

Cut from Shadow
Dinner Disaster!

Souls

Elena, Meredith, and Bonnie, accompanied by the little serving girl Lakshmi, who had special permission to show off various features of the estate, had a wonderful time walking over the grounds surrounding Lady Ulma's mansion. There was so much to see and to hear or guess about: a game park where deer and rabbit grazed peacefully; a stream that was punctuated by a

carefully enhanced pond, now full of ducks; a gone-to-seed flower garden that Damon and Elena had hired two dozen skilled servants to bring back to life; a kitchen garden which seemed to have thrived on neglect, and was producing cabbages bigger than basketballs and squashes nearly three feet long. The herb garden, too, seemed to be in overgrown, but wonderful shape, with fragrant mint, coriander, rosemary and wild basil, all growing in profusion.

In the kitchen garden they heard the sound of childish laughter and found a little boy playing. He was an adorable toddler, with huge blue eyes with an expression that reminded Elena of Bonnie. He might have been about two and a half—old enough to enjoy being tickled and falling on his back laughing. He was dressed surprisingly richly in a blue suit with a high, white ruffled collar that reminded Elena irresistibly of Little Lord Fauntleroy. It was also Elena who decided that he must be the child or relative of one of the cooks, for he seemed happy and at home in the kitchen garden, but very timid of going outside.

He couldn't clearly tell them his name, for when they asked him, he responded first with "Dinny" or something very like it, and the next time with "Rotey." They gave up and simply played with him with a large rubber ball for about half an hour whereupon, abruptly, he curled up on the warm grass and went to sleep. Elena, feeling more tired than she had expected, decided to do the same, inside the mansion.

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That evening was special, the first formal meal they were to have at home in the mansion, and the first that Elena was allowed to attend. Elena and the two other girls were delighted to find that miracles had been wrought again by the seamstresses. When they descended to the dining room Meredith was wearing

a leopard print evening dress with side cutouts that made her look as dangerous as a predator, and yet so sexy that if they'd had werewolf guests she might have gotten eaten, Damon joked. Elena was in a royal blue halter dress that matched her eyes and billowed down to her pearly sandals from an empire waistline that was trimmed with tiny multicolored freshwater pearls. She still wore Stefan's pendant although Damon had said that in the privacy of their own home, he'd prefer the girls not wear token collars.

Bonnie was the one truly dressed up: she was wearing a soft blue gown with a satin bodice decorated all over with pale blue beading, and a full skirt overlaid with layer after layer of tulle draping. With sapphires at her ears and arms and fingers, she looked ready to dance at any moment.

She entered the dining room to find that Damon was reclining at the head of the table and Ulma at its foot. The table was a singularly organically shaped structure designed to accommodate all the couches and still leave nooks for the servers, carvers, the salt cellar mistress (a position of obvious prestige), the spice lads, food tasters, and all the other servants who seemed to be necessary to the functioning of a special "family dinner." Bonnie, though separated from Damon by several undulations of the table, seemed to be occupying the spot of first, or favorite, concubine. Sage amused them by explaining to Elena, that although her back was entirely healed and her leg concealed, she should not have been at the table at all, owing to the cut on her cheek. In a traditional household, it would have rendered her as spoiled, probably for life—but Damon had said a few grim words to the household staff and she was seated near Ulma, at the foot, and—to her own secret amusement—being served last.

Since Damon had made it a point beyond argument, no vampires were employed in the household except one or two of Ulma's old family retainers, who, fortunately, did not wait at table.

The first dishes were a clear venison soup with tiny slivers of pancake in it that Elena found delicious, and a thick soup tasting of almonds and honey that under normal circumstances would have served any of the girls as a meal in itself. But after this there were a bewildering variety of savories, from which Elena picked only a few shrimp served with a sharp vinegar, glad to find something she recognized. After that there was a pause, and then, with actual trumpeters sounding a fanfare from the steps above the dining hall, proud servants, holding the silver platters high over their heads, carried in a whole roast peacock, served with its head and tail, and half a dozen other large platters containing whole roast or boiled animals, all too often identifiable. Damon, of course, waved each dish past with a word or two about the presentation, all the while sipping Black Magic from a healthy-sized gem-encrusted gold goblet. Elena could see nothing except the peacock in her minds' eye and was frantically ticking off things to talk about to Ulma or whoever instructed the chefs, when the horror started.

