

FROM THE
AMARANTHINE UNIVERSE

Tales of the Executioners

ZURI:

Trapped

A short story

By Joleene Naylor



<http://www.joleenenaylor.com>

Joleene@joleenenaylor.com

First Edition, 2018

Second Edition, 2019

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You never know what you'll find in the shadows... ..



Other books by Joleene Naylor:

Amaranthine Series:

- 1: Shades of Gray
- 2: Legacy of Ghosts
- 3: Ties of Blood
- 4: Ashes of Deceit
- 5: Heart of the Raven
- 6: Children of Shadows
7. Clash of Legends
8. Masque of the Vampire
- 9: Goddess of Night

Stand Alone Novels:

Brothers of Darkness: Patrick's Story

Short Story Collections:

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Deal with the Devil: Jorick's origin story

COMING SOON:

Micah's novel (not the final title)



Dedicated to John & Sherry with much admiration for their strength and ability to keep fighting.

Thanks to Chris Harris and Bonnie Mutchler for their ninja-like proofreading skills.

What is an Executioner?



The Executioners are the vampire's equivalent of special police. They go on "assignments" that The Guild (the vampire government) sends them on, and they don't have a reputation for being very nice. It's a reputation that is often well deserved.

For more on Executioners and the universe they live in, [check out the *Amaranthine* series by Joleene Naylor](#).

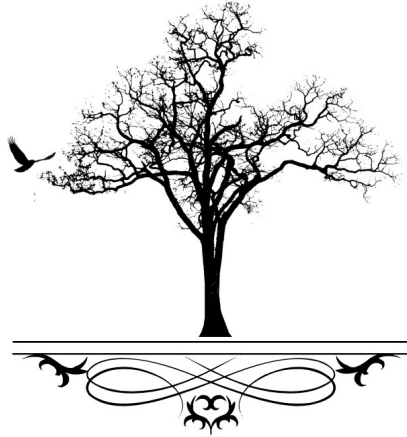


This is the fourteenth in a collection of short stories, *Tales of the Executioners*. Each story is about a different Executioner from the *Amaranthine* universe. To get all the stories (including previously unreleased shorts and bonus stories) get the *Tales of the Executioners Collections Volume One and Two*.

Zuri became an Executioner in 1868, replacing Daniel. This story takes place during the novel *Heart of the Raven*.

This story may contain violence, strong language, sexual content or other disturbing scenes and is not intended for a young audience.





Zuri

(This story takes place in January at The Guild's citadel, during the novel *Heart of the Raven*.)

WARNING: This story contains spoilers for the novel *Ashes of Deceit*. Proceed at your own risk.

“-Stay tuned for more-”

The TV died with a click, and Zuri dropped the remote control to the stand. He was tired of the endless prattle, tired of everything.

He shifted in the overstuffed chair and looked from one wall to another. A poster, a framed photo, a painting, the dusty TV, the doorway to his bedroom. He had the panorama memorized, down to each speck of dust.

Just like he'd memorized what led him to this captivity.

He sat in the front of a sleek black sports car, while Senya steered down the rural highway. Behind him, Dismas was crammed in the backseat, his fingers tapping impatiently on his knee.

“Tell me again why we don't have any guards with us?” Dismas asked.

Senya rolled her eyes and snapped back the same thing she'd said twice before, “Malick felt they were unnecessary.”

Unnecessary. For Malick to say they needed less force was bizarre. He was usually happy to send masses of vampires to do the smallest job, even for something as simple as a murder investigation. Normally this would warrant one Executioner and two guards. In fact, a few days ago, Beldren and two guards had been sent to just such a scene. Zuri had run into him,

on his way back from another assignment. Though he'd opted to help out, his presence hadn't been necessary.

So why send three of the elite Executioners now? It couldn't have anything to do with a change in location, because the last murder was close to this one. The same location, the same MO. It was obvious the two were connected – that they had a serial killer on their hands – but even that didn't warrant three Executioners and no guards.

Especially since we know the killer is only a human.

Senya checked her GPS and turned down a quiet winter road. Zuri recognized it in a dull sort of way. They were headed to the nearest vampire den – which had also been the den closest to the last murder. He and Beldren had stopped in last time and had a quick word with the coven.

No, not really, he reminded himself. Mostly they'd spoken to Jorick, who claimed to be visiting the den “for the holidays.” The Hand of Death, as he was also known, was Malick's fledgling. He'd been the head of the Executioners until he'd quit in a spectacular display that involved fighting his fellows and threatening his master. Malick had let him go then, just like he'd let him go at that mansion a couple months ago. Jorick was one of the special ones who would always be let go, not just because of his blood tie to Malick, but also his age and powerful abilities.

And Senya has no idea she's driving straight towards him - no idea he's at that den. I bet Malick knows, though. That was probably why he'd sent three Executioners and no guards. Three was a small party, so they wouldn't scare the local coven, but being all Executioners, they might be strong enough to fight a powerful enemy.

Maybe.

