in one spot and began to sob. Mahasti glanced over her shoulder once, her dark eyes vacant, before she continued her silent vigil.

Layla lay on the cold hard metal, her fingers clamped pointlessly around the gaping gashes on her throat as she gasped and sobbed. Her tears tasted as salty to her as blood.

## **21h00**

She must have lost consciousness. At first, again, she had no idea of where she was. Then, as memory slowly began to come back, she hoped desperately that it had been a terrible dream. She kept her eyes closed. Her throat was raw from the crying, and her hand was still clasped tightly around her neck. Loosening her fingers slowly she lifted them, noticing the stickiness under her skin, but when she probed hesitantly at her flesh there was nothing. No gashes, no gore, no lethal wounds, no pain. Intact.

Layla opened her eyes gradually, praying silently and frantically all the while. Above her, a low metal ceiling. The pipes. Choking back a sob she shifted her gaze around.

Mahasti crouched a few feet from her, back turned towards her. She seemed to be listening to something. Layla could not control the horrified cry that escaped her. Casting a glance over her shoulder, Mahasti looked at Layla wordlessly.

"Oh God. I thought I was dreaming."

"You may have been. You were sleeping."

"I thought I had dreamt *you*."

The woman watched Layla without comment. She was not pretty by any conventional means, but certainly extremely striking. Her sharp features housed exotic slanted dark eyes and pronounced Slavic cheekbones. While she was dirty and grimy, the patches of skin that showed were pale and smooth as marble.

Shuddering at the coolness Layla sat up. "Are you going to kill me?"

"No."

"I don't believe you."

She should have known Mahasti wouldn't respond. The woman watched her, cat-like eyes blinking impassively.

"I want to go. I want to leave."

The other woman said nothing. Rocking forward in frustration Layla clenched her teeth, and then reflected for a moment before she spoke again.

"Will you show me the way to the bathroom? Where you found me?"

Mahasti watched her. She appeared to be thinking. Then, suddenly, she nodded. "Yes." When she began to move it was a startling sight. Her muscles shifted from absolute stillness to coiled lithe grace instantaneously. Even in that crouched stance she had taken six steps forward before Layla could respond.

"Hey. Wait!"

Without comment Mahasti did just that. Struggling upright, Layla stretched her cramped thighs and rubbed her hands against her upper arms in an attempt to banish the chill before she once again noticed the stickiness with distaste. Lifting her hands she looked at them with a grimace - and was surprised to find that she could see the faint blotches of red (blood?) coating them clearly. Looking up she studied her surroundings, and then the woman waiting patiently for her. It was not as dark in the pipes as she had thought. There had to be a hidden source of light somewhere.

The pain in her cortex was still there, lingering, though the ache in her shoulders had abated. Shifting them to loosen the tightness she rose to a crouch.

"Okay."

Mahasti led the way, her movements graceful and wholly soundless. They took several turns, at times sliding down slightly slanted pathways or climbing up ledges where the pipes joined at different levels. The space grew, until they could stand up straight without a problem.

Finally the woman stopped. Pointing at a grate at their feet, she graced Layla with her detached stare.

"The bathroom."

Keeping one wary eye on Mahasti, Layla knelt down and grasped the edges of the grate. It didn't seem to be fastened, but it was so heavy that she could only lift it a few centimeters off its frame before her fingers began to cramp. She tried once, and then again, with the same result.



Sitting back on her haunches she exhaled sharply, feeling tears of frustration well up in her eyes. She shot a quick look at Mahasti - the other woman was patiently sitting on her haunches - and looked away, angry at herself. Finally, with an irate wipe at her eyes, she cleared her throat.

"It's too heavy for me."

Mahasti gave her a minute nod. "Yes. It is heavy."

"Will you help me lift it?" As Layla asked it, she could feel her heart clenching in her chest. If this madwoman intended to keep her here, surely she would find out now. It had seemed like the right question, but in retrospect it was probably ludicrous to ask your captor to help you escape.

The woman across from her looked down at the grate for a moment, her body completely still. Then, turning her unnervingly dark gaze back to Layla she nodded.

"Yes."

The shock hit Layla with such force that she gasped before she could stop herself. Mahasti did not respond to the sound, but reached down and slid her fingers below the edges of the metal square. Hurriedly Layla did the same, and then counted, feeling ridiculous for it.

"One, two..."

She should have known that the other woman would not have any use for such social conventions. Mahasti simply lifted, and with alacrity Layla followed her example. She knew how heavy the grate had been; even with two carrying the weight it should have been weightier than it was. She knew this, and yet she did not have to strain to raise the metal. Mahasti did not seem to be exerting herself in any manner. Her dark eyes were fixed on a point beyond Layla without focus, and when she had lowered the grate to a level point beside the open hatch she simply eased it down onto the surface and resumed her position, crouched near the hatch. With a slight shake of her head Layla shook her hands and then peered down through the open square at the white tiled floor now visible about three meters below them. The stalls were off to the right, the basins to the left, but right below her there was nothing that would assist in her descent.

To her surprise, Mahasti suddenly offered guidance without being prompted. "It is not too high to jump."

"I'm afraid that I will hurt myself."

"You will not hurt yourself."

It was oddly comforting, how the woman stated everything as if it were a fact. Then, realizing that she had thought this, Layla shook her head at herself. She was a prisoner. This woman was her kidnapper. Just because the door to escape had been opened did not mean that she could afford to be complacent.

Taking a deep breath she moved forward - strangely, Mahasti shifted backwards as if she did not want to be too close to her - and, propping her hands on the edges of the hatch, lowered herself as far as she could. Then, with a clench of her teeth and a short silent prayer to whoever was listening, she let go.

## **21h30**

Layla had never been an athletic woman. Thus, it rather surprised her when she landed perfectly on both feet. Though the shock of the landing jarred through her ankles and feet she was in one piece.

*Safe.*

As if to dispel the very notion of the word, Mahasti suddenly appeared next to her. If hers had been a perfect landing, the other woman's was practically unearthly. Dropping low on the ground, Mahasti rose fluidly in the same motion and stretched. In the harsh glare of the fluorescent light she stood out sharply against the white tiles and the white walls - in fact, there was a very brief moment when Layla had the distinctly absurd feeling that Mahasti was some sort of human... or not human? ... black hole; that she was absorbing any light that dared to come near her. Concentrating on the woman, Layla tried to figure out what it was that had given her that impression. To her mystification the simple act of looking at Mahasti caused an odd visual effect; it was as if the woman was impossible to focus on properly. The edges of her silhouette shifted and reset themselves, causing a faint recurring blur. Nauseous from both the strain and the flickering movement, Layla screwed her eyes shut and took a deep breath.

