

Excerpt of "Valentine" from *Unsafe Words* by Loren Rhoads

Alondra had never done this kind of magic before. It felt awful, dirty. Her head ached from the concentration it took. Still, she sat in the quaint café, drinking peppermint tea. Teeth gritted, she traced sigils for summoning in the moisture her glass left on the birch tabletop.

She'd never been to Oslo before, spoke almost no Norwegian, but that hadn't posed a problem. The Scandinavians she'd met all spoke lovely English. It shamed her to not have more vocabulary. She'd scarcely prepared for the trip and didn't know how long before her quarry moved on.

And he traveled a lot. Alondra wasn't sure if he fled something or searched for something. Not that it mattered. She didn't want to know more about him than his regular habits in this place. She needed to know enough to find him. Meet him. Get him alone and kill him.

Cold sweat slicked her hands on the glass of tea. Murder was so out of character that she could barely hold the thought long enough to plan. Still, she had no other option. Victor needed a new heart and she would bring him one. It was the least she could do.

But...murder?

How would she live with the deed? She wouldn't be able to tell Victor what she'd done. She probably wouldn't even be able to face him. She vowed to do this thing, get it over with, save Victor's life, and run. She'd find somewhere deep and dark in which to hide. Then she would never, ever return home. It would be enough to know that Victor survived.

She drained the glass of tea and signaled for another, then resumed drawing sigils on the tabletop.

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She stared into space, focus lost, when something called her back to the low-ceilinged room. Nearby, hunched over a tall pint of Ringnes, sat Simon Lebranche. Her target.

Hers weren't the only eyes drawn to him. He didn't make a spectacle of himself, but he also didn't blend in. He'd shed his big fur coat: beaver? otter? Something lush and dark, anyway. Beside his beer glass sat a black silk cavalier's hat, complete with ostrich plume. He wore a black sweater soft as cashmere, over black leather jeans heavy enough to block the cold. All the black clothing set off his creamy skin, his chartreuse eyes, his tousled hair and beard like spun gold.

Alondra didn't know how old Lebranche was. She'd read that he'd fired his musket at the Battle of Marsten Moor, fought on horseback at Jasna Góra and later at Waterloo. Never on the winning side, but always surviving to fight again. After Napoleon's defeat, Lebranche had taken an interest in the arts, befriending Dante Gabriel Rossetti, even posing for him. Now all that seemed gone: friends, war, art. Maybe he searched for someone to end his wandering.

Alondra didn't have to resort to her second sight to see the energy coursing around him—Saint Elmo's fire—sparking and spitting in the dark café. The wonder was that no one else saw it. That kind of life force was perfect for her needs, as long as she didn't panic and fuck it up.

Lebranche caught her looking and swiveled the chair next to him invitingly.

Alondra swept her hand across the liquid on the tabletop and collected her things. She slipped into the vacant chair while Lebranche gazed out the window at the Museum of Contemporary Art's sculpture garden across the street.

"Do you know me?" His accent was vaguely French and half a hundred other things.

“I’d like to,” she purred, then wondered if she’d overdone it. She watched the path his hand took to lift his beer.

“You can see it, then?”

He didn’t mean his hand. Alondra nodded. “I see it. Like a corona around the sun.”

“Like a moth to a flame?” he asked. He seemed too weary to threaten her.

“Like used to surround my boyfriend, only his energy was red. He was a vampire.”

“Was?” Lebranche echoed.

“May still be.” She shrugged. “He left me when I refused to become a vampire, too.”

Alondra had considered tracking Jordan down, even though she didn’t bear a grudge. An immortal she knew would have been easier to trap, if not to kill. She’d decided that she didn’t want to infect Victor with vampirism. She didn’t know if such a thing could be transmitted via organ transplant, but didn’t assume there’d been much research on the topic.

“Why didn’t you join him?” Lebranche asked. “Doesn’t everyone crave immortality?”

He amused himself at her expense, but rather than let on that she understood his subtext, Alondra took the question at face value. “I couldn’t stand the intimacy drinking blood requires. You’re not a vampire, are you?”

Lebranche laughed. “I didn’t know there was such a thing.”

He was lying. He must have seen them during his centuries at war, feeding on the fallen.

Continued in *Unsafe Words*.