

By Hailie Evans

The Lady of the House

“Love is as strong as Hate, and both can be wielded to disastrous ends.”

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An empty manor surrounded by acres of land. A simple front door above the two-step porch. Hanging beside the door, bolted to the siding, is an iron house plaque that reads Trille House. Within the house, a grand piano sits center stage in the drawing room, and a fire crackles in the hearth. Ornate pictures decorate the front hall—all of the same woman: the Lady of the house. In them she is elegantly—but not modestly—dressed in flowing, yellow fabric, her blonde curls tumbling down in perfect array. The portrait of vivacious youth. The ancient, knotted, pine floors don't so much as creak underfoot, and the house is quiet. Eerily silent. In the parlor, an aesthetic chandelier with glittering crystal hangs from the ceiling, and several well-furnished chairs decorate the floor—both for ladies and gentlemen alike—around a pristine coffee table. Down a separate hallway lies the dining room with a long, oak table, the wood polished and unscratched. A small hall connects the dining room to the kitchen, where an icebox stands untouched, and the cookware hangs unused. A back stairway connects to the kitchen, leading down into the pitch darkness of a basement where the shadows hang so heavily a person could suffocate within them. Connecting to the parlor, a carpeted staircase leads up to the second floor. The bedroom and washroom are upstairs, along with the gentleman's personal office and the lady's fainting room. Everything is in place and cared for but unused. Dead.

On the second floor, in the bedroom, a woman stands at the singular window as the sun begins to creep upward in the sky. The curtains flutter in the wind on either side of her like broken wings. She is all that remains in the manor now. The sun continues rising, a singular red orb casting its light upon the land like a lantern in search of some unknown thing. Every day the powerful star crests the horizon—hope renewed—and every day it sets—disappointed—darkness and despair recoloring its soul. The woman’s eyes are bright in the morning light, the sun reflecting in her eyes as they scour the land, looking beyond the limits of sight. No clouds fog the orbs of her face and no rain falls. The looking glass is empty, save the reflection of the lonely, burning sun.

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I tucked my chin to my chest, fresh curls curtaining my face and catching in my eyelashes. Hugo’s hands rested atop mine, the rough weave of his gentleman’s gloves scratching against my fingers. He dropped to a knee beside my cushioned desk chair. Hugo loved me as no other could. My parents, in dismay, had often said that someone like me could never love, for I was too powerful, too ambitious, to be locked into chains such as love. They were wrong. It has now been seven winters since I, on the threshold of adulthood, welcomed his love into my house, and the heat that spreads through me, igniting into a fire each time his woody eyes meet mine, and the ownership I feel over him—what could that be if not love? It was no idle passion.

“Rubescent...” He drew me back from my reverie, trailing off. I could see the worry in the furrow of his brow, the concern in the downturn of his lips.

“Hugo,” I whispered back tenderly.

“Mr. Trille, dear—you must remember. Address me as Mr. Trille.” He did not reprimand me harshly even as he employed another of his vain attempts at firmness, the innocent days of endearments and soft glances lost to his stern visage. He presented a severe front whenever he feared society would judge us harshly. Hugo worried a great deal about what the people thought—we were young and quite withdrawn from their petty circles; it had not taken the neighbors long to realize that our residence was not commonplace. They crouched, like ravenous dogs, waiting for any act with which they might condemn us, and this frightened Hugo. I didn’t particularly care what those scornful people thought, but Hugo, in his fear, did. He didn’t understand that they could never touch us, just as they didn’t recognize how trivial their mortal existence was beside mine. Even Hugo didn’t fully perceive the significance of our union—as long as I claimed him, nothing could touch him. He pulled my face to center with two firm fingers under my chin. My curls fell to the side, leaving my face exposed to him. His knee plunged into the plush carpet as he bowed before me, looking up at me. His fidelity struck a chord in me, a distant clang that sang an old tale: *the villain always works alone—to love is a weakness*. These are the rules one must follow in life to maintain the balance between the favored and the detested. However, if these universal rules are designed for justice, then I have to wonder: *why does the villain always lose?*