Zuri thought about warning Senya, but she'd only ask him why they hadn't reported Jorick before. And what could he say? When Beldren had called in the final report, he'd skipped mentioning him to avoid the extra paperwork. Even when they'd been told there was another murder, it still didn't seem worth it, not until Zuri was ordered to remain and assist Senya's investigation of the new crime. By then it was too late. Beldren had quietly headed back to The Guild, and Zuri had checked into a motel. There he waited for Senya to show up and hoped that Jorick wasn't really involved. The hope thinned when Senya arrived, two days later, with Dismas in tow, making it three Executioners. Still, he tried to hold onto his optimism as they took most of the evening to interrogate the survivors, then bedded down for the day, ready to head to the nearest den the next evening.

The den where Jorick and his human just happen to be staying.

The farm house came into view; a den that belonged to someone named Kale. Zuri's memory skipped ahead, past the initial confrontation and tense pseudo cooperation. It hadn't been just Jorick there with Kale's coven, but Jorick's fledgling Oren, and other vampires that Zuri would later learn belonged to him.

Like Fabian.

The memory of Fabian's dark, pitiless eyes sent a shiver down Zuri's spine and threw him back to the present; back to his apartment in the Guild's citadel. He needed air, and space. Something to distract him.

He swept to his feet, grabbed his coat, and headed out. The hallways were less crowded than usual, a mixed blessing, and soon he was outside in the quiet night. Snowflakes drifted from the sky like soft puffs of feathers. *From fallen angels*, he thought absently, and as quickly dismissed the fancy. It was depressing, like so many of the thoughts he'd had lately. Apparently, even a walk outdoors wasn't enough to distract him.

But that didn't mean he needed a so-called "recovery period". If anything, he needed to get back to it; back to being an Executioner, to handling assignments, dealing with lawbreakers, and even doing pointless paperwork.

Anything to take my mind off of it.

But there was no distraction here. Just the soft roar of the wind whipping through a grain elevator complex; towering silver bins, metal buildings, and seed company signs. He looked past it to the train tracks that zigged through the back of the property, left from days when grain came by rail car. An unused spur, it now sat under the snow, quietly rusting away, a symbol of different days.

Can I get more depressing?

As if to answer his question, his memories threw him back to Kale's den. Senya questioned one of them outside, leaving him and Dismas to lurk in the house, trying to be menacing. The attack came suddenly; several of the occupants rushed them. Zuri hadn't even had time to draw his weapon before they were on him. The fighting was a blur, though he could see Dismas' death clearly. Jorick stood with his hand buried wrist deep in the Executioner's chest. Blood was splattered up to his elbow and across his pale face. His black hair hung wild, like a warrior from a movie, as if he was determined to look the part of his own mythology.

Dismas, on the other hand, was frozen, dark eyes wide. His fingers unclenched. His weapon fell to the floor with a clink. Jorick withdrew his fist, leaving a gaping hole studded with broken ribs. Dismas stumbled backwards, choked once, then crumpled to the ground in a heap. His silver medallion dropped into the gory cavity, as if replacing the heart Jorick had ripped away.

The battle sped up again in Zuri's memory. He and Senya had made some progress; two of the enemy lay slumped on the floor and another was badly injured. He'd started to feel optimistic. Jorick was getting tired. Maybe, if he and Senya worked together...

But when he looked for her, she was gone. He tried to sense her, and couldn't. *Of course not*, he told himself. *She's a phantom. She can hide her presence. She's just in another room. She's... She's...*

But she wasn't. She was gone, and he was alone.

The wind whistled loudly, bringing him back to the present. Zuri turned away, rubbing the phantom ache in his arms. He was a vampire, so there was no permanent damage, nothing that blood and rest hadn't been able to fix. Anything else was in his head, dancing with his fantasies of revenge.

After Senya had left, he'd been taken prisoner, held for twelve days by Fabian and the others. While he was there, Oren's coven had attacked the citadel. During the fight – a fight Malick had allowed to happen – the ancient master had revolted against the high council in a spectacle of blood and terror. He'd left The Guild, taking a slew of guards and three loyal Executioners with him.

Of course Senya was one of those.

And what good would it do if she was still here? What would he do? Kill her? Not that she didn't deserve it, but the punishment for that would be unthinkable.

Worse than twelve days captivity.

Zuri kicked a clump of snow, as if it was the cause of his problems, then shuffled into the office. A vampire with the leather skin of a farmer, and a hat to match, sat behind the desk. With a nod, he pressed the button that would unlock the not-so-secret door to the citadel, home to the country's vampire government.

Zuri trooped into the back room of the office, where the shiny silver door waited. More sci-fi than rural, it was hardly disguised in a seed shop. That the humans who worked the office didn't know vampires lived beneath them was impossible. Pure Guild propaganda, designed to make the immortal visitors feel more at ease.

They don't want them to worry about humans sneaking down during the day and slaying everything in sight.