"Open your eyes."

"What?" Scowling, she obeyed and peered at the other woman. Mahasti was not looking at her. The other woman had approached the basin and was splashing water on her face, ostensibly to remove the grime. Pausing, she looked at Layla over her shoulder.

"Do not close your eyes. You will want to know what is coming."

"Freak show." Layla couldn't stop the sour comment from slipping past her lips, but the other woman apparently didn't care. Mahasti was once again bent over the basin, wiping and scrubbing at her face.

Taking the moment, Layla studied the dark woman as carefully as she was able to. Mahasti was slightly shorter than she, wiry and lean. The outfit she was wearing was comprised of odds and ends; a black short-sleeved t-shirt with a few threadbare patches worn over a long-sleeved burgundy shirt, a pair of jeans in a dark colour probably attributed to filth rather than the actual material, and sneakers that could have been white once, but was now a dusky gray with a pair of bizarrely pink soles. A thin green artificial leather belt held up the tatty old jeans, and between their loose grip on her hips and the shifted material of the shirt a jagged design in black showed partially.

Suddenly Mahasti turned her head and Layla busied herself at the closest basin quickly, scrubbing her own hands until they were rid of the dark sticky mess that had been coating them. Blood? So she'd thought, but she had nothing to show for it. She didn't even believe in vampires. She believed in freaks and misguided weirdoes and the power of the mind when you were exhausted and scared.

Cupping her hands she gathered water from the running tap and splashed it over her face. When she looked up into the mirror it took a moment before her brain registered what was wrong.

She was flickering. Not like Mahasti - to herself she looked like one would when standing before a running projector, bright one moment and almost transparent the next. She was a mess, a blur of blood and wild untidy blonde hair and tear tracks, and she was flickering.

Jerking back, Layla turned her head away and clenched her teeth before she looked back.

Nothing but her.

With a strangled gasp she leaned forward and rested her forehead against the cool mirror. She had to get away. She would be fine when she could rest. This woman was screwing with her mind. Telling her she was a vampire... Vampires weren't supposed to have any reflection. So the books said. Rolling her forehead against the smooth surface, Layla turned her head gradually to shift her field of vision.

Mahasti had finished at the basin and was now standing in the middle of the room, watching Layla idly.

She had a reflection. Of sorts. It rolled, like static when a television wasn't exactly on the right channel, down and down, obscuring all details but a basic faint outline. Fuzzy bars of black, gray, icy pale blue.

With a cry of anguish Layla turned towards her, eyes wide with dread. Mahasti stood unmoved. "Do not look at the world through the mirror."

"Why not!? I've *seen* you!"

"Not for me. For the *Zonbi*. You will not see them there."

"Dear god... " With a sob Layla began to scream. "Help me! Somebody help me!" It was late. Most stores would be closed, but the security guards might hear her and come for her. Anything but this.

Mahasti watched her guardedly, and then shook her head. "You will not want to do that. You call them to you."

"Fuck **off**! I'm sick of this shit! SOMEBODY HELP ME!" With a sob Layla stumbled back

against the wall and slid down with her face in her hands. "You - just leave me alone!" Her sobs echoed off the walls of the empty room, and when she lifted her head a while later, Mahasti was gone.

There was, however, a woman standing in the bathroom door. She had her head cocked to one side, with a quizzical expression on her face. The logo on the breast pocket of her steel grey jacket read "Fantom Security", with a little yellow line drawing beneath it.

"Were you calling?"

"Oh, thank God." Rising from her slump against the white tiles Layla shook her head. "I didn't think anyone would come. I didn't think anyone was still here... "

Something wasn't right. She could feel it as she rose, while she was speaking; a little filament of dread rising up through her chest and into her throat. It might have been the way the woman watched her, almost as if she were tracking the sound of Layla's voice rather than looking directly at her. Or the way that she stood so motionlessly, not even a twitch. It could have been the scent... though Layla could smell nothing out of the ordinary, and immediately dismissed the bizarre thought that entered as if from someone else's head.

"Is there a problem?" The woman's voice was mellifluous, but the inflection was just a little... wrong.

Looking around, Layla tried to find any method of escape while attempting to appear as nonchalant as possible. "I... it sounds silly, but there was someone in here with me..." Her gawk caught the mirror and she almost screamed as she realized that she could not see the woman's reflection in the doorway. Snapping her gaze back she became conscious of the fact that the woman was now approaching slowly, with a weird disembodied lurching motion. It almost looked as if someone were controlling her badly with wires, like a marionette. Over her shoulder two men were now also visible, their eyes focused on Layla as they entered the bathroom.

"I... I'm" She wanted to sound as if she was calm, but her voice was escaping in breathless gasps. They had to know that she knew. That she knew something. To hell with pretence. Layla skittered backwards until she was cringing with her back pressed against the cold wall. There was nowhere to run.

The woman approached her, stopping when there was barely a meter of space between them. Tilting her head slightly she sniffed the air. The man behind her did the same, his upturned nose twitching as he did so. Beneath his neatly clipped brown walrus moustache his mouth drooped on the left, like he'd had a stroke. Inhaling deeply he leaned forward and spoke into the woman's ear.

"*Kochon* stink." His voice was somewhere between a hiss and a wheeze.

The woman made a humming sound in her throat. "Mm." Staring at Layla with eyes the colour of olives she smiled. "Where is your friend?"

Her breath smelled like something familiar, something sweet and cloying and dank. The smell wafted over Layla and she almost gagged. "She's not my friend. She's ... she's mad... I don't know... "

"Mmm." That same humming sound. The woman looked over her shoulder at the men behind her, and then back. "Very well, then."

There was an unpleasant grin on her face, one that showed her dirty teeth and pale gums to their fullest advantage.

It was earth that her breath smelled of.

The hand that the woman reached out was scratched in four places. A solid layer of black lay under the nails. Layla pressed back against the wall, a soft high-pitched keen escaping from her throat.

## [Part two](#)

[K. Alexander's Scrolls](#)  
[Index Page](#)

---

# ~ Penhale at Sunrise ~

by K. Alexander

**You can find the DISCLAIMER and WARNINGS on [Part one](#)**

Constructive criticism welcomed. Find me at: [kalexy@webmail.co.za](mailto:kalexy@webmail.co.za)

*The hand that the woman reached out was scratched in four places. A solid layer of black lay under the nails. Layla pressed back against the wall, a soft high-pitched keen escaping from her throat.*

**22h00**

It happened so quickly that Layla shouldn't have been able to see it at all; like a silly sped-up Kung-Fu movie with a frenetic electronic soundtrack in the background.