“I do remember,” I responded, smiling innocently down at my lap. To see him kneeling before me... mine. He was mine, and he always would be. He lifted my hand to reveal the pile of notes scattered across my desk. I anticipated his disapproval before it even touched his face. He hated my work—hated that I wouldn’t leave it alone. He never once said it aloud, but he didn’t need to voice his discontent for me to hear it. He was a good man for understanding. Most men wouldn’t let their wives work. Hugo doesn’t care that I work—it’s Renee Corderstone he

hates. To think that another woman would be the cause of my husband's jealousy! The thought was nearly amusing enough to make me laugh. Hugo fingered the slips of paper, gazing down with an unreadable expression.

"Is it *her* again?" he asked, contempt underlying his voice, try as he might to keep it hidden. My eyes followed his to the slips of paper: previous sightings, her last locations, who she might be working with, where she could be hiding. Who she loved. Renee Corderstone was the flip side to my coin, determined by fate when it pushed us together as nemeses; yet, she could only hope to be my equal. To begin, she had never been smart enough to conceal her contacts from me, as I concealed Hugo from her. Nor did she have anyone to care for her. For some time, whispers and rumors had told of another hero who might have meant something to Renee, but she was killed by natural causes close to a year ago: stabbed to death in her sleep. A pity, really.

"Hugo, my dear—"

"Mr. Trille."

"Mr. Trille," I conceded, playing with the syllables on my tongue as I watched him through my lashes. His serious expression never wavered. "I will only be done with my work when she is gone," I calmly explained again.

"I understand, but what if she's never gone? What then? You can't live your life in this damp basement. It isn't good for your health, and it isn't good for us." He kept his tone of voice even, controlled. I tilted my chin up, a cold blaze roaring through my ears.

"Hugo." He didn't dare interrupt me this time. The man knew his boundaries. "I will *never* be finished with Renee Corderstone, so long as her heart beats." I leaned forward, placing

a dainty hand against his strong chest. “Do you know why that is?” I whispered, the answer already a song in my blood, lancing through my body and setting off every fight response within me. When he didn’t reply, I pressed my hand down harder onto his chest to elicit a response. “*Do you?*” His lovely, brown eyes stared into mine, and my toes curled in my boots. I leaned closer, my answer a breath against his cheek. “It’s because I *hate* her. I hate her with all I am—every thought, breath, and cell in my body. This passion—it is what gets me up in the morning and keeps me up late at night as twilight descends upon my bed. And so long as our hate for each other lives on, so, too, will my endless fight with her. Only one of us can exist happily. And I assure you, Mr. Trille,” I brushed a hand down the scruff of his cheek, “it will be me. That is when we can live happily, just you and me. Once I have won.” He dropped his face into my caress, then pulled away and stood.

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“Why, Rubescent?” he asked. “Why must you choose?” He turned and departed, murmuring softly as he left—too softly for even her to hear— “Why must you choose her?”

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The wind was howling outside my window, thrashing against the glass like a caged animal. What form that animal would take was still unknown. I rolled in bed, the covers fighting my movements but eventually giving way to allow me to turn. Hugo was still sitting at his desk in his nightclothes, his pen moving fluidly across the paper. The lamp’s soft glow cast shadows under his eyes and lips, giving his face a dour expression. I closed my eyes, exhaling softly as I reached out to him with my mind. He felt worry and fear and intense passion. There was anger as well, and strong dislike—not hate, but close. I brushed my power against his emotions—deep