Through the shiny door was a set of stairs that led to what had once been a welcome room. Now it was a disaster, roped in caution tape and marked by shattered walls, the aftermath of that revolt. Most of the top two floors were like that, with damage going all the way down to the bottom level. He could only imagine what it had looked like at the time.

At least the elevators are working, he thought as he slumped towards them. Though he had no idea where he was going to go. When faced with the buttons, he hit the first floor and leaned back against the wall as the car descended. Maybe he could find a distraction in the public areas.

The doors swished open. He exited and made his way down a corridor. The fighting hadn't reached the shopping area, and vampires moved through it with bags and smiles, as if

nothing had ever happened. Zuri surveyed the shops, and the shoppers, before he rejected them both.

With nowhere else to go, he headed for a nightclub. He wasn't interested in the neon light atmosphere, but, this early in the night, it should be empty. It would be somewhere different to sit, at least. Something different to look at.

Away more than he was home, it had been years since he'd been to the nightclub. The blue-lit hallway was certainly new, as was the black gauze curtain over the door. Inside was just as different. Bright neon lights lit an empty stage and shone on a polished bar and tables. Luckily, just as he'd hoped, the only occupant was the vampire behind the bar.

Who will want to talk, Zuri thought bitterly. Bartenders always wanted to talk, even if they were just slinging flavored blood. Better to take a table. Maybe that would keep chattiness at bay.

He glanced at the vampire wiping glasses. *No, that probably won't work*. Hell, he might as well nip it in the bud and sit at the damn bar.

He took a stool, and the bartender gave him a nod. Zuri waited, but the other vampire didn't speak, only hummed to himself as he finished his task.

The glass clean, he deposited it on a tray, then turned to his customer. "What can I get you?"

"Do you still have cinnamon and sugar mix?"

The vampire flipped dark hair out of his eyes. "We have any flavor you want."

He busied himself with mixing the blood drink, and Zuri leaned his elbows on the bar. How long would it be before the guy was asking questions and acting friendly? That's what they all did, pretended to be your friend. He didn't need any friends right now.

What I need is to be reinstated.

The bartender deposited a glass on the bar. "There you go, sir."

Zuri tugged out the fancy swizzle stick and downed the drink in a gulp. It tasted close to what he remembered. Maybe a little more sugar next time.

"Another?" the bartender asked.

Zuri mumbled but nodded, and soon he had a second drink before him.

If only there was alcohol in this. And if only alcohol still affected me.

The bartender went back to his glasses while Zuri sipped his drink. He watched the other vampire; watched the sure quick motions of the rag over the glass. How long would it be before the chattering started?

Maybe I should get it over with.

"You worked here long?"

The bartender paused to shrug. "A year."

“I didn’t think you looked familiar.” Zuri took another drink. “I haven’t been in here in a long time.”

“You should come back when the show’s going.” The bartender nodded towards the stage. “This month we have Lua the burlesque temptress.”

Zuri cocked an eyebrow. “Is she really a temptress?”

“She’s not bad looking, if that’s what you mean. She has an entertaining routine. Strips down to nothing but you never see a thing. She uses giant fans.” He held his hands out to indicate the sheer size. “Covered in feathers. She cleans up in tips.”

Zuri grunted. “I’m surprised you’re having shows after what happened. What’s it been? Four days?”

“You mean the attack? Yeah, it’s something like that. But it never reached here.”

“I heard there were a lot of casualties.”

“Now that’s true. It was a shame.” He paused, then added, “You weren’t here for it?”

Zuri glared at nothing. “No.”

“Be glad you missed it. I’ll remember the screaming for the rest of my life.” The bartender turned back to his glasses.

Zuri finished his drink and motioned for a third. When it was delivered, the bar tender grinned. “You must like that.”

“Maybe.” *Or maybe I like it better than staring at the same four walls.*

“As long as you keep buying.” The bartender laughed. “I have to pay the bills.”

Zuri stirred the drink listlessly. “You own the place?”

“Yep. Bought out the previous owner last year.”

But if he’d only been there a year, that meant he’d come to the citadel and bought the place right off the bat. Why? Unless it was a holdover from his human days. “Did you own a bar before?”

“Nah. I just saw the listing and thought why not? You only live once.”

Zuri shrugged a response.

“That’s what my mom said to me,” he added. “She said I might as well because-”

“Because you only live once,” Zuri muttered. “You have your mother?”

“Have? Um…”

Zuri rolled his eyes. “I mean that she’s with you, in immortality.”

“Oh. Yeah. She’s the one who turned me, actually.”

Zuri made a noncommittal noise and wondered how that worked out. To have your mother – or any blood relative – as a constant companion. His own master had been a brief blip in his life, a bored vampire who’d turned him for a distraction, then wandered off after two years. Zuri hadn’t seen him since, though he assumed he was still alive somewhere, even more bored than he’d been.

He reached to tug on his necklace, a nervous habit, but stopped when his fingers found nothing. They'd ripped away the Executioner amulet when he was taken prisoner, and laughed about it. He'd expected to get a new one, but since he was still on ordered leave...