From right above them Mahasti dropped onto the woman's shoulders. Her thighs wrapped around the woman's head and then she arched herself backwards into a handstand, flinging the woman

forcefully into the opposite wall with a sickening crack. Even as the woman was sliding down bonelessly, leaving a trail of blood, Mahasti had already twisted back and kicked the walrus-mustachioed man's legs from under him. He landed heavily on his back, and before he could shift she was bearing down on him. Her knee drove down on his face with a loud crunch, and then she was kneeling over what was left of his head, calmly watching the third man. A big broad guy with a blond buzz cut, he'd just realized what had happened. In the hundredths of a second that it took him to bend his knees and drop into an aggressive stance, Mahasti uncoiled from her crouched position and leapt directly into him. Her head exploded into his jaw from below, snapping his teeth together and his head back with a thump. He fell straight backwards, his tall frame hitting the ground with a dull thud, unaware of the woman who now crouched above him like a feral cat.

Mahasti turned her head to look at the bloody woman who was crumpled in the corner, her eyes glassy. Then she studied the man under her for a moment. When she was satisfied she straightened up and stretched almost casually, looking over at Layla.

"You were looking at the mirror."

"What did you just **do**?" Even as she said it Layla realized that she was calm; that she was actually much too cool and rational after having faced several psychopathic killers. That awareness should have scared her more than the slaughter, but she was completely numb.

"I finished them." Leaning down, Mahasti took the scarf from the blond man's neck and used it to wipe the gory mess from her leg.

"Why?"

"Did you wish to do it yourself?"

"No! No." Layla watched with grim fascination as the dark woman threw the scarf into the corner, where it drifted down to drape itself over the dead woman. "They are *Zonbi*." She meant it as a question, but it came out as an amazed bleak statement. As you would say a particularly nasty truth.

Leaning down, Mahasti grasped the big man's lapels, and then looked up. "I have already told you."

If Layla hadn't thought by this time that the other woman was incapable of sarcasm, she might have imagined the sentence to contain an unsaid "I told you so." As it was she had to chance a quick look just to make sure. Mahasti was hoisting a man twice her size up by his lapels without so much as a grunt. Because he was much taller than the dark woman she couldn't pick him far enough up off the ground, and so she settled for dragging him towards one of the stalls. Layla's eyes fixed on the sole of his large brown shoe scraping past her, bump-bump-bumping over a set of uneven tiles, and idly she wondered where her fear had gone. She felt cold inside. There was nothing else beyond a vague sense of false serenity. Perhaps this was the effect of being terrified for too long a period.

Propping the big man inside the stall, Mahasti returned for the walrus-mustachioed man, casually taking him by one foot and dragging him behind her. This time Layla did have to turn away from the sight of his crushed face, and when she'd finally fought down the bile and managed to get her swallowing reflex under control, Mahasti had already taken away the woman too. Closing the stall door behind her the dark woman walked to a basin and washed her hands casually.

"Were they alive? The ... *Zonbi*?"

Mahasti looked up at her reflection in the mirror and wiped at a dirty spot on her cheek. "Not as you understand it."

"How then? Do they work for Penhale?"

"Yes. They work for Penhale." Mahasti yawned, and though her teeth were pristine they certainly weren't pointed. "When he takes them they become him. He owns their ears, their eyes, their limbs, and he feels through them. They have no emotions or will of their own."

"What did they ... he want with me?"

"He wants your blood. The fresh ones make him strong."

It was horrible, but she had to know more. "The fresh ones? What do you mean?"

"The fresh ones." Turning her head Mahasti looked at Layla with dark eyes. "The fresh ones. It will take you one day to become. Now, you are still fresh. Your blood is between, and you are not strong enough to fight."

Frowning, Layla stepped closer. "You mean I'm like ... fresh meat?"

"Yes. You are fresh meat."

"And you? What are you?"

"I am old meat." It was surprising, how close the woman got to making a joke. It would have been funny, perhaps, except that her voice was so level and that she'd just told Layla that she was live bait.

"And Penhale won't hurt you?"

"Penhale does not want me."

"So he *can* hurt you?"

Mahasti stared at Layla, her dark eyes inscrutable. Finally she shrugged minutely. "Penhale can hurt me. I can hurt Penhale. It is irrelevant. We have no interest in one another."

"Why doesn't Penhale want you?"

It almost seemed as though, behind the expressionless eyes, Mahasti was trying to work out what Layla wanted. "I am an elder. I am of more use here than I am as *Zonbi*."

"An elder?" Layla took another step closer. "What is that?"

"I am an elder." If she wasn't mistaken, Mahasti was getting edgy. She had no idea how she knew this, because the woman was still standing motionlessly, her gaze blank. "I have lived for a long time. As long as Penhale. I am as strong as Penhale. He does not fight me if he has no reason to."

"So why are you of more use here? What do you do?"

There was a pause before Mahasti spoke. "I take one. I take what I need. I make them fresh and leave them for Penhale. He takes the blood, and then he takes them."

"So you supply ... meat to him?"

"Yes. I supply to him."

"And in exchange, what does he give you?"

Mahasti's eyes flickered away from her for the barest moment. "He leaves me be."

"It doesn't sound like a fair trade to me, but maybe that's just because I'm fresh meat." Leaning against the basin Layla watched Mahasti. "So if he gets me after you're done, why did you stop the *Zonbi*?"

Returning Layla's gaze, Mahasti looked at her impassively. Then, suddenly, she snapped her stare to the door. "There will be more. It will be good for you to leave now." Without a backwards glance she crouched and then jumped. Catching the edges of the hatch with her fingertips she pulled herself up without trouble, disappearing through the dark square.

## **23h00**

Swallowing, Layla looked at the door with trepidation, and then up at the hatch. It was much too high for her. She'd never make it.

Abruptly Mahasti's head appeared upside down, sporting its usual blank expression, and then the woman extended one hand downwards. "If you jump I will catch you."

"Bu... I can't jump that high. I can't jump that high!"



Mahasti said nothing. Letting loose a strangled nervous laugh Layla looked at the door again. Somehow the smell came back to her; that sweet and cloying and dank scent - it was earth. That's what it smelled like - and then she turned and ran and leapt. And somehow, impossibly, her hand just touched Mahasti's. Effortlessly the other woman pulled her up into the darkness of the pipes. Mahasti's hand was cold, the skin dry and smooth. Depositing her on the metal surface the woman turned around and began to walk away. Feeling her heart hammer in her throat Layla called out.

"Wait!"

Impassively Mahasti obeyed, her back to Layla. Closing the distance between them Layla reached out to grab the other woman's arm, drawing back at the last moment. "What am I supposed to do? Where am I supposed to go?"

