

A shirtless man with long, wavy hair is shown from the chest up, standing in a dark, grassy field. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting his muscular physique. The background is dark and textured, suggesting tall grass or reeds.

Tracey
H. Kitts

THE
DREAD
MOON

The Dread Moon
by Tracey H. Kitts

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CONTENTS

[Chapter One](#)
[Chapter Two](#)
[Chapter Three](#)
[Chapter Four](#)
[Chapter Five](#)
[Chapter Six](#)
[Chapter Seven](#)
[Chapter Eight](#)
[Chapter Nine](#)
[Chapter Ten](#)
[Chapter Eleven](#)
[Chapter Twelve](#)
[Chapter Thirteen](#)
[Chapter Fourteen](#)
[Chapter Fifteen](#)
[Chapter Sixteen](#)
[Chapter Seventeen](#)
[Chapter Eighteen](#)
[Chapter Nineteen](#)
[Chapter Twenty](#)
[Chapter Twenty One](#)
[Chapter Twenty Two](#)
[Chapter Twenty Three](#)
[Chapter Twenty Four](#)
[Chapter Twenty Five](#)
[Chapter Twenty Six](#)

The Dread Moon
by Tracey H. Kitts

[Chapter Twenty Seven](#)

[Chapter Twenty Eight](#)

[Chapter Twenty Nine](#)

[Epilogue](#)

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By

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Chapter One

The smell of coffee woke me early, and I wasn't entirely happy about it. But, the longer I breathed in the tantalizing aroma, the more I wanted a cup. Thunder rumbled outside, and due to the storm, it was still dark. I could have slept really well for at least a few more hours. However, good coffee like good men should never be wasted. Good coffee isn't always easy to find, but a good man is even harder to come by. Then again, I had an unfair advantage. All I had to do was go into the kitchen to find both.

It had been a week since the announcement that werewolves were indeed real, and they could be your next door neighbor. For the most part, I had to say people were handling the news well. Maybe they were just in shock.

As for me, all was well except perhaps my dreams. I kept dreaming about a man, a particular man. I have dreamed of him off and on since I was sixteen. I guess you could say he is quite literally the man of my dreams, and he had showed up twice in the past two days. First, I dreamed he was lying beside me in bed with his arms wrapped tightly around me. I felt safe until I realized what was going on. I woke up startled, almost expecting to find a strange man in my bed. I was relieved to find Alfred instead.

The next day I fell asleep on the sofa downstairs. This time, I dreamed I was falling, only it felt more like floating. He was telling me to fall, to let myself fall. "It is alright. I will catch you." I felt myself floating down to him and he caught

The Dread Moon
by Tracey H. Kitts

me. I never doubted that he would. Never once did I feel any fear, nor did I ever expect to hit the ground. All I can tell you after nearly a lifetime of dreams is that he is tall, dark, and ravishing. But lately, I could almost see his face.

I flopped onto my back with a sigh. I'd fallen asleep in Alfred's downstairs bedroom the night before. The sheets were cool in the places where I hadn't touched, and I stretched until my toes reached the cool bits of cover near the edge of the bed.

"Lilith," I heard Alfred's voice call from the kitchen.

He had left the door open, and his voice echoed down the hall. I threw my arm over my eyes. He'd left the bed curtains open too. Alfred called me again and I growled. It was bad enough the sun was in my face, but why did we have to get up so damn early?

"What?" I asked.

But by the time I finally spoke Alfred was standing in the door with a sarcastic smile on his face.

"Get up," he ordered.

"Why?"

He walked over grabbed the covers near the foot of the bed and snatched. I curled up into a ball as I rolled onto my side and groaned, "For the love of God!"

He scooped me up before I could object further and lifted me off the bed.

"I thought there was a storm outside?" I said, looking over his shoulder.

"There is," he said with a smile. "You just managed to catch a lucky patch of sunlight between the clouds."

The Dread Moon
by Tracey H. Kitts

I rested my head dejectedly against his shoulder while Alfred carried me to the kitchen.

"Why won't you let me sleep?" I sighed pitifully.

"Because we've got a lot to do today," he said as he kissed the top of my head.

As we entered the kitchen the smell of fresh coffee so close at hand seemed to stir me. I had completely forgotten we had a ball to attend shortly. The Hunter's Ball was an annual event on planet Terra, and one of the rare occasions I found reason enough to visit my home planet.

"Oh, I forgot that was today," I mumbled as Alfred lowered me to the floor.

I sat at the table and rubbed my eyes in a desperate attempt to keep them open. The clock on the microwave said it was seven o'clock. From the look of things, Alfred had been up for a while. He was still lounging around in a pair of deep blue silk pajamas, but breakfast was nearly done.

It had been five months since we'd decided to stop hiding our feelings for each other. I had to say, they had been the best five months of my life. It was so wonderful to love and have that love returned. It wasn't like I'd never been in love before, we both knew this wasn't my first time. But every time I looked at Alfred it felt that way. His embrace stole away some of the bitter disappointments I had suffered. Alfred had always seemed to have such command of the situation, no matter what the situation was. If he had any doubts about us, they didn't show. I trusted him with my life, in so many ways.

The Dread Moon
by Tracey H. Kitts

I realized Alfred had been talking and I'd been lost in a daydream, watching him walk around the room. His dark hair was tousled from sleep, and the bronze of his skin seemed somehow diminished next to the blue. But no amount of dark color could ever make Alfred look truly pale. He was a welcome sight to my still sleep filled eyes, and all I could think to do was smile at him.

"Are you with me this time?" He smiled and placed a mug of my favorite coffee underneath my nose.

"Mmhm."

He went over with me exactly when we needed to get down to the transporter in his lab in order to make the party on time. Next, he reviewed the guest list. There were going to be people there Alfred thought would benefit from seeing me. Since the role of The Hunters had now begun to undergo some serious changes, there were talks of forming a new task force. This group would be known as H.A.V.O.C. (Hunter Assault Team for Violators of Werewolf Code.) A decision would be made soon as to who would head this group in different areas of the worlds. For our area, I was shaping up to be the most likely candidate. I didn't exactly relish the thought of having more responsibility, or of being in what was sure to be a public spotlight. But I couldn't let my father down, and he was rallying strongly for me to have the position. The Wizard Council would be at the Hunter's Ball, and I needed to make a good impression.

"So, what are you wearing?" Alfred asked.

"Well, this event is formal, so that calls for formal attire." I smiled.

The Dread Moon
by Tracey H. Kitts

I had deliberately not let Alfred see the dress I was planning to wear. I was shopping with my best friend Kat when we found it. The moment I saw the dress I knew it would be perfect. Kathryn Roberts and I had been the best of friends since I'd rescued a former boyfriend of hers from a werewolf attack nearly five years ago. In the years I had known her, Kat had never lied to me about anything and she swore I looked good in this dress. I valued her opinion.

Alfred looked at me with a questioning smirk and I added, "You'll just have to wait and see."

Kat called a few hours later while I was getting ready.

"I'm nervous," I confided.

"About what? You've been to these things before, right?"

"Yes ... but I've never been under such pressure to let myself be seen. I've always sort of blended into the background, and I'll be honest, Kat, I liked the background," I whined.

"Yeah, but they need to see that you're a reasonably competent individual, now don't they?" she said sensibly.

"All they have to do is look at my track record to know I get the job done."

"They also need someone who will look good on camera," she went on like I hadn't spoken, "cause, let's face it, you will be in the public eye once this Havoc thing is announced."

"You're right," I sighed, "I might as well try to make myself look like a worthy poster child."

"So, do you think he'll be there?"

"Who?"

"The man from your dreams, of course! You've got to admit he's been showing up more and more lately."

I honestly had never thought to associate the appearance of the tall, dark stranger in my dreams with the ball, and I told her so.

"But, it's a possibility, isn't it? You're dreams have a creepy way of coming true, Lil. I can't help but think that you'll meet him soon." She paused. "But what will you do then? I mean, you've got no idea who this man is, or if he's...."

"If he's what?"

"I dunno, evil or something."

"Well, you're a tremendous comfort," I grunted, pulling my shoes from underneath the bed with some difficulty.

"Sorry, it's just been driving me crazy. I want to know who he is!"

"You and me both. So," I began hesitantly, "how are you doing?"

Kathryn had dumped her semi-serious boyfriend fairly recently. The reason I knew Charles Xander had been semi-serious is because they'd split at the end of October, and it was now January and Kat was not dating someone new. It had turned out Charles was a werewolf with close ties to Bade Garren. Bade was a challenger to the leader of the local werewolf pack, and had sent Charles to get close to Kat in order to spy on me. We'd got this information out of him at Kat's Halloween party along with the help of the king of the local wolf pack, Marco Barak. It was Marco who had proposed the werewolf code to the council, and Marco who also haunted

my dreams. I had thought that once Alfred returned from his trip to Terra last August I would be able to put Marco out of my mind, but that was only half true. It was easier to ignore him, but I was never able to completely shut him out.

"I'm ok," Kat answered after a short pause. "You know, I didn't dump him because he was a werewolf, right?"

"I figured."

"I dumped him because he was a liar."

"Trust me, I can relate."

Kathryn, who knew my track record for picking up losers, only laughed.

A short while after our conversation, I was staring in the mirror at my reflection. The dress Kat and I had decided on was black. I had always thought I looked good in black, and I was hoping everyone else would agree. The dress was sleeveless, and fit close against my throat, with a clasp behind the neck. I had wanted to avoid drawing attention to my breasts. I felt it was an inappropriate occasion to show cleavage. Given that I needed to make a competent impression, I didn't want to flash my assets. The back was open below the clasp. Though it did not reveal too much, the dip in back was low enough that wearing a bra was out of the question. The shimmering fabric draped over my slender waist and the curve of my hips, falling in silken splendor to my ankles. There was a split on the left side which came to mid thigh. High enough to be sexy, but low enough to not look slutty. My shoes were black leather with a three inch heel. Across the top were straps which tied just above my ankles.

