

Closer Than Sisters
(Spec. Script)
For Penny Dreadful

by

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COLD OPEN.

INT. VANESSA'S BEDROOM, NIGHT.

The camera examines the tatters of Vanessa's room after the fight with Fenton, the vampire boy.

The picture window is shattered, glass and wood littering the floor. The glass catches and refracts the light from the gas lamp, which flickers fitfully in the cold breeze. Fenton's body is slumped against the wall, still pinioned in place by the stake through his skull. The blood on his face and on the floor is black. It seems for a moment that he takes a rattling breath – but no, that too is just the wind coming through the broken window.

SEMBENE enters. He carries a bundle of objects which he sets down on the bed, one by one.

Clean rags.

A bucket of water.

A white sheet, folded neatly.

A handful of large white candles.

A small, gleaming hatchet.

INT. MURRAY'S STUDY, NIGHT.

MALCOLM MURRAY paces, openly agitated, before his team; DOCTOR FRANKENSTEIN, ETHAN CHANDLER, and VANESSA IVES are splayed around the room. Only Frankenstein is paying full attention.

MURRAY

We have nothing – less than
nothing – now that the creature is
dead! Our attempt to cure the
malady failed –

FRANKENSTEIN

The attempts were inconclusive,
sir – we didn't have time to run a
full battery of tests, but I was
able to give a sample of the blood
to Doctor Van Helsing, who is
extremely knowledgeable in this
area, and –

MURRAY

– Our tests failed and the
creature has invited its master
into my home. It knows where we
are and it is certainly planning,
even now, to terminate us. We have
lost whatever advantage we had.

VANESSA

It has always known where we are.
Mina was able to visit me, and
you.

MURRAY

You have no knowledge of the
forces behind those visitations,
Miss Ives.

FRANKENSTEIN

I do not think you should give up
hope of our finding a cure for
your daughter —

MURRAY

Mina is nothing like that monster!
The tests I had you run were
precautionary only — a preparation
for the worst case scenario. If I
hear you speak that way about my
daughter again, Frankenstein, I
will find a new doctor to carry on
your investigations. Do not think
that I cannot.

VANESSA

Do not be absurd, Murray.

MURRAY

Excuse me?

VANESSA

We are at war — a war into which
you conscripted us. In times like
these you cannot allow your
pettiness to overtake your
general's mind.
You know as well as I do that
doctors of Frankenstein's
speciality are not to be found on
every street corner. You cannot
pop out and replace him on a whim.

She stands.

VANESSA (CONT'D)

I do not say this for the
doctor's sake, Sir Malcolm. I
remind you simply because you do
not seem to care that we are not
useless, we are not expendable —
we are not bait.

The camera follows her as she exits through a darkened doorway.

MURRAY

Miss Ives!
Vanessa!

FADE TO:

THEME MUSIC.

PENNY DREADFUL CREDITS PLAY.

ACT ONE.

We are trapped in the midst of blearily out-of-focus shapes. A voice burbles indistinctly, as if from far away, and sharpens as it continues to speak:

TEACHER (V.O.)

Vanessa!
Vanessa!

The image, too, sharpens until it coalesces into:

INT. ART CLASSROOM, DAY [PAST].

TEACHER

Miss Ives! What are you doing?

A young Vanessa Ives – around 17, strapped into in a heavy wool school dress – snaps to attention at her dainty little easel. She is one of a circle of schoolgirls, arranged around a still life of fruit. Outside the window it is a bleak, snowy November day somewhere in the British countryside. The TEACHER stands behind Vanessa's stool.

VANESSA

Miss?

TEACHER

You may think this class is some kind of a joke, but I do not. A mastery of the arts is a necessary talent for any young woman of breeding...

Another STUDENT in the circle whispers to her neighbor:

STUDENT

Breeding?

The girls giggle cruelly behind their hands.

TEACHER

... who hopes to be presented to polite society. And let me make myself very clear, Miss Ives, no young woman under my instruction will get away with painting... sick filth like this.

VANESSA

Filth, Miss? I —

Vanessa really looks at her painting for the first time. On her canvas are the faint outlines of the still life, plastered over with a garish scrawl of the bust of a pretty blonde girl, completely naked and covered in blood. Vanessa is as shocked as her schoolmistress.

VANESSA (CONT'D)

Please, I didn't paint this — I mean, I didn't think I was doing this, I don't know what happened.