"You lose something?"

Zuri looked sharply to the bartender. There was no malice in his eyes. He had no way of knowing. The comment had probably been an innocent one.

Footsteps came down the corridor. A pair of vampires swept aside the filmy black curtain to duck through. The bartender moved to serve them, and Zuri took his cue to leave. Though his apartment was the last place he wanted to go, he hated the thought of a crowd even more.

It could be worse, he told himself. I could still be with them.



"What am I?" Zuri stared through new eyes, looking from his bloody hands to Logan.

The man smiled; revealing those strange elongated teeth, like the smile of a fox. "You are as I am, made stronger with my blood."

Blood. There was a lot of it. It was on Zuri's hands, splashed on his chest, staining his shirt, pooling on the floor around the savaged body of a young girl. He squinted and recognized her as the inn's serving girl who'd shown him to his room earlier. That she was... had he...

And then the pain came, ripping through him like a hot knife. He fell to the floor next to her. He writhed, eyes squeezed closed, as if to blot out everything, including the sick memory of what he'd done, of the way her flesh had rent, the way her blood had tasted so delicious...

Zuri jerked awake and the memory-turned-dream faded. Logan. How long had it been since he'd last seen his master? 1779, wasn't it, when Logan had announced he was bored.

"I have more than taught you what you need to know; nature herself could have shown you the way. Perhaps it was my vanity that held us close, or my curiosity. Regardless both have run their course and the time has come for us to part ways."

Zuri had stared at him for a moment, then shrugged. What else was there to do? It wasn't as if he had the words to describe the complicated mess he felt; a mess better kept to himself, anyway.

And that was it. Logan had tipped his hat and walked away into the night, his boots clacking on cobblestones. Zuri had watched him for a moment, then turned back for the inn and their rented room. After that he'd followed the same life style – rented rooms, nightly meals, money taken from victim's pouches – until he'd become a guard for The Guild. From there he'd moved on to greater guard, and finally became an Executioner.

Ancient history, he told himself. More than two hundred years ago. Does any of it even matter anymore?

He had no answer, only a gnawing thirst that told him the sun was gone. It was time to rise.

He climbed out of bed, showered, and dressed, stopping again when it came time to slide the missing necklace over his head. For a moment he saw the twisted face of his captor – Fabian, the brother-in-law of Oren. Fabian was the one who'd ripped the necklace free and thrown it on the floor.

“You're nothing now, Executioner. This – this is a symbol of what you were. Now it's gone and you're nothing!”

The world had faded in and out, blurred, then cleared in time for Zuri to see the raised dagger in Fabian's hand, in time for him to realize he was going to die, just as Dismas had died.

But another had stepped in. Muscles, stacked like building blocks, gleamed under ebony skin. A voice like molasses declared, “There's been enough death.”

Fabian jerked away. “You have no right to tell me what to do!”

Jorick had stepped in, then. “You can fight over his bones later. We need to catch up to the others.”

Fabian looked ready to argue, but Oren shushed him with a motion. “Jorick's right. Pack him up and we'll head back to the den.”

Zuri couldn't move his arms. Was he tied up? He'd tried to push against the bonds – as a titan he was stronger than other vampires, and stronger than any rope they could find – but for some reason he couldn't fight, he couldn't...

A loud knocking pulled Zuri back to the present. He tugged his shirt smooth and moved to open the door. In the corridor stood Beldren, tall and slender with a blond ponytail and his own flashing silver medallion.

Zuri nodded a greeting.

Beldren returned it, eyes over his shoulder, taking in the tidy apartment. “I have to go back out in a couple of hours, but I wanted to see how you were doing.”

Zuri shrugged and stepped to the side to let Beldren pass. The vampire moved to his accustomed chair and smoothly folded himself into it. “Jorick is leaving tonight for Munich.”

Jorick had left Oren's war coven the day after the fight – the day after Senya had abandoned him. Even as a prisoner, Zuri had figured that much out. Oddly, in Zuri's blurry memories, it was Jorick who'd returned twelve days later, to drag him back to the citadel. A penance for the crime of leaving him there, perhaps? But if so...

“Leaving? He's still here?”

“Of course. He hasn't been let go yet.” A muscle in Beldren's jaw twitched. “After you were...imprisoned, Jorick and his human were apprehended for those murders, which they

didn't do by the way. But during the trial he was found culpable of Dismas' death and your... predicament. As punishment, Malick reinstated him as an Executioner."

Zuri stiffened. Punishment? He was punished by being given an Executioner post – the same post Zuri would give his eye teeth to have back?

"Eileifr was against it, and in hindsight everyone thinks Malick did it because he was hoping Jorick would join him in the revolt, so he wanted to make sure Jorick was available. Anyway, you won't have to worry about running into him. He's heading out for Munich tonight."

Zuri shut the door and paused, an eyebrow arched. "Munich?"

Beldren nodded. "Someone has to report to the True Council about what happened here. You know how old ones are. They have to have someone in person so they can pluck it from their brains. Anyway, I believe Eileifr is planning to send Verchiel and one of the new Executioners with him."

