

Southern Discomfort

ACI I SCENE 1: A cabin in the woods. The front porch. MEGAN is sitting in the porch swing, rocking her sleeping daughter HOLLY. MEGAN is wearing a tank top and jeans. Despite the heat, SIDNEY is wearing a dark suit, white shirt, black fedora. He is just leaving.

MEGAN: Thank you again, for bringing her home.

SIDNEY: You're welcome ma'am.

MEGAN: It's funny.

SIDNEY: What?

MEGAN: You don't look like...

SIDNEY: Like what? A child molester?

MEGAN: I was gonna say the devil, but I guess a child molester's pretty much the same. Are you?

SIDNEY: A child molester? Or the devil?

MEGAN: Either. Both. No – no – you know what? I don't... You should go. Kyle'll be coming here with Amber any time, and... oh, but you know that, don't you? That's why you're here.

SIDNEY: (tiredly) Kyle and his daughter are in no danger from me tonight.

MEGAN: I'm not sure I believe you.

SIDNEY: Probably better that you don't, but it's still true. Offer me a glass of tea.

MEGAN: Excuse me?

SIDNEY: We're in the south. It's hot. We're both thirsty. Offer me a glass of iced tea. Go inside, put the child in her bed, and then come back, and I'll try to explain what I am. What I was... what... what I used to be.

MEGAN: Deathbed confession.

SIDNEY: I hope not. Maybe... maybe everyone needs someone to talk to on a sultry summer evening. Even you. Even me. Maybe if you understand, there'll be less fear.

MEGAN: You want to woo me to the dark side.

SIDNEY: Forcing you isn't working. Forcing everyone isn't working. But no. You're... once you come back from the Change, you're lost to us. Almost invisible.

MEGAN: (after a moment of inner debate) I think this one would be better in her own bed. Listen, Sidney, I'm ever so grateful you found her. Can you... wait a few minutes? Stay for a glass of tea?

SIDNEY: I'd like that. Thank you, ma'am.

MEGAN leaves the swing and scoops the slumbering child into her arms. She enters the open door of the cabin, bumping the door closed with her hip. SIDNEY sits on the porch steps to wait.

*The lights fade.*

SENE 2: MEGAN returns with two glasses of iced tea. SIDNEY is still on the porch steps. She exits the house, pauses, stares at him, then continues on her mission shaking her head as if she can't quite believe she's fraternizing with the energy.

MEGAN: You're still here, hat and all.

SIDNEY: (rising to his feet) Well, I don't often get to share a glass of homemade iced tea with an attractive woman in the moonlight.

MEGAN: (snorting a derisive laugh) Don't go there. You're not even...

SIDNEY: Human? I am now. As much as you are. Maybe more.

MEGAN: (handing over the glass) Here. (grudgingly) Anyway, it's NesTea. (she backs up against the opposite pillar of the porch roof, leaning against it. She sets her own glass on the rail as she listens.)

SIDNEY: Thank you, anyway. (he takes a long drink, grimaces, and then smooths his features. So.

MEGAN: So.

SIDNEY: So...?

MEGAN: So, are you? The Devil?

SIDNEY: No. We're a race of beings that you might call imps or demons if you saw our true forms, but you might just as easily call us angels or sprites. If you watch science fiction, we're 'symbiotic lifeforms.'

MEGAN: Are you a child molester?

SIDNEY: Yes and no.

MEGAN: I don't get it.

SIDNEY: The person inside this body, the brain and soul and mind operating this meat-puppet, is no such thing. I think harming children is abhorrent. Life is sacred. Even human life. And taking it is never the first option.

MEGAN: I sense a 'but' coming.

SIDNEY: (dipping his head) But... the person who occupied this body before me – the person who died using it – the – host, if you will – liked to take home little boys, tied them, and play with them until he got bored.

MEGAN: And then what?

SIDNEY: Not sure you really want to know that, Megan.

MEGAN: (chilled) Not sure I like you using my first name, Sidney.

SIDNEY: (backing off) Ms. Holter.

MEGAN: (relaxed) Better. (tentative) I... I need to know... Did you – did he - was he just an abuser? Beating them up, or did... was there sex? Or was... did the boys get... killed.