She might have missed the beginning if there had not been another pause—though, thankfully, no fanfare this time—and the very silence acted as a vacuum to draw all eyes to the covered silver platter being held at the top of the stairs, as a carver pushed a little carving table before Bonnie. The carver, a plump, pleasant, smiling man, was clearly according Bonnie (as favorite courtesan) the honor of the first and most tender choice of roast. He picked up a long thin knife and lovingly stropped it against another before, he nodded with a

flourish to the servant still holding high the platter, which was about the size to fit a whole chicken.

There was some question, afterward, about her Power. Lady Ulma would always claim that Elena was already rising as the carver began to uncover the dish. Elena had some vague memory of needing to do something that was not at all clear in her mind—but it was certain that by the time of the cover-lifting she had a clear view over the sauce lad's shoulder. After that, however, she was simply swept along with the series of events.

The carver had not finished lifting the cover when she saw it. A delicate wisp of a golden curl. Nothing that she had ever seen inside a covered dish and nothing that belonged there. In the silence, as steam began to plume out around the sides of the dish beside Bonnie, Elena heard her own voice raised high, perfectly clear in the expectant silence of the room.

“Keep that dish covered!”

The very violence of her outburst succeeded in making the carver pause. Even if this concubine was at this moment at the bottom of the pack, you could never tell what might happen tomorrow. Masters were notoriously fickle, and a lovely girl like this one might well end up a favorite again.

The shrillness of Elena's voice did something else, though. It caused Bonnie to see through the plume of smoke what looked like a little golden curl. Meredith was already on her feet, alerted by Elena's frantic outburst and the size of the covered dish. Now her dusky skin turned gray and Elena knew she'd gotten it.

Bonnie's shoulders went down and on a whole number of levels Elena was glad: Bonnie was going to faint without a word, and she would be followed

by Elena and finally Meredith, all the Lord Vampire's courtesans, one, two, three. That meant, primarily, that Elena could give in to the sucking black vortex at her feet, that kept hearing Dr. Meggar's voice saying, "Red meat! Red meat!" It also meant that she didn't have to dwell on the particularly large roast that was the base of the throne, as it were, for the peacock. It had a frighteningly familiar silhouette with small arms and legs doubled up and held by white frills and blue ribbon.

Bonnie's fainting would also mean that Elena didn't have to deal—right now—with a great sheaf of memories that were popping up like magicians' cards out of a pack, and primarily that she didn't have to wonder in how many ways she could have prevented this greatest of tragedies, or how to re-evaluate her view of everyone in the household that she had come to know, including Lady Ulma.

And then Elena heard the first shriek splinter the expectant silence and she saw that Bonnie was not going to faint; that in fact Bonnie had thrown her head back for a whole series of glass-shattering shrieks, and Elena knew somewhere in the dizzying cotton-wool that was filling her head that if Bonnie did not faint then neither could she. There was something that had to be done before she could simply fall over. And somehow, although her lips were numb and her eyes were blind with tears that seemed to have permanently frozen over them, obscuring her vision, she was shuffling forward. No, she was shouldering forward, shoving her way past all manner of servants who had a right to be there and even more that did not, but who were so thrown off by this extraordinary turn of events that they didn't know where their places *were*.

And now Bonnie's hands were beating at the horror in front of her and, in slow motion, the cover was coming off, only, thankfully, to be clamped back on

by the carver, who then fell to his knees, wailing and begging for his life. Honey and vinegar filled Elena's mouth and she had no memory of how she emptied it before she heard her own shrieks also filling the room, and Meredith's alto screams seeming to echo back at her.

Unfortunately, this seemed to make it even harder to get to Bonnie, as the servants around Elena wanted her to drink water, wanted her to sit down, wanted her to do anything but scream bloody murder until she could force Bonnie to stop screaming bloody murder.