New Executioners?

Beldren went on, as if he already guessed the question. "There are three new ones, to replace the defectors. There's a woman – Lisiantha I think her name is. Dark hair. We've worked with her a few times. And...who else? Oh yes, Fallon. He's been a greater guard for some time. I remember him from clear back in the fifties. Or maybe the sixties. Or was it the eighties? He's blond, curly hair, looks young. The third is Cyprus. He was a guard here. You might have seen him. A mane of long red hair nearly to his waist." He motioned the appearance, then waved it away. "He used to be a guard for Munich, so he's going with Jorick as a kind of liaison. Why Verchiel is going is anyone's guess. Probably because Eileifr wants rid of him as much as we do."

Zuri took the opposite chair and folded his hands in his lap while Beldren added, "I assume you know everything else that happened? Oren and Traven's covens attacked, Malick revolted and took off, Eileifr's taken over the council—"

"I know that." Bitterness made Zuri's words brittle. "He's the one who insisted on this 'recovery time'."

"Is that what he's calling it?" Beldren asked. "Not that you couldn't use some time off. We all could. I'd fancy a vacation."

"This isn't a vacation. This is little better than being Traven and Fabian's prisoner!"

Beldren picked invisible lint from his coat. "You can't really mean that. I've heard about your...imprisonment."

Anger bubbled to Zuri's lips, but he swallowed it back to say instead, "How long until I'm reinstated?"

"Good grief, I have no idea. It's certainly not my decision. If you want, I can put in a word with Eileifr, say that you seem to be...altogether, or whatever. Not that I think it will make any

difference. He's a demon eye, and can see the outcome before he makes the decision. I assume he's keeping you on hold because he's seen something."

Zuri cocked an incredulous eyebrow. There was a good chance this so called "recuperation" was to make sure he didn't cause waves with Jorick. Malick might be gone, but he doubted the favoritism was.

"Anyway." Beldren rubbed his hands together. "You've stewed in here enough, I imagine. Breakfast, perhaps? My treat."

Zuri shrugged. It wasn't like he had anything else to do.



Zuri saw Beldren and his company of guards off, then slumped back for the elevator. He reached for the second floor button, but on a whim hit the first. Though he'd fed with Beldren, a cinnamon and sugar mix sounded good.

The nightclub was empty except for the bartender, who was wiping tables. Today he wore a shirt that proclaimed "My Name is John" in a scrawl similar to a handwritten name tag.

Zuri took a stool and nodded to the garment. "Is it?"

The bartender looked up from his task. "Is what?" He followed Zuri's gaze and grinned. "As a matter of fact, it is. Pleased to meet you. Again," he added with a laugh.

Zuri grunted a reply and turned his eyes to the glasses behind the bar. Shiny rows waiting for the late evening rush.

"Do you really get that many customers?"

John finished his task and joined the Executioner. "Sometimes. Business is down a little, though not as much as you'd expect. There may have been a lot of casualties, but the looky-loos have started showing up, wanting to gawk at the ruins. Enough about me. What can I get you?"

Zuri muttered his order – the same as last night's – and soon had a glass in hand. He sipped the contents and waited for the bartender to start the chitchat. *Just like he did last night.*

When nothing came, Zuri decided he might as well do it himself. Save the guy the trouble.

"So you live with your mother?" When John blinked, Zuri added, "She's your master?"

"Oh well, yeah." He smiled affably. "But she's in Oklahoma, still. How about you?"

Zuri shrugged. "My master is long gone, and my mother long dead."

"Oh. Sorry."

Zuri shrugged again. "It is what it is. She died of smallpox when I was a child. As did my sisters. I survived." He thought of the familiar patchwork of scars that covered his trunk. Though smoothed by immortality, the pits were still barely visible, the mark of the disease.

Zuri wasn't a mind reader, but he could sense John's discomfort and added, "It was a long time ago. I barely remember them. Or it."

"I guess that's the good thing about time," John said vaguely.

Zuri scoffed. "That it hides all wounds in a fog, like some kind of chrysalis that entombs our misery? We forget no chrysalis is permanent. Just as the butterfly bursts forth in the spring, so do the memories."

"But haven't they been changed, like the caterpillar turning into the butterfly?" John countered. "Better with time?"

"Or twisted into something darker." Zuri drained his glass and set it on the bar. One look at John's uncertain face left him backtracking. "I'm sorry. Just ignore me."

"No, it's okay. You're obviously in a pretty dark place right now."

"I'm nowhere right now. Trapped here until Eileifr decides I'm 'well', whatever that means."

"Eileifr... That name's familiar."

"He's in charge of the high council now that Malick's gone – and in charge of the Executioners. He thinks I need time off to 'recuperate from the trauma'. As if all of vampiredom – and being an Executioner – isn't traumatic. Do they think that killing illegally created vampire children, or burning bodies, or destroying unmarked humans isn't traumatizing? Malick knew it was, but he believed trauma made us stronger. Eileifr on the other hand... I don't know what he believes."