"Do what you wish. Penhale comes at sunrise."

"Why did you save me?"

The dark woman moved as if to go, and this time Layla did grab her wrist. With the power Mahasti had exposed, the grip would not stop her, but she did hesitate.

"Why? *Why* did you save me?"

Finally Mahasti turned to face her. "It is not for you. I do not like the *Zonbi*."

"You're not telling me the truth." Insistently Layla shook Mahasti's wrist. "They would have gotten me at dawn anyway. Penhale would have gotten me anyway. Do you not want him to take me?"

"It does not matter to me. You are for Penhale now. I have finished with you."

She had wanted Mahasti to say yes. She shouldn't have expected anything. And still - there was something behind the woman's eyes that pushed her to try once more.

"Mahasti." It was the first time that she'd used the name. It felt foreign on her tongue, and from the look the other woman was giving her it sounded just as strange. "Why can't I stay with you?"

Mahasti scowled. "Because you are for Penhale."

"But why? Why can't I be .. yours, and not his?"

Layla had no idea when she'd decided she'd be better off with this woman she thought completely mad, but surely it was rational to expect less trouble from someone who professed to being finished with you, rather than someone who was still supposed to *take* you. Someone who considered you his fresh meat. And, after the bathroom, she was well aware that she was no longer safe. If she'd ever been.

Mahasti's gaze was direct and empty. "I have no need of you."

"So you've said!" Suddenly Layla was fed up and irritated and just plain angry. "I know of how little *use* I am, thank you very much. What I am asking you is whether you don't **want** him to take me! There's a difference!"

The dark woman withdrew her wrist from Layla's grip in the blink of an eye and walked away. Following her, Layla refused to give up.

"Why did you save me from the *Zonbi*? It's not as easy as you not liking them! You'd left. You could have stayed gone! You didn't come back without reason. Why? *Why*, Mahasti?"

It was as if hearing her name flicked a switch in the other woman's head. Stopping, she stood silently for a moment before she spoke over her shoulder without looking at Layla. "You would have suffered at their hands. I do not wish that."

"But I'll suffer at Penhale's hands, right? Won't I?"

Mahasti nodded. "Yes. You will suffer at Penhale's hands."

"Then why would you save me from them only to pass me over to him?"

"The *Zonbi* are minions. They have no rights here. I will not fight with Penhale. You belong to him. That is the way of the accord." Mahasti began to walk again, her feet silent on the metal. "You will not suffer long."

"You're going to hand me over to him and you're trying to *comfort* me?" Barking a short laugh Layla followed Mahasti. "You turn people into you, and then you sell them out. You're a Judas."

"I have been called that."

"And you don't care." Throwing her hands in the air in frustration Layla clenched her teeth. "You know what - never mind. What am I supposed to do until sunrise?"

"You are welcome to do as you wish."

"What I **want** to do is bash in your head with a pipe!"

"You are welcome to make an attempt."

Layla's mouth dropped open in astonishment. Rushing forward she tried to peer around the other woman at her face, but the space was too narrow.

"Did you just... was that *sarcasm*?"

"It is unlikely."

"You're doing it again!"

"You must be mistaken."

Stopping in her tracks, Layla watched Mahasti's narrow back suspiciously as the other woman walked away. Either the woman was warming to her (har har, her already whacked out mind helpfully supplied) or she was listening with new ears.

"Don't you dare go growing a personality on me, Mahasti."

The other woman halted, apparently waiting for Layla. "I would not dream of it."

With a shake of her head Layla began to walk again. "So I'm welcome to do whatever I want to. Except that there are apparently more homicidal maniacs wandering around inside the building looking for me. And that there's apparently a mucho homicidal maniac waiting outside for me, too."

"He is outside in the night. At dawn he will be inside," Mahasti offered in an apparent abrupt desire to be helpful.

"Yes. Thank you Sir David Attenborough."

"I am Mahasti."

"I *know*." Shooting her an evil glare Layla twisted her neck. The ache at the base of it was beginning to subside. In fact, all of the discomfort she had been experiencing was seeping away slowly, leaving her feeling ... lightheaded. Numb. Empty. "So what will you be doing until sunrise?"

"I am going to the roof."

"Can I come with you?"

"You are welcome to..."

"... do as I wish. Blah blah fucking blah."

## **23h30**

They had run into a horizontal shaft, with a ladder to the right leading towards the top. At the end of the ladder there was a small gap, which led to another pipe, which led to a grate. Mahasti had reached the grate well before Layla, her movements so sure and fast that Layla could not keep

up, and by the time the other woman had joined her she'd already pried the grate from the wall. The four industrial screws were still attached to the bent corners of the metal sheeting, much the worse for wear. Propping it against the side wall, Mahasti climbed through the open space and dropped from view. A little more careful, Layla extended her head to see where she was going. At first glance it was a suicide drop. They were high up in the office section of the building, perhaps on the tenth floor, and far below them there were only street lights and lazily buzzing streets. A second look revealed a ledge a few meters down. Mahasti was already moving towards her left, casually walking on the narrow ledge to where a ladder protruded from the wall.

With a smothered swear word Layla swung her body around and lowered herself by her hands. When she was hanging fully extended it was still a fairly high drop. She should have been panicking or afraid - she was petrified of heights - but instead she felt only dimly puzzled.

"Can't you help me here? I'm going to fall."

Turning around, Mahasti looked at her calmly, and then gauged the height of the drop. In the moonlight her eyes were pools of ink. "You will not fall. Let go."

Even as she thought she should argue, she loosened her grip on the edge of the grating and fell. The landing was much too easy, a soft drop onto her toes, and then she was pressed to the cold plastered bricks of the building. Her heart was hammering in her chest.

At least... it should have been.

With a glimmer of a smile Mahasti nodded and turned, then climbed up the ladder. Layla rushed to join her, amazed at her balance as she skittered across the concrete ledge. When she pulled herself up the last rung and swung across the edge of the rooftop Mahasti was already crouched on the edge a few steps away, her gaze on the ground far below. Joining her, Layla hunkered down carefully and took in the view across the city.

"What do you see?"

Mahasti pondered. "Everything."

"Do you come here every night?"

"Not every night. Sometimes there are things to be taken care of."

"Like what?"

Mahasti ignored her. It was obviously not a question she felt needed an answer. Lowering her legs over the edge Layla sat down.

"How old are you?"

"I am very old." Apparently Mahasti could decipher the look of annoyance shot her way, because

she decided to elaborate. "I do not know an exact number. After so many years it becomes all the same."

"Have you been here all this time?"

"Here. Everywhere."