And then she saw something which caused everything in the room, momentarily, to go black-and-white and soundless, like a very old photo imprinting its image on her eyes. Lady Ulma was trying to rise from her couch, but was frozen midway in doing it, with one hand over her curving abdomen and the other clenched into a fist at her temple.

Poison? We've all gone mad, all the women, at least—is it possible that we've been—

She's pregnant!

As Elena stared, forgetting to scream in the new horror before her eyes, the fuzziness that had clouded them just a minute ago disappeared. And she saw, with the utmost clarity, a long spasm of contraction that rippled across the pregnant woman's stomach and held her frozen again as sweat appeared in great droplets at her temples. She was trying to wipe the sweat away, but the hand that swiped at her forehead was trembling with weakness.

She's going into premature labor.

It didn't matter why. Some guiding voice told Elena this as one part of her mind began to wonder, helplessly, if perhaps Lady Ulma was as horrified at the

thought of eating a sweet toddler, or if Lady Ulma was worried that after this they wouldn't help her to keep her family home, or if, as seemed most likely, Lady Ulma simply had been scared out of her wits by this dinner guest turned into a shrieking madwoman and the shock had been too much for a pregnancy that had already been through so many horrors. All the questions disappeared in a puff of smoke as Elena realized that a tragedy was about to be doubled right here in this room, if someone couldn't get the hellish noise and the hysteria to stop.

But, to her immense frustration, she still wasn't able to get to Bonnie. Not even charging with her shoulder, first waving, and then *flinging* attendants away from her. Neither, in a room where the noise level had now reached a peak, was she able to attract anyone sensible's attention to ask them to bring Dr. Meggar. Everyone was reacting to her as if she were a thrashing, screaming maniac—like Bonnie . . .

“Damon!” Scrambling up onto her couch, ignoring the renewed shrieks of fear and well-meant advice around her, she looked for the only person that she could think of that might have kept his head. To her relief, an instant later, Meredith popped up from across the table, barely visible behind the peacock.

“*Damon!*” With Meredith's voice added to hers she could hear herself calling through the din. And what's more, from her new vantage point she could see Damon. He was standing right in front of Bonnie, ignoring Bonnie's flailing hands smeared with God-knew-what. But he wasn't *doing* anything.

We made him promise, Elena remembered. No mind control. No Influence to force us to do anything we really didn't want to.

He gave his word, Elena thought. And somehow she knew that, once pledged, Damon would not, *could* not, simply break his word. If he hadn't done it

in five hundred years, she reasoned, he wasn't going to break it now over a screaming teenager.

Elena and Meredith exchanged another helpless look. Then Elena took a quick look back at Bonnie. Someone had already tried the water-in-the-face trick. Bonnie's normally fluffy strawberry hair was flat and wet. And she was *still* screaming—like Fazina herself, generating a truly remarkable amount of noise for one so tiny in stature. Damon had her by the shoulders and was shaking her, but far too gently to get anywhere with her. Elena would bet that to Bonnie he was just another blob in a sea of blobs, and that neither comfort nor enlightenment had emerged from the blobby ocean.

And the two of them couldn't get out of the room. That was bad. Damon and Bonnie were both trapped by a solid phalanx of servants, couches, and the three other diners—not to mention the table—between them and the two exits from the room. Lady Ulma was nearest the exits, but she was lying on a high-backed couch that kept the crowd of onlookers who were now thronging in the doorway from seeing her plight as Elena had.

Elena and Meredith were reaching a decision by a consensus of velociraptor sisterhood. It was not one that had ever been reached before, but the situation was desperate. Elena held up a hand flat in the air with the thumb pointing toward her and all the fingers together as if to slice something with it, then brought her other hand sharply toward it in a gesture as if clapping her palm with her fingers, once. Across the table, Meredith was doing the same thing, but Elena noticed that Meredith's smack was a good deal more vigorous.

After one more instant, while Elena hung in limbo, frozen by what she had to do, she turned back toward Damon, seeing Meredith turn with her. They both

called again, Elena putting all her Power behind her voice to try to cut through the noise.

Damon heard. He had been fully occupied with Bonnie, but now he looked up to see the two other girls standing on their couches, both shouting at him.

Damon!