"You're an Executioner, then?" John asked. Zuri's reply was a grunt, so he went on. "I imagine your vampire experience has been pretty... bloody. But I have to say mine hasn't been traumatic. It's actually been pretty nice."

"It would be, being turned by your mother, I imagine. No loss, no old life left behind. That's not how they used to do things." He stopped before he sounded like an old man complaining about the kids 'these days'. "You haven't been immortal long, have you?"

"Ten years now. I guess that's nothing compared to you and everything you've seen."

"Sometimes I think I've seen too much." Zuri finished the drink and sat the glass on the bar. "Eh, ignore me. It's just this sitting around that's getting to me."

"So you said." John gave him a good humored wink, as if to say, "Sure."

"It is," Zuri insisted. "I'm not used to the inaction. There's only twelve of us for the whole damn country. Did you know that? Twelve. So we're always gone. An Executioner is lucky to spend a day sleeping in his own bed, let alone five in a row. It's unnatural."

"I could see that, if you're not used to it."

“I’m not.”

John shrugged as he refilled the glass. “Still, it has to be kind of nice, not having to do all that stuff you said.”

“What stuff?”

“The killing children and all that. It seems kinda wearisome.”

Wearisome. It was an interesting word choice. Was it wearisome? He knew some of the Executioners found it exhilarating – or ex-Executioners, he should say. Those who felt that way had pretty much left with Malick. The ones that remained…how did they feel about it? How did he feel?

I don’t know.

The answer was the kind that led to soul searching. But Zuri didn’t feel like searching his soul – if he even had one.

Oblivious to his thoughts, John added, “Still, maybe doing all that is better than whatever trauma they think you suffered.”

“You’re right about that, though I don’t want to talk about it.”

John chuckled. “I figured that. Can’t say I blame you. Hey, you know what you should do? Now that you have some time off, you should take up a hobby.”

Zuri paused, the glass halfway to his mouth. “A hobby? Like what?”

“I don’t know. There must be something you’re interested in.”

“I’ve probably quit more hobbies than you ever dreamed of starting.”

“Just a suggestion.”

Zuri downed the drink and John turned to some task – why would he want to do that? Why spend immortality serving vampires? Washing glasses, wiping tables, mixing blood and spices? Why not coast on the good life? Put his feet up, relax, have some fun?

Right, like I do. I can’t even stand five days without an assignment.

It was another soul searching moment Zuri didn’t care for, so he finished his drink, paid his bill, and headed back to his apartment. Maybe there would be something worth watching on TV.

Yeah, right.



Zuri dug through the closet. Boxes held remnants from his past; things he’d once been interested in, then gotten bored with. A chunk of wood was at the bottom of one, half carved into a turtle. He’d done a lot of woodcarving once upon a time, when things had been quieter. Then the world sped up. They started driving automobiles instead of taking the train or riding a horse. Things happened faster, with less time to just sit and wait, and the hobby fell by the wayside.

Zuri set the partial turtle aside and dug out the old wood carving set. The blades were rusty, which meant he'd have to make a trip to the shopping area. Was it worth all that? Though he wasn't sure, he had nothing better to do, and he had money to burn. *At least being an Executioner paid well.*



Bedtime found Zuri with a new set of tools, but no will to actually do the work. It was late, anyway, so he changed into a pair of pajama pants and climbed into bed. The blankets were soft, and the pillow fluffy, but when he closed his eyes he saw the dark room in Oren's war den, heard the distant murmuring of the occupants, and felt the phantom ache in his arms.

It's over, he told himself. It's over, it's done with, and it doesn't matter. You're too old for this. Too strong for this. You're not a wimp, not like one of these young vampires.

Despite the pep talk, sleep remained hard to achieve. When he did, his dreams were more memory than fiction. The same memories that replayed over and over, memories of being Fabian's prisoner.

"Is he awake?"

Zuri blinked against the blurriness that sucked him down. He was so tired, so...so... thirsty. His throat burned so bad. If he could just have a drink...just one drink...

"I think he's out still," another voice said. It sounded like Fabian.

"Good. It will make it easier for you to put his arms back."

Put my arms back? My arms? My...my...

Right. They were gone. He'd seen that the last time he'd woken up. Or maybe the time before that. It was all a confusing smear, punctuated with burning thirst. He just needed a drink...

"Me?" Fabian cried. "You're the one who wants to put them back! I say leave them off."

Zuri forced his eyes to focus and saw his dark haired captor and another vampire; one who looked like a fairytale prince, complete with ruffled shirt.

"Idiot." The prince sneered. "How can we bargain with him if he's ruined? They need to be reattached for a few hours, at least."

Fabian scoffed. "You're just saying that because Jorick and his monkeys want them back on."

"I hardly care what Jorick wants, though, to my knowledge, he doesn't have a preference."

"Right. That's why Loren and Micah have been chattering about putting them back since they got here? They're Jorick's mouthpieces, just like you, Traven!"