"Europe? Africa?"

"Everywhere. After so many years it becomes all the same."

Layla's mouth twitched. "Forgive me for saying so, but your conversational skills are absolutely crap."

Though she did not look at Layla, Mahasti nodded slightly. "You are forgiven."

Layla snorted. "I very much feel like pushing you off the building."

"You are welcome to make an attempt."

"You know, Mahasti, I wish you'd stick to either having no personality or to being ... quirky. This in-between garbage makes me queasy."

"I shall take that into consideration."

Exhaling loudly, Layla frowned. "Are they all like you? Is Penhale like you?"

"No. I have already told you."

"I don't mean like that. I mean, like personality."

Mahasti looked at her impassively over her shoulder. "You wish to know if his conversational skills are absolutely crap." In her exotic, slightly slurred accent the words sounded out of place, like an opera singer breaking into rap.

"Stop messing with me. And yes, that's what I meant."

"Penhale is not like me. Penhale has social graces. He *entertains*." She turned her gaze back to the view. "Penhale likes people."

Layla snickered. "Funny. But then I suppose you wouldn't know. So you don't like people?"

"I do not spend much time amongst them. I have no need of them, bar the obvious."

*Bar the obvious. Sinking her teeth into people and then throwing them in the lion's cage.* "But surely you spend time with those you take before ... before sunrise?"

"It is rare." Mahasti graced Layla with a look that might have conveyed amusement, had it come from anyone else. "They do not usually wish to speak with me. They wish to run away. I do not stop them."

Leaning forward Layla watched Mahasti carefully. "Has anyone ever escaped?"

"From me? All who have tried. I do not care to keep them. From Penhale, they do not. If they run, he tracks them down. If it is not sunrise, it is another night."

"Is it possible to escape from Penhale?" Layla was searching Mahasti's face for any clue, however small. Something that might help her.

"Not for you." The problem was that Mahasti's face held no expression. It also seemed to hold no secrets, which meant that she probably wasn't lying.

"And for you?"

Dark eyes met hers sharply. "I have no need to escape from Penhale. I am not held by Penhale."

"Are you free to leave?"

"I have no reason to leave."

"And if you wanted to? Could you?"

Mahasti's silence was icy. Sensing an impasse Layla tried again.

"You work for him, right? Is he the boss?"

"I do not work for Penhale. I have no ... boss." This time there was a definite edge to Mahasti's cool voice.

"You're buying his favour with gifts so he'll leave you alone."

"I have no need to buy his favour."

"You said if you supply the fresh ones he leaves you be."

"I know what I have said." If ever an outwardly emotionless, unruffled and still creature could be agitated, this must have been it. Mahasti watched Layla with hostile dark eyes before she turned her head away. "What is it that you want?"

Swiveling on the edge so that she could look at Mahasti, Layla leaned forward. "I want to know why you do what you're doing? Why would you pander to this Penhale character? If you're as strong as he is, why are you doing his work for him?"

"You wish to manipulate me, because in doing so you wish to save your own life."

Layla balked as visibly as possible. "Nonsense."

"You imagine that I hold information that will help you with that."

"Fuck. Fine." Shrugging, Layla sniffed crossly. "You see right through me. So?"

Mahasti glanced at her briefly. "I have no reason to help you."

"What about because I'm *begging* you to?"

The dark eyes were blank and unreadable, and they held absolutely no grace. Clenching her teeth, Layla faced forward again and propped her elbows on her knees. "All right. I get it. It's every freak for herself. So can you just humour me and let me talk to you until ... sunrise?"

"You are welcome to do as you wish."

"Yeah. Sure." Layla watched the night pass by.

## 01h30

Mahasti never moved. She was as still as a statue, her pale expressionless face reinforcing the image.

"Where do you go?"

That pale face turned towards Layla, the features blank. "I do not understand your question."

"You say that sometimes you don't come up here, because you have things to do. Where do you go?"

"I go nowhere. My concerns are within this building."

"Why? Is it on a burial site or something?"

There was a flash of amusement in Mahasti's eyes. "I would not know. "

"Right." Layla mentally chastised herself. "I probably saw one too many vampire movies. Sorry. So why do you stay in this building?"

"Because it is my place." Place. Not meant like slang: *pad*, or *hangout*, or *home*. Meant like ... consignment. Relegation. Where one belongs.

"So you never leave?"

"It is my place."

"And you never feel like you'd *want* to leave?"

"I have no need of it."

Shaking her head Layla raised an eyebrow. "You don't seem to think you need anything."

Apparently Mahasti was done with responding to non-questions. Layla watched her for a moment as she watched the ground below them, and then continued with her frustrating, one-sided conversation. For the moment it was all she had.

"Could you leave, if you wanted to?"

She wasn't sure how she knew it, but the look Mahasti graced her with was full of *'I have no need of it'* before the other woman decided to answer. "No."

Layla had expected ... something. Anger, maybe. Irritation. Or a lie. Well, Mahasti didn't seem to lie... but it was never as easy as this. Was it? Swallowing, she considered the dark woman's answer. Inasmuch as that she got a straight answer it was good. Now that she knew Mahasti was a prisoner herself, of sorts, and probably unable to help in any way... that part wasn't so great. In fact, that revelation downright sucked.

"Does Penhale keep you here?"

"Penhale does not physically keep me here." Mahasti looked away. "However, the *Zonbi* patrol the streets around this building at night. During the day I cannot go out. If I were to leave he would be aware of this, and would without a doubt he would take an ... active interest in my whereabouts and my wellbeing."

"But why? Surely his *zonbi* can provide fresh ones for him?"

Mahasti did not make a sound, but Layla got the distinct impression of an amused laugh. "*Zonbi* are without wits. They are puppets to Penhale's mind. He dominates their actions and most of their thoughts. They are not entirely empty, however. If Penhale sends them to do his bidding and find fresh ones, their own simple minds and lust for flesh would override his control for but a moment and they would finish the prey. They are ... " Mahasti paused to search for the proper words, "dogs who would steal the scraps from their Master's table." Her dark eyes turned to Layla, pinning the other woman with an intense look. "It is not to do with what I bring. I am an elder - one of few. I have much power. I can kill Penhale as he can kill me. It is only expected that he would wish to know of my whereabouts."

"So if you can kill him, why don't you just walk out of here?"



"Penhale would not face me himself. The *Zonbi* would be dispatched. I can kill *Zonbi*, but there are many. They would exhaust me, and then the sunrise would come. Or Penhale would come."

"Why haven't you started turning your own? Like an army?"

"He takes them." Mahasti turned her gaze away. "And I have no need of an army."