The Dread Moon
by Tracey H. Kitts

When I was fairly certain that I was presentable, I went downstairs to meet Alfred. I saw him at the foot of the stairs and my heart stopped. He was standing there, checking his watch and looking impatient. He looked up and saw me, and his mouth opened slightly as if he was going to say something, but no words came. He looked wonderful. Alfred wore a black tuxedo, complete with one of those neat little bowties. Where other men might have looked like a penguin, he managed to look like he'd stepped out of a really sexy spy novel and into my home.

As I reached the last few steps, I stretched my hand up playfully and closed Alfred's mouth.

"Thank you," I said as I smiled up at him.

His kiss was soft and unexpected against my lips. Every time Alfred touched me I wanted him, and this time was no exception.

"Aren't we running behind?" I whispered.

"Yes." He smiled, and kissed me again.

I pulled back reluctantly. "Then we should get going."

He looked disappointed, "Are you upset with me?"

"No," I smiled, "But we don't have time to finish what you were about to start."

My heels clicked on the hard wood of the last few steps and I found that even with a three inch heel, I only came to the middle of Alfred's chest. Dr. Alfred Moody is six foot five, and normally, my five foot four frame came to just slightly below the middle of his chest. I loved how small and fragile I felt in comparison to him. I enjoyed Alfred's strength. Looking up into his handsome face, I found it hard to believe he was

The Dread Moon
by Tracey H. Kitts

my father's age. Of course with the Terran life span being what it is, he didn't look fifty one. Alfred could easily have passed for thirty something, making his assumed age seem appropriate for any prying eyes in the small town where I lived.

We descended the dark narrow passageway which led down to Alfred's lab in silence. I think we both were dreading the ball for different reasons. I was nervous about people watching my every move. But I believe Alfred was more worried about his old partner, Jacob Mercury, my father and commander of The Hunters. Neither one of us had exactly told him about "us" but I didn't feel it was necessary. My dad had always been clever, and I'm sure he'd worked it all out by now. Alfred however, did not like to have loose ends about anything, and felt we should say something ... he just had no idea how that topic of conversation should be approached.

I stood back while Alfred pressed the tile that would transport us across the street from the headquarters of The Hunters. The building itself had many transporters; however they had been shut down for the event for security reasons. I traveled by transporter about once a year, because that was all I could stand. I had never grown accustomed to the awful sort of freeze dried feeling it gave me. The circle of small white tiles began to emit a soft glow, and I stepped into them with Alfred. I was careful not to touch him. Wouldn't want my particles mixing with someone else.

Instantly, I had the sensation of strong cold hands reaching deep inside of me and it felt like my body was being frozen from the inside out. Just when the feeling became so

cold it hurt, nearly to the point of terrible pain, it was over. I swayed slightly, and Alfred's strong hand on my shoulder steadied me.

"Shit, I hate these things," I said, rubbing my bare arms to fight off the nonexistent cold.

"Yeah, you never quite get used to that feeling," Alfred agreed, though he seemed to be having no difficulty. I think he was just being sympathetic.

Planet Terra is not what most people would expect in an alien planet. Although there were many advanced technologies available, there were no massive robots walking the streets, or spacecraft zooming through the air. Of course, one reason for that was the airspace over The Hunter's headquarters was restricted. As we stepped out onto the street, I got a good look at my favorite thing about my home planet, its moons.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Two

Dusk had just settled over the landscape, casting a soft purple glow. The sky on Terra always had a faint purplish tint, but at night it seemed to glow like a deep gem. Planet Terra has two moons, and that night they hung like magnificent crescents in the sky. Their soft light illuminated a path up the street, where others could be seen making their way to the same destination. The Hunter's headquarters rose toward the sky like a large silver bullet pointed to the heavens.

"We might as well get this over with," I sighed, taking the lead toward the building.

Headquarters was actually covered with mirrors facing all angles of the many streets it sat in the middle of. But, to the casual observer the bullet shaped building looked like just that, a big silver bullet with no windows and only one entrance. It was as I approached this entrance that I ran into the last person I had ever expected to see.

Bradley Daniel stood directly in front of the steps leading into headquarters, and he had the nerve to smile at me. Bradley and I had dated for three and a half years. Turns out he was married. He lied to me, cheated, and everything else in between, and he had the nerve to smile at me. I wanted to hit him. But like so many times before, my heart hurt when I looked at Bradley. He was still good looking, with a tall muscular physique, and dark close cut hair. He was definitely my type. However, Bradley turned out to be someone entirely different than the person I thought I knew. And the man who

stood before me was not the man I'd fallen in love with either. I was in love with an ideal, and Bradley no longer fit the profile. I decided not to speak, and made to walk past him.

"You're not even going to speak?" he asked with a conversational tone.

"Why bother with a hello when goodbye is so unimportant to you?" I said. I fought to keep my voice calm and even, but it did not have the casual tone his did. My voice was strained, and what I had said was meant to sting.

"Would it matter if I apologized?" With these words he put his hand on my wrist and stopped me where I stood on the second step.

I removed my hand from him with as much dignity as I could muster, but the look of disgust on my face must have been unmistakable.

"No, it wouldn't," I said softly, "and don't ever touch me."

"I had no idea...." he began stupidly.

"That somehow doesn't surprise me, Bradley. You never really did have a clue, did you?"

"Listen, I—"

"Am a coward and a liar and should know when to keep my mouth shut," I interrupted with a hiss. "How dare you presume to touch me, to speak to me, after the way you acted?" I turned my back on him again as I said, "You and I have nothing more to say to each other."

I looked back over my shoulder at the other people in the street and saw Alfred approaching. He had been stopped by a

colleague, but was walking faster after having noticed whom I was speaking to.

"I just thought that since I was divorced now...."

I was disgusted. "Now that you're divorced you can dedicate more time to yourself. After all, that was always you're first love," I said with as much contempt as possible.

"Is everything alright?" Alfred asked, as he walked up and placed a hand on my shoulder.

"We were having a conversation," Bradley answered, though the question had been directed at me.

"No, you were not," Alfred said coldly.

We turned to walk up the steps and Bradley made the mistake of touching Alfred's shoulder. "Just what do you think you're—?"

But he never got to finish the sentence. Without hesitation, Alfred had rounded on him. Even at close range, Alfred's punch had some serious power behind it. In the blink of an eye, Bradley lay at the foot of the steps with blood gushing from his broken nose. I admit I was shocked, but very pleased all the same.

Alfred stepped forward and growled menacingly, "Stay down you son of a bitch."

Bradley pressed a handkerchief to his nose, but he stayed put. Coward. I touched Alfred's arm lightly as I walked past him, letting him know without words to stay put. I knelt beside Bradley and said sweetly, "Eat shit and live, Bradley."

As I stood up he replied, "Don't you mean eat shit and die?"

"No, I want you to remember the flavor."

The Dread Moon
by Tracey H. Kitts

We made one more attempt to enter the building, and I realized with some horror that a crowd had gathered. Alfred was on the fourth step this time when Bradley spoke again, "I just thought that—"

This time, the hit knocked him hard enough that he skidded slightly when he hit the ground. I turned to him once more and said something I had previously not been given the chance to say, "Goodbye, Bradley," I whispered. He actually looked startled before he passed out.

When Alfred and I finally reached the top of the steps, we found my father amongst the gawking crowd. Jacob Mercury stood by the open front doors with his arms crossed. Some might have considered his look stern, but I knew him too well. He was thinking about something. My father, like Alfred, did not look his age. The gray streak in his red beard and fine lines near his eyes were the only indications that he was over thirty five. He is only five foot ten, but his presence seemed to fill the large doorway. I saw Alfred hesitate, but just for a moment. My father was the only person I think Alfred had ever been afraid of.

But then he smiled at us both and shook Alfred's hand.

"Glad you could come," he said genially.

I threw my arms around his neck. "Hey, daddy," I whispered as I kissed his cheek.

He looked back down the steps as a few good Samaritans attempted to get Bradley on his feet again. From the look of things, he still wasn't conscious. I can't really say I was sorry, but I tried not to let it show. Still, part of me insisted it wasn't wrong to take some small pleasure in his misery, especially

after the way he'd treated me. Then again, I couldn't cast stones.

"That's gonna leave a mark." He winked at Alfred.

"With any luck," Alfred said with a sarcastic smile.

"People have been waiting for you," he said, smiled at me and walked inside.

Alfred and I followed a few paces behind. "See." I smiled at Alfred. "No explanation necessary."

Alfred looked relieved, and after seeing Bradley get some of what he had coming, I felt the same way. This was not my first trip to headquarters, but the place never failed to give me pause. The high arch of the ceiling in the entrance was covered with a magnificent mural. Michelangelo, as some may have guessed was "not of this world," and it was one of his finest masterpieces which adorned the high ceiling. The painting depicted a pack of werewolves kneeling at the feet of one of the few remaining images of the first Hunter. He had always seemed so familiar to me, standing tall and dark underneath the full moon, but that night something was different. I felt like I knew him, but that was not possible. I realized Alfred was leaving me behind and picked up my pace, attempting to clear my head of the ridiculous thought.

I glanced around the entrance hall once more. Here people mingled near a table of refreshments in the corner, where a rather inebriated wizard kept spiking the punch with a flick of his wrist. The bright orange of his robes reflected in the highly polished tile of the floor. Directly in the center of the room, and also highly polished was the emblem of The Hunters. At first glance, it looked like only a full moon, but this was

The Dread Moon
by Tracey H. Kitts

known as The Blood Moon, and it glowed a deep and sinister red that reflected onto the faces of those who passed over its surface.

As I reached the far end of the room I turned back, looking once more to the high ceiling. The image of the kneeling werewolves faded into another picture. In this picture the first Hunter was standing atop a menacing gargoyle high on a building top in the middle of a raging storm. His shirt was torn open to reveal a magnificently chiseled physique. On the left side of his chest were fresh claw marks. His cloak billowed in the wind and a whip could be seen slashing through the air, one held in each capable hand. His long dark hair, like his cloak, seemed to blend with the darkness, and become a part of the storm. All of this gave an incredibly powerful and imposing impression, but there was something in his eyes that captured me. The deep emerald green of his eyes seemed to pierce my soul as I stood there, blocking traffic, staring.

"Are you coming?" Alfred touched my shoulder and I jumped.