With a snarl, Traven grabbed Fabian by the front of his shirt and slammed him into the wall. “Say such things again and I will cut out your tongue. I swore an oath to Oren, not to you.” He flung Fabian aside and straightened his shirt. “Now replace his arms. Tomorrow you can remove them again, if it suits you, but they cannot remain unattached for more than a day or two at a time, or they’ll wither. Malick will not bargain for a ruined Executioner. Remember that.”

He strode out the door, leaving Fabian to snarl after him, “One of these days I’m going to kill you.”

Zuri moaned softly as Fabian jerked open a nearby box. The scent of old blood wafted out. Though Zuri knew it was his own blood, and that it would do nothing to satisfy him, the smell drove his hunger. He needed a drink. Oh God, he needed a drink...

Fabian jerked a dagger from his pocket. He grabbed the left stump of Zuri’s arm, just a few inches below the shoulder. Though he hadn’t fed, sleep had healed him, and the skin had grown over the severed bones and muscles, leaving a perfectly smooth nub.

“Fucking Traven wants this done, next time he can do it himself.”

Zuri saw the flash of the blade. Then, the pain came as Fabian cut the skin away. Zuri tried to fight, tried to kick and struggle loose, but he was too weak. His fight came to barely more than a flinch, and his cries a dry gurgle in his throat. They’d drained him of blood and left him that way to keep him weak, to stop him from escaping, from defending himself.

Fabian peeled the skin away to leave exposed bones and muscle. Zuri’s rattles turned into dry screams. The scent of his own blood left his heart pounding. His arms burned like fire. He knew his reaction only fueled Fabian and made him feel more in control. He needed to hold it in, to stoically accept, to-

The logic died as Fabian cut into the other arm. Zuri squeezed his eyes shut and howled, though the sound was more like wind through a tin can. Fabian ignored it as he fetched the withered arms. With another snarl, he lashed them in place, lining up bones and gory meat. Zuri tried to move them, though he knew it was futile. It would take blood or sleep for the skin and muscles to grow again, knitting back together as they did. Blood they weren’t likely to give him.

“Don’t get used to them,” Fabian snapped. “They’re coming off again.”

Zuri didn’t try to reply. With a scoff, Fabian kicked him in the ribs, then stormed out.

The world swam, wavered, then faded to black. It came back studded with pain. He opened his eyes to see Fabian there again, cutting through his arm with a hacksaw.

“Is that really necessary?” a teenage vampire asked.

Fabian glared over the grisly work. “Have you forgotten who this is? What this is? This is an Executioner! A demon from hell! It was his kind that killed my sister! I will not rest until he suffers – until they all suffer and die, screaming, like she died!”

His sister. Oren's wife. Right. Zuri had been there. He'd been there but he wasn't the one that killed her – the one who had to kill her – because she'd made those illegal children. There was even a baby, an immortal baby, trapped forever. That was a sin, that was...that was...

He lost touch with his thoughts, lost touch with the world. There was only the pain as they cut his arms free, the sound as they slammed them back in that box, the snicker as Fabian promised they might never go back again.

But they did. The skin was peeled away from the stubs and the arms reattached, only to be cut free again. He didn't know how many times it had happened, only that the last time they were put back was there, at the citadel, in the medical facility.

That time he'd had enough blood in him to scream.

He jerked awake with a start. His heart pounded and the familiar agony burned through his arms. He rubbed them, as if that would chase away the remembered pain, the remembered fear...

As if anything could ever take that away.

Zuri felt instinctively that the sun was down. Thirst burned his throat. Though not as violent as in his memories, it was enough to get him dressed and out the door. He stopped at a café, ordered a large decanter, and took off, dodging the casual attention of the other patrons. He didn't want their stares – or their company.

He retreated to his apartment and his half-carved turtle. A hobby, John had suggested. Sure. Why not? He took a seat and selected the tools, now foreign in his unpracticed hands. His cuts were clumsy. Rather than making him feel better, the work made him feel worse. When the chisel bit into his thumb, he swore and threw it all across the room.

“Fuck this.”

Sucking the cut, he stomped over woodchips and out the door. His feet led him to the elevator, and finally to the empty club. John was in his usual place, sorting through a rack of spices and syrups.

“Welcome back! If you stick around tonight you can see Lua's performance.”

Zuri snorted his opinion and took the glass John set in front of him. He wasn't really thirsty now; he'd downed the whole decanter earlier, but he sipped at it anyway.

John went back to his work, humming, while Zuri waited for him to strike up a conversation. It was just a matter of time. Any minute now...

When the seconds stretched, Zuri decided it was better to do it himself than to wait. *Right. Better to just get it over with. Sure. Not like I want someone to talk to.*

“You're too cheerful.”

John chuckled. “I have a lot to be happy about, I guess. You do too, I'm sure.”

Zuri scoffed, “Like what?”

“You’re here, in the best club in the citadel, huh?” John laughed, then turned serious. “But you are here. Alive. If not family, you have friends.”

