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ROSES OF BLOOD ON BARBWIRE VINES

a zombie/vampire novel by D.L. Snell

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ABOUT THE BOOK

As zombies invade a barricaded apartment building, the vampire denizens must protect their human livestock. Shade, the vampire monarch, defends her late father's kingdom, while Frost, Shade's general, convinces his brethren to migrate to an island, where they can breed and hunt humans. In their path stands a legion of corpses, just now evolving into something far more lethal, something with tentacles—and that's just the beginning.



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

D.L. Snell is an Affiliate of the Horror Writers Association, a graduate of Pacific University's Creative Writing program, and an editor for Permuted Press. He also tutors writing. Snell has published horror stories in anthologies such as *Chimeraworld* #3, *Cold Flesh*, *The Undead*, and *The Undead: Skin & Bones*. For more info, visit Exit66.net.

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Prologue

Kent readied his handgun as Troy and the zombies ran upstairs. His flashlight seemed like a movie projector, the monsters merely illusions, just actors in costumes--torn suits, ripped skirts, intestines trailing behind. Except no actor or make-up artist could manufacture the pure hunger in these creatures' eyes. Neither that nor the smell of excrement and death.

One of the corpses groped for Troy. Kent shot it, surprised at his aim, and a black bouquet budded from the zombie's head.

Troy made it to the landing, and both men retreated into the apartment. Kent shut the door on the zombies. Their dead bodies crashed into it. It was cheap, hollow. It wouldn't last long.

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In the corner, the women screamed, and the little boy, Payton, cried. Two battery-operated lanterns lit the room against the night.

Kent grabbed Troy's dirty t-shirt and yanked him close, spitting as he yelled, beads gleaming in his beard. "What the hell did you do?"

Troy shrugged and tried to pull away, breathing hard, reeking of canned tuna. "It was Jackson, man! He lost it! He cleared the junk and just--he just walked out! He left the door wide open!"

Kent almost asked why--his brain was working too fast, his heart a cannon in his chest and ears--but he knew exactly why Jackson committed suicide. Five people had been cooped up in this small apartment for months. Their water was low, their food was low, and they fought constantly; they picked at each other's warts, sores, and other imperfections. Kent and Jackson had actually come to blows a few weeks back, all for a cigarette. After a long silent period, Jackson finally cracked. Now everyone would be cut on the shards.

The zombies had already splintered the wood. Two minutes, tops, and they would be inside.

"What're we going to do?" Troy asked, yelling over the pounding and the kicking and the cracking of wood. He was a good kid, about twenty-three, a soccer player who preferred rugby, but he asked the stupidest questions.

Kent glanced around the room, trying to think, trying to plan. They had piled all the big furniture in the lobby downstairs to create a makeshift barrier, a scab against the zombie scourge. Troy had picked that scab. Little good the couch and bookcase did downstairs. Kent could have used them to block the apartment door. Now the front room was nearly empty except for their bedding, some coloring books for the kid, and a box full of tools they'd scavenged. And, of course, their guns. A few pistols was all. Insufficient lead.

The bedroom contained nothing, except the bloodstains on the carpet and the chill that lived in the walls. No one went in there anymore. Not since the men cleaned up Josie's suicide.

Kent couldn't come up with a plan--it was too damn noisy! And he had been a roofer, not an architect, not someone who planned or designed. But he had to protect the women and the kid. They were about the only sun in this place, and he had already failed his own woman, Josie. His kisses and reassurances hadn't patched the hole she'd been digging in herself. Their arguments over stupid shit like who hogged the blankets hadn't helped.

Payton yipped as a mangled hand busted through the door. It was hopeless. They were dead.

"Wait!" Troy shouted, holding up his hand. "I hear something!"

Kent did too. An approaching motor. The rattle of automatic gunfire.

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They both went to the window and looked down at the street, three stories below, a pinball machine of wrecked cars lit by the moon. Bodies rotted in the gutters. Zombies wandered everywhere.

A bus hurtled through them.

It sported plates of steel armor, a plow, and a crown of razor wire, with a machinegun emplacement on top. A man in a leather trench coat fired the gun. Other passengers shot through ports along the sides of the bus; walking carrion lay down, an easier meal for the crows.