"But they could help you, if you wanted to escape!" Gesturing wildly to the view around them Layla shook her head in exasperation. "Surely you want to see new places? Not be held to this building by what essentially boils down to a big bad bully? Especially if you could beat him! Why don't you wait for him to come at sunrise and ... take him out?"

"There is no reason for this." The dark woman was infuriatingly implacable. "A fight with Penhale will result in certain death."

"But I thought you said you could kill him?"

The dire subject matter didn't seem to distress Mahasti. "I can kill Penhale as he can kill me. My blood is ... toxic to him, as his is to me. It will not cause death - in fact, it will enhance the victor's bloodline immeasurably in time - yet initially it causes blood trauma. It is like going into shock, as humans would say. It is as two nuclear bombs meeting in mid-flight. I can fight Penhale, and I can injure him, but in return he will injure me also. And while we are both debilitated, he will call the *Zonbi* to him. I will be vulnerable to a counter attack. The odds are not in my favour. I will not fight Penhale."

"Oh." Layla thought frantically. "Can't you sneak up on him or something?"

"No. He knows where I am as surely as I know of his whereabouts. We sense one another, and we are wary when we are close." She leaned back to look at the moon, barely a crescent above them.

"And my blood? Technically I have some of you in me, right? Doesn't that mean...?"

"In the equation of two nuclear bombs you are barely a spark of static electricity. *Layla*." She had not said the name, did not know it to use it, but Layla could hear the intention. "There will be no fight. It is not my business. *You* are not my business."

[Conclusion...](#)

[K. Alexander's Scrolls](#)  
[Index Page](#)

---

# ~ Penhale at Sunrise ~

by K. Alexander

You can find the **DISCLAIMER** and **WARNINGS** on [Part one](#)

Constructive criticism welcomed. Find me at: [kalex@webmail.co.za](mailto:kalex@webmail.co.za)

*"In the equation of two nuclear bombs you are barely a spark of static electricity. Layla."*

*"She had not said the name, did not know it to use it, but Layla could hear the intention."*

*"There will be no fight. It is not my business. You are not my business."*

**03h30**

"Aren't you lonely?"

Mahasti seemed amused. From her perch on the edge of the roof she looked over at her visitor. There was no expression on her face, but to Layla's eyes a small smile appeared to curve around the dark woman's lips.

"No."

"I think you are."

It wasn't a question, and by her silence Mahasti was clearly back in the no-question no-answer zone.

Leaving her be for the moment, Layla took stock of herself and the situation. It was improbably peaceful up there with the sinister and imperturbable woman, waiting for what was likely to be a bad experience. Very bad, if she wasn't mistaken. Of course, Mahasti could have been lying or exaggerating... but that wasn't something that appeared to be in Mahasti's nature.

Sometimes, just sometimes, being lied to for your own good was preferable to the stark ugly bleak truth.

Leaning back Layla enjoyed the feeling of the moonlight washing over her. It gave her the sensation she probably would have felt ... earlier... when she was in the sun. A light breeze was blowing. Considering that winter was approaching she should have been cold, but the night was velvety on her skin. She could see in the dark, she'd realized somewhere in this evening. Objects were crystal clear, as if there was a beam shining on them. Extending her arms she flexed her fingers. Her limbs moved differently. Slower, faster, she couldn't tell which. There was a languidness to her actions that she could not control, and it felt almost like an extension of her state of mind. As if she were suspended, swimming through the newly viscous nature of the air around her.

Turning her head she caught Mahasti watching her flexing fingers. The dark woman looked on

without comment, her gaze following the slow movements quietly. Stretching her legs in front of her - for once unafraid to fall - Layla reveled at the feeling of muscle uncoiling.

"When will I begin to want... blood?"

Mahasti's eyes stayed on the slow movements. "Tomorrow night, perhaps. You will come into all effects only later. It is different for each."

"But I won't make it to tomorrow night."

"No."

Inhaling deeply - a bizarrely airless feeling - Layla frowned. "I feel so ... healthy. Good. Like I could do anything."

No question. No answer. Did Layla expect anything else?

"It seems wrong. This seems wrong, you know?"

"I do not understand what you mean."

"It's not right." Even as she actually *tried* to work herself up Layla could feel the emotion slipping away from her, leaving her much too calm and clear. "I've turned into a monster; something that will be killing other beings. It's everything I stand against. Stood against? Maybe it's just my puritanical nature, but I sort of expected *suffering*. Of some kind, you know? Any kind. To make up for the atrocity to come, if you will. I didn't expect to feel like an Olympic athlete, with my capacity for remorse perceptibly slipping away. It's disgraceful... distasteful. Do you even understand what I'm trying to say, Mahasti?"

The dark woman looked over the rooftops for such a long time that Layla thought she'd discarded the question. Finally, she spoke.

"A jaguar does not curse the fact that it is more powerful than its prey. It does not expect to compensate in some manner for its nature. It does what it is made to do. When it can no longer do what it is made to do, it is done away with, and rarely in a pleasant fashion. Therein lies its recompense."

"That's easier to say when you're the jaguar than when you're the deer."

Mahasti nodded. "And yet, the jaguar cannot think as the deer. It does not kill because it is evil, but because that is its nature - and the jaguar knows only its own nature."

"Except," laying her hand on her chest Layla marveled at the silence within her body for a moment, "*this* jaguar knows the nature of the deer. This jaguar *was* the deer."

If she had still been capable of being startled, the sudden motion as Mahasti shifted forward and

placed her own cold hand over Layla's would have scared the living crap out of her. As it was, she felt an icy shiver travel down her spine. This close, Mahasti's eyes were intensely black.

"This jaguar will never be a deer again, and so must reconcile with being a jaguar."

They sat like that for a while, Mahasti's cold hand soothing over Layla's, and then the dark woman pulled away and turned back towards the city. Layla watched her sharp profile with a sliver of amusement.

"You know you're in trouble when the crazies start to make sense." Not expecting an answer, she rubbed her neck thoughtfully. "Does Penhale live in this building?"

"No. He lives elsewhere."

"But..." with a frown Layla bit her lip. "If he comes at sunrise, how does he get here? And how does he get back?"

"He moves in the day."

"I thought you said you couldn't go out into the sun?"

"I cannot. Penhale is not like me. I have told you this. He has taken an elder before. His bloodline is enhanced."

"So if you killed him you'd be able to go out?" Layla stared at Mahasti. "That's good enough reason."

"There is nothing different beyond this place."

"There's *more*!"

"I have no need of more."

"You know," jumping up Layla glared down at Mahasti, "fuck you and your no need of anything. If this is what I get to be like, then perhaps it's better that I try my luck against Penhale."

