

Seeking Sanctuary

A Short Story
by Josh Closs

It wasn't beating in her chest anymore, but Mara's heart sank as she looked up at the tall wooden doors. She double-checked the scrap of paper, and though it had smeared and smudged in the rain, she could still clearly read the address.

Her would-be sanctuary was a church. Which would be great if she weren't pretty sure she would dissolve into a pile of dust as soon as she crossed the threshold.

A week ago, Mara became a vampire. The circumstances were bloody and do not make for pleasant conversation, so we'll move past that, sufficing to say that Mara would not be giving that particular dating app five stars. The vampire that turned her, who to most eyes looked to be a pale sunglasses-at-night-wearing twentysomething dude with long meticulously-shampooed hair, was named Avarice. Since Mara's transformation, he had spent the last week torturing her with a potential sense of normalcy.

"Oh, the sunlight thing's just a myth," he had said during Mara's first morning among the ranks of the undead, moments before Mara felt the worst pain she'd ever felt against her left forearm as he laughed. The burn line was still visible, even in this dim, rain-soaked light.

"Garlic won't hurt you any more than it did before," he lied the next day as he visited her windowless room, bearing a tray of garlic bread. He watched with glee as Mara's throat swelled up in an allergic reaction.

Turns out, vampires don't need to breathe; it just makes their existences much more pleasant.

Avarice was, in a word, sadistic.

And he didn't even have a cool laugh! It was breathy and obnoxious! Couldn't she at least be a cool vampire's plaything?

But she had escaped. Earlier that night while Avarice was out, presumably looking for another victim, he had left Mara's door unlocked. Accident or trap, she saw it as her only opportunity to sneak out.

As she made her way through Avarice's sizable estate, searching in vain for weather-appropriate clothing to prepare for the storms she saw outside, she instead found a scrap of paper with a pen resting on top of it and read the simple message:

Vampire Sanctuary: 1412 Elm

Even then, part of Mara assumed that this was another setup. Another cruel joke, and Avarice would be there waiting for her, guffawing as usual.

But that didn't happen.

All that happened is Mara looked up at the doors of, according to the sign, the First Christian Church of El Cambio. It certainly looked old enough to be the first one, too.

She stared at it, paralyzed by indecision as she stood in the rain. She barely felt it by this point.

She had barely felt anything for the last week.

Like any normal and reasonable person, Mara had often thought how awesome it would be to be a vampire. Turning into a bat? Living forever? Having an excuse to not leave the house while the sun's out? Three for three, right?

But what Mara hadn't considered was the absolute loneliness of it. The certainty that she would never fit in with society again. There's no hiding that pale skin, those ghastly fangs, or those blood-red eyes; not for more than a couple of drinks, as she had learned the hard way. She and the rest of her ilk could never be mistaken for anything but vampires for the rest of eternity.

Plus, that bat thing was a myth.

So if Avarice was doing all of this to amuse himself, Mara couldn't really blame him. He was just trying to feel something again.

...OK, scratch that. She could definitely blame him. Tormenting others is a total dick move.

In any case, she was here. And she was wet. There were lights on inside, and... Maybe they'd converted the interior to one of those modernized churches with abstract crosses that wouldn't burn her eyes to look upon them. In any case, she stepped up to the door and knocked as loud as she could.

Mara decided to count to a hundred to see if anyone would come, but she wasn't out of the single digits when one of the doors creaked open and the warm, dry air hit Mara's dead skin.

"Goodness, you're soaked!" A very-much-alive man wearing a plain black collared shirt said, looking her over. "Come in, come in!"

"Uh..."

Mara hadn't expected this. She looked at the silver cross draped around the man's neck and didn't feel her entire world cave in on her, so maybe some of the "Your World is Now Nothing But Pain" vampire mythos was made up, along with the awesome parts?

More unusual, though, was his apparent kindness. Here was a living, breathing human being nice to her. For no apparent reason.

That was almost scarier than Avarice.

"Oh, where are my manners?" he said. "I'm Brother Miguel. I didn't know anyone was coming, though.... Who sent you?"