“Sure. You see them all sitting here.” Zuri motioned to the empty space.

“Do you see mine?” John asked. “They may not be here, but they’re here.” He touched his heart. “You’re feeling miserable now, but it will end. You just have to have the patience to fight through to the other side. There’s always light just beyond the horizon.”

“Yeah? Where was my light when I was held prisoner for twelve days? Starved, tortured, left by my so-called ally? Huh?”

John blinked away his surprise quickly. “You got away, didn’t you? I mean, you’re not a prisoner now. Except in here.” He tapped the side of his head.

Zuri growled low. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Take it however you want.” The bartender rubbed his hands together. “But you know, everyone suffers bad times. Sure, my immortality has been good, but it took a lot to get here. I had to fight to stay alive, just like my mom did. We both went through the dark and came back stronger. You will, too, unless you let yourself drown in it.”

When Zuri refused to answer, John changed the subject. “Sure you don’t want to see Lua?”

Zuri’s reply was a grunt, and, with a shrug, John grabbed a rag and moved to wipe tables.

Alone, Zuri gulped his drink and focused on the shiny glasses behind the bar, then on to the neatly stacked rack of flavorings. When had vampires started adding flavor to blood? How long did the thrill of the hunt, of the kill, last before it became something you just did to survive, like eating had once been? Just a chore you needed to do in order to keep chugging on.

Like everything else.

John returned to rinse his rag, and Zuri paid his bill. He wasn’t in the mood for the cheerfulness, or the clever quips. Light beyond the horizon… only a prisoner in his head… Pfft. As if.

He stomped back to his apartment and snatched the half-carved turtle from the floor. It looked at him with accusing eyes – eyes that screamed, “You were a prisoner for twelve days, but you’ve left me one for how many decades? Trapped, half-formed, unrealized.”

“And what should I do, huh? Look at this.” He jabbed the newest cuts with a finger. “It looks like crap.”

But the wooden eyes didn’t care. With a snarl – maybe anger at the turtle, or anger at himself – Zuri dropped into the chair and grabbed his tools. The cuts were clumsy, chunky, obvious from the older, smoother work. Still, he kept at it, dropping wood chips around his feet. The minutes slipped past, then the hours. Zuri paused to survey the nearly complete turtle. He supposed he should thank John for the hobby suggestion, not that he felt like

thanking him for anything just then. Tonight's comments had irritated him in an almost irrational way.

He turned back to the work, running over the conversation in his head. Friends. Light beyond the horizon. Sure, he was alive, but so what? Sure, he wasn't a prisoner of the war coven anymore, but he was still a prisoner – a real prisoner – stuck in the damn citadel, forced to look at the same rooms night after night, reliving the same agonizing memories-

In my head.

That was where the reoccurring memories were, where the cycle kept repeating, where he was really trapped.

"You're not a prisoner now. Except in here."

With that thought, the last of the wood fell away, and he cradled the turtle in his large hand. Though imperfect, the wooden creature was free of the block, of his prison. The time he'd spent stuck in limbo showed, from the difference in the quality, to the subtle colors of old and new cut wood. He was forever marked by the years he'd been trapped.

Just as I am. Though Zuri wanted to pretend it hadn't affected him, those days of imprisonment had left their mark; not just the nightmares, and the memories, but a secret, burning fear in the pit of his brain, a fear that it would all happen again. The kind of fear that made you kill first and ask questions later. The same kind of fear that had driven other Executioners over the years; Executioners like Senya, who would run, terrified tail between her legs, rather than try to help a colleague.

The kind of fear Eileifr didn't want making decisions anymore.

And that was why he was on recuperation leave. Not as a punishment, but a precaution. It wasn't something he should hate, or fear, but something he should embrace. Just as he needed time to hone his skills and make that turtle smooth again, so he needed time to heal inside, to make *himself* smooth again.

But in the meantime, he needed to remember one thing; the most important thing. No matter how it had happened, or what it had left behind, now, just like the turtle, he was free.

Or soon would be.

You can find Zuri in *Legacy of Ghosts* and other Amaranthine novels by Joleene Naylor.



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About the author:

Joleene Naylor is the author of the glitter-less *Amaranthine* vampire universe, a world where vampires aren't for children. Comprised of a main series, a standalone prequel, a novella, and several short story collections, she has plans to continue expanding with a trilogy and more standalone novels.

In her spare time, Joleene is a freelance book cover designer and for-fun photographer. She maintains several blogs, full of odd ramblings, and occasionally updates her website at **JoleeneNaylor.com**. In what little time is left, she watches anime, plays PokemonGo, and works on her crooked Victorian house in Villisca, Iowa. Between her husband, family, and pets, she is never lonely, in fact, quite the opposite. Should she disappear, one might look for her on a beach in Tahiti, sipping a tropical drink and wearing a disguise.

Ramblings from the Darkness at <http://www.joleenenaylor.com>
You never know what you'll find in the shadows...

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