Rising to her feet fluidly Mahasti graced Layla with a blank look. "Perhaps."

"And don't think that I'm going to be going to wherever it is he and you want me to go like a good girl. I'm going to be fucking kicking and screaming, do you hear me?"

"I hear you."

The neutrality was getting to her. Shoving her hands deep in her pockets Layla glowered at Mahasti. "I was hoping to reach some shred of compassion in you, but obviously you're beyond that. Never mind a jaguar - you're a fucking *leech*. You throw bits to the monster so he won't pay

too much attention to you. You're a coward. At least Judas got something out of the deal. You know what?" Stomping closer she grabbed Mahasti's hand and, fishing a battered and abandoned silver coin out of her pocket, slammed it down into the woman's palm. "Here. Now at least you have *something* to show for it. It's not thirty, but it will have to do."

Mahasti yanked her hand back so abruptly that Layla stepped back, startled. The coin dropped to the concrete floor between them with a melodious *ting*. The woman looked at Layla with dark unfathomable eyes, and then down at her casually curled hand where the claret-coloured blood was already brimming heavily on a jagged circular laceration. Glancing down too, Layla smirked spitefully.

"So Judas the jaguar can't even take her ... what did you call it? *Compensation*. Serves you fucking right."

Mahasti closed her bleeding hand indifferently. "Perhaps."

"Fuck off." Turning around, Layla made her way back to the ladder where they had first ascended the roof. She could hear Mahasti move behind her, following her.

"You do not know which way to go."

"I'm going away from you. That's good enough for me. Like it fucking *matters*!"

As she climbed down the ladder she could hear the other woman on the rungs above her, and again behind her on the ledge as she moved carelessly over the abyss back to the grate. When she reached for the edge of the hatch and felt hands wrap around her waist she let go and stepped back angrily.

"Mahasti, I want you to **leave me alone**. Whatever screwed up idea you have, whatever you think you still owe me, consider it done. You've made yourself clear as to where you stand. I'm not going with you. Leave. Me. Alone."

No question. No answer. The dark woman merely nodded - barely; so barely that Layla *knew* the motion rather than saw it - and remained where she was.

With one last dark scowl Layla grasped the edge of the hatch and pulled herself up, away from Mahasti. This time she was not followed.

## 04h45

She was lost. Whatever this... thing had done to her, it hadn't given her a sudden innate knowledge of her environment. She had gone in one direction, and then in another. She had climbed, and then she had dropped. Occasionally she found a hatch, but inevitably they led to rooms that housed pipes or machinery. Rooms with latched metal doors. She'd tried to break

those down, but evidently she did not have the power that Mahasti possessed. Yet? Well, she wouldn't have the chance to find out. The only assistance that she could make out from her condition was that she wasn't actually getting tired.

One more turn. One more dead end.

One more drop. One more climb.

If she'd still been *Layla*, she would have been crying with frustration and worry by now. As this new thing, she could feel only a mild level of distress.

One more turn. One more dead end?

Except that it wasn't. There was a grate in the wall, small enough that she'd probably have to skin her limbs to get through it. Approaching with caution she grasped the edges of the metal square and pulled. It was stuck fast. Clenching her teeth she leaned back and put her newly acquired muscle into it, trying to pry the metal from the wall where it was bolted. A long low grunt escaped from her throat, but underneath it she could hear the whine of a stressed element - and then the grate gave way. She almost fell back, but found her footing just in time. Putting the grate to one side she stuck her head through the open hatch, peering into the small dark room below hurriedly.

Empty.

As she'd thought the hatch was so small that she skinned her shoulders going through. Nevertheless, it was nothing compared to the feeling of lightness she felt when she landed on the carpeted floor. Extending her hands towards the roof she stretched luxuriously, and then took a good look at her surroundings.

It looked like an unused broom closet. Shelving hugged the walls around her, and in one corner a bucket stood, lonely and forlorn.

With a satisfied huff Layla stepped forward and tried the door. Locked. Bending down, she peered at the door handle. It was a standard metal job, and she was going to get through it if she had to break it down with her shoulder. Gauging the distance and the weak point she lifted one foot and kicked out sharply. Beneath her building power the weak lock couldn't hold. The door cracked. Shoving it open with her hands Layla stepped out into what was obviously a conference room.

She knew, as she entered the room, that she wasn't alone, but by then it was too late.

He sat at the furthest end of the large oak table, his fingers steeped in front of him meditatively. His dark eyes were already on her, and though she wouldn't have been able to tell him from anyone else on the street by his nondescript appearance, his pitch-black malicious orbs would have given him away as something... dreadful. They were amused, now, the expression heightened by his obnoxious smile. He had long greasy black hair, tucked behind his ears

haphazardly; his chin was cleft and stubbly; beneath his dark shirt Layla could make out a narrow bony frame. Her scrutiny was swift, but his eyes were faster. Raising one eyebrow he smirked.

She would never get back through the hatch in time. He was sitting, she was already standing, she was closer to the door... but she knew.

Steeling herself she walked forward, though her body was urging her backwards, away from him. Reaching forward she placed her hands on the back of the chair opposite him, studying him across the length of the table.

"Penhale."

The man's smile curved into something truly revolting.

"I'm impressed. She came."

His words were aimed past her. When she turned her head to look over her shoulder - her body was screaming at her not to let him out of her sight - she was almost resigned to find Mahasti behind her, guarding the door.

"As I have already told you."

Mahasti's slight smile was nearly as horrific as his.

**05:15**

"You led me into a trap?"

Mahasti was unfazed. "I left you alone, as you requested. You came of your own volition."

There was a rustle as Penhale rose from his chair. Looking at him brought to Layla's mind the thought she'd had when seeing Mahasti properly for the first time. He wasn't in the darkness - he **was** the darkness. His approach was soundless and inhumanly fast. He stopped a few meters away from her, and his eyes took her in with delight. Slowly. So slowly that her skin crawled.

"Good." Cocking his head he sniffed. "Fresh. Ahh."

Layla started as he drew a finger harshly down her back - she hadn't even seen him lift his hand - no doubt leaving slashed skin in the path of his merciless touch. She wasn't sure if her mind was simply telling her things, but where he touched her she felt as if maggots were swarming against her. Under his stroke her shirt tore, and when he reached her lower back it simply fell from her.

Glancing up, she caught Mahasti's gaze. To her surprise, the woman's dark eyes studied her

chest, her shoulders, the top of her breasts with something akin to ... lust. Was she wrong? Was there even expression? She couldn't say anymore. Behind Layla Penhale chuckled, a rank breathless chortle.

"Want a little something for yourself, Mahasti?"