Mara, still too stunned to speak, held out the piece of paper to Brother Miguel, who took it, not showing any signs of minding its soggy state. Upon looking at the handwriting, however, his face gained a wry smile. "Avarice," he said.

"Yes," Mara said.

"I'm sorry. You escaped from him, then?"

"Yes."

"Well, that is good news. And it's fortunate he had this lying around."

"I thought it was a trap," Mara said.

"Just a stroke of providence," Brother Miguel said. "The Lord must want you here."

Mara blinked a few times. "...You know that sounds super-sketch, right? I mean, aren't religion and the undead supposed to be enemies?"

Brother Miguel smiled, the wrinkles around his eyes showing his age better than his youthful energy. "Just because you've lost your heartbeat doesn't mean you're not under His care," he said, unclasping the cross around his neck and holding it out to Mara. "Here. See?"

Mara took it in her hand and turned it over a few times. She couldn't eat garlic bread, but she could handle a cross. Ain't that just the way.

"You're safe here," Brother Miguel said. "Come in, please. We just want to help."

Mara weighed her options for a moment, but upon realizing that "Trust a guy who isn't actively trying to kill you" or "Be exposed to a guy who left you gasping for air for six hours" were the two main choices, she stepped inside.

"Right, let's get that door closed," Brother Miguel said as Mara looked around the lobby. She saw a basin of holy water in the corner and various colorful pamphlets advertising upcoming events.

"Y'all are kinda... old-school, huh?"

Brother Miguel smiled. "Many of the congregants prefer this style," he said. "Though our thinking has evolved somewhat from what you might be fearing from this decor."

"Well, in any case, I'm glad as hell to be in here instead of out there," she said. Then, realizing her word choice, she covered her mouth and said, "Ahh, sh...oot, sorry! I forgot where I am."

"Don't concern yourself," Brother Miguel said, now ambling towards a small closet door in the left wall. "After all, if you're looking for someone to talk to about hell, I suppose I'm more qualified than most. Ahh, but I'm rambling! Come, come; let's get you dried off, shall we?"

Mara followed him over to the closet, still dreading a garlic butter bath at any moment. "Y'know, I went to church all the time growing up," she said.

“Not so much anymore?” Brother Miguel asked, opening the door and poking his head in. Mara could see it was filled with a wide range of clothing, almost overflowing.

“Afraid not,” Mara said. “I still believe in God — or something like God, at least — but... Well, the church has been kinda...”

“Kinda?” Brother Miguel said as he looked through the closet.

“...Ahh, just as I feared, we’re out of women’s undergarments. I’ll have to go get you some.”

Mara blinked. “You’re... gonna go buy underwear for me?”

“Well, I’m not going to ask you to go back into that mess,” he said, pulling out some other clothes and building them into a neat pile on a nearby table. “Our funding for new clothes has been a bit thin lately, but I can move some numbers around for a new vampire. Shirts and pants, on the other hand, we have from donations in abundance. Unless you’d prefer a skirt?”

“Pants are fine,” Mara said. “Shorts, even, if you have them.”

“Wonderful,” he said, pulling out a few pairs and placing them on the table. “Ahh, first things first, though...” he added, pulling a towel out of the closet and handing it to Mara. “Laundered, all of it, I promise. You could pop in there and change, if you want.”

“I can just take whatever I want to wear?” Mara asked.

“Indeed.”

“...Cool,” Mara said, grabbing a shirt and pair of cute shorts in her size from the table and heading in. “Can you still hear me?”

“I can.”

“...So, you’re really a church guy, right?” Mara said.

“I work here, yes,” he said. “But I get the feeling you’re not so much surprised that a church worker would be kind to a vampire so much as you’re surprised that I’m being kind at all. As you said, the church has been kinda.”

Mara laughed. “Yeah. Kinda... crappy. Like, I don’t get how the church has so neatly cut around all the parts of the Bible that talk about loving your neighbor as yourself and welcoming in outsiders, y’know?”

Instead, it's all a sycophantic cult of personality that throws out anyone who disagrees with them about the color of the carpet, let alone who does or doesn't deserve to be treated like a human being."

Mara didn't hear a response for a while. She wondered if this was all some test; that the secret UV light was about to kick on and fry her as she finally wriggled out of her soaked jeans, toweling herself off as best she could.