TEACHER

Liar!

VANESSA

No, miss, I mean —

TEACHER

You may retire to the dormitory, Miss Ives. The headmistress will speak to you about this.

Vanessa begins to protest, but the teacher grabs her harshly by the scruff of the collar and hoists her from her stool. Vanessa exits to the whispers and titters of her classmates.

INT. SCHOOL HALLWAY, DAY [PAST].

As Vanessa walks towards the dormitory, she hears a disturbance outside. Through the window, we see a black coach, stark against the meager snow, pull up to the school's front doors. There is a sudden bustle of activity as people explode from both the school and the coach to unpack and unload. She watches for a moment before a maid entering from a side room sends her scurrying down the hall.

INT. DORMITORY, DAY [PAST].

Vanessa sits in one of a long line of identical chairs beside a long line of identical beds. A few touches of girlish homeyness have been imposed upon the space: picture frames or bits of lace are tacked up over some of the beds; a few dolls sit on pillows. A simple cross hangs above Vanessa's bed.

Footsteps click down the hall until a MATRON and a MAID enter, leading a blonde GIRL in an ill-fitting winter cloak and hat. It is the girl from Vanessa's painting.

MATRON

Y'can't keep that cloak, as it's my warmest and I'll need to be going out to town this evening. Sarah, do you think you could scare up a winter dress for her?

MAID

I think I could find something, Ma'am.

MATRON

Well, look around. Your winter clothes have been ordered for you, yes?

GIRL

Yes, Ma'am. My father sent away for a suitable wardrobe.

MAID (ASIDE)

It doesn't seem Christian, plunging a girl in the snow in a cotton shift.

MATRON

It isn't our place to be judging Sir Malcolm, Sarah.

MAID

Yes, ma'am.

MATRON

She's shivering. Step lively, now.

The matron bustles the maid out of the room. The blonde girl stands where they left her. Vanessa watches.

VANESSA

Are you cold?

GIRL

A bit.

VANESSA

Why don't you have winter dresses?

GIRL

I'm from Egypt. We don't have winter there.

VANESSA

You're not from Egypt.

GIRL

Yes I am. I've lived there my whole life.

VANESSA

I think you're lying.

The girl approaches and offers Vanessa the hem of her white cotton dress to touch.

GIRL

This dress is from Egypt, made of Egyptian cotton. It's the softest in the world. My Morabiyah sewed this dress for me. She takes care of me. Well. Took care of me. Look!

The girl pulls her hair back from the nape of her neck and shows Vanessa a small talisman, embroidered on the dress in blue thread.

GIRL (CONT'D)

It's for protection.

Vanessa traces her fingers along the talisman's lines. The girl drops her hair back into place and turns around.

GIRL (CONT'D)

My father is a cartographer for the Royal Army – an explorer.

VANESSA

Is there a great deal to explore there?

GIRL

Oh, yes. My father is always off on missions. He never takes us with him. But that doesn't stop me from exploring, myself.

The maid re-enters with a dowdy wool dress draped over one arm.

MAID

Miss Mina? Why don't you come here
and see if this fits you? We'll
need to get you into something
warmer, anyhow.

The girl — MINA — flashes Vanessa a quick look before following the maid away. Vanessa stares after her.

The darkness from the beginning of the act suddenly closes in, like ink dropping into water.

A series of brief memories — or visions — flash violently through the ink.

Someone who might be Vanessa or Young Vanessa convulses with a brutal electric shock.

She is dropped into depthless water and struggles to free herself from restraints that are just out of our vision.

A rough hand grabs a chunk of her wild black hair and slices it clean off with shining silver scissors.

A different hand — a gentle hand — is placed on her shoulder. A single kind touch.

ETHAN (O.S.)

I've never seen in here before.

INT. VANESSA'S CHAPEL, NIGHT [PRESENT].

Vanessa is sitting on a wooden pew at the back of the room, in much the same position in which we left her in the past. Shocked out of her reverie, she looks up at Ethan, who is standing in the doorway. She is shaken by her vision and composes herself as she speaks — weaving the veneer of calm up around her.

VANESSA

Nor were you invited to, Mister
Chandler. Despite my perhaps
startling outburst downstairs, I
have no need of your assistance.

ETHAN

Maybe there wasn't any need, but
it seemed a sight more appealing
than staying down there with those
two. I don't like the way they

talk to each other.