Layla watched, as the dark woman took in the expanse of bared flesh leisurely before black eyes lifted to meet hers blankly. She wondered if Penhale would let her go, if Mahasti said yes now.

"I have no need."

Penhale obviously felt the tremor as it rippled through Layla. His chuckle turned into a full-throated barked laugh which sounded as if had been calculated to be repulsive.

"Wouldn't it have been nice to know you were *wanted*? But our Mahasti doesn't know anything about need. There are probably a few you could have fulfilled for her, that she's not even aware of having, but ... oh well." The last two words were spat out sharply, calculated to squash her hopes with the most force available to him. Stepping closer, he pushed himself against her. "I certainly have some of those. And if our Mahasti doesn't *have any need of you*..."

Layla was so focused on the repulsive closeness of him, the fetid smell of his breath on her, that she didn't notice Mahasti moving. Suddenly the woman was right in front of her, so close that she was pressed between the lengths of the two lean bodies. Mahasti looked into her eyes, and then over her shoulder at Penhale. The dark woman's gaze was no longer calm - there was something brutal raging behind her expression.

Without warning she leaned in and claimed Layla's mouth roughly. Her kiss was cold, her mouth fierce. Mahasti was so forceful that Layla had to wrap a shaking hand in the other woman's shirt to avoid hurtling backwards into the repulsive presence behind her. There was nothing of the calm emotionless woman that Layla had known. Mahasti's lips plundered hers pitilessly, Mahasti's tongue drove into her mouth, Mahasti's hand fixed on the back of her head, tangled in her hair painfully so that she couldn't move.

She felt the edgy pressure on her tongue and the sudden pain right before her mouth welled up with warm blood. Gagging on the taste she pushed Mahasti away forcefully. Her power would not have been enough - the other woman was immeasurably stronger - but nevertheless Mahasti stepped back at the demand. Her face shaped itself into silent enjoyment as she wiped the streak of blood from her bottom lip.

"Hmm." It was a deep rumbled purr from her throat. Her eyes fixed on Layla darkly. "Perhaps I had forgotten that I am a jaguar."

Angrily spitting out blood, Layla snarled at Mahasti. "You're a Judas, asshole. Complete with kiss-off money."

"Enough!" Penhale's voice cut through her. She could feel the obscene bulge in his groin



pressing against her thigh. His hand reached around and wrapped around her jaw, and then he was pivoting her around roughly to face him. Black orbs glittered with *hunger*. "Got under our Mahasti's skin, did you? I didn't think that would ever happen... that she'd be open to any persuasion... but seeing that you've brought that out in her, I can't wait to see what you bring out in me. Tasty." His gaze slipped over her to Mahasti.  
"I would have let you have her *before*..."

"Now." Mahasti's voice was smooth, and cut over his like a knife.

Penhale gave a little chuckle, his breath washing over Layla. "... but you shouldn't have put on that little show. Mahasti. Now my needs are immediate - and they supercede yours." With a lewd movement he ground himself against Layla. "Stay and watch, or leave. Either way, IT'S. MY. TURN."

Layla had no chance to register where Mahasti was before Penhale's mouth descended on hers harshly. His lips were icy, his tongue sweeping over her mouth hunting for blood - and though Mahasti had been rough, compared to Penhale her touch had been positively tender. She struggled backwards, but he wrapped his long wiry arms around her and crushed her against him without much effort.

Suddenly, his dark eyes snapped open. His grip slipped from her back.

Surging forward, she kept her lips fastened to his, her mouth working against his. He tried to pull back, but Mahasti was behind him. The dark woman wrapped her arms around both him and Layla, holding them together forcibly in a violent lovers' embrace.

His eyes rolled back. With awkward motions he began to claw at whatever was closest, trying to free his hands from Mahasti's grip. Blood ran from his mouth, first in a small trickle and then more profusely. Layla pulled back and he choked gutturally, spitting out a cascade of dark crimson.

When Mahasti loosened her grip he toppled sideways, gagging, his limbs unresponsive. Curling up on the carpet he coughed and retched hoarsely, clutching at his throat, leaving deep gashes in his own flesh.

With one of the deep phlegmy coughs, a small battered silver coin slipped out of his throat to his mouth, and then thunked dully onto the carpet. On Penhale's tongue a multitude of gushing red circular lesions were just visible in the darkness.

Stepping over him, Layla approached Mahasti, spitting out the last of the blood in her mouth as she did so. She grasped the dark woman's jaw between her fingers, pressing lightly at her cheeks until Mahasti opened her mouth. The coin-shaped lesions were still bleeding badly, and a dribble of crimson snaked down the corner of Mahasti's mouth. With one finger Layla gently wiped it away.

"Your poor mouth."

Taking Layla's hand in her own, Mahasti removed it from her solemn face. "It will heal."

"I have no doubt." Running her tongue over her own very slightly stinging mouth Layla grinned. "I can't tell you how glad I am, right now, that I'm still just a *fresh one*."

The dark woman smiled minutely. It was filled with triumph, and it was more than a little bloody. "He had no time to call them, but I must take him up into the pipes before day. After I ... dispose of him, I will need rest."

With one last squeeze of Layla's hand she let the other woman go and bent to lift Penhale by his lapels onto her shoulders.

Layla smiled. "Shall I follow?"

. "Needs must." Mahasti shot her a wicked glance. Or perhaps, just perhaps, she didn't.

## THE END

### Author's post-script:

#### Trivia

If you're curious and you're wondering just how much fun I was having with this:

Mahasti - Origin: Persian, "The moon's being"

Layla - Origin: Egyptian, "Born at night"

Zonbi - Louisiana Creole or Haitian Creole *zonbi*, of Bantu origin; akin to Kimbundu *nzúmbe*: Ghost

*Kochon* - Origin: Haitian Creole, "Pig"

Does Penhale mean anything? Nope. That just was his name from the beginning, and try as I might I couldn't shift it.

#### State of mind music:

I almost never write without a soundtrack - it helps me to set a consistent atmosphere and keeps my thoughts together. Whilst working on this I was listening to Portishead, Evanescence, Lacuna Coil, some Tori Amos and Within Temptation. I call it my hallucinogenic playlist.

#### Also

I've already been rapped over the knuckles because the story is so short and sudden, but the fact is that it's already about twenty pages longer than I intended it to be. I'm genetically incapable of leaving out dialogue.

#### Pps.

I've never written a horror, so the answer is lots. I was having lots of fun. Buckets. Ten-ton earth-

moving truckloads of fun. Sadistic grind-my-little-teeth-and-giggle-maniacally sort of fun. And I hope you were having just a little fun with me too.

<hr size=2 width="100%" align=center>