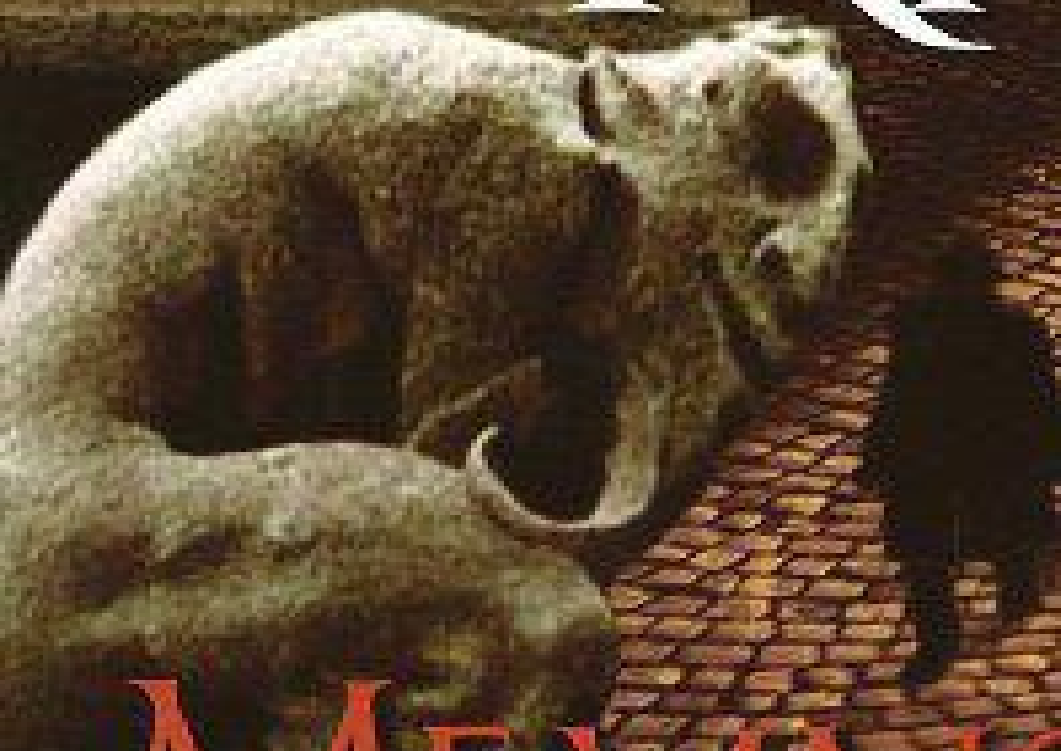


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#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

ANNE RICE

Author of
Merrick



Book
V
of
The Vampire
Chronicles

MEMNOCH THE DEVIL

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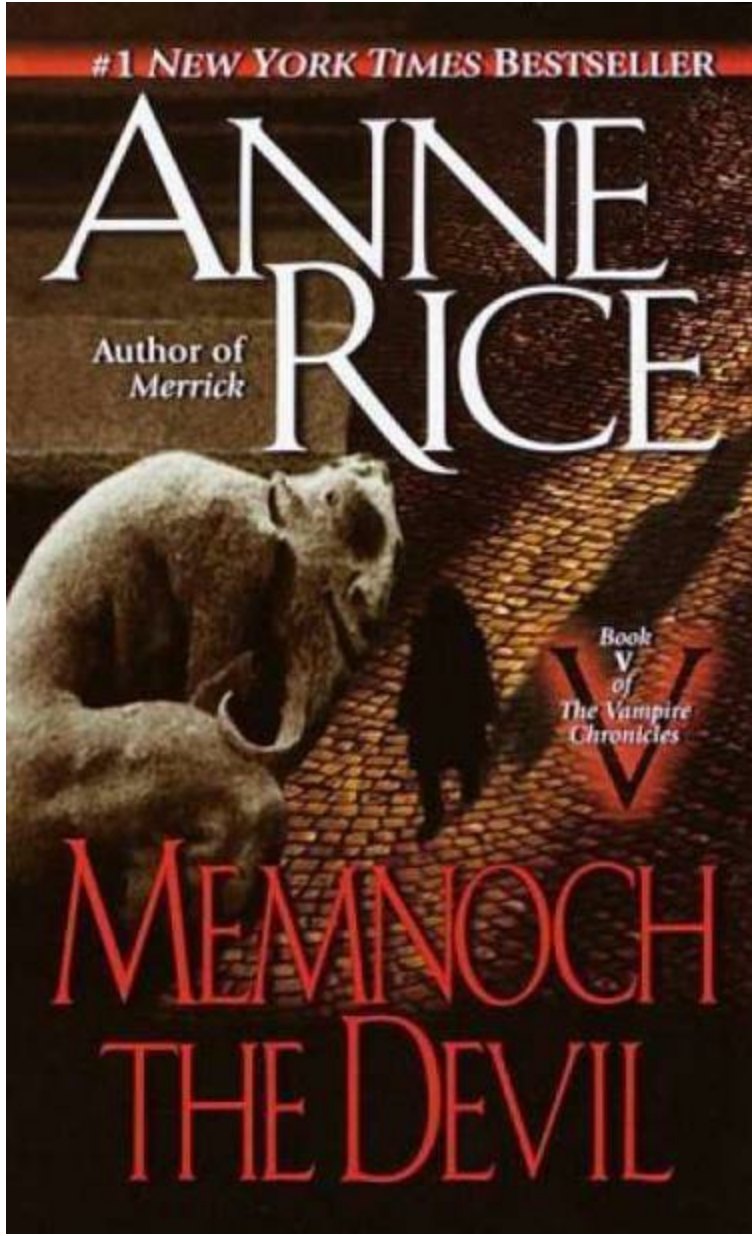
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Prologue