and with-holding, but willing to be reframed by my spectral hands. Hugo felt...confused, and he felt desire. Desire to show me...show me that love was more than hate. At the heart of this emotional current was love—relentless, obsessive, dominating love. I pondered this for a while, the scratch of his pen steady in the background. Hugo wanted, more than anything else, to show me that he was more than Renee could ever be. Yes, that was what he was processing. I let my power caress his stream of emotions. I was a wraith at the borders of his mind, unseen and not felt but there beside him, experiencing his emotions with him. Hidden from him, yet right there. Hidden as he was from her—my nemesis—for my own protection. The wind howled at me, unabating, and I turned my powers away from Hugo. *What do you want to say?* I silently asked the Beast. Of course, it didn't answer. It wasn't really alive, just like any menacing monster of our imaginations—mere phantoms, like me, my power an idea rather than a true threat. A phantom, constantly pushing in on Renee Corderstone until I devoured her, sweeping her out of existence. But how? I twisted again under the sheets until the silk coverings were entwined around my limbs like bindings. I was bound, this I knew. I couldn't fight Renee. She was too powerful, and my power did not aid me. I needed someone, but a pawn was too weak; one never succeeds by sending a pawn to do a queen's work. Again, I felt Hugo's discontent, almost as if it was reaching for me. I trailed my phantom fingers through the eddy of his emotions, and it came to me. What if Hugo was right? What if love was stronger than hate?

I realized the irony of my way of life: a married villain in love, contradicting every law of supervillain existence. *I defied the mold.* Yet, I adhered to that mold. I hid Hugo from the world, from *her*, and when I fought her, the only thing I put at risk was the random host of my power—any stranger off the street on a given day. I once met another woman like me, detested and rejected, yet free and self-sufficient. I only spoke with her for a short time—she didn't approve

of forming relations—but she loved to preach: “Heroes win because they do not stand alone. We lose because we won’t stand with others.” I never understood this; it’s easier to think that we lose because no one will stand with us in our ideas than to believe that we are incapable of leading or following. But now I see: we refuse to stand with anyone but ourselves, and that is why we lose. I opened my eyes and watched Hugo from my bed. Maybe Hugo was right. Maybe he could be more than her. His emotions were still a colorful stream beneath my mental touch as his inner voice likely played out our encounter over and over again. A smile touched my lips as I watched him. I would give him what he wanted. I would let him prove to me his love and prove to himself that love was stronger than hate. I would not make the same, fatal mistake of forsaking all others as those before me, like that woman, had done. Hugo would not remain hidden from Renee. No, he was my strongest asset, and like the heroes, I would fight alongside my partner and my love. I would give Hugo what he wanted most in the world because if he believed he had the power to win me the war, he just might be able to do it. I dove my magical apparition into the depths of his river, and we joined in a union so intimate that we were one, him and me. Our souls knitted together, and from that union, his power was given birth. I gave it life, but he fed it, its form and strength completely his.

Hello Hugo, my love, I whispered through him. He resembled a marble statue, sitting motionless in his desk chair, but I knew he heard me, and I knew he felt it, the power now surging through his veins. A power that could locate my most hated adversary; a power that could bring about my victory.

“Rubescent,” he spoke. He knew it was me with him. He could feel it, and this level of connection set my heart racing. Never before had someone known what had occurred simply by feeling me join with them.

I have given you the power to prove you can be more to me than she is. I give you the power to fight for me.

“I should not have to fight for ownership of my wife,” he said, rising from his chair in a fluent motion. “I love you, Rubescent.” I knew that—I could feel it surging through his being. “But you have never felt that I was enough.” It was beautiful, my most flawless work. His insecurities channeled into his desire, and it made him stronger. He paused, hanging his head. “I know this. My love is not enough. Now, though, with this power, I can finally show you that I am all you need!”

“Together...together we can prove our love,” I spoke, encouraging him, the image of my triumph moments away from realization. He threw the window open wide, letting the prowling Beast slip in with a heavy, content sigh. Even the elements could appreciate this wonderful, mortal plan falling into place. The beauty of its inescapability.

“I want you, Rubescent,” he declared, his gaze cast outward towards the horizon. “But for as long as *she*’s been with us, there has been no us. It has been you and her. She has put you through pain and heartache, and she has rejected you. She will come to see that she should not have despised you and that she should not have stolen you from me.” Ah yes, she would soon understand that she was doomed the day she first realized I was her nemesis—the day she first felt my power align in the universe with hers. She should have known from the start that she would be trampled, her well of ability a pond to my great lake. Now, I would drown her in a wave. Hugo threw himself from the window into the dark night beyond.