Even the telepathic channel was over-crowded; Elena knew her voice was only getting through faintly.

She and Meredith, hands held high, made the slapping gesture again. This time Elena increased the power of her swinging hand to match Meredith's.

Damon stared at them, back and forth as Elena nodded both vigorously and impatiently. She could barely hear her own telepathic voice as she jabbed a finger toward Lady Ulma's couch. *Make it stop! Get the doctor. Ulma's going into labor! DO IT NOW!*

Whether he picked all that up she didn't know, but he got the basic message. There was a little clear space around Bonnie, where broken dishes and goblets and the ruins of many platters of food lay on the floor. Bonnie was still beating with her hands at invisible enemies and somehow keeping up the ear-splitting noise that rose above all the rest.

Damon took a step into the area. He swung the flat of his hand, stopping it just at the last second before it could impact Bonnie's face.

Bonnie, eyes shut, took absolutely no notice.

Damon tried again, raising his hand, swinging, only stop dead exactly at the moment when his fingers touched Bonnie's cheek.

Elena lost her cool.

“LADY ULMA’S BABY IS GOING TO DIE BECAUSE OF YOU!” she screamed, at the same time sending the words with all the Power she could summon. “THIS HAS TO STOP! SHE’S GOING TO MISCARRY AND IT WILL BE ALL YOUR FAULT BECAUSE YOU COULDN’T STOP IT—”

And then Damon stopped it.

Damon kissed Bonnie.

Elena, from her perch, could see it all. She saw how Damon, who was not so very tall himself, had to bend down to her, and how, ignoring her tear-smudged face, he kissed her just as she was opening her mouth for a fresh scream. Elena could see Bonnie’s eyes open and widen and then blink as if she were coming out of some fugue state. Then she slowly shut her eyes as she cooperated with the kiss—and then she went limp. Her hands, which had been raised in defensive claws, relaxed and went around Damon’s neck and then slowly, she brought them down to her sides. She swayed.

Silence spread out from them like ripples in a pool.

Meredith and Elena looked at each other, each slightly ashamed. There, they had been advocating violence toward a sister, and had entirely missed Damon’s better solution. And Elena told herself that it was not in the least because she was jealous of Bonnie—after all, Meredith hadn’t thought of it either, and Meredith didn’t want Damon to kiss her.

And since when do I want Damon to kiss me? Elena asked herself, feeling something now like fear.

The silence acted as if a tonic had spread like ripples across the entire room. The servants, who had been bellowing or screeching at each other to shut up, shut up. The carver and his assistants, who had been kneeling, wailing, and

begging for their miserable lives, shut up. The majordomo, who had been one of the loudest, bawling his orders at servant after servant, took a gulp of wine and said no more.

In the silence, Elena's words rang out clearly. "Lady Ulma's in labor! *You* and *you* and *you* carry her couch upstairs, and—where's Lakshmi?—there you are! Run, *run*, get a litter and bring Dr. Meggar back on it immediately."

For just an instant everyone hesitated. This was a slave, the same one who had gotten herself ten stripes for overreaching herself before, and besides in the aftermath of the hysteria, there was a sort of spell of inaction that kept everyone silent and frozen in place.

Damon broke it. "She speaks for me in every word," he said, lifting his head at last from Bonnie's, which for some reason, made Elena feel more relaxed. "Lakshmi! Take this"—he expertly flipped the girl a coin purse—"for the litter. Do whatever you have to do, but *get him*." Damon was not shouting by any means, but speaking in a way that penetrated every crevice in the room and the hallway. Forcefully, that was it. He was speaking so forcefully that servants began talking again, looking for a way to clean up the mess, the majordomo once again began to give his orders in his stentorian voice, and the carver, prostrate in a mess that Elena couldn't look at without wanting to be sick, began again wailing that he had simply followed his orders and he had nothing to do with the choice of cuisine.

But Elena's words, with Damon's backing, were already being obeyed. The couch was floating away on the backs of hardy young men and women, whom Elena had picked because they were all of one height, and Lakshmi was already out of the room at a dead run.

This time when Elena elbowed her way through the servants that still separated her from Bonnie, she was able to reach her. To her relief, she saw Meredith coming from the other direction.