LESTAT here. You know who I am? Then skip the next few paragraphs. For those whom I have not met before, I want this to be love at first sight.

Behold: your hero for the duration, a perfect imitation of a blond, blue-eyed, six-foot Anglo-Saxon male. A vampire, and one of the strongest you'll ever encounter. My fangs are too small to be noticed unless I want them to be; but they're very sharp, and I cannot go for more than a few hours without wanting human blood.

Of course, I don't need it that often. And just how often I do need it, I don't know, because I've never put it to the test.

I'm monstrously strong. I can take to the air. I can hear people talking on the other side of the city or even the globe. I can read minds; I can bind with spells.

I'm immortal. I've been virtually ageless since 1789.

Am I unique? By no means. There are some twenty other vampires in the world of whom I know. Half of these I know intimately; one half of those I love.

Add to this twenty a good two hundred vagabonds and strangers of whom I know nothing but now and then hear something; and for good measure another thousand secretive immortals, roaming about in human guise.

Men, women, children—any human being can become a vampire. All it takes is a vampire willing to bring you into it, to suck out most of your blood, and then let you take it back, mixed with his or her own. It's not all that simple; but if you survive, you'll live forever. While you're young, you'll thirst unbearably, probably have to kill each night. By the time you're a thousand years old, you'll look and sound wise, even if you were a kid when you started, and you will drink and kill because you cannot resist it, whether you need it anymore or not.

If you live longer than that, and some do, who knows? You'll get tougher, whiter, ever more monstrous. You'll know so much about suffering that you will go through rapid cycles of cruelty and kindness, insight and maniacal blindness. You'll probably go mad. Then

you'll be sane again. Then you may forget who you are.

I myself combine the best of vampiric youth and old age. Only two hundred years old, I have been for various reasons granted the strength of the ancients. I have a modern sensibility but a dead aristocrat's impeccable taste. I know exactly who I am. I am rich. I am

beautiful. I can see my reflection in mirrors. And in shopwindows. I love to sing and to dance.

What do I do? Anything that I please.

Think about it. Is it enough to make you want to read my story?

Have you perhaps read my stories of the vampires before?

Here's the catch: it doesn't matter here that I'm a vampire. It is not central to the tale. It's just a given, like my innocent smile and soft, purring French-accented voice and graceful way of sauntering down the street. It comes with the package. But what happened here could have happened to a human being; indeed, it surely has happened to humans, and it will happen to them again.

We have souls, you and I.

We want to know things; we share the

same earth, rich and verdant and fraught with perils. We don't either of us know what it means to die, no matter what we might say to the contrary. It's a cinch that if we did, I wouldn't be writing and you wouldn't be reading this book.

What does matter very much, as we go into this story together, is that I have set for myself the task of being a hero in this world. I maintain myself as morally complex, spiritually tough, and aesthetically relevant a being of

blazing insight and impact, a guy with

things to say to you.