Ramming other cars aside, metal crunching, tires shrieking, the makeshift tank pulled a U-turn and then reversed toward the apartment building. It left smears and clumps of dead flesh in its wake.

“What the hell are they doing?” Troy asked.

Kent shook his head. But as the bus sped up, he knew exactly what they were planning.

“Get back!” He yanked Troy away from the window. Not that the impact would harm them this high up. He was just acting on instinct.

The building shook as the bus crashed through the front entrance. The women screamed. The boy peed himself, and Kent could smell it.

The zombies were almost through the door. Several arms flailed and smacked the wall.

“Go!” Kent told the women and the boy. “The bedroom!”

They gawked at him, and he could tell they didn’t want to go in there. But it was the only defensible room with a window. The bathroom window was just a vent, too small to climb through.

“Go!” Kent shouted.

They went.

He returned to the window, and Troy came too.

Below, the backend of the bus was buried in the building, littered with pieces of plywood, broken studs, and brick façade.

Three men had joined the machine gunner on the roof. They wore trench coats too, and they were firing M-16s into the zombies, producing bursts of light. Heads popped into black jelly and jam. Kent never understood why the brains of the dead were black. He figured it had something to do with the parasite that reanimated them; the Puppeteer, the radio had called it. Whatever the hell *that* was.

“Who are they?” Troy asked. “The military?”

“I don’t know,” Kent replied. They had been waiting for someone to save them for a long time, hoping for the National Guard or some other rescue team. This group did not look military, but they seemed to know what they were doing.

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Downstairs, in the lobby, gunshots erupted. More men from the bus, most likely. Kent hoped they hurried.

Finally, a zombie priest broke through the door. The side of its head was deflated like a basketball, but not enough to kill it. Kent shot the priest, but more zombies barged in.

He and Troy retreated to the bedroom with the guns. They shut and locked the door.

In this room, the temperature dropped noticeably, and the chill whispered. The women and the boy, Payton, sat in the corner farthest from the bloodstain on the carpet. Kent could still see the shape of Josie's head in the discoloration. She'd made a mess in more ways than one, a mess no one could ever totally clean.

The zombies began to break down the final barrier. Fully armed, Kent and Troy waited for the heads to poke through. They never did.

The gunfire of their saviors grew louder and louder, until, right outside the door, weapons discharged and the last zombies slumped to the ground.

One man knocked. "Search and rescue!" he called. "Anyone here?"

Troy opened the door before Kent could say anything. Damn kid.

"Jesus Christ, thank you!" He hugged the man who had knocked, a man with long brown hair and eyes of muddy gold.

Three other men stood behind him. They stared at Kent. One had icy eyes, and they froze the fluids in Kent's spine. Another stepped forward, tall and regal, the faint scent of cloves. He moved almost like a fluid, no sound at all except a quiet ripple. A pentagram necklace glimmered against his breast like a shooting star.

"Good evening," he said, his tone proper and polite. "We have come to save you."

The man's pupils were abnormally large, two telescopes into deep, dark space. Kent could barely look away, could barely think. He couldn't even hear the gunfire outside anymore, though he knew it was there, couldn't smell the meaty, oily stink of the zombies that lay in splats around the room. Someone told him once that certain snakes could hypnotize birds. Was this man a snake?

The women stopped crying as the stranger looked past Kent, but they couldn't stop shuddering.

"Good evening, ladies."

Something about his voice, as if he were speaking inside Kent's head, coiled and hissing.

Move, he thought. *Run*. But if he did, the man with the pentagram would strike, faster than any rattler. Besides, Kent couldn't move. Fear, the greatest Medusa, had turned him to stone.

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Smiling subtly, the man with the pentagram turned to his underlings. “Bring them,” he said. “I’ll gather their supplies.”

The soldier with brown hair grabbed Troy’s arm.

“Who are you?” the kid asked, his voice hollow and full of echoes. No one answered.

The other two soldiers came forward. One went for the women and the boy, and the second, the man with icy eyes, approached Kent. He grinned, exposing fangs. Then he came down like a blizzard.

PART ONE

CITY OF ROSES

Chapter One

In the darkness below, the humans whimpered and huddled in one corner of the room. They were completely nude. The floor of the apartment above them had been removed, along with the joists. In this upper apartment, hidden in a crisscross of built-in rafters, Shade crouched on a catwalk. Her pupils dilated into discs of jet.