“Oh God,” Bonnie was saying, her clear brown eyes fixing on Elena. “I can’t believe—it wasn’t real, was it? It was some sort of—joke, or—they set us up, right? Because it’s the first formal dinner. They—” Just then Meredith arrived, said nothing at all, and took Bonnie into her arms. Elena, who had been trying to lead Bonnie out of this place of terrible shrapnel, gave in, and wound her arms around both of them.

They finally had to walk that way, crabwise, out of the dining room and upstairs.

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There was a final commotion about the pantry before they got settled down. Damon, in a stroke of what Elena considered pure genius, had gone stomping around the mansion yelling impartially at everyone for insulting his concubines by profaning their religion. It was, as Elena was to find, much easier to convince people in the city that you were the member of a small and very scrupulous sect which forbade the eating of anything made with human products in it, than simply to refuse a “long pork” sandwich only to realize that the crackers and cheese you’d chosen were equally cannibalistic.

That was what the final commotion was about. They got Bonnie upstairs and then were about to send a couple of reliable upstairs girls to get some cheese and crackers, when Bonnie began to shriek again.

“No, no, no! *I’ll grind your bones to make my bread!* And the cheese—it’s all in wheels; Meredith and I saw it. *How do we know what they make cheese of?*” She was still almost hysterical, but she had a point.

Uncomfortably, they avoided one another’s eyes—too many meals already eaten, too many questions asked too late. Who knew what they used here instead of lard? Everyone was awkward as visions of past meals danced before their mind’s eyes. No one was particularly logical.

And then there was Lady Ulma to worry about. Dr. Meggar had come at once, but had immediately sent them from the room, and there had been no news after that.

It was Elena who broke out the Black Magic. It was the only thing that Damon was quite sure was not made out of humans or any human by-products, and they were all, in Elena’s estimation, overdue for something “medicinal.” Damon, who had been keeping well out of the way since dinner had finished, looked pleased as one after another of them praised it.

With nothing on their stomachs—all three girls had been sick since the discovery—the Magic worked quickly. They relaxed, and finally Meredith—the most level-headed of all of them—said, “We’ve already got half the key. Even if we live on bottled water from the outside and fruit picked from the orchards around the mansion, we have to get the other half. We can make it until next week.”

“I’m going to live on Black Magic alone,” Bonnie retorted, in a slightly slurred voice. “I mean—the orchards—fertilizer.”

“I know what you’re saying,” Damon said. “But just as a point of fact, those orchards haven’t been fertilized in over twenty years. By now I’d consider the fruit on them safe.”

Bonnie nodded her head obediently, but she had her stubborn face on. Elena went for Plan B.

“Surely, there’s somebody here who imports food from outside. From Earth. Even macaroni and cheese would be fine.”

Lakshmi confirmed that there was indeed an import shop so expensive she’d never actually been inside. But in the windows, she said, were all sorts of delicacies: Spam and Green Beans and Caviar and Ketchup.

“All colors!” she said enthusiastically.

“We’ll live on green beans and caviar if we have to,” Elena said, watching poor Bonnie’s reaction to the thought of Spam. She could see how it almost made Bonnie vomit again, but she could also see how, with a shudder, Bonnie controlled herself.

She’s really changing, Elena thought, once again amazed at how the diminutive girl was handling herself. I have to remember to tell her that I’m impressed.

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In the next few days, Damon got a reputation for being a wildly extravagant epicure. His butler arrived at the small gourmet store that stocked fresh food from Earth and bought fresh white Wonder bread—all the little gourmet store had in stock—jars and jars of peanut butter, jars and jars of grape jelly, and a wide assortment of vegetables and other canned goods.

At Lady Ulma's mansion, the three human concubines entered into the longest religious holiday of their year: the Feast of the Peanut Butter Sandwiches for all Meals.

I knew when I wrote an even more gory version of this scene (the painted, glass-eyed, candy-toothed, cooked-just-rare little head is actually seen) that it was too much. But I had a morbid fascination to see where the story would go, so I finished it. Also, deleting it meant necessarily deleting a scene in which Lakshmi learns her worth, so here it is, as originally written. The next morning . . .