SIDNEY: (pushes the brim of his fedora back slightly so he can get a better look at MEGAN's face) If you don't mind my saying so, Megan – Ms. Holter – questions like that are usually more about the person asking than they are about the person being asked.

MEGAN: So, you won't tell me?

SIDNEY: (thoughtfully, slowly) Your kind. True humans. You look at us like demon spawn. You can't accept that we might be better than the hosts we claim. But just like you, we come in all flavors, Ms. Holter. Good. Bad. In between. Now... Original Sidney... don't much care for sharing his name... let's call him Sid. Ol' Sid was low in every sense of the word. He worked as a carnny – a carnival busker – selling crap novelties to gullible kids for too much coin. 'Knock over five bottles fer a dolla' win a prize. Get yer fun heah!

(He pulls a white handkerchief from his pocket and coughs into it, then looks at it, makes a face that mixes fleeting fear with distaste folds it differently and replaces it in his breast pocket.)

He'd find his marks that way. The kids who didn't have a posse of friends. The littlest, scrawniest, loneliest boys. The ones least likely to me missed. 'Sorry you didn't win, son. Hey, help me close up and I'll see if I have an extra you can have.' And then he'd take them home.

MEGAN: No one noticed?

SIDNEY: No one cared. How many times did Kyle stay out late as a kid? It was easier when he wasn't home, staring at everyone with his big lost eyes, wasn't it? Sid picked the boys whose absence made life... easier.

MEGAN: Oh, my god.

SIDNEY: Afraid he had nothin' to do with it.

MEGAN: No. No, I guess not. (She slides into a seated position so they're both sitting on the porch steps on opposite sides. It's a wide porch. They're not intimate. And yet they sort of are because of the dark and the shadows.)

SIDNEY: Sid liked to punch his way into the tender flesh of untried boys. The younger the better. He'd keep them tied and scared like lambs waiting to be slaughtered. He had one in his special room when he had the heart attack that let me in.

MEGAN: God, tell me you didn't -

SIDNEY: (interrupting, fierce) I didn't! (quiet. Intense) My first human act was to set the kid free. My first human word was to tell the kid: (Sidney roars the next word loud enough to rip the night in two) RUN!

*Blackout.*

ACT II SCENE 1: Inside the cabin. SIDNEY is lying on the sofa in the living room. There's a lit fire, and candles are lit around the room. His fedora is on the table next to him. MEGAN is in the arm chair next to the sofa, a shawl wrapped around her shoulders. She's holding a mug. Outside there is a crashing storm. Lightning flashes and thunder booms punctuate the scene.

SIDNEY: (waking with a start) What happened? Where am I? (starts coughing, like before, and black slime comes out of his mouth.) Ugh.

MEGAN: Hang on. Let me help. You had an attack after you... Never mind. (she leaves her chair, trading her mug for a towel en route to him wipes his face like a child.) What is that shit?

SIDNEY: Disease. Infection. Our kind... can't adapt.

MEGAN: Is that what the Merge is for? Are you... (she grasps for a word) terraforming?

SIDNEY: You been watching the Syfy channel?

MEGAN: (shrugging) My husband liked *Star Trek*, I guess it kinda sunk in.

SIDNEY: (chuckling) You're not far off, though. The Merge... It's a reforming of place and people in our image and for our needs.

MEGAN: At the expense of the rest of us? Doesn't seem fair.

SIDNEY: What is?

MEGAN: Gotta point there. But you also gotta know, Kyle's not gonna stop... not gonna give up...

SIDNEY: We know. We're counting on it.

MEGAN: So, what is he? Some kind of extradimensional bounty hunter for your kind?

SIDNEY: No... but if I ever decide to give up my day job and write a novel, I think you just gave me the plot. Kyle... Kyle's like... Like a beacon. A guiding light. Like... You said your husband liked *Star Trek*? If we're anti-matter, he's pure matter. We're opposites who attract, we counter each other, but we can't coexist.

MEGAN: Like Harry and Voldemort?

SIDNEY: (laughing) My entire people reduced to a children's book plotline. Sure. Like that. Only... only more.