The humans exuded the smell of urine and blood, thick with the taste of ammonia and iron. Strewn across the floor, their quilts emanated the musk of night sweats; their slop buckets stank of feces. Although boards covered the windows, barring sunlight and moonlight alike, although no lantern devils danced upon the plaster, the humans glowed almost infrared.

A child was crying. His mother hushed him and tried to blend with the group.

Shade shut her eyes and moistened her lips, savoring the plum of her lipstick, relishing the prick of her canine teeth. Her onyx hair whispered hexes and incantations. The catwalk groaned beneath her.

Inside her belly, the Beast woke, a hairless canine form, all muscles and teeth, a collar of spikes and a steel chain, the epitome of her hunger. It grumbled and drooled around molars and tusks. It tensed, snarled, and lunged.

Shade's lashes flittered open. She bared her fangs, and with a whirl of cape, she swooped into the room.

Amidst the group, a woman screamed. The Beast tried to attack, but Shade held its chain. Before the zombie outbreak, humans had roamed free, and she had loved to hunt them. Since then, she had spoiled the Beast, had spoiled herself, with convenient blood. Both needed to learn delayed gratification.

Back in the rafters, she perched on a horizontal beam. Her black leather pants tautened; her black boots flexed. A pentagram swung pendulum from her neck.

In their corner, the humans muttered and shuffled, clutching each other, trying to knit. The child sniveled. His mother muffled him with her hand.

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Before modifications, the apartment had consisted of four rooms: a living room, a bathroom, a bedroom, and a kitchen. Now, the humans were isolated in the living room, what Shade's late father had dubbed the refectory. All the doors had been replaced with redwood studs, plywood, plaster, and three-inch screws. All the windows were shuttered.

Above, the apartment of rafters was likewise sealed, except for a makeshift hatch near the ceiling. It led into the bedroom of a neighboring unit. It was the only entrance, the only exit, the only view.

Again, Shade swooped into the room. The screamer began to shriek, and Shade circled her. Bladder fluid marinated the woman's inner thigh. Unbathed, her bare flesh smelled like patchouli and onions. And her blood, *her blood!*

Shade yearned to pierce the grape in the woman's throat, to revel the juice as it jettisoned across her face and trickled down her neck, hot and slippery between her breasts.

From a holster on her belt, she withdrew a black whip, no longer than a panther's tail. The leather of her gloves creaked as she tightened her grip.

She lashed out, and the woman fell to her knees, unlucky to hit plywood instead of bedding.

In a different time, when humans owned the building, the noise would have riled the tenant below. Tonight, that tenant's apartment, along with most the third

floor, was a tangle of barbwire on a heap of cement rubble. It was a snare, in case the captives above should break through the floor. Only rats inhabited those rooms, their angry chatter too meek to hear.

Shade knelt, yanked the woman's mane, and punctured her trachea with a dagger. She kissed the wound, shutting her eyes to focus on the sweet suction, the tease and tickle of her tongue. When she departed, she smelled copper. She tasted pinot noir, a red wine.

She released the woman's hair, and her head drooped. The bitch heaved, sucking air through her tracheotomy. Urine squirted down her legs and puddled on the floor.

Back in the rafters, Shade became a gargoyle, motionless to silence the boards. Her prey slumped onto her side, one hand working between her legs, whimpering in masturbation. The human sex drive had always responded to the likes of Shade; it was the only way humans could cope with such encounters, gorged with blood and dripping fluids.

The other humans murmured and glanced at the rafters, believing Shade had gone. One even reached out to calm the injured woman, but faltered, ventured a bit farther, and eventually withdrew. The mother removed her hand from the boy's mouth, and he sniffled, wiping snot on the back of his forearm. Around them, the group slowly unstitched.

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Yes, Shade thought. The danger has passed.

And then, as they stepped out of bounds, she keened like a bat and plunged into the room. The humans jumped back, tightening their weave. The woman on the floor looked up just as Shade's cape enveloped her. She had no time to squeal.

The Beast's teeth locked into her throat and ripped. Blood scalded Shade's face. She caught red raindrops with her tongue, let the fluid soak her hair and spatter the shoulders of her cape. The woman writhed, but Shade pinned the bitch beneath her knee and jammed her forearm beneath her nose.