"Yeah," I answered breathlessly.

I followed Alfred down the hall and into the enormous ball room. I saw my father waiting near the far side of the room with a man who could only be Aldan Medwin, the eldest member of The Wizard Council. I recognized him instantly from the picture I'd seen several years ago. He hadn't changed. His long silvery white beard and hair blended together with the shimmering blue gray of his robes. The other wizards present that night seemed to enjoy the fact

The Dread Moon
by Tracey H. Kitts

that they didn't exactly blend in. To the right of the door, I saw another council member, Eldon Jokull. His name literally translates to mean, old glacier. However, he is affectionately known as Old Man Winter. Despite the fact that he was in his eighties, Jokull's long dark hair contrasted nicely with the deep cold looking blue of his robes. He appeared every bit as frigid as his ability to manipulate ice and snow.

He was deeply engrossed in conversation with the final council member in attendance that evening, Abraham Conner, whose name translates to wise father of nations. Like all powerful wizards, he had a nickname as well. Abraham Conner had the ability to manipulate and distort time. It was for this reason he was known as Father Time.

Before facing the dreaded conversation which surely awaited me, I took a brief look around and saw that the Icarum were in attendance this year. The Icarum are a race of winged people from the planet Icknar. Years ago, the lycanthropy virus spread to their planet as well. The Icarum cannot contract the virus, so there is no such thing as winged werewolves. However, this did not prevent other people from moving to the planet who *could* contract lycanthropy. When they learned of the actions Terra had taken to attempt some sort of control, The Hunters set up offices on Icknar at their request, eventually recruiting many of its people. Several thousand of the Icarum now lived on Terra, and some had lived on Earth years ago, but Earth wasn't really ready for winged people just yet.

I was halfway across the floor to where my father and Aldan stood when a familiar face alighted gracefully in my

path. I had not seen Julius Blight since my days as a trainee, and couldn't help but smile at his appearance. Julius is around six foot two, though the wings always made him look taller to me. His soft lavender eyes twinkled as he smiled at me and bowed elegantly, causing his startling white hair to cascade over his shoulders.

"It's good to see you, Julius," I said, smiling.

He rose to his full height again and his luscious lips curled into a smile as he brushed the hair back from his face. Julius and I had dated briefly while we'd trained together. He was still every bit as sexy as I'd remembered, but I did not love him. All the same, it was good to look at him again. There's nothing like a gorgeous man with wings.

"You look well," he said.

"And you." I nodded appreciatively.

Apparently deciding to skip pretence entirely he asked, "Would you like to dance?" As he said this, Julius looked up. There, among what appeared to be stars at the ceiling twirled the other Icarum Hunters and their dance partners.

"That can wait can't it?" said a deep, but gentle voice from behind Julius.

We both turned to see Aldan Medwin, a kind smile on his lined face.

"You can of course have her back later," he assured him with a smile, "But I've been waiting quite a while for the pleasure."

Julius stepped aside with another dramatic bow and flew back toward the ceiling. Aldan then turned to me, still wearing a smile and inquired, "Would you care to dance?"

I must have looked surprised for he continued, "Surely it doesn't shock you so much that an old man would like to dance with you?"

"No," I replied hesitantly, "It's just that...."

"Go, on. You don't have to worry about offending me, I assure you." He smiled.

"Well, I know that only seven wizards are born every century and I've seen four here tonight ... I feel privileged, but I never expected to dance with one."

It may have sounded like a kiss up sort of statement, but it was true. I was a little awestruck, for lack of a better word.

"You have a way with words, my dear. But may I offer a bit of advice?"

I nodded.

"Never trust a wizard who cannot dance." His eyes sparkled with this comment, and I knew that I liked Aldan Medwin.

The band immediately struck up a waltz and I took his arm without hesitation. "What can I do for you Mr. Medwin?" I asked politely.

"Please, call me Aldan. And it is *I* who am your humble servant," he replied. "You know," Aldan remarked as he twirled me around dramatically, "I cannot help but feel that I know you. Perhaps it is your striking resemblance to a former member of the council."

I froze for a moment; I knew who he was talking about. My great, great grandfather, Mathias Alexander, had been the last member of the council to die in office. It was his vacated council seat that Aldan Medwin had taken over.

"So, you know him?" he asked, apparently noticing my pause.

"Yes." I didn't know what else to say.

"It's nice that you don't try to hide the fact, for that would only make the conversation more difficult, don't you think?" He twirled me again with these words.

When I didn't respond he continued, "You see, I knew The Seducer well and holding your hand ... is almost like being in his presence again. I noticed your father's physical resemblance as well, but I feel his power in you." He looked at me intently for a moment and then smiled again. "Have no great concern, my dear, I will keep this matter between us. It is not the business of everyone that the power of The Seducer has been reborn. After all, he's not exactly on the same team any more, is he?"

I laughed at this. "Surely you don't mean people would be offended because his powers have passed to a woman?"

"Offended? No. Intimidated, perhaps, maybe even afraid."

"And you, what do you think about it?" I couldn't resist asking.

"I am ... intrigued."

A new song started to play and he quickly asked, "Do you tango?"

I barely had time to nod, before he practically swept me off my feet. I gripped his hand tightly, deliberately pressing my bare skin against his. I wanted to know what he really thought. To my chagrin he responded abruptly, "If you would like to know what I think, I would much prefer to be asked."

The Dread Moon
by Tracey H. Kitts

I wasn't sure how to respond, but he went on as if I had apologized, "It's quite alright. After all, most people would never know the difference. But if you want to know what I really think, it is a bit frightening, and yet fascinating."

"What is exactly?"

"The thought of being able to experience his power from a new perspective, of course."

He dipped me as I replied, "Would you feel better if I promised not to seduce you?"

"My dear," he replied with a warm smile, "your very presence has the effect."

Mathias Alexander did not have the best of reputations, but he was one of the most powerful wizards in recorded history. He had passed on to me what was known as the voice of seduction. His power *was* seduction, and everything about him worked toward this end. I felt a power warm and sinuous flow through my veins as I flipped that switch in my mind that controlled my power. I took every unfulfilled desire, every explicit fantasy, and put them into my voice. Aldan pulled me against him and I stroked his long silver hair gently as I purred, "I assure you, my voice can do much more."

He gasped as a look of complete rapture passed over his features. "So it can," he replied breathlessly.

"I am not irresponsible with my abilities," I said, my voice returned to normal.

"All the same, I am impressed. I did not expect you to have mastered the voice."

After a few moments pause, and the completion of our dance, he informed me, "I am confident you would do well in heading up your local division of H.A.V.O.C."

"Thank you—"

"However, I feel it would be a waste of your capabilities to limit you to it."

"Excuse me?" I wasn't sure I liked where the conversation was leading.

"I would like for you to head the division entirely, having all other division leaders answer to you."

"And who would I answer to?"

"Why, to your father, of course." He gestured toward where my father stood near the back of the room talking to Alfred.

"But why—?"

"Am I so confident? Because I like you."

"But—"

"And I don't like a lot of people." He smiled. "I trust you, though I couldn't say why. You're a good person, Lilith. Never let yourself be told otherwise."

I was taken slightly aback by his comments. "I don't know if I'd go that far."

"Mathias was a good person too," he said kindly.

My eyes stung unexpectedly and my vision became a bit misty.

Aldan either didn't notice I was fighting back tears at the mention of the ancestor I'd never met in person, or he chose to graciously overlook it.

The Dread Moon
by Tracey H. Kitts

"If you will excuse me, my dear," Aldan said as he bowed. "I have many much more unpleasant tasks to perform this evening," he added with another smile.

With that Aldan Medwin turned back in the direction of my father and Alfred.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Three

Before I could take a step back toward the refreshments Julius once again blocked my path. "Don't think you can walk all over me just because you've seen me naked." He smiled wickedly, and I must say it suited him. "Now, how about that dance?"

Julius pulled me close, and we twirled in graceful circles ever closer to the ceiling. I did not recall the ceiling looking as it did that night. It appeared to be open straight into the night sky. Julius caught me staring and explained, "Aldan enchanted it for the evening. Beautiful, isn't it?"

"Yes."

I smiled, unable to take my eyes from the many twinkling stars above us. Julius held me tighter as he flew closer so that I could get a better look at the magically enhanced ceiling. He never even lost time with the music. Talk about grace.

"You're light on your feet," I teased.

"Did you wear any underwear?" He winked.

"Yes, thankfully," I laughed. "Otherwise, I'm sure people would be pointing and laughing by now."

He laughed, and I was reminded painfully it was my fault I hadn't heard that laugh in such a long time. The music became slow once more and he held me closer as he whispered something about not wanting me to fall. Truthfully, I had no fear of falling. I knew Julius would be loathed to let me go, even if we were on solid ground.

The Dread Moon
by Tracey H. Kitts

"How has my fallen angel been doing?" I asked softly, as I rested my face against his shoulder. The gentle swish of his wings was soothing and I sighed contently, gazing once more at the stars above. I tried to ignore how good he looked, but couldn't help noticing all the same. Julius wore a long black robe, almost the same style as the wizards wore, but it opened in front more like a jacket, and in back to accommodate his wings. His chest was bare beneath the dark robe as was the fashion among the Icarum men.

"I'm alright," he answered slowly. "How are you?" He paused and when I didn't answer he said, "I saw that little scene out front. Are you alright?"

"I'm fine," I sighed, burying my face against his shoulder once again, mostly to avoid eye contact. "That 'scene' was a long time overdue."

"Are you seeing someone?" he asked.

"You see that man talking to my father, the one who probably doesn't look happy about me dancing with you?" I smirked.

"Your seeing Alfred?" He looked skeptical.

"Yes."

"For how long?"

"About five months now."

"But—"

"I'm happy, Julius."

"Admit it, you just don't want feathers in your bed." His tone was light, but his eyes looked hurt.

"You know that's not true. When we dated before ... it was just too soon."

"After Peter, I know," he said softly.

Peter had been my first love, and the son of one of my father's deceased colleagues. We were dating when I was attacked, and I'd told him everything. He had been the first person to call me a monster. Part of me had never recovered.

"And now," I whispered as I stroked the side of his lovely face, "it's just too late."

