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Midnight Bites

The Morganville Vampires

TALES OF MORGANVILLE

RACHEL CAINE

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WELCOME BACK TO MORGANVILLE

I never thought I'd get to say that, but after receiving many, many requests for some kind of collection of all the various short stories I'd written in the world of Morganville, I began to consider the idea of putting them all together . . . all the one-offs, exclusives, and Web stories. All the stories that were only published in certain languages, or countries.

But the one thing I did *not* want to do was just give you things you could (with great effort) put together for yourself. I needed to be sure you got good stuff. New stuff.

So there are included in this anthology, thanks to the incredible generosity of my six Kickstarter backers for the Web series of Morganville, six original tales for you to enjoy. These backers have hardcover editions of these stories in a special coffee-table collection, but they've been kind enough to let me share the Morganville love with all of you, too. So where those stories appear, you'll see their names attached to them, with special thanks.

Each story has a little introduction and backstory with it, from me.

One final note: I resisted calling this *The Complete*

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Collection, because I don't think I'm done with Morganville yet (or it isn't done with me). Because, as you know, once you're a Morganville resident . . . you'll never want to leave.

Rachel Caine, *Midnight Bites*

Introduction



This story came about just because I wanted to know more about Myrnin for my own understanding of his character, and sometimes, the best way to achieve that is to write a character's history from his/her point of view. The character tells me what's important, and what changed, for better or worse. Discovering that Myrnin's father had some type of mental disorder was important to me, because of course when he was born, such things weren't really understood. When I was working on the draft of the first book in which Myrnin appeared, my co-worker who read it said, 'Oh, you've written a bipolar character, and he's actually really cool! Did you know that I take medication for that?' She went on to relate all the ways he was familiar to her. I was amazed, and honoured. I won't name the co-worker, for privacy, but I say now, as then: thank you for sharing your story with me, and you know who you are. I hope Myrnin continues to make you proud.

MYRNIN'S TALE

I grew up knowing that I would go insane. My mother spared no chance to tell me so; I was, on regular occasions, walked up the road to the small, windowless shack with its padlocked door, and introduced to my dirty, filthy, rag-clad father, who scratched at the walls of his prison until his fingers bled, and whimpered like a child in the harsh glare of daylight.

I still remember standing there, looking in on him, and the hard, hot weight of my mother's hand on my shoulder to keep me from running, either towards him or away from him. I must have been five years old, perhaps, or six; I was old enough to know not to show any sign of distress or weakness. In my household, distress earned you slaps and blows until your tears stopped. Weakness invited far worse.

I don't remember what she told me on the first visit, but I do remember the ritual went on for years . . . up the road, unlocking the chains, rattling them back, shouting through the door, then opening it to reveal the pathetic monster within.

When I was ten, the visits stopped, but only because on that last occasion the door swung open to reveal my father

dead in the corner of the hut, curled into a ball. He looked like a wax dummy, I thought, or something dug up in the bogs, unearthed after a thousand years of silent neglect.

He hadn't starved. He'd expired of some fit, which no one found surprising in the least. He was buried in haste, with decent rites, but few mourners.

My mother attended the funeral, but only because it was expected, I thought. I can't say I felt any differently.

After the burial, she took me aside and looked at me fiercely. We shared many things, my mother and I, but her eyes were brown, and mine were very dark, black in most light. That, I had from my father. 'Myrnnin,' she said. 'I've had an offer to apprentice you. I'm going to take it. It's one fewer mouth to feed. You'll be on your way in the morning. Say goodbye to your sisters.'

My sisters and I shared little except a roof, but I did as I was bid, exchanged polite, cold kisses and lied about how I would miss them. In none of this did I have a choice . . . not my family, nor my apprenticeship. My mother would be relieved to be rid of me, I knew that. I could see it in her face. It was not only that she wanted fewer children underfoot; it was that she feared me.

She feared I was like my father.

I didn't fear that. I feared, in fact, that I would be much, much worse.

In the morning, a knock came at the door of our small cottage well before dawn. We were rural folk, used to rising early, but this was far too early even for us. My mother was drowsy and churlish as she pulled a blanket over her shoulders and went to see who it was. She came back

awake and looking more than a little frightened, and sat on my small cot, which was separated a little from the bed in which my three sisters slept. 'It's time,' she said. 'They've come for you. Get your things.'

My things were hardly enough to fill out a small bundle, but she'd sacrificed part of the cheese, and some ends of the bread, and some precious smoked meat. I wouldn't starve, even if my new master forgot to feed me (as I'd heard they sometimes did). I rose without a word, put on my leather shoes for travelling, and my woollen wrap. We were too poor to afford metal pins, so like my mother and sisters, I fastened it with a small wooden peg. It was the nicest thing I owned, the woollen wrap, dyed a deep green like the forest in which we lived. I think it had been a gift from my father, when I was born.