The blood smelled flat, an iron deficiency. Shade had expected vintage burgundy, but the more the Beast drank, the more its thirst clawed her throat. Soon, the human's struggles stilled; the flow petered into a squirt, a drizzle, a drip.

Shade stood, licking the cheap wine from her lips. Wet hair clung to her cheek, and fresh blood ached between her breasts. Her nipples swelled against the black leather corset top. Her eyes shined timeless obsidian.

In their corner, the humans cowered. Even the child was too terrified to weep. Shade approached them, torturing the floorboards to make them cringe.

The mother grasped her son and shrank into the horde. Although blind without light, the woman stared right at Shade, alert like a cornered deer. An artery throbbed in her neck. Shade could already feel the wine pulsing into her mouth, spilling over and dripping off her chin, Bacchus overjoyed.

But she only owned so many humans, the last of their kind, aside from the torsos across the hall, now just penises, vaginas, and incubator wombs--*breeders*. Eventually, these torsos would produce new livestock, but until then, Shade could not keep killing. She could not let the Beast off its leash.

It growled and pawed at her throat, pawed until she was raw and thirsty. She deserved another swallow. She could muzzle the Beast's killer jaws, just for a taste.

Yes, yes--Shade opened her mouth and lunged.

Someone screeched, ultrasonic, bat sonar.

Through the rafters, a rectangle glowed two shades lighter than the surrounding darkness: the hatch. A man's silhouette blotted its center, and the sound waves vibrated from his mouth.

He had been watching her, had watched her spill blood. Her arms and scalp tingled at the thought. Then the tingles became a shiver: he had witnessed her lose control.

Shade looked at the mother, at her pulsating artery. Then, with a swirl of cape, she disappeared into the rafters. The Beast lay down inside her.

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On the catwalk, Shade strode toward the hatch, clenching her fists and jaws.

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Instead of a flimsy lock, three deadbolts enforced the hatch, engaged from the outside. Armed with a .357, a soldier named James constantly guarded the locks. As a Sexton, James maintained Haven security in concert with three other soldiers. He allowed only two people into the refectory: Shade and General Frost, the leader of Shade's Undertakers, executioners of the undead. Usually, James locked Shade in the room until she finished. He also cleaned the messes and sacrificed them to the seer, their resident clairvoyant.

Today, someone besides James held the door, a man with an ice-sculpture jaw and a mourner's veil of hair, scaly unknowns snaking beneath the frozen surface of his eyes.

"General Frost," Shade said, as James shut the door behind her.

The general's eyes fixed her, grim and steady. He ignored her coat of blood, did not even lick his lips at the scent.

"What is it?" she asked.

Frost glanced at James. When he looked back at Shade, secrets lurked beneath the ice. "Walk with me," he said.

Shade nodded.

In this room, a catwalk traversed a pit, where rattlesnakes of barbwire coiled atop blocks of column, and orgies of rebar waited to probe flesh. Shade and Frost

walked through the rafters side by side. James passed them to unlock the opposite door; he turned his head as if to catch any whispers.

Frost must have suspected the eavesdropper; he fixed his gaze straight ahead and held his tongue. Shade studied him, trying to find hints in the chiseled cheekbone or the pale lips. His face was impassive, his icy eyes unbreakable.

At the other end of the room, she and Frost descended a ladder to a clearing amidst the barbwire. James admitted them into the next room, empty. From there, Shade and Frost stepped into the hallway. Lanterns guttered along the narrow corridor. A cardinal runner--frayed and pocked with cigarette burns--covered the floor, except for the expanse of the refectory. There, the floor cut away and dropped to more wire-crowned boulders and rebar.

Frost checked the shadowy doorways for lurkers. "Come," he said, turning right, away from the pitfall. His cape billowed as he marched. Knives, keys, and other tools clinked on his utility belt. His Glock was lackluster in the murk, like a toy.

Even with long legs, Shade struggled to pace the general. He led her to the stairwell, and they went up, skipping five steps at once. The wood creaked under their weight, and the banister wobbled. The staircase spiraled oblong, leaving a central shaft, a freefall from building-top to ground floor.

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Frost peered over the banister and inspected the stairs below. Shade looked down as well. The entire first-floor flight had been axed, in case zombies finally penetrated the barrier and accessed the building. Barbwire, boulders, and toppled vending machines congested the bottom of the stairwell and extended through the doorway into the lobby.