"I understand," he sighed. "You know, I'll never get over you?" he teased.

"That's alright, you've never gotten over yourself either."

We laughed and reminisced about old times before I said, "I recognized the members of the council, but who was that younger wizard out front?"

Julius laughed, "The one in the horrible orange robes? That's Aldan's nephew."

"But for only seven to be born every century, what are the odds of having two in the same family at the same time?"

"It's rare to say the least, but apparently Eric is a bit of an embarrassment." Julius giggled and it made dimples in his cheeks.

"Absolutely pathetic." I shook my head.

"Yes, he is actually. He doesn't seem to take life seriously. Who knows if he has any real talent or not?"

"I was referring to how good you still look," I said, smiling.

"What did you expect, bald spots?" He fluttered his wings slightly and I laughed as we began to float back to the dance floor below.

Unfortunately, Alfred didn't dance. I saw that he was still talking to my father, so I made my way again toward the

entrance hall after saying a brief farewell to Julius. I walked over to the table of refreshments and poured myself a glass of punch. I found Aldan's nephew still lurking around, but this time he was staring at the mural covering the ceiling. I walked over to him.

"Eric, isn't it?"

"Yes," he said, but didn't look at me.

"Make it strong," I said, holding out my punch.

He smiled at me appreciatively, and flicked his wrist over my glass. "Enjoy." He winked and went back to looking at the ceiling. After a moment, I figured I didn't have anything else to do, so I looked with him.

"You know, you're only the second wizard I've ever met?" I said conversationally.

"Really? You poor thing, only your second wizard and it had to be me." He turned to me then and smiled. "Well, at least it's not your first time."

I laughed and nearly spilled my punch.

"Lilith Mercury, isn't it?"

"Yes." I extended my hand in greeting.

I noticed then that Eric Medwin wasn't completely unattractive. He wasn't exactly handsome, but he had charisma. His bright red hair clashed horribly with the orange of his robes, but he seemed to be enjoying the fact that he stood out.

"A pleasure to meet a fellow redhead," he said with a wink. "You know you should be careful?"

"Of what?"

"He has a thing for redheads."

I was confused. "Who?"

Eric looked back up to the painting and a chill ran through me. What was it about those eyes? Then I had a feeling, I almost knew the answer. "How could you possibly—?"

"Know that? I have no idea," he replied blandly, as if he hadn't said anything strange at all. Whoever thought Eric Medwin did not have talent hadn't paid close attention. But before I could question him further, Alfred walked up followed by Aldan.

"Ready to be gone are you?" He smiled at us both.

"Yes," I answered, catching Alfred's eye. "Actually, I've got a headache."

"I could fix that," Aldan offered. "Or, is it just an excuse?"

When I didn't answer he laughed and put an arm around me, "Oh well, I won't tell anyone. Let's all be off then, shall we?"

I looked back at Alfred and found him following with a smile, apparently enjoying the show. I wasn't exactly sure how to react to Aldan's instant liking. Truthfully, I found myself enjoying his company as well. Eric was a bit strange, but so was I. I liked him too. On our way out the door Aldan commented, "I find there is nothing more irritating than having to attend events like this, except perhaps traveling by transporter."

Aldan continued to talk all the way down the street and back into the building which housed the transporter we would use to get home. Alfred and I stepped into the circle of tiles first. I waved goodbye to Aldan and his nephew when he suddenly remarked, "Tell Mathias I said hello, won't you?"

The Dread Moon
by Tracey H. Kitts

I didn't have time to respond. The next thing I knew, I was being frozen again from the inside out. Suddenly, I was back in Alfred's lab, where I promptly tripped and fell to the floor.

"Damn these things," I cursed the transporter, and snatched off my heels.

"Are you alright?" Alfred reached out a hand to help me.

I handed him my shoes and scrambled awkwardly to my feet. "I'm fine."

On our way back up the long staircase into the house, we talked about how the night had gone. If I hadn't been so angry when I'd fallen, I would have remembered how damn cold those stone steps are. Instead I suffered in silence. If I mentioned my feet were freezing, it would give Alfred an excuse to tease me. It was only lunch time back on Earth, and the sunlight outside seemed odd in comparison to Terra's deep purple night sky. I told him about my conversation with Aldan, and how strange but likable I had found him.

"I wouldn't worry about it. It's good that he likes you. He's always liked Jacob, and that's worked out well for him," Alfred said.

I decided to drop the subject, since it was his nephew who had truly concerned me. I didn't tell Alfred about our conversation in the entrance hall, but it was definitely on my mind. Eric wasn't really referring to the painting, was he?

Alfred stopped to check our messages, and I went upstairs to change. A bruise was already forming on my knee where I fell in the lab. I bruise easily and have a tendency to bump into things. Lucky for me I heal at almost werewolf speed.

Otherwise, I'd look like someone had abused me most of the time.

I had just hung the dress back in my closet when Alfred walked in. His shirt was unbuttoned, and the tie was long gone. He looked wonderfully tousled, and I had a sudden desire to snatch off his belt.

"I saw you dancing with Blight," he said softly.

"And?"

"And I didn't like it." He walked forward and placed his hand on the nape of my neck. Alfred looked dangerous, and it turned me on. I knew him well enough to recognize his jealousy, and to know I wasn't in danger of anything but maybe listening to him bitch. His fingers tightened at the base of my neck and I moaned.

He held me close then, and I felt something in his pocket. Alfred smiled down at me and I knelt in front of him, not bothering to step back so that our bodies brushed together on my way down. I started at his ankles and ran my hands up his legs and over his inner thighs as I stood back up. It was all I could do to keep from ripping his clothes off. Fuck pretense. I had never been good at foreplay. But guys seemed a little put off when you actually *could* rip their clothes off.

"What are you doing?" he asked as a lazy smile spread across his face.

"Looking for any concealed weapons." I said the word "weapons" just as I moved my hand over the front of his pants. "Is that aspirin in your pocket, or are you just glad to

see me?" I removed the bottle from his pocket and rattled it at him.

"Just in case," he said.

I walked over to my writing desk and sat the bottle down. "I don't have a headache," I said.

I reached out to him and took Alfred by the hand. I led him over to the chair in front of the desk, pushed him down, and opened his already unbuttoned shirt. As I leaned over him, I began to kiss the exposed skin of his chest on my way toward his belt buckle. I leaned back onto the balls of my feet and pulled him toward me with a hand on the back of each knee, causing him to slump down in the chair. I let my eyes tell him all the things that were on my mind.

"Don't think I'm not still jealous," he commented with a sort of half smile.

"You can be jealous all you want," I purred, as I began to unbuckle his belt.

I unzipped his pants and ran my hands along the curve of his hips, exposing the part of him I was most interested in at the moment. Without warning, I took him with my mouth. Much to my satisfaction, Alfred seemed to forget any other complaints he might have had. I looked up a few moments later and knew that my voice would be filled with the desire I felt.

"Take me," I whispered.

My command was instantly obeyed as Alfred snatched me from the floor and practically flung me onto the bed. I gasped with excitement as I fell onto the crimson sheets. Alfred ripped the black lace panties from my body and took me. I

The Dread Moon
by Tracey H. Kitts

cried out as he entered me, causing my breath to catch. I moaned and wrapped myself around him as I tore the shirt from his body. It got caught around one wrist and he snatched it off with a frustrated growl as he scooped his hands underneath my back, lifting me against him, almost in a sitting position. His hands grasped me from behind, lifting me more fully onto him, and I cried out as I climaxed. I clung to Alfred as a warm rush of power flowed from me and into him. We fell back onto the bed, both of us breathing hard.

"Should I be jealous more often?" he panted.

I laughed softly as I slid from the bed and walked to the shower. The bruise on my knee was already healed.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Four

When another of my injuries healed so quickly, it reminded me I had forgotten to ask Mathias about the last time. A part of my great, great grandfather's consciousness still existed somewhere in the back of my mind, and I was able to contact him through meditation. He had passed a piece of his spirit to me along with his powers. After a quick shower, I decided it was time we had a chat while Alfred napped. Since he'd been up longer than I had, Alfred was out cold by the time I took Mathias' journal from the shelf and padded barefoot downstairs.

I went into the kitchen and unplugged the phone. I also checked to be sure the doors were locked, so I would have no interruptions. I took the gold chenille throw from the back of the crimson sofa and spread it on the floor in front of the fireplace. Here I also placed a pillow and lay down facing the ceiling, palms up, legs slightly apart. This is known in yoga as corpse pose, and I lay there for several moments and just breathed.

Once more the stone staircase appeared before me, so much like the one which lead to my dungeon, and Alfred's lab. I ascended these steps gradually through a flow of color, one to represent each chakra of the body. At last, I reached the door to the place in my mind where I could escape and recover. The door was silver and ornately carved with intricate vines and leaves. It looked much like the door to my dungeon. Beside this door was an elaborate silver box. It was

here that I must place all of my worries if I ever expected to enter.

I opened the lid and saw the universe, somehow contained within the small space. Immediately, an image of Marco appeared, like a snapshot in my hand. His deep chocolate brown eyes stared back at me as if the image were alive. I placed it in the box. Other things began to come to mind. Another snapshot went into the box, this one of the mural that adorned the ceiling back at headquarters. And then a closer shot of those piercing emerald eyes. After several minutes like this, a key appeared in the lock, and I stepped inside.

The room, as always, was equipped with whatever I had need of, and at the moment, I needed to talk to Mathias.

His voice was suddenly in my mind, *"What troubles you?"*

"Why are my injuries healing so fast?"

"Have you not recovered faster since your attack years ago?"

"Yes, but this is different." I told him what had happened a few months ago when several deep puncture wounds on my arm had healed almost instantly after Alfred and I had had sex.

"And during this encounter, did you use the voice of seduction?"

"Yes, I did." My heart was already beating faster in reaction to what I was afraid he was going to say. Mathias proceeded to describe the feeling that had washed over me during orgasm, and flowed into Alfred.

Then, without warning he said, *"The voice is a form of vampirism."*

"What?"

"Have you ever heard of an incubus, or succubus?"