The wind covered any noise he made, the darkness concealed him as he darted across the ground, and the clouds shielded his path as he ran from my property, faster than the flight of a

falcon cutting its way through the nighttime air. I let out a sigh from deep within my chest. His elation as he flew across the land, his determination and drive—it was a stimulant to my mind and soul.

There was a burning passion at the core of everything, smoldering embers; whether it was love or hate, I could not tell. That is the beauty of love. So strong of an emotion, so crippling when lost, but with it... With it, you can change the world, destroy an icon, bring to life a new era. Hate founded in love, and vice versa, is the strongest emotion we as humans can feel, the most powerful foundation for me to build off of, and with Hugo, I had built a fortress.

The wind continued to prowl through the room, a hunting hound, circling at my feet and growling in the night air. A servant.

Hugo was close; I could feel his anticipation. The electricity running through his body. The adrenaline coursing through his veins. The time was almost upon us. Excitement, and underlying mania—he had found her. Anticipation, edginess. She was within his grasp. I could feel it. My lips curled into a smile, almost involuntarily. Renee's end had dawned, and with the coming sun, she would fall as I rose. Deep anxiety ran through my chest—my own, not Hugo's. I had waited for so long, fought for so long. Grim satisfaction flowed into me as Hugo closed in on his prey. Even the wind halted in that second before the two clashed in battle, then the crash of his emotional climax hit me with the force of a tsunami. Rage, hate, love, gratification: he unleashed himself upon Renee. I couldn't see the battle, but I could feel its course. I could feel the ugly pleasure when he dealt a blow; the pain and fear overridden by rage when he took a hit; the elation when he knew he'd taken the upper hand; and finally, euphoria. It was such an

intense, dream-like state of victory that I had to close my eyes to center myself. Hugo's emotions threatened to overtake me, and I could feel his desire to return to me to share in this victory.

I had won. At long last, I had won. What would that woman say now when she heard my name? No longer would she be able to taunt me for my "cowardly power," a power that wouldn't allow me to fight my own battles, and weakened me when I used it rather than strengthening me. No longer would I face harassment and persecution by others like me, face their disgust with me for the nature of my abilities, and suffer their ostracization of me. The scorn and laughter I had faced as I had grown into womanhood would dissipate and feel shame. I rose from the four-poster bed and slipped my nightgown from my sloping shoulder, and it slid off my naked body like a sheen of water. I adorned an elegant, gossamer robe the shade of a birch's autumn leaves to mark the fall of one to another. A simple black cord held the empress-worthy robes together: hiding and revealing me all at once. Warmth—he was here. I felt him in the room, watching me with desire and lust. A smile touched my lips as I turned to meet my champion.

"Welcome back, my love," I said, taking in his appearance. His hair was wind-blown, and his eyes were bright with adrenaline. My gaze fell to his hands, crusted in copper. He approached me and dropped to his knees at my feet.

"I ended your troubles," he said, looking up at me adoringly and crazed. "I proved that my love is stronger than your hate." He clasped his hands before him, a praying soldier to his goddess. "I freed you, Rubescent." Sickening pleasure erupted from him, but it hollowed out in the sudden awareness I felt. With acute focus, I questioned him.

"What did you do, Hugo," I asked icily, my voice dangerous in my own ears. An asp waiting to strike in response to the wrong answer. He bowed his head in submission.