VANESSA

Concerning the unfortunate young Fenton, or...?

ETHAN

Him, yeah, but everything. They look at the world with such a coldness, I — well, I'm not used to it, I guess. Look, I don't mean to barge into business that isn't mine. I won't even step a foot further into this room if you don't want me to. I just don't want to go back down there. Not right now.

VANESSA

All right. You may stay.

ETHAN

You know, I was never much of a churchgoing man. But it's comforting to see it here. Your dedication, I mean — setting up here and praying.

VANESSA

Prayer is... difficult. Here. Isn't it? But I find that if one takes time for contemplation, it tends to offer up some answers.

ETHAN

What answers have you been offered?

VANESSA

Malcolm Murray says that I am the daughter he deserved — that my calculating mind is the only gift his own deserves. But Mina Murray was not the girl her father believed her to be.

ETHAN

Why not?

VANESSA

There were many things that she hid from him. Or that he chose to ignore. Sir Malcolm has a mind which tends to excise all but the

most vital information — or have you not noticed?

ETHAN
It's hard to miss.

VANESSA
But who knows what will become vital sometime in the future?

Ethan ponders this question, but he does not have an answer. He feels — quite rightly — that he is missing a great deal of this equation.

ETHAN
Did you know Miss Murray?

VANESSA
We were friends in our girlhood.

ETHAN
And you think you know her better than her father does.

VANESSA
In some ways, yes. I was privy to a side of her which her father knows very little about — a side which, I believe, could shed light on our current situation.

She stands in a decisive and businesslike manner.

VANESSA (CONT'D)
Which is why I should like to go out this evening. I have a great deal to explore.

Vanessa strides past Ethan into the hall towards her room. He follows her, stuttering protests.

ETHAN
To explore? Where?

Vanessa does not pause in her step or even look back at him.

VANESSA
I am not yet sure. I will know it when I see it.

ETHAN
Miss Ives, I can't let you do that. There are some nasty people

in town these days — I'm sure you know it — you can't go off not even knowing where you're going.

VANESSA

I am sure I can take care of myself, but if you are concerned for my wellbeing, you may join me.

ETHAN

I just mean to say that it seems to be a sight too dangerous to risk.

VANESSA

That is where I believe you are wrong.
I had a vision, Mister Chandler.

Ethan is caught off guard.

ETHAN

I — ah... Sir Malcolm told me.
About those.

VANESSA

I believe I was contacted by something very powerful — dredging up old, hidden parts of my own mind and presenting them to me. It is obscure message, to be sure, and one that I do not yet understand.
I aim to understand it.

INT. VANESSA'S BEDROOM, CONTINUOUS.

Sembene is still in Vanessa's room when she enters, Ethan trailing behind her. The manservant has removed his jacket and rolled his shirtsleeves up to his elbows; he wears black leather gloves which go up to his forearms. He has meticulously cleaned the blood and glass from the floor to make room for the gory ritual which he is now enacting.

The white tapers from earlier dot the surfaces of the room (floor, windowsill, etc), stuck in pools of their own wax. Sembene has laid Fenton's body on the sheet.

The boy's feet, left hand, and head have been severed from his body; Sembene, hatchet in hand, was obviously about to sever the body's right hand when Vanessa entered. He greets her with an impassive nod.

Ethan enters, gags, and hurriedly steps back into the hallway.

ETHAN
Jesus Christ.

SEMBENE
An old ritual. To keep him from rising again.

ETHAN
A busted skull wasn't enough? That usually lays a fellow low, in my experience.

VANESSA
Sembene knows what he is doing, Mister Chandler. Far better, indeed, than many people in this life. If he says that this or any ritual is necessary for our safety, I will believe him unconditionally. I suggest you begin to do the same.

ETHAN
Yeah, well.

Still, he leans in the doorway and will not fully enter the room. He winces as we hear a dull thump: Sembene's hatchet severing Fenton's remaining hand. Sembene lays the hatchet aside and begins to recite, very softly, the words of the old ritual.

As Sembene's chant sets a low beat in the room, we follow Vanessa to a chest of drawers by one wall. She pulls open the top drawer to reveal a small armory of discreet weaponry, all couched in red velvet. She picks up, examines, and replaces a heavy knife that looks as if it's made of one piece of beaten bronze — hefting it like an old friend. She chooses instead a more delicate silver-bladed dagger, which she conceals neatly on her person. Thus armed, she turns to Ethan.