"Yes. They feed off the desires of their victims," I said quietly. My chest hurt and I felt like I couldn't breathe. "So, I ... *fed* off of Alfred? I used him to heal my injuries?" I was horrified.

"Not him, his desire. It is a rare ability to say the least. However, I assure you, you did not steal his strength nor in any way compromise him."

"Didn't in any way compromise him? How can you say that? I *fed* off of his desire. Is there any way to *not* do this, I mean, can I control it?"

"Of course. You do not automatically do this. However, if you have sex while you are injured in any way, you will feed in order to heal yourself. That is simply the way it is. As I said, this is a form of vampirism. A true incubus or succubus, who needs to feed in order to survive, could potentially.... "

"Potentially what?"

"Love someone to death."

"I suppose it's inevitable," I mumbled.

"What is?"

"In one way or another, I'm destined to be a monster." Mathias' deep throaty laugh drifted though my mind.

"You are not a monster, and neither was I."

"How can you be so sure?" I pleaded.

"Because I have met real monsters before. It is not what a person is that makes them a monster, but what they do."

What Mathias said made a lot of sense, and it helped to ease my mind.

"How long has it been since you have rested?" he asked.

"I've slept, just not well."

"You must stop worrying. I am aware of all the things running through your mind, and there is not one that you can change."

I knew better than to ask him to elaborate. I was certain he was referring to all of the things I had placed in the small silver box before entering. Finally he said, *"Will you let me help you?"*

Mathias' help was not always straight forward. I hesitated before asking, "What did you have in mind?"

"Look to the table," he said softly.

Beside the sofa which was always in this room of mine, there was a table with many layers of shelves. On the top shelf sat a blue shimmering bottle labeled "peace of mind." I knew how to use the bottle, but before I did so I relayed a message, "Aldan Medwin says hello."

To my surprise Mathias' laughter echoed through my mind again as he replied, *"I suppose this is his way of rubbing it in."*

"Rubbing what in?"

"I seduced his sister years ago and he told me, in a fit of rage that his revenge would be to thrive when I was little more than a memory."

"He serves on the council in your place."

"And he well deserves it. Aldan was a good man. I would not have wanted someone like me near a female relative of mine either."

I went on to tell Mathias about my conversation with Aldan, and how I had instantly liked him. I also told him of the effect that the briefest touch of my power had had on Aldan.

He laughed again, *"Then that explains it, he has forgiven me."*

"How can you be sure?"

"Because he now knows what his sister was up against, and for him to speak to me again, even through a passed along message, says he now understands that. Trust me, I knew him for two hundred years before he finally stopped speaking to me."

I decided to take his word about Aldan. There was another question I was dying to ask. "Have you ever known an incubus? A real one?"

"Yes." He grew uncharacteristically quiet after this reply. I waited for more of an explanation, but none came.

"Mathias? Please, tell me about him."

"I offered him an alternative to what he had become. I thought I could help him."

"Did you help him?" I asked hesitantly.

"To become more dangerous, yes."

Mathias was obviously upset over this past incident, so I didn't push the issue further. I waited silently for him to change the subject. A few minutes later, he said, *"You need some rest."*

The Dread Moon
by Tracey H. Kitts

I agreed. I took the shimmering blue bottle and placed a drop of its milky contents onto my finger. Next, I applied this drop to my forehead between my eyebrows, and slightly up. I stretched out across the sofa and covered myself in a blanket that looked to be made of thousands of tiny leaves. It was the best sleep I had had in months.

* * * *

Over the next few days, I did my best to not be bothered by what Mathias had told me. However, my very best efforts could not distract me. It was nearly a week later when a better distraction than I could have created on my own called me out of the blue. Alfred was in town, and I was just stepping out of the shower when the phone rang that morning.

"Hello."

"Lilith Mercury?"

"Yes."

"This is Alek Ambrose, I'm the wizard who—"

"I know who you are," I interrupted, "but why are you calling me?"

Alek Ambrose was the wizard originally offered the council seat vacated by Mathias Alexander forty years ago. When he was only twenty years old, Ambrose had defeated a goblin army conjured by the dark wizard Tavarius Maeryn. However, he turned down the appointment, saying he had not defeated Maeryn in order to obtain the seat, he had simply done the right thing.

"I felt that I should," he said simply, "and I learned a long time ago to take my feelings seriously." He had a sexy hypnotic voice, smooth as silk, and welcoming as a warm fire on a cold night. "Perhaps, if you tell me a little about yourself, we might both be enlightened as to why I called."

"How do I know you're who you say you are?"

The question had barely left my lips when I felt his power break over me. A threat, a hint, a promise of what he was capable of.

"What would you like to know?" I gasped.

Over the course of the next forty minutes or so, I found myself opening up to a complete stranger about my private life. I was able to talk to Alek as if he were Kat. I felt like I had known him for years. But it wasn't just me opening up. I was eager to know where Alek Ambrose had been for the past forty years. To my surprise, he told me. Alek was calling from England where he had lived for the past forty years in hiding. Well, not exactly hiding, but no one had really considered he would be writing and directing plays in London. At least that explained the accent. He didn't possess the magical voice of seduction; Alek just had a sexy voice. I could have listened to him for hours.

"So, you've been in theatre for forty years?" I asked.

"Precisely." Alek had a way of enunciating his words where every syllable was clearly heard. His voice, though sexy, was also powerful. It was a commanding voice, and even though he was not harsh with me, I felt compelled to obey.

"You've never gone back to Terra in all these years? Even once?"

The Dread Moon
by Tracey H. Kitts

"Once," he admitted. Then Alek seemed to slip into a pleasant dream as he retold what happened in the moments before he returned to Earth. "Are you familiar with the large pool near the Council Tower?" I was. "As I passed this, I saw a woman. She was lovely, a vision to be sure," he sighed. "I watched while she stripped naked and went for a swim under the moonlight."

My heart was hammering violently in my chest. Surely, I wasn't the only one to ever skinny dip in the lake by the Council Tower?

"Why didn't you speak to her, or do you just like to watch?"

I'm not sure what made me say it, but his response answered the question I had not asked. "Because she was there with one of the Icarum. As a matter of fact, he appeared to be sketching her portrait while she swam. So, after a moment's fascination, I left."

"It was me," I almost whispered.

"And what did the Icarum gentleman do to deserve a naked picture of you?" he asked softly.

"I'm afraid I can't tell you that."

"Blackmailed you did he?"

"What makes you jump to that?" I laughed nervously.

He paused, and just when I thought he wasn't going to answer he said, "The way you just laughed at it."

"What are you, a mind reader?"

"No. I'm a person reader."

The Dread Moon
by Tracey H. Kitts

"And what did you read from watching my midnight swim? Or were you just hoping to get a good flash?" I couldn't resist asking.

"You are certainly beautiful," he began slowly. "However, as I watched you sit on a large rock under the stars, something interested me that had nothing to do with your breasts."

"And what would that be? My ass?"

"No. You were sitting on that." His sarcasm made me smile. "What I saw was a woman who is comfortable in her own skin ... and that is very appealing to me."

"Damn," I sighed. "You're good."

"Well, I've had practice."

"Did you practice this conversation?"

"No. I actually called having no idea what I was going to say."

"What made you think I wouldn't hang up on you?"

"I hoped that you would give me a chance to explain," he laughed. "Or, at least enjoy a good obscene phone call."

"Well, it isn't obscene yet. There's been the vague mention of my ass, but other than that...."

"Would you like it to be?" he inquired softly.

I paused, not sure how to respond.

"I'm only teasing, darling. Have no fear that I shall cross the seas to molest you. It's simply my personality." I could hear the smile in his voice, and having a flirtatious personality myself, I could relate. If that's how he wanted to play it, I wasn't about to be outdone.

"So, is this where you were planning to offer to show me your magic wand?" I laughed. "Or don't you guys need any sort of *stick* to perform magic?"

He laughed, and it was wicked. "Darling, I assure you my *stick* isn't the only thing that's magic."

"Really?" I said, as if I wasn't buying it.

"You give me a few hours, a blindfold, and some leather straps, and I'll show you *magic*," he practically purred into the phone.

I shivered. "Mmm, I'm all aquiver," I said, still sarcastic.

"What's that noise? I keep hearing something," he said.

"I'm drying my hair with a towel."

"You-mean-to-tell-me-that-you've-been-wet-and-naked-through-this-entire-conversation." It wasn't a question.

"Yeah, that's right."

"Why didn't you say so?" He sounded deprived.

"You didn't ask."

I then informed him that as much as I had enjoyed our conversation, I was getting cold. "I should go," I added.

"So, you've enjoyed talking to me, have you?" He paused. "Why have you enjoyed talking to me?"

I asked him, "Have you ever heard the expression that if God had a human voice, he would sound like Aretha Franklin?" He had. "Well, if the devil had a voice, he would sound like you."

He laughed, a wicked and evil rumble that did things to me a stranger's voice shouldn't have.

"I should be wet and naked again about six o'clock tomorrow," I volunteered.

The Dread Moon
by Tracey H. Kitts

"Until then," he replied, and the line went dead.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Five

Over the next two weeks I became almost closer to Alek than I was to Kat. Our flirting remained relatively innocent, and neither one of us tried to make it anything more. I told him about Alfred. Not because he'd asked, but because it was the right thing to do. I was enjoying our newfound friendship, but I wanted him to be clear, it was *a friendship*. Neither one of us had a clue yet as to why he had felt led to call me, and we hadn't discussed it since that first day. One oddity I noticed about Alek was that he never said hello or goodbye. When I asked him about this he told me he never put any thought into why he didn't say hello. But goodbye was the last thing he said to his father before he was killed in an accident. Alek was eight. I was contemplating the tragedy of this when someone rung my doorbell.

No one I knew ever rung my doorbell. I had a large silver door knocker in the shape of a lion's head with a ring hanging from its mouth. It was one way of telling who or what might be on the other side of the door. Most people liked the door knocker. I looked out the window on my way downstairs, dusk had just fallen over the landscape, and I was alone. Alfred had gone to visit my father for a few hours. The only person who had rung my doorbell recently was Marco. Unconsciously my heart began to flutter at the thought of him standing on my front porch.