Bonnie and Meredith weren't surprised when Elena wanted to see Damon about two things: one being who should go and two being what she was going to wear. What did surprise them were her choices.

"If it's all right," she said slowly at the beginning, tracing a finger round and round on the large table in one of the parlors as everyone gathered the next morning, "I would like for just a few people to go with me. Stefan's been badly treated," she went on, "and he hates to look bad in front of other people. I don't want to humiliate him."

There was sort of a group blush at this. Or maybe it was a group flush of resentment—and then a group blush of culpability. With the western windows slightly open, so that an early morning red light fell over everything, it was hard to tell. Only one thing was certain: everyone wanted to go.

"So I hope," Elena said, turning to look Meredith and Bonnie in the eye, "that none of you are hurt if I don't choose you to come with me."

That should tell both of them they're out, Elena thought and saw understanding blossom in both faces. Most of her plans depended on how her two best friends reacted to this.

Meredith gallantly stepped up to bat first. “Elena, you’ve been through hell—literally—and almost died doing it—to get to Stefan. You take with you the people who will do the most good.”

“We realize it isn’t a popularity contest,” Bonnie added, swallowing, because she was trying not to cry. She really wants to go, Elena thought, but she understands. “Stefan may feel more embarrassed in front of a girl than a boy.” And she didn’t even add “*even though we would never do anything to embarrass him,*” Elena thought, going around for a hug and to feel Bonnie’s soft little birdlike body in her arms. Then she turned and felt Meredith’s warm and slim hard arms, and as always felt some of her tension drained away.

“Thank you,” she said, wiping tears from her eyes afterward. “And you’re right, I think it would be harder to face girls than boys in the situation he’s in. Also it will be harder to face friends he already knows and loves. So I would like to ask these people to go with me: Sage, Damon, and Dr. Meggar—if Lakshmi will run and get a litter and ask him to come.”

There was a murmur around the table, instantly silenced when Damon said, “That’s it, then. Lakshmi, is there enough money left to get another litter or did Dr. Meggar charge too much last night?”

There was an odd reaction to this. Sage, Lucen, Lady Ulma and the women attendants that always seemed to follow Elena—they all froze. Lakshmi herself went dead white, clapped her hand to her pocket and then, trembling visibly, drew out the purse of geld he had thrown her the day before. She held it toward Damon in both hands, her entire body turning into gelatin before everyone’s eyes. She ended up crawling on her knees to him, holding it above her head and saying—as far as Elena could understand through the sobs—“Oh, I

beg you—I forgot—I beg you—I never touched a geld myself—master—I swear—”

“Stop it,” Damon said sharply, but Elena saw that this was not the time for sharpness or logic. She hastily took a third body in her hands, a body that seemed all coltish young bones, with barely enough flesh to cover them.

“Lakshmi,” she said, over and over, even when impatience nudged her urgently to be on the way. “Little Lakshmi. Do you know that Lady Ulma might have lost her baby, if not for you?”

“I ran,” sobbed Lakshmi. “I didn’t even bargain with the litter men.”

“I know you did. And because of *you*, Lady Ulma is safe, and the baby is safe. Do you understand?”

“But the money—”

“Troll the money!” Elena cried, using a vulgar expression which, in its long form, meant “give the money to a troll”—in other words, waste it. “We don’t care that you forgot about the money purse. What we care about it is *you*, and we can’t have you upset over a little thing like this.”

“Care about me?” Lakshmi stared at Elena’s face as if trying to find the flaw, the trap, the catch. “More than a purse *full* of geld?”

“Yes, of course. We can always replace geld. We could never replace *you*.”

Lakshmi, looking completely bewildered and overcome, fell back into Elena’s arms, limp. But the next instant she had leaped up. “I still have the purse!” she cried. “I’ll get to Dr. Meggar’s as fast as I can and we’ll wait there—or should I meet you? Where should I go?”

Damon spoke up. “The *Shi no Shi*.”

Lakshmi's eyes got round. She stared at Damon for just an instant, and then she was bounding out the door, her shaken voice floating behind her: "We'll wait at his office!"