“I destroyed her for you,” he pledged in my name. An emptiness filled me as I looked at the blood on his hands. My mind went silent, and I ripped my power from his body, leaving him a mortal husk. Rage, so cold it burned, bit my heart. I looked at the man before me. He had killed her—Renee Corderstone. But she had let him. Hugo—a mere pawn—did not possess the strength to slay Renee Corderstone. The weak-willed hero had let this happen; she had given in. A bitter taste coated my tongue as I watched my traitorous husband kneeling before me, mocking me. His eyes shone with a delirious haze as he awaited my response. The wind froze in its place, and the house seemed to hold its breath—waiting. His blood-coated hands reached for me. A desperate plea. With a movement so slight it could have seemed unintentional, I pulled away from his childish reach. Revolting. Disgust pulled my face into a pinched expression as I looked down upon him. Disgust, but not with him alone. Renee Corderstone had allowed herself to be bested by a mere figurehead—bearing my power, yes, but a puppet nonetheless who could do nothing more than serve. She was not worthy of calling herself my nemesis—no one was. Hugo reached again for my hand, rising to his feet so that he stood above me.

He had done what no others could do. He had stolen from me what I hated most because of his *greed*. He wanted me for himself; he wanted to keep me locked in this *house* where he could display me as his pretty, little wife. The hollowness rang through me. This pitiful creature before me had stolen my purpose in life, and without it, what was I? The imbalance rang like a dissonant chord through me. Mortals are full of greed and the need to break what they touch. They love to start wars so that they may kill each other. I had sent him to win, not to slaughter.

Realization dawned on me as he looked down at me, brushing one of those treacherous hands down the side of my face. Going behind my back, he had set out to slaughter Renee, to

take from me everything I possessed. *Mr. Trille* had stolen my work, my purpose, and my identity. And for what? He leaned in to press a kiss to my lips, but I turned my head. He wanted a lap dog; he wanted a trophy to display. And the absurdity—dark and amusing—was that he thought that by killing her, he had fulfilled me.

He was blind. Even as his eyes, metallic-looking in the lamplight, scoured me and stripped me to the bone, he was blind. Unknowingly, he had started this war, but this was not a war he wanted. This was not a war he could win. Because he was on my property now, and my house answered to me: its Lady.

I woke the house with a scream, torn from my chest in raw pain and fury. Knives flew from the drawers and glass shattered, the shards coming to my call. With a strength previously unknown to my husband, I threw every ounce of my power into him again, though not to empower him, but to eradicate him. Knives flew into his body, porcupine quills stuck in a mutt, and glass gouged out his soft tissue. Enraged tears streamed down my face as the house continued its onslaught, and the scream continued to rip its way from my chest with such intensity it should have torn my vocal cords. The neighbors would pry, and the prefects would surely investigate, but they would not stand against me. I screamed to the world as Hugo died. Let them come. They'd face me, and they, too, wouldn't prevail. I was a villain with no hero. Now, no one could stop me, for the one person fated to had failed. I was disgusted by her failure. Fate had determined she could stop me, but fate had been wrong, and the world would know. The house returned to its stagnant position, and everything cleaned itself except for the body at my feet. I knelt beside the body of my husband, tears still falling for the loss of my love. I brushed his hair back, leaving a sticky streak of his blood across my hand.

“Sleep well, my love,” I whispered in a choked voice before standing and walking to the broken window. We should have had eternity together, but he hadn’t chosen me. I rested my hands on the wooden pane—dainty hands, innocent hands. Hands stained crimson—stained as surely as my societal reputation would be for as long as I lived amongst the gossips and party-goers. After everything, I had been right. Hate prevailed over love.

Death sang in my empty home, resonating through its wooden floors. A war had been waged, and none had survived, for he had killed her, I had killed him, and together, they had killed me. The curtains billowed around my figure as I stood at the pitifully bare window frame watching the blood-red sun crest the horizon, marking the beginning of a new kind of villain—the empty kind. The purposeless kind. The searching kind. For I couldn’t have spent my entire life dedicated to this fight if this was how it was meant to end. There *must* be more. There has to be.

Some will say I’ve won. The “appraised victor,” they will call me. Certainly, I triumphed over my foes both loved and hated, but I did not win. I lost just as they did. The only difference is that I must live with my loss—feel the void it created. I will spend the rest of my days with the knowledge, in my heart, that I am missing an essential piece of myself. I will spend the rest of my days searching—searching for what is already gone.