No one followed them upstairs. They were alone.

Through a metal door at the top, Frost walked onto the roof, crunching tarred gravel under his engineer boots. Shade followed him past the inert fans and pipes, past the collection of pots and glasses, which gathered rainwater for baths. They stopped at the building's edge, a panorama of blackout buildings and gridlock streets, all pallid in the cloud-filtered moonlight. The city reeked of carcasses bloated with gasses and runny with fluids. Its dead bemoaned their graves, forever doomed to wander.

Once, this city had a name. Sapped of all life, that name no longer mattered. Location, community, and culture were mere artifacts, lost in the rubble of day's end. Even the city's alias, the City of Roses, had lost value, though Shade's father Roman had tried to restore it before his death; he had tried to build an empire. Now, Frost's Undertakers called it the City of Corpses, a more accurate moniker, though Shade would never utter it.

"Look," Frost said, pointing down at the barricade over a waist-high parapet.

Made of car husks, concrete mountains, barbwire brambles, and other rubbish, the barrier circled the apartment building, nearly one story high and covering more than half the street. Zombies, ant-sized from this height, constantly bashed, scratched, and clawed the vending machines, burnt trucks, and crumbling Doric columns of the blockage. Some ghouls tangled with the barbwire, flesh nearly raked to the bone from hours of struggle. Others squirmed on rebar or beneath dislodged boulders.

Where Frost was pointing, a cemetery gate surfaced the fortification. It blocked a pipe, which Roman's Bloodhounds once used to import human refugees. Obsolete now, the Bloodhounds had been a search-and-rescue team dedicated to capturing human survivors. After the population had depleted, the Bloodhounds became the Undertakers, death to the undead.

Since the final delivery, Sextons had sealed the pipe. But the zombies had finally pushed the gate over enough to climb it. One had made it to the top, now impaled and writhing on the gate's cast iron finials. Others clambered upward, sliding down or wedging between the bars, faces snared on the thorny metal vines.

"Soon," Frost said, "they will penetrate the Haven. The barbwire is thin there, easily trampled, and the window shutters will not endure assault."

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As the general spoke, a SWAT officer shimmied up the cast-iron bars. His left pant leg was torn, along with much of his calf. He still wore his black ski mask, but had lost his helmet.

“What harm could they do?” Shade asked. “All the lower stairs have been removed. They couldn’t reach us.”

“True.” Frost leaned his elbows against the parapet, staring down at the street. “But in time, they could undermine the structure, cause it to collapse.”

“Surely they will rot before then.”

Frost did not reply. They both knew the Puppeteer slowed decomposition. The scientists had designed it to maintain tissue and to combat the microorganisms of decay. And with a concerted effort, its puppets might easily bash through walls and supports. Weighted with snares, the apartments would cave. Shade knew nothing of the building’s load bearing system to think otherwise.

On the gate, the officer was halfway up. He had slid down, but slowly regained his height. More corpses followed suit.

“What do you propose?” Shade asked.

Frost did not hesitate: “Relocation.”

“What?”

He stood and finally met her eyes. His gaze could freeze anyone's attention, especially when the secrets of deep skimmed the surface, blurs fishtailing, disappearing into the gloom.

"In the north river, we have found a boat, fully fueled and operational."

"Is that true?"

"Yes. And the Undertakers have secured an uninhabited island off the coast. They have already stocked it with weapons, food, medicine--all the supplies we would need. We could populate it, let the humans roam and multiply. We could build on your father's legacy. We could *hunt*."

As he spoke, Frost's pupils eclipsed his irises, leaving a blue corona. His fangs began to lengthen. Shade avoided his eyes, those alluring black holes; she looked out at the old brick buildings and the towers with steel frames.

Roman had dreamt of a grand metropolis purged of the undead, gargoyles shepherding humans through crosswalks and roadways, the Haven as their castle. Before his death, before the theater and the assassin in the shadows, he had asked Shade to defend their home. "Rebuild this city, our city, the City of Roses." That night, he left to never return.

"No," she told Frost, still evading his hypnotic eyes. "I will not abandon my father's kingdom."