Then, she heard Brother Miguel say, "Yeah, you're gonna fit in just fine around here."

"Really?" Mara said, finally starting to feel a little dry as she slipped on the new-to-her clothes. "Hey, is it cool if I'm barefoot?"

"No problem in my book," Brother Miguel said.

"Nice," Mara said, opening the door.

"Feel better?"

Mara took in a deep breath and let it out slowly. For the first time in a week, she felt something like comfort.

There was still an empty, gnawing hole in her being where her lifeforce used to be, but by comparison, she felt refreshed.

"Here," Brother Miguel said, handing her a pen and a pad of paper.

"Write down your sizes so I can go get your stuff. However detailed you want to be is fine."

"You always do this when vampires show up?" Mara asked, taking the pen and paper.

"I'd do it for anyone who needs clothes, but yes," he said as Mara wrote. "The Bible is rather plain about providing clothes for those who need them. If anyone arrives at our door in need, we do all we can to provide for them."

Mara smiled as she gave Brother Miguel her notes. "You know... And I'm sure you're aware of this, but you're being rather nice to me, in direct contrast to my complaints about the church. And those were complaints about how the church treats people with pulses."

"Well, the most important person in my religion didn't have a pulse for a few days, so I still think you're worth my very best," Brother

Miguel said. "C'mon, I'll show you where you're staying," he added, leading her down a hallway.

"What about my wet clothes?"

"I'll take care of them. You can start carrying your own weight later. For now, let someone who wasn't subjected to abuse for the past week do the heavy lifting."

"...God, it was abuse, wasn't it? I was just writing it off as, y'know, vampire evil or whatever, but..."

"Unless Avarice has drastically changed his ways, yes, there's no better word for it," he said, stopping in front of a nondescript door. "But that's in the past now. This way to the basement," he said, opening it. The stairway down went for forty or fifty steps, and at the bottom she could see an unnatural glow. "You're not part of a secret demon cult or something, are you?"

Brother Miguel laughed as he led her downstairs. "No, but I could get you connected with one if you want."

"Really?" Mara said, following. "You're referring folks to other religious organizations?"

"Whatever works," he said. "If my message isn't getting to you, it doesn't do either of us any good to keep you away from someone whose message might, even if I don't agree with them on the finer points. ...Or, in the demon cult's case, pretty much any of the points. But we host Bingo nights with them every other Tuesday, so you'll run into them eventually if you stick around."

"Hold up," Mara said, placing a hand on his shoulder.

"Yes?" Brother Miguel said, grabbing one of the railings to steady himself as he stopped.

"You didn't scream when you saw me. You invited me in. You're an honest-to-God decent human being. You... You're being too cool, is what I'm trying to say. It can't be this easy."

"What can't be this easy?"

“Going from being alive to undead,” Mara said. “Hell, I think I’m having an easier time as a vampire than I ever did as a human. What gives?”

“Ah. Well, I suppose it’s easier to show than tell,” Brother Miguel said, continuing down the staircase.

“Like, what’s to stop me from biting you right now?” Mara asked.

“Decency,” Brother Miguel said.

“...No, seriously. I’m getting pretty thirsty looking at you. ...In the literal sense.”

“Seriously. I wouldn’t fight back. The choice between you as a pile of dust and me as maybe a vampire is cut-and-dry.”

“So you don’t carry a stake or anything?”

“I do carry something like that,” he said. “But only for if one of you folks gets out of control and threatens the other members.”

“How’d you end up with this gig, anyway?” Mara said. “Seems you had to know what you were getting into before starting here.”

“I kid you not,” he said as they reached the bottom of the stairs, “Craigslist.”

“Really.”

“I know my Bible and I like vampires, so I met all of the qualifications,” he said. “I was fully expecting it to be a joke, and was pleasantly surprised.”

At the bottom of the stairs, Mara found a cavernous chamber that she would call catacombs, with the room she stood in acting as a central hub, lit by those unnatural compact fluorescents she’d seen.

“You keep the dead with the dead,” Mara said.