So if you read this, read it for that reason that Lestat is talking again, that he is frightened, that he is searching desperately for the lesson and for the song and for the *raison d'être*, that he wants to understand his own story and he wants you to understand it, and that it is the very best story he has right now to tell.

If that's not enough, read something else.

If it is, then read on. In chains, to my friend and my scribe, I dictated these words. Come with me. Just listen to me. Don't leave me

alone.

1

I SAW him when he came through the front doors. Tall, solidly built, dark brown hair and eyes, skin still fairly dark because it had been dark when I'd made him a vampire. Walking a little too fast, but basically passing for a human being. My beloved David.

I was on the stairway. The grand stairway, one might say. It was one of those very opulent old hotels, divinely overdone, full of crimson and

gold, and rather pleasant. My Victim had picked it. I hadn't. My victim was dining with his daughter. And I'd picked up from my victim's mind that this was where he always met his daughter in New York, for the simple reason that St. Patrick's Cathedral was across the street.

David saw me at once a slouching, blond, long-haired youth, bronze face and hands, the usual deep violet sunglasses over my eyes, hair presentably combed for once, body tricked out in a dark-blue, doubled-breasted Brooks Brothers suit.

I saw him smile before he could stop himself. He knew my vanity, and he probably knew that in the early nineties of the twentieth century, Italian

fashion had flooded the market with so much shapeless, hangy, bulky, formless attire that one of the most erotic and flattering garments a man could choose was the well-tailored navy-blue Brooks Brothers suit.

Besides, a mop of flowing hair and expert tailoring are always a potent combination. Who knows that better than I?

I didn't mean to harp on the clothes! To hell with the clothes. It's just I was so proud of myself for being spiffed up and full of gorgeous contradictions a picture of long locks, the impeccable tailoring, and a regal manner of slumping against the railing and sort of blocking stairs.

He came up to me at once. He smelled like the deep winter out-side where people were slipping in the frozen streets, and snow had turned to filth in the gutters. His face had the subtle preternatural gleam which only I could detect, and love, and properly appreciate, and eventually kiss.

We walked together onto the carpeted mezzanine.

Momentarily, I hated it that he was two inches taller than me. But I was so glad to see him, so glad to be near him. And it was warm in here, and shadowy and vast, one of the places where people do not stare at others.

"You've come," I said. "I didn't think you would."

"Of course," he scolded, the gracious British accent breaking softly from the young dark face, giving me the usual shock. This was an old man in a young man's body, recently made a vampire, and by me, one of the most powerful of our remaining kind.

"What did you expect?" he said, tete-a-tete. "Armand told me you were calling me. Maharet told me."

"Ah, that answers my first question." I wanted to kiss him, and suddenly I did put out my arms, rather tentatively and politely so that he could get away if he wanted, and when he let me hug him, when he returned the warmth, I felt a happiness I hadn't experienced in months.

Perhaps I hadn't experienced it since I had left him, with Louis. We had been in some nameless jungle place, the three of us, when we agreed to part, and that had been a year ago.

"Your first question?" he asked, peering at me very closely, sizing me up perhaps, doing everything a vampire can do to measure the mood and mind of his maker, because a vampire cannot read his maker's mind, any more than the maker can read the mind of the fledgling.

And there we stood divided, laden with preternatural gifts, both fit and rather full of emotion, and unable to communicate except in the simplest and best way, perhaps with words.

"My first question," I began to explain, to answer, "was simply going to be: Where have you been, and have you found the others, and did they try to hurt you? All that rot, you know how I broke the rules when I made you, et cetera."

"All that rot," he mocked me, the French accent I still possessed, now coupled with something definitely American. "What rot."

"Come on," I said. "Let's go into the bar there and talk. Obviously no one has done anything to you. I didn't think they could or they would, or that they'd dare. I wouldn't have let you slip off into the world if I'd thought you were in danger."

He smiled, his brown eyes full of gold light for just an instant.

"Didn't you tell me this twenty-five times, more or less, before we parted company?"

We found a small table, cleaving to the wall. The place was half crowded, the perfect proportion exactly. What did we look like? A couple of young men on the make for mortal men or women? I don't care.

"No one has harmed me," he said, "and no one has shown the slightest interest in it."