At the door, my mother stopped me and put her hands on my shoulders. I looked up at her, and saw something in her lined, hard face that puzzled me. It was a kind of fear, and . . . sadness. She pulled me into her arms and gave me a hard, uncomfortable hug, all bones and muscle, and then shoved me back to arm's length. 'Do as you're told, boy,' she said, and then pushed me out, into the weak, grey predawn light, towards a tall figure sitting on a huge dark horse.

The door slammed shut behind me, cutting off any possibility of escape, not that there was any refuge possible with my family. I stood silently, looking up, and up, at that hooded, heavily cloaked figure on the horse. There was a suggestion of a face in the shadows, but little else that I could make out. The horse snorted mist on the cold air and pawed the ground as if impatient to be gone.

'Your name,' the figure said. He had a deep, cultured

voice, but something in it made me afraid. 'Speak up, child.'

'Myrnnin, sir.'

'An old name,' he said, and it seemed he liked that. 'Climb up behind me. I don't like being out in the sun.'

That seemed odd, because once the sun rose, the chill burnt off; this was a fair season, little chance of snow. I noticed he had expensively tailored leather gloves on his hands, and his boots seemed heavy and thick beneath the long robes. I was conscious of my own poor cloth, the thin sandals that were the only footwear I owned. I wondered why someone like him would want someone like me . . . There were poor folk everywhere, and children were ten a spit for the taking. I stared at him for a long moment, not sure what to do. The horse, after all, was very tall, and I was not.

Also, the horse was eyeing me with a clear sense of dislike.

'Enough of that, come on,' my new master snapped, and held down his gloved hand. I took it, trying not to tremble too much, and before I could even think, he'd pulled me straight up onto the back of that gigantic beast, into a thoroughly uncomfortable position behind him on the hard leather pad. I wrapped my arms around him, more out of sheer panic than trust, and he grunted and said, 'Hold on, boy. We'll be moving fast.'

I shut my eyes, and pressed my face to his cloak as the horse lunged; the world spun and tilted and then began to speed by, too fast, too fast. My new master didn't smell like anyone I'd ever known: no stench of old sweat, and only a light odour of mould to his clothes. Herbs. He smelt like sweet summer herbs.

I don't know how long we rode – days, most certainly;

I felt sick and light-headed most of the time. We did stop from time to time, to allow me to choke down water or bites of bread and meat, or for the more necessary bodily functions . . . but my new lord ate little, and if he was subject to the needs of the body, I saw no sign of it.

He wore the cloak's hood up, always. I got only the smallest glimpses of his face. He looked younger than I would have thought – only ten years older than me, if that. Odd, to be so young and rumoured to have such knowledge.

I ached everywhere, in every muscle and bone, until it made me want to weep. I didn't. I gritted my teeth and held on without a whimper as we rode, and rode, through misty cold mornings and chilly evenings and icy dark nights.

I had no eyes for the land around us, but even I could not mistake how it changed from the deep green forest to slowly rolling hills with spottings of trees and brush. I didn't care for it, truth be told; it would be hard to hide out here.

On the morning when the fog lifted with the sun's determined glare, my master drew rein and stopped us on a hilltop. Below was a valley, neatly sectioned into fields. Up the rise of the next hill sprawled an enormous dark castle, four square corners and jutting towers. It was the biggest thing I had ever seen. You could have put ten of my small villages inside the walls, and still had room for guests.

I must have made some sound of amazement, because my master turned his head and looked back at me, and for a moment, just a moment, I thought that the sunrise turned his eyes to a fierce hot red. Then it was gone, in a flash.

'It's not so bad,' he said. 'I hear you have a quick mind. We'll have much to learn together, Myrnin.'

I was too sore and exhausted to even try to make a run

for it, and he didn't give me time to try; he spurred his horse on, down into the valley, and in an hour we were up the next hill, riding a winding, narrow road to the castle.

So began my apprenticeship to Gwion, lord of the place in which I was taken to learn my trade of alchemy, and wizardry, and what men today would call science. Gwion, you will not be surprised to hear, was no man at all, but a vampire, one older than any others alive at that time. His age surpassed even that of Bishop, who ruled the vampires in France with an iron hand until his daughter, Amelie, cleverly upended his rule.

But that's tales for another day, and enough of this gazing into the mirror.

I am Myrnnin, son of a madman, apprentice to Gwion, and master of nothing.

And content I am to be that.