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Frost put a hand on her shoulder. “Had we but world enough, and time, I would say yes, stay. But worms find their way in, Shade. Lust turns to ashes, empires crumble to dust. So let us break these iron gates. Let us fly.” A chant hissed between his every word, the forked tongue of the ancients. He was casting a spell, a serpent with an apple and a silver tongue, that old *carpe diem*. Pick the fruit, Eve. Partake.

Now, as she pictured the island--pursuing a naked man across a beach, catching whiffs of his blood as purple-lined shells gashed his feet--a heat roused in her breast. Moisture livened her loins, decades dry, and something fluttered against her ribs. She tried to smother the flurry in its cage of bone, tried to break its wings because Icarus died in impulsive flight, because they would have at least a year before the puppets destroyed the Haven, her father’s castle. But before she could, Frost swept her into a waltz and took the lead.

“Remember what it was like?” he asked, his breath hot and coppery. “The thrill of the chase? Remember how sweet the blood?”

Shade said, “Yes, yes,” unable to stop the wings. Her pentagram necklace swayed with her, once more playing the pendulum.

“This,” Frost said, licking wine from Shade’s neck, teasing her flesh with his fangs, “this is rat’s blood, a vector’s disease. We are royalty. We crave vintage!”

He spun her outward, then embraced her, pressing his crotch to her buttocks. Shade gyrated against him, disgusted at her human behavior, yet electrified, Beast awake and purring. Frost placed a hand on her belly, slowing her seduction. He brought his lips to her ear and whispered, the faintest breeze: “Let us hunt, let us be free.”

She turned and kissed him, tasting minty lips, flicking and teasing with her tongue. Frost cupped her breast and tested its ripeness while she stroked the swell inside his leather pants. She never questioned how he became potent. He knew spells.

Running his finger over Shade’s pentagram, Frost chanted the ancient language. He untied her corset and pried it open like a ribcage, freeing her breasts, letting them bounce and jiggle before tasting each dark cherry.

Shade moaned. Biting her gloves, she pulled them off. She unzipped Frost’s pants, freed him, traced vein and underbelly with cool fingertips, surprised at the rigidity and heat of his flesh, surprised to feel his heartbeat. Gripping his girth, she pumped twice, emphatically.

Frost lifted her, and she straddled his waist. He set her on the parapet, with the drop to her back, and he unbuttoned the slit along her crotch. Still suckling her breast, he slid a finger inside her, rolling her vulva with his thumb. Shade bit her

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lip and let her legs quiver as flames coiled around her spine, as they spit luminous venom into every cell.

With a thrust, Frost penetrated the skin of her plum, stoking the fire, slamming again and again until Shade felt she were falling backward, over the parapet and toward the barricade. The fire climaxed and threw lanterns across her vision. And with Frost's final thrusts, the inferno spurted magma, burning, burning--and then Shade floated on water and ash.

Her hair streamed slowly across her cheeks. It whispered into silence.

Frost pulled away, dripping their sex. He began to sheath himself. Shade sighed and let her head fall back. Twilight stained the sky with livor mortis, in rigor and decaying. She prayed it would seep bodily fluids, to clean the stickiness that plastered her hair and skin, to clear the dew from her brow.

Frost stepped to the parapet and pointed his Glock at the barricade. The shot echoed, a lonely call that would wander, eternally unanswered. The casing tinkled on the gravel at his feet. Below, finally at the top of the cemetery gate, the SWAT officer toppled with a blown-out kneecap. He tumbled past other climbers and halted against a fist of concrete.

Frost holstered his gun and watched the officer drag himself back to the gate. "May I press your decision?" he asked, his fangs withdrawn, his voice a carnal dust that had known the passions of the furnace.

Shade shut her eyes. She saw the kingdom Roman had envisioned, turrets and spires charcoal against midnight blue, a city of shadows, the City of Roses. And even as that stone empire crumbled into sand, even as the clouds eclipsed her shimmering pentagram, a smile won her lips. The words that passed her tongue tasted of ancient wine, long hidden in the world's most dank barrel-vaulted cellar.

“We shall hunt,” she said. “We shall be free.”

The sky began to weep.

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We hope you enjoyed this excerpt from D.L. Snell's upcoming zombie/vampire novel, *Roses of Blood on Barbwire Vines*. Don't forget to visit www.rosesofblood.com to

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Thanks!