“This was never used as a burial site,” Brother Miguel said, leading her to the door on the opposite side. “The church was designed with hosting vampires in mind. We’ve done some renovating since then, but you’re not disturbing anyone’s gravesite by being here.”

“Ah,” Mara said. “Well. Good. So where is everyone?”

“There’s the question,” Brother Miguel said, leading her to the doorway opposite the staircase, crossing the sizeable chamber. “And

I'm not qualified to answer it. Phoebe is, though, and she should be here."

"Phoebe?" Mara asked as Brother Miguel knocked on the door.

"You know you don't need to knock," a pleasant voice on the other side of the door said.

"Always like to check," he said. "I've got a newcomer here in need of a crash-course in being a vampire. You have time?"

"Oh! I always have time for that," the voice said, now accompanied by the sound of footsteps and, a moment later, the door opening. Standing on the other side was a woman who looked to be about Mara's age. Of course, given her red eyes, that guess could be off by a few centuries. Appearances could be deceiving for vampires.

For example, her warm smile could be nothing more than a honeypot luring Mara in.

"I'm Phoebe," she said, extending a hand.

"Mara," she said, cautiously shaking it.

"Good gracious, you look ravenous. When was the last time you fed?"

"Ahh, I knew I was forgetting something," Brother Miguel said, ashamed.

"Understandable, Miguel," Phoebe said as she reached into a pocket and pulled out a flask. "You've only been at this for a decade. Another three or four and I'm sure you'll get the hang of it."

"Right, right," Brother Miguel said, laughing. "I'm off to buy her some things, unless you need anything else from me?"

Phoebe gave a small nod and said, "Thank you, Brother Miguel. I'll handle things from here."

"Great," Brother Miguel said. "Mara, if you need to contact anyone from your old life, you tell me and I'll see what I can do. Deal?"

"Deal," Mara said. "...Nobody right now, but... Deal."

With that, Brother Miguel turned to leave the underground office space.

"Have you bitten any humans?" Phoebe asked.

“Excuse me?” Mara said.

“Sorry, the real question is, have you had human blood?”

“No,” Mara said.

Phoebe nodded, handing her the flask. “Very good. Here, this will do for now, then. Most of us are off it by now, but when you start out, animal blood helps stave off the cravings and doesn’t have quite so many moral ramifications as human blood.”

Mara opened the flask and, thinking better than to sniff it, screwed up the courage to take a mouthful and swallow, desperate for any sustenance.

To her surprise, it was delicious. She could tell it was blood, but it was hitting all the right taste buds and slaking her thirst by leaps and bounds with every mouthful. As she drained the flask, she let out a contented sigh.

“You have a little...” Phoebe said, pointing to the corner of her mouth.

“Oh,” Mara said, licking at the indicated corner with her tongue. “That it?”

“Perfect,” Phoebe said.

“...Do you have more?”

“In due time,” Phoebe said with a smile. “For the time being, though, please, come in and take a seat.”

Mara, still apprehensive, didn’t sense that Phoebe was an immediate threat, and so she did as asked.

Phoebe’s office was filled with dark woods and well-arranged art pieces on the wall. This wasn’t the space of a person who would sugar-coat things for Mara.

If anything, it reminded Mara of her old therapist’s office.

“So,” Phoebe said, shutting the door behind her and taking a seat on one of two couches in the corner of the room, “how’d you get here, Mara?”

Mara smirked. “Well, when my Mom and Dad met around ’88, so I guess we could start there...”

Phoebe smiled. "We can skip ahead a bit. When'd you turn? If you're willing to share."

"About a week ago," Mara said, taking a seat on the couch across from her host. "Some asshat named Avarice."

Phoebe winced. "I'm sorry," she said.

"Yeah," Mara said. "Why do you let him keep doing what he does? It's evil. He's evil."

"Because he's stronger than us," Phoebe said. "We tried taking him down with, y'know, The Power of Friendship, but he ended up dusting half a dozen of us."

"...I'm sorry," Mara said.

"Thank you," Phoebe said. "Anyway. After that, we entered a truce. When he gets bored with his new quarries, he 'accidentally' lets them escape. Which, I guess, is how you wound up here."

"Yup," Mara said. "So he got tired of me, I guess."