MEGAN: You said... you said it was Sid's heart attack that let you in... but when I was... when it came for... I wasn't at the point of death...

SIDNEY: No.

MEGAN: So, is it random?

SIDNEY: No.

MEGAN: I don't under... Oh.

SIDNEY: (gently) We come at the break of life and death. At the moment when your kind makes the choice to leave, whether consciously or not. We slip inside. If you're... if you're still there, we retain most of what makes you... *you*. If you're not, we're on our own.

MEGAN: Why are some of you... feral?

SIDNEY: We try to get to our new arrivals as soon as possible, but... sometimes we miss. We missed with you. Without a guide... the shock of new sensation. The harshness of yellow sunlight. The piercing freshness of the air. Zero to madness and bloodlust in sixty seconds.

*MEGAN sits back, digesting this. SIDNEY watches her. It is unclear which of them, in that moment, is predator and which is prey. Possibly it is more accurate to believe that they are two aliens making first contact.*

MEGAN: Did you... have a... a demon midwife?

SIDNEY: (laughing) Demon midwife! Hilarious. No. I'm... I'm a little different than most. I came with a sort of... mission objective, I guess you'd call it. Sorry, I'm afraid I can't reveal all my secrets. Could I trouble you for a cup of the tea you were drinking? (he sniffs the air) Chamomile, isn't it?

MEGAN: Sure... (she leaves SIDNEY, and heads out of the room, pausing a moment) You're a lot less intimidating without your hat on. (She exits.)

SIDNEY: (looking skyward) Yes, I *know*. (beat) Sometimes, it's nice to just... talk.

*Huge lightning flash, then utter darkness.*

SCENE 2: The same living room. A steady rain falls outside. The fire is dying, the candles are burnt low. Plates with the remains of sandwiches are on the table. The implication is that SIDNEY and MEGAN were enjoying their chat, but also that he remained because the roads were impassable.

SIDNEY: (placing his hat back on his head): Storm's let up. I should take my leave of you. I appreciate your courtesy, Ms. Holter.

MEGAN: (trying to be cool, and failing) It's been an informative evening, Sidney.

SIDNEY: I suppose it has.

MEGAN: Tell me about your hat.

SIDNEY: (shaken, this is a human question) I – I'm sorry?

MEGAN: Your fedora. I'm guessing (she affects his earlier tone) 'Ol' Sid' wasn't such a natty dresser?

SIDNEY: Ah... no.

MEGAN: And I couldn't help but notice the quality. Police and fire order their hats special, I'm guessing you did, too. It definitely didn't come from a department store. And the watch you're wearing... Holly calls pieces like that 'dad' watches.

SIDNEY: 'Dad' watches. We don't... we don't have parents. If we're lucky, we retain the memories of our hosts' parents and if they're lucky those parents weren't utter assholes. Sid's father was the person who broke him. But his grandfather... his grandfather would have been a guiding force for good if he'd lived longer.

MEGAN: Was he one of you?

SIDNEY: Sadly no. Sid might've turned out differently if he were.

MEGAN: The hat was his?

SIDNEY: The first one. And the watch. They seemed to fit. I felt at ease with them on. Like they were part of me.

MEGAN: A costume.

SIDNEY: A uniform.

MEGAN: Interesting.

SIDNEY: I suppose. (he rises from the couch) Ms. Holter, I thank you again for your courtesy. Take care of your daughter. Tell Kyle... we don't mean him harm, but we can't promise him safety either. He needs to watch himself. The reverend is not the ally Kyle perceives him to be.

MEGAN: He's a man of god.

SIDNEY: Is he? Which god? Whose god? How do you know we're not 'of god'?

MEGAN: How do I know you're not?

SIDNEY: (smiling, showing very white teeth) I guess you don't. (He tips his hat to her, opens the door, and leaves. Once he's gone, the power returns.)

HOLLY: (v/o) Mommy, is the storm over?

MEGAN: (calling toward the back of the cabin.) This one is, sweetie. Go back to sleep. Mommy loves you.

*MEGAN begins to clean up the mugs and plates as the lights fade out.*

THE END

NOTE: Sidney, Megan, and Holly are characters from the television show and comic book series *Outcast* that was created by Robert Kirkman.