However, it was not Marco who awaited me. Upon opening the door I saw a tall dark skinned woman. Her tan went well

with her almost ebony hair and heavy lidded eyes. She wore a long flowing skirt of many colored silks, and a soft lavender blouse. She looked like a gypsy.

"Lilith Mercury?" she asked with a strong Romanian accent.
"Yes."

"My name is Annabel, may I speak with you?"

"Yes ... come in." I wasn't sure what else to say.

I led Annabel into the kitchen where she refused any kind of drink, but took a seat at the table.

"Thank you, Ms. Mercury, for allowing me into your home."

I put some water to boil on the stove, having had a sudden craving for hot chocolate. Could it have been thinking about Marco that gave me the urge for chocolate? Possibly.

"What can I do for you, Annabel?"

"You will please forgive me if this is rude, but I will get to the point," she made it a question and seemed to pause for my approval. I nodded. "I am a vampire," she blurted out, "and I quite understand if you wish to revoke your invitation without hearing what I have to say."

On the contrary, I was intrigued, especially after what I had learned recently about myself. I was definitely in no position to judge. I put the pack of cocoa I'd been holding on the table and took a seat opposite Annabel. "Please, go on."

She seemed relieved. "I am here on behalf of the Vampire Council."

I hadn't know a Vampire Council existed but, "Alright."

"Surely you must know of the recent changes in regards to the rights of the wolves. It is our desire to obtain the same recognition."

"I can sympathize with your situation, but how does that involve me?"

"It has come to the attention of the council that you are not entirely human."

"You mean they've been spying on me, but go on."

"We felt that you might be more understanding due to this fact, and you are also known as the best in your field."

"What is it exactly you want me to do?"

She toyed absently with the fringe of her skirt and for a moment would not look at me. "The original has been missing for some time."

"The original what? Vampire?"

"Yes. We believe if he were to speak on our behalf before The Wizard Council, like the alpha werewolf did for his people...."

"Then you could be granted the same privileges."

"Yes."

The vampire population had kept themselves remarkably quiet over the years, not living in the open nearly as much as werewolves. I knew of their existence, but I'd never sat at my kitchen table and had a polite conversation with one before. They handled their own business, took night jobs where available, and no one was the wiser. In short, they didn't cause a problem. Nobody knew exactly where vampires had come from, or how vampirism was first started. It just sort of happened somewhere along the way. To my knowledge, it hadn't been consciously spread like lycanthropy. I understood where Annabel was coming from, but this seemed way out of my area of expertise.

"You know, this isn't exactly what I do?"

She mentioned an obscene amount of money, but price was not my concern.

"I realize that," she began. "But you would have a better chance than any of us at finding him."

"How do you figure?"

"He knows when we are near, he can sense us and has avoided us for years."

"I wouldn't even know where to begin...."

"Where you find werewolves, you will find him. He prefers the taste of their blood."

The kettle started to whistle and I jumped. I took the pack of cocoa with me to the counter and mixed my chocolate while I considered what she was saying.

"Suppose I was to consider this ... how would I know when I've found him?"

For the first time Annabel smiled, and if it was possible with skin as dark as hers, she blushed. "There is no mistaking him. You will know him," she said confidently. Annabel rose to her feet and produced a piece of paper seemingly out of thin air. "I can be reached at this number. Our time is your time. As long as we have searched, we are in no hurry. However, your discretion is of course appreciated."

"Of course." I took the number and saw Annabel to the door where she thanked me again.

My discretion, did that mean I couldn't tell Alfred? I had not told him what Mathias said about the voice being a form of vampirism for fear of what he might think of me. How could I tell him this without explaining my interest?

The Dread Moon
by Tracey H. Kitts

* * * *

A few hours later I was trying to make the decision I'd made sound like a good one. "I thought it was the best thing to do in the interest of equality."

Alfred just stared at me blankly so I went on, "The council had to know something like this might come up from the decision they made. So, it should come as no surprise."

"What about everyday people? You think they enjoyed hearing that werewolves are real?" he spoke finally.

"Probably not, but after a shock like that, what are a few vampires?"

Alfred got very quiet. He was quiet for so long I was certain I did not want to hear his answer.

"You know I love you, Lilith," he said quietly. "I'll keep my mouth shut about this, but don't ask me to help."

"I wasn't going to," I said hotly. "I just don't think it's right to help out one group and then treat another like they're less than human."

"That's because they're *not* human, Lilith." His voice was cold and I took offense.

"Do you think *I'm* human? If so, then why not them?"

He didn't immediately respond, and that stung worse than an insult. "You *don't* think of me as human, do you?"

"Of course I do ... but you're different."

"Wrong answer, Alfred, wrong answer," I said softly.

That night I went to bed alone for the first time in six months. I was still awake at midnight, reading a collection of the works of Edgar Allan Poe when I heard a soft tapping

The Dread Moon
by Tracey H. Kitts

noise against my balcony window. I didn't hesitate to open the French doors. Since Kat had thrown rocks at my window before, it was her I expected to see.

I opened the doors and something smacked me hard between the eyes.

"Shit, I'm sorry, Red," a familiar deep voice said in hushed tones.

I looked up and found Marco Barak perched on a tree limb directly in front of my balcony. I put a hand to my aching forehead and clenched my eyes tight against the pain. I heard Marco leap from the limb onto the balcony, and before I could open my eyes, he was removing my hand from the injury. It had been almost three months since I'd seen Marco, and when I opened my eyes my anger began to fade.

Marco Barak looked better in jeans than anyone had a right to. The pair he was wearing that night only made it more difficult to be in the presence of one of the sexiest men I'd ever seen. "I'm so sorry," he whispered as if he were comforting a small child. I felt the soft cotton of his thin white t-shirt pressed against my face, and underneath it, the warm skin of the alpha werewolf I'd been dreaming about. He pressed a kiss to my forehead, and it actually felt better.

"I'll live," I said as I breathed deeply of his wonderful scent. Marco always smelled better near the full moon. I knew it was werewolf pheromones, but I didn't care. I loved the way he smelled, and I breathed him in. "It's late, Marco."

He pulled back, giving me the opportunity to look up at his handsome face. He had let his hair grow a little longer, and it

looked good on him. Strands of dark chestnut hair hung over his eyes as he smiled down at me. "I've missed you, Red."

I had missed his voice. Marco had one of those wonderfully rough, deep voices. It was the sort of voice someone usually had from too many cigarettes and too much whiskey, but it was just his natural voice. I knew Marco would never have reacted the way Alfred had earlier, and with a pang of guilt, I looked away from the emotion in his eyes.

"What's wrong?" he asked softly.

"Am I that transparent?"

"No. I'm just that observant." He looked shrewdly toward the open balcony doors, then back to me. "You had a fight?"

"Let's just say Alfred didn't want anything other than human in his bed."

"Did he say that to you?" Marco growled menacingly.

"No, he didn't have to. Look, I really shouldn't be telling you my problems."

Marco stepped back from me and seated himself in one of the two small chairs near a round wrought iron table which sat on the balcony. "I asked," he said, motioning for me to take the other seat. "Indulge me."

I told Marco everything that had happened lately, and with him I didn't leave anything out. I didn't feel the need. Marco had never judged me.

"See, you needed to tell me this," he said as he pointed a finger at me. "This guy likes werewolf blood. Considering the fact that I'm opening my new club next week, this is need to know information. After all, a lot of my pack is sure to be there."

The Dread Moon
by Tracey H. Kitts

"I've heard it advertised, The Dread Moon, right?"

"That's right," he answered with a smile, "the first commercially advertised werewolf club. Of course, it's open to the public. It's the one place where people know they can go to mingle the animals." He winked.

"Where did you get the name?"

"It has a sort of reggae/Jamaican flavor to it," he said, talking with his hands. "Actually, that's the reason for my late visit. The grand opening is next weekend. It will be televised and ... I was hoping you wouldn't mind being seen in public with me."

"That's sweet," I said, smiling, "but haven't you heard? I'm to be the head of H.A.V.O.C. All other division leaders will answer to me. It's already been in the news all over Terra. They've announced it on the radio here, and before I went to bed tonight I saw my face plastered on the ten o'clock news."

"Yes, I saw it," he snickered.

"It's not funny! I just ran into town for some fertilizer for my roses."

"Red, you were wearing a shirt that said 'pour some sugar on me.' What did you expect?"

"Well, that was only one day after the announcement. I honestly didn't think I'd have to worry about paparazzi at the nursery."

He laughed again, and the deep rumble of his voice floated across my skin. "Well, at the very least it will be some good publicity for H.A.V.O.C., *and* it will show me, leader of the pack, as an upright law abiding citizen."

The Dread Moon
by Tracey H. Kitts

"And it will make it look like the only reason I'm heading up the division is because I'm sleeping with you."

He grew very serious then. "But you're not sleeping with me, Red."

I hadn't meant to bring up a painful subject. "No," I said, "but it will certainly look that way." I sighed. "Things aren't over between Alfred and me, we just had a ... disagreement."

"A disagreement? With a man who doesn't even think of you as human? Red, if it's not over now, it soon will be."

I wanted to cry, but I didn't want to do it in front of Marco. He slid out of his chair and knelt before me, resting his head in my lap. After several minutes of me silently stroking his hair Marco suggested, "Tell him it's political. It is really."

"It may be political, but politics didn't bring you to my balcony tonight."

He looked up at me then, and before he could say words I was afraid of hearing, I said, "I'll go. I'll think of something."

Whatever he was going to say seemed to be forgotten. "Excellent. I'll pick you up at nine Friday." Marco stood up and walked toward the rail. "I suppose ... I should leave."

"I suppose you should," I agreed. But I didn't feel like making him go. Instead I walked to the balcony doors and just looked at him, reclining against the railing. Marco moved toward me like a true animal of prey. When he was only inches away he reached up and took hold of the door frame.

Leaning in just short of contact he whispered, "Let me in, Red."

"I'm sorry, Marco. Not tonight."

He kissed my forehead again, and I enjoyed watching him walk back to the railing. A brief glance over his shoulder, and he was gone. With all that was already on my mind, there was no way I would be sleeping any time soon. So, I called Alek. He was the first person that came to mind, and I went with that instinct.