VANESSA
As you said, this will probably be dangerous. Are you prepared?

EXT. ARCHERY FIELD, DAY [PAST].

A blunted arrow "thwocks" into a target. It is spring at the finishing school, and a line of girls is having an archery class. When every girl has finished shooting, the

GAMES MISTRESS shouts:

GAMES MISTRESS:

Retrieve!

The girls put their bows down and walk across the field to retrieve their arrows. Vanessa and Mina – now fast friends – walk together.

MINA

In Egypt once we had a nomad to dinner – a man whose family lived in the desert, setting up their camp wherever they pleased. He told me that when his family is at war with another family of nomads, they fight with arrows tipped in a deadly poison. They make it from the root of a flower that you can only find in the heart of the desert.

VANESSA

Were you frightened?

MINA

Not at all. I'm not scared of anyone.

Mina pulls one of her arrows out of the target and licks the tip with a dark smile. Vanessa laughs.

A second line of girls takes their place to shoot, so Mina and Vanessa retire to the grass under a large tree.

VANESSA

Egypt sounds so exciting. I should never want to leave if I lived there.

MINA

I never will, once I get back.

VANESSA

Why did you come here at all?

MINA

My father said I needed controlling. I think that's the stupidest thing I've ever heard when practically all I did was look through the musty old junk that he brings home.

VANESSA

If I were an explorer, I wouldn't settle for any old junk. I should dig up a Pharaoh's tomb. I'd stroll in, easy as a summer breeze, and load up all of his gold and rubies into my arms. Imagine: treasure that hasn't seen the light of day for two thousand years!

MINA

You sound just like my brother: always on about the wrong thing. Who cares about some tarnished bracelets?

Vanessa is hurt by her friend's slight.

VANESSA

A Pharaoh's treasure is nothing to scoff at. I'm sure it's better than anything your father has discovered.

MINA

That's because you don't know anything about what's really valuable.

VANESSA

Oh, and I'm sure you do.

MINA

Really, Vanessa, he's found something truly special. You can't even imagine.

She sizes up her friend's interest out of the corner of her eye — making sure that, once again, Vanessa hangs on her words.

MINA (CONT'D)

I can show you, if you promise me something...

VANESSA

What?

MINA

You must promise that you won't get frightened. You frighten so easily — it's quite an embarrassment.

VANESSA
That's not true, Mina!

Mina scoffs. She checks to see that nobody is watching them, then scoots with Vanessa to the far side of the tree.

Mina breathes deeply in preparation, then begins to recite a rasping, guttural incantation. It is not in English. She seems to be trying to get something out of her body – it runs like a spasm through her legs, hips, stomach, and chest, then she is gagging to force it out of her mouth... She retches into her hands and then offers Vanessa a large black scorpion.

When she sees that Vanessa is about to scream, she drops it on her lap and slaps a hand over Vanessa's mouth.

MINA
I told you not to be frightened!
Don't make a sound, or someone
will come and find it.

VANESSA
Someone will find it! I want
someone to find it – and take it
away!

MINA
No, don't be frightened of it. If
won't hurt you, it's very clever.
Look:

She holds her hand out to the scorpion, who crawls onto her palm.

MINA (CONT'D, TO THE SCORPION)
Up!

The scorpion raises its tail, then its body, until it is doing a sort of handstand on its two front legs.

MINA (CONT'D)
Down.

The scorpion drops back onto all eight legs.

MINA (CONT'D)
Very good. Give me a kiss.

She raises her palm to her lips and lets the scorpion crawl onto her chin. It curls its stinger around until it just touches her lips, reminiscent of "The Lovers" card from present-time Vanessa's tarot deck.

Mina smiles, then whispers something to the scorpion. She then plucks it off her lips and sets it on Vanessa's shoulder. It crawls up Vanessa's neck and nestles in the hair next to her ear like a glittering black hairpin

SCORPION (IN MINA'S VOICE)

I can teach it to carry messages
for us, too.

VANESSA

It can talk!

MINA

Not really, it just listens and
repeats. But we could use it to
talk between our beds after lights
out, couldn't we?

VANESSA

I... I suppose we could. Wouldn't
matron notice, though, us just
carrying it around?

Mina laughs, snatches the scorpion from Vanessa's hair, and smashes it on the ground.

MINA

Oh, don't worry. I can call it
back any time. It's just something
from inside me.

END ACT ONE.