Phoebe nodded. "Well, there is good news," she said.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. All that 'sire' business is crap, so you're not gonna get drawn back by his thrall or whatever."

"Oh," Mara said. "That's... Actually, yeah, that was a concern."

"I'm surprised you haven't asked me yet." Phoebe said.

"Asked you what?"

"Where the other vampires are."

"...It seemed impolite."

"The last thing you need to be is polite with me, Mara. You have a million questions running through your head right now, and ten million more waiting until you have enough RAM to process them," she said.

"True," Mara said. "So. Where are the other vampires?"

"An excellent question. The other six vampires living down here are currently out and about, performing various tasks."

"...Six?"

"Vampires are extraordinarily rare, Mara," Phoebe said, taking her hand. "Letting alone the fact that most people never encounter

one — not face-to-face, at least — it's only about a one in a hundred thousand chance that someone who gets bit ends up coming back.”

Mara blinked a few times. “One in a hundred thousand?”

“It's not a precise number, but it's certainly not much better a chance than that,” Phoebe said. “There are some common factors, though. The vampires I've met exhibit two common characteristics: They possess extraordinary determination to get what they want, and they didn't get what they want when they were alive. There are, of course, many people like that who don't end up turning afterwards, so it's not as if we go around performing psych profiles on people and draining them. Vampires only happen because people like Avarice are unwilling to control their urges.”

“So, do I... owe something to Avarice, then?” Mara said.

“Hell no,” Phoebe said. “Good came out of his shitty behavior, but that doesn't change the fact that he's an ass.”

“Right. It's just... Wow, so I'm one in a hundred thousand, huh?”

“You're more than that, Mara,” Phoebe said. “You're here with me. And right now, no one else in the universe is. That makes you... Well, depending on how you define personhood and whether or not there's life on other planets... Let's say safely that you're at least one in seven billion. And that means that I'm here for you, to make sure you can get what you need.”

“Here's what you need to know right now: You're OK. Nobody here is gonna hurt you. You have time to figure this out. And after what must have been a week from hell, this probably feels like heaven or Shangri-La or something like that, but in a day or two, you'll realize that we're all just folks trying to figure out eternity just the same as you are. You have a question, feel free to ask me or anyone else, but it's OK to not know exactly what you're doing. Because none of us do.”

“...Right,” Mara said. “Y'know, you're not doing a very good job of setting yourself up as a female authority figure with ambiguous motives, likely as not to betray me. You're being far too nice to me.”

“I get that all the time,” Phoebe said.

“Real talk, though, how does this setup work?” Mara said. “Y’all just get to stay in the basement of a church rent-free?”

“Not quite,” Phoebe said. “There are a number of jobs we could do that don’t require us to face the outside world directly. Whatever work that may be, that gives us enough revenue to pay Brother Miguel a fair rent and the human congregants for their blood donations.”

Mara blinked. “...Y’all drink human blood?”

“Indirectly, but yes,” Phoebe said. “Animal blood does in a pinch, as you’ve learned, but if we go too long without human blood — about a month or so — we lose our humanity. Fortunately, all we need is about a glassful and we’re set, so it’s a good one-to-one ratio we have between us, and they’re happy to give. You get used to it after a while, especially with our setup.”

“The church knows they’re sponsoring a nest of vampires, then?”

“The members do,” Phoebe said. “Most of us attend, too. You’d be under no obligation to do so, of course.”

“And they’re not freaked out about it?”

“The ones who are leave,” Phoebe said. “When they try to call the police, the police let them know that we’re legal and on good terms with them. Which took a while, let me tell you, but it’s paying off now in dividends.”

Something had been bothering Mara since the front door of the church opened and she didn’t instantly die. It had taken her this long to put her finger on it, though.

“...Do I deserve this?” she said.

“What do you mean?”

“I... I’m reaping the benefits of work I didn’t do,” she said.

“You are.”

“Isn’t that... wrong?”

Phoebe smiled. “The last will be first, and the first will be last.’ You didn’t wait around to become a vampire until this was all set up for you, did you? You haven’t cheated your way into this position, Mara. I’m offering you a helping hand. And I know that it feels wrong to accept it,

after years of being told that you have to be this successful or this smart or this pretty to do what you want, but now you get to play by a new set of rules. And those rules would be different if you were with another group, but you're with us. And here, you're going to work later, but you don't have to earn anything right now."