"It's late," his smooth sexy voice answered.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have—"

"Not at all. That wasn't a complaint. Now what is it that has you calling me in the middle of the night?"

While I started telling Alek what had happened, I made my way downstairs to take a sleeping pill or two. I figured I'd talk to him until they took effect. We'd talked so much over the past few weeks about so many things, he practically knew my life's history, and I his. The only thing I hadn't told Alek about was Mathias. I was never sure how safe it was to talk about wizards to other wizards. They always seemed to have a history, and I didn't really want to know that my ancestor had ruined the lives of one of his relatives as well.

"You obviously have some unresolved feelings toward him," he said about Marco. "I say go. After all, it is a good political move, in my opinion. Perhaps, it will make up for the 'sugar,'" he laughed.

"I should have left that part out."

"While we're on the subject of your love life there's something I've been thinking about, if I may ask?"

"Go ahead."

"You've shared with me the unfortunate circumstances of your attack, and you say that your scars remain?"

"That's right."

"And you are bothered by these scars. They remind you that you're not who you used to be."

"Thanks for the psychoanalysis."

"Let me finish. I wondered how it is that at seventeen, so soon after your attack, you ended up swimming naked with one of the Icarum."

I laughed, "Is that all? Well, it so happens that only a few months before Julius Blight, that's the naked Icarum—"

"I gathered that much—"

"—was attacked by a couple of werewolves."

"And? What happened to him?"

"They tried to tear his wings off ... So you see, we had something in common. Neither one of us was exactly what we used to be, and we became close while I helped him to recover. Fortunately for Julius, all Icarum have a natural immunity to the virus. So, the only thing that changed for him was the scars."

"This is before you came back after training?"

"Yes, I stayed on Terra for a year and a half. I was the one who found Julius."

"You rescued him? What of the wolves?"

"I slaughtered them. Julius was my friend ... I went berserk ... It frightened me. I'd never reacted to anything like that before. But, the way I handled the situation led my father to believe I was ready to hunt on my own. So, a few months later he assigned me to Earth and Alfred, and I've been here ever since."

The Dread Moon
by Tracey H. Kitts

We talked a while longer, and the sleeping pills finally began to work.

"Get some rest, darling, you're starting to ramble."

Since he never said goodbye, that was the end of my conversation with Alek, after which I was finally able to get some sleep.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Six

I was relieved when Alfred informed me over breakfast the next day that he would be leaving Friday morning and wouldn't return until Sunday. Being my partner wasn't the only job Alfred had with The Hunters. He helped my dad with all sorts of what I called "spying efforts," among other things. This meant I didn't have to tell him about Marco, because he wouldn't be around to know. Keeping this from him should have bothered me more. I wondered what my relief said about me, but tried not to dwell on it. After all, I was still angry with Alfred and that could have something to do with it.

We spoke very little over the next couple of days, and I forced myself to pretend I didn't mind sleeping alone. It was Friday morning when he finally approached me in the kitchen.

"Are you planning to shut me out forever?" he asked softly.

"I'm sorry, I didn't know you spoke to anyone who wasn't completely human," I said stiffly. I was still angry about what he had said a few nights ago. Though truthfully, it was what he *didn't* say that hurt the most.

"Lilith, I'm sorry. That's not what I meant to say."

"But it's what you said, Alfred. You don't think of me as human."

"Are you dumping me?"

"No ... but this isn't something I can get over in a few days." I looked him in the eye and let every bit of the pain I felt be seen. "You hurt me, Alfred. Don't do it again."

The Dread Moon
by Tracey H. Kitts

He walked over to where I sat and knelt down in front of me, turning my chair slightly so I faced him. "I'm really sorry," he said, taking my hand in his. "If I could take it back, I would." He sighed, "It's really not what I meant to say." And through his touch I knew what he said was true.

"What did you mean to say?"

"I meant to say that I don't think of you as human, but I don't think of you as anything less."

I started to say something, but he stopped me. "Lilith, I've seen what vampires can do. You're not like that. I wasn't trying to insult you. I appreciate that you want everyone to be equal, but the fact of the matter is they are not the same as us." He paused. "Please, let me try again. You've known me long enough to know I'm set in my ways. You have to understand that back in the days we didn't try to treat everyone as equals ... we just..."

"Killed everyone, I know." What Alfred said made a lot of sense, but I was still hurt. "It's still gonna take me a while," I said softly.

"I never meant to hurt you," he said.

I leaned forward and kissed him softly. "I know."

After Alfred left I felt like crying. Instead, I called Kat and told her what had happened.

"And you called Alek instead of me?" she yelled.

"Look, I knew you had to open the shop early, so I didn't want to wake you," I explained.

Kathryn Roberts ran a decorating shop in town, soon to expand next door into a coffee shop once she got some more help.

"Admit it, you just like the sound of his voice."

"Yeah, I do."

"You want me to fake a British accent?" she laughed.

"That won't be necessary," I assured her.

We talked for a few more minutes and Kat agreed to come over and help me find something to wear that night. When I opened the door she hugged me, her dark brunette curls falling across my face.

"I'm so proud of you," she said.

"For what, screwing up my life so thoroughly? Must be entertaining."

"For doing this anyway. Alfred had no right to say what he did. I've known him for years too, and I love Alfred, but that was wrong. He should know by now how you would take a comment like that."

"You would think, but that's not why I agreed to go with Marco tonight."

"Then why are you going?"

I wondered for a minute if I should tell Kat the truth. I told her the political bullshit and then decided to tell the real reason, "Because I couldn't stand the thoughts of him going with anyone else."

To my surprise, Kat got sort of misty eyed and said, "I'm sorry. It's just that you two obviously care for each other," she sobbed.

"Kat, I'm sorry if I—"

"You didn't," she sniffed, regaining some control.

The Dread Moon
by Tracey H. Kitts

"I can't just throw away what I have with Alfred. I've loved him most of my life." I hesitated, "There's something between us, but I'm not in love with Marco."

Kat looked at me like she was about to explain something to a particularly dense child. "The way you look when you talk about him, if that's not love I don't know what is."

Marco had said the event was formal, at least for VIPs in attendance and that included me. After looking through my entire closet, we both decided I should wear the same black dress I had worn to The Hunter's Ball. After all, the same people would not be seeing it. The dress did seem perfect for the press to see me in. It covered my breasts, but revealed enough skin to still be sexy. Kat left just before I started to get ready and said she would try to be there too, since it was a public event. She loved club Red, Marco's other establishment, and was dying to see what he had done with The Dread Moon.

For the first time in years, I was ready early. I sat in one of the bay windows downstairs and watched storm clouds gather over what was only hours before a clear night sky. The wind whipped the tree tops mercilessly, and I decided to step onto the porch. I locked the door and took my small evening bag with me. The cold wind tore through my thin dress and I cursed myself for not remembering to look for a matching jacket. It was only the second day of February, but the weather was unseasonably cold. Though I much preferred it to the sweltering summer we had just endured, I still wished I had brought a jacket.

I was just about to go back inside when I saw headlights at the end of the driveway. My heart fluttered uncomfortably in my chest, and my stomach seemed to be doing flips. *"This is not a date,"* I kept telling myself. *"You shouldn't be this excited."* But I was excited. A long black limousine pulled up in front of the house, and had barely come to a stop before Marco stepped outside. No amount of self lecturing could have kept me from getting excited when I looked at him. He was wearing a tuxedo and looking better than rain to a desert. His dark hair hung in layers, the longest of which reached just below chin level and shined underneath the porch light like it had been polished. The top of his shirt was unbuttoned, and a bowtie hung loosely around his neck. Through the open shirt I could see the beginning of the dark hair on his chest that I knew ran in a fine line down his stomach. I had never seen Marco completely naked, but that didn't stop me from remembering what I had seen and imagining what I hadn't.

He walked with a smile to where I stood, shivering on the top step, and removed his coat. I could still feel the warmth of his body as he wrapped the jacket around my shoulders and pulled it closed underneath my chin.

"You look good, Red." He smiled and rubbed my forehead. "I'm glad to see the rock didn't leave a mark."

"It bruised for about a day, but I covered it with my hair." I smirked.

"So, what did you tell him?" he asked about Alfred.

"Nothing, he's not here."

Marco raised an eyebrow at the comment and I elaborated, "He's working with my father for a few days."

The Dread Moon
by Tracey H. Kitts

He placed his arm around me tightly and walked me to the car while he asked, "How is Jacob these days?"

"Fine."

Marco just smiled as if he knew a joke I didn't and helped me into the car.

When he slid in beside me across the backseat, my heart stopped painfully. The Dread Moon was close to the beach, and a good three hours from club Red so they wouldn't be in direct competition. However, the beach was a fifty minute drive from my house, over an hour if there was traffic, and there I sat next to my greatest weakness since chocolate.

"It's alright, Red. I won't let the press get their hooks in you. Once we get there, I'll do the talking," he said, obviously mistaking why I was quiet.

I reached over and placed my hand over his where it rested against his thigh, gently stroking the backs of his knuckles. Even that simple contact was enough to thrill me.

"Don't feel guilty, Red," he whispered. "You haven't done anything wrong."

"It's not what I've done that bothers me," I confessed, "it's what I'd like to do."

"Any time you're ready," he said as he squeezed my hand gently.

I couldn't speak. I wanted Marco, but what about Alfred? What had I done? I loved Alfred. Was being with Marco worth breaking Alfred's heart? Of course not. I couldn't deliberately hurt Alfred. So, there I sat, beside a man who wasn't mine, but I was there because I couldn't stand the thought of him belonging to anyone else. It was killing me.

"Come here." Marco wrapped his arm around me and I rested my head against his shoulder. "Things will work out somehow, Red. Don't worry."

But I was worried. I was afraid that by the time I made up my mind, Marco wouldn't be waiting around for me. *"Then I'll just have to kill his next mate."* The instant the thought crossed my mind it frightened me. Had it really gone that far? Was this the place I had brought myself in resisting so hard? I had killed Marco's last mate, the alpha female of his pack. At the time I was being attacked, I had no idea who she was. Her obvious jealousy had given me some indication, and Marco later confirmed the truth. I had killed his alpha female, making me next in line for the position. Of course, I had not yet accepted Marco's offer. But the more I was near him, it weighed heavily on my mind.