Someone was playing a piano, very tenderly for a hotel bar, I thought. And it was something by Erik Satie. What luck.

"The tie," he said, leaning forward, white teeth flashing, fangs completely hidden, of course. "This, this big mass of silk around your neck! This is not Brooks Brothers!" He gave a soft teasing laugh. "Look at you, and the wing-tip shoes! My, my. What's going on in your mind? And what is this all about?"

The bartender threw a hefty shadow over the small table, and murmured predictable phrases that were lost to me in my excitement and in the noise.

"Something hot," David said. It didn't surprise me. "You know, rum punch or some such, whatever you can heat up."

I nodded and made a little gesture to the indifferent fellow that I would take the same thing.

Vampires always order hot drinks. They aren't going to drink them; but they can feel the warmth and smell them if they're hot, and that is so good.

David looked at me again. Or rather this familiar body with David inside looked at me. Because for me, David would always be the elderly human I'd known and treasured, as well as this magnificent burnished shell of stolen flesh that was slowly being shaped by his expressions and manner and mood.

Dear Reader, he switched human bodies before I made him a vampire, worry no more. It has nothing to do with this story.

"Something's following you again?" he asked. "This is what Armand told me. So did Jesse."

"Where did you see them?"

"Armand?" he asked. "A complete accident. In Paris. He was just walking on the street. He was the first one I saw."

"He didn't make any move to hurt you?"

"Why would he? Why were you calling to me? Who's stalking you? What is all this?"

"And you've been with Maharet."

He sat back. He shook his head. "Lestat, I have pored over manuscripts such as no living human has seen in centuries; I have laid my hands on clay tablets that..."

"David, the scholar," I said. "Educated by the Talamasca to be the perfect vampire, though they never had an inkling that that is what you'd become."

"Oh, but you must understand. Maharet took me to these places where she keeps her treasures. You have to know what it means to hold in your hands a tablet covered in symbols that predate cuneiform. And Maharet herself, I might have lived how many centuries without ever glimpsing her."

Maharet was really the only one he had ever had to fear. I suppose we both knew it. My memories of Maharet held no menace, only the mystery of a survivor of Millennia, a living being so ancient that each gesture seemed marble made liquid, and her soft voice had become the distillation of all human eloquence.

"If she gave you her blessing, nothing else much matters," I said with a little sigh. I wondered if I myself would ever lay eyes upon her again. I had not hoped for it nor wanted it.

"I've also seen my beloved Jesse," said David.

"Ah, I should have thought of that, of course."

"I went searching for my beloved Jesse. I went crying out from place to place, just the way you sent out the wordless cry for me."

Jesse. Pale, bird-boned, red-haired. Twentieth-century born. Highly educated and psychic as a human. Jesse he had known as a human; Jesse he knew now as an immortal. Jesse had been his human pupil in the order called the Talamasca. Now he was the equal of Jesse in beauty and vampiric power, or

very near to it. I really did not know.

Jesse had been brought over by Maharet of the First Brood, born as a human before humans had begun to write their history at all or barely knew that they had one. The Elder now, if there was one, the Queen of the Damned was Maharet and her mute sister, Mekare, of whom no one spoke anymore much at all.

I had never seen a fledgling brought over by one as old as Maharet.

Jesse had seemed a transparent vessel of immense strength when last I saw her. Jesse must have had her own tales to tell now, her own chronicles and adventures.

I had passed onto David my own vintage blood mixed with a strain even older than Maharet's. Yes, blood from Akasha, and blood from the ancient Marius, and of course my own strength was in my blood, and my own strength, as we all knew, was quite beyond measure.

So he and Jesse must have been grand companions, and what had it meant to her to see her aged mentor clothed in the fleshly raiment of a young human male?

I was immediately envious and suddenly full of despair. I'd drawn David away from those willowy white creatures who had drawn him into their sanctuary somewhere far across the sea, deep in a land where their treasures might be hidden from crisis and war for generations. Exotic names came to mind, but I could not for the moment think where they had gone, the two red-haired ones, the one ancient, the one young. And to their hearth, they had admitted David.

A little sound startled me and I looked over my shoulder. I settled back, embarrassed to have appeared so anxious, and I focused silently for a moment on my victim.

My Victim was still in the restaurant very near us in this hotel, sitting with his beautiful daughter. I wouldn't lose him tonight. I was sure enough of that.