Mara stared into Phoebe's eyes, those blood-red eyes that were terrifying in Avarice but were full of love and life in her new friend, and knew that she had found home.

"Thank you," she said.

"You're welcome," Phoebe said. "Do you hug?"

"Absolutely," Mara said, almost tackling her in an embrace. Then, after a few seconds, she broke it off and asked, "So, what do you do?"

"Excuse me?"

"You know, how you said y'all do jobs to pay the bills. What do you do?"

"Ah. We're a vampire videogame studio."

Mara stared at her, a huge grin creeping onto her face. "That's the coolest combination of words I've ever heard," she said. "What do y'all make?"

"We mostly do contract work for mortal-faced companies, but sometimes we make a game and give it to them to publish for us. Tim owes me a lot of favors, but he's good for it."

"Do you... I mean, do you need me? Do you have a job I could do?"

"I'm sure we do. Eventually. But first up is you getting some rest," Phoebe said, leading her to a door behind her desk. "For tonight, you can use my room; I'm sure you're exhausted, so sleep as long as you need. After that, we'll figure out what your skills are and get you to work. Or, if you change your mind — "

"Yeah, that's not gonna happen," Mara said, still grinning.

"Glad to hear it," Phoebe said, opening the door. The room's style matched Phoebe's office, though the light bedsheets were surprisingly cheerful. "You need anything?"

“Well, Brother Miguel should be back soon with some, y’know, underthings, so...”

“The waiting game, then,” Phoebe said. “Feel free to peruse my game collection and see if anything catches your fancy. Or, if you prefer, you can go ahead and hop in the shower; I’ll drop off your things when they arrive. And yeah, that whole ‘running water kills vampires’ thing’s another myth, so you’re fine.”

“A shower sounds amazing,” Mara said, heading for the bathroom.

“You’re sure it’s OK I’m taking over your room like this?”

“Ah, I’ll be fine,” Phoebe said. “I’m running low-energy these days since we’re brainstorming in between projects, so I only need to sleep once a week or so.”

“...This is such a cool new world and I can’t wait to learn all about it,” Mara said.

“Good,” Phoebe said, taking Mara’s hands and looking deep into her eyes, making sure she knew she was there. “For now, though, your goal is to find some amount of peace. It might take a minute; it might take a month. But you need to find that part of you that isn’t still on the mortality treadmill.”

“...That sounds challenging,” Mara said.

“It is,” Phoebe said. “But you know the good news?”

“...Do you mean the Good News good news, or...?”

“A little of both, actually,” Phoebe said. “One of the perks of immortality is that, barring the unthinkable, I’m going to be with you always, to the very end of the age. On this side of heaven and, hopefully, the other, too. So you’ve got time.”

They hugged again.

“And you stink. So go take a shower.”

Mara laughed. “Right. See you soon.”

As she entered the sharply-decorated bathroom, she noticed there were no mirrors. As she saw her lack-of-reflection in some of the stainless steel fixtures, she realized why.

“Geez, I’m gonna need a list of what’s real and what isn’t,” she said to herself as she turned the shower faucet. As she took off her new clothes and placed them neatly beside the sink, unafraid of being naked in a near-stranger’s bathroom as she tossed her old, week-worn underwear on the floor, she thought she felt a small piece of what Phoebe had described.

She felt the universe around her not as a threat to be feared, but as an opportunity to explore.

She felt the support of people that, knowing nothing about her except that she was a vampire, took her in and swore to go above and beyond to help her.

She felt a week’s worth of stress and agony begin to work away as she stepped into the steaming water, her skin echoing the warmth it had when she was alive. It wasn’t quite the same, but it wasn’t worse.

It was different.

It was new.

It was hope.

She wasn’t waiting for the other shoe to drop anymore. That fear still lingered in the back of her mind, but it no longer dominated her world. For the first time in a long time on either side of her turning, Mara felt secure enough to live in this moment without worrying about the next.

It wasn’t beating in her chest anymore, but Mara’s heart was full.