"I'll still be here when you make up your mind."

I looked down and realized I was still holding Marco's hand. He must have heard my thoughts through the contact, because I hadn't thought to block it.

"I'm sorry," I said, and tried to withdraw my hand.

"No," he said, holding me tighter. "It does me good to know you care, Red."

"I never said I cared."

He smiled almost sadly as he looked down at me and asked, "Can you honestly say that you don't?"

The answer was no, I couldn't. But I didn't say that. I didn't say anything at all. I stretched upward and touched lips as warm and soft as I had remembered. Marco pulled me

onto his lap and held me tight, though the kiss remained gentle. "What am I going to do?" I whispered against his lips.

"You don't have to make a decision tonight, Red. Enjoy yourself, try to relax. Things will happen as they were meant to, with or without our consent."

"You sound just like Mathias," I said dejectedly.

"Funny, he's the one who said it to me."

Someone knocked on the dark window which separated us from the front seat. Marco lowered the partition and Luther waved at us in the mirror. "We're almost there, you two break it up," he said, winking at me.

I smiled and slid from Marco's lap, trying not to blush.

"Can you help me with this?" He held up his bowtie.

"Well," I said as I slid back onto his lap in order to get the right angle, "I don't know if I'm the best person to attempt this." I buttoned up his shirt and gave it my best shot. To be honest, I had more difficulty buttoning up his shirt than I did with the bowtie. It just seemed a shame to be putting his clothes *on*.

As we drove up I slid back onto my side of the seat and looked at the waiting swarm of flashing cameras and people. Nausea hit me like a brick. "Holy shit." My heart fluttered again in a much more unpleasant sort of way.

Marco squeezed my hand and I felt my pulse begin to come under control. His presence soothed me almost like a drug. "Just hold onto me," he said. He had shared with me before that my touch did the same for him. Something told me as much as we both hated having to deal with the press, we'd be clinging to each other. As we slowed down, a soft rain

The Dread Moon
by Tracey H. Kitts

began to fall and Luther handed us an umbrella from the front seat.

Luther pulled up directly in front of the club. An area was roped off leading straight into the building. Along this rope were several heavily muscled bodyguards who I'm sure were pack members. Good, the press couldn't get too close.

Marco put his hand on the door. "Ready?" he asked.

I nodded, and he opened the door. Marco got out and opened the umbrella before taking my hand again and helping me to stand. I was nearly blinded by the dozens of cameras flashing in my face, almost immediately. While Marco answered a few questions from some reporters to his right, I looked up and saw the sign hanging above the door. "The Dread Moon" was spelled out in large dark blue letters, and beside this hung a crescent moon. I liked it.

"Ms. Mercury, are you dating Marco Barak?" This rather sudden question being directed my way snapped me back to reality. However before I could answer, we were both bombarded with more questions.

"The head of the new H.A.V.O.C. organization dating a werewolf, isn't that against the rules?"

"Mr. Barak, are you in love with a woman who was so recently your sworn enemy?"

"What it's like having sex with a werewolf?"

"Is he an animal in bed?"

"What does this mean for the future of H.A.V.O.C.?"

Marco finally managed to interrupt, "What this means is Lilith Mercury and myself," he began as he paused to smile at

me, "are friends. Before I was turned years ago, we were colleagues."

"So, you've known each other for years?" someone shouted from the crowd.

"That's right."

"Were you involved while she was a werewolf hunter and you were a werewolf?"

He laughed, "First of all, I'm still a werewolf, and we are not involved. To answer your earlier question," he continued before anyone else could interrupt, "What this means for H.A.V.O.C. is that if we can get along with each other, no one else should have a problem."

I had to say, Marco handled himself well, especially since I knew how nervous he was. Standing there, smiling for the cameras, he was the perfect spokesperson for the werewolves. Sexy, rugged, and completely tame. At least, that's what they thought.

We turned for the door again and I pulled him close enough to whisper, "You owe me, big time."

"Is that what they call it these days, 'getting along'?" I knew that obnoxious voice. I turned and saw Lola standing behind the blue velvet rope. "I take it you liked that picture I took?"

"The picture you took?"

Then it dawned on me who had been watching me the last time I went into town. Lola worked at the video store, and was apparently moonlighting with the local piece of crap newspaper. She and I had known each other since high school, and my opinion of her had not improved over the

The Dread Moon
by Tracey H. Kitts

years. I refused to let her embarrass me. "Actually, that's my favorite t-shirt," I replied.

"Do you like it as much as wearing the werewolf's coat?" she asked with a sneer.

"No," I said provocatively. "This is much warmer."

"Lilith!" This voice I recognized also and I was glad to hear it. Kat and Elijah were standing a short distance away behind another section of rope. I ignored whatever remark Lola had been about to make and walked toward them. From the corner of my eye I saw Marco pull one of the bodyguards close and whisper, "Don't let her in," as he looked toward Lola.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Seven

Before I got too close, I could hear Kat and Elijah arguing. Apparently she still wasn't satisfied with his driving. "I did *not* nearly kill her!" Elijah yelled, his deep blue eyes growing darker with anger. Every time they got together, Kat and Elijah fought like siblings.

"You nearly ran her over, Elijah!"

"She was on the sidewalk!" he yelled.

"Do you two want to get into my club?" Marco winked at Kat and she giggled.

He looked at Elijah, and I realized they had never met even though they were at the same party last Halloween. I'm sure Elijah would never recognize the large black werewolf as the handsome man standing beside me.

"Marco, this is Elijah Jasper."

"Of course." He smiled and shook Elijah's hand. But Marco already knew who he was. I'd dated Elijah briefly while Alfred worked on Terra for several months last summer, before Alfred and I started seeing each other. Some of Marco's wolves had seen us in a club together one night and ran back to him with the story. He was a good actor, but I could tell Marco didn't like Elijah.

As a matter of fact, Elijah didn't seem too pleased with the arrangement either. He looked at me, and for a second I thought I saw anger in his eyes before he smiled. He looked good. He was wearing a black suit that made his eyes seem more blue, and his dark blond hair appear almost brown.

The Dread Moon
by Tracey H. Kitts

Elijah was the same height as Kat, though with the heels she wore, Kat was slightly taller. Ever since he'd moved into town a few years ago, I'd thought Elijah Jasper was adorable, even if he was a bit too innocent for my taste. All the same, his blue eyes always made me smile.

"Shall we?" Marco reached in front of them and moved the velvet cord. Other people surged forward, but they were no match for the reflexes of a werewolf. He closed the area off again, and we entered the club together.

The Dread Moon was huge. Club Red was not small, but this was even bigger. An enormous dance floor stood before us, already filled with people. As we moved further into the room, I could see stairs to my left. Here, the dance floor extended four stories up with people dancing and looking down over the rails at the party below. To my right was another staircase that Marco leaned in and told me led to the VIP rooms and his office.

The smooth Jamaican rhythm of the music was almost hypnotic.

"Fuckin' A," Kat said, wiggling her way between us. "You got any hot Jamaicans around here?"

I couldn't help laughing, because a handsome man stepped over almost on cue. He had a creamy chocolate complexion and long dreadlocks. He was Marco's height, though slightly more muscular. He wore dress pants and a vest, but no shirt.

"This is Jeremiah," Marco said. "Jeremiah, this is Lilith Mercury."

The Dread Moon
by Tracey H. Kitts

We shook hands and Marco informed me that Jeremiah would be helping him to run the place since he couldn't always be there.

"Et was my sister dat ya saved las summer," he said. I loved his accent.

I remembered the tall dark woman in the parking lot of The Firestarter. I had rescued her from a gang who'd tried to rape her. Now that he mentioned it, I could see the resemblance. The truth of the matter was, I'd been sent to kill her. But after taking in the scene, I was on her side. I had refused to kill someone for defending herself.

"I moved here after de incident so I could keep an eye on her."

"Wauneta works here now," Marco said, and pointed at the bar across the room. Sure enough, I recognized the bartender as the woman I'd saved. The men talked for a few more minutes while Marco introduced the Jamaican to Kat and Elijah. It was then that a streak of silvery gray hair caught my attention amongst the crowd.

"Will you excuse me for a minute?" I slipped Marco's jacket from my shoulders and followed the streak of gray hair onto the dance floor without waiting for an answer.

"What are you doing here?" I caught Aldan Medwin by the sleeve.

He was wearing a dignified looking suit with a long jacket that could almost be considered a frock coat, in place of the robes he'd worn at the ball. But with the long beard and hair, he looked more like a dressed up hippie.

"My dear." He placed a hand over his heart in alarm but he was smiling. "You startled me," he said.

"Don't act like you weren't watching me just now."

"Alright, I won't. How did it go with Mathias? I take it you passed along my greeting?"

"Yes, I did."

"And I assume he told you what he did?"

"Yes. Actually, there's something I wanted to ask you about that."

We made our way to the bar where I spoke to Wauneta who thanked me again for my help last summer. This made such a good impression on Aldan, he bought me a drink. We sat at the bar while I asked him to explain exactly what had happened with my ancestor and his sister.

"So, Eric isn't...?" I couldn't bring myself to finish the question.

"Mathias' child? Heaven's no." He shuddered. "That's my other sister's son."

"But the red hair?"

"It runs in my family," he pointed out, smiling. "Were I not over five hundred years old, mine would no doubt still glow in the dark," he chuckled and ordered a coke and rum.

"As you've probably already figured out, my sister that Mathias seduced was Aurora, already married by that time to Joshua Mercury. When I realized what had been going on, of course it took me two hundred years to figure out my niece was not aging normally ... Well, I'm sure you can understand why I was so upset?"

"Of course. So, what made you decide to speak to him? Have you really forgiven Mathias?"

He smiled as he replied, "For the first time I was able to understand, if only for a moment, what my sister was up against." He sighed, "I could no longer hold a grudge."

"So, this means that you're my—"

"Great, great uncle, yes. I'm sure you'll learn to live with the shame of it." He winked.

Aldan and I talked for a long time while I watched Marco make his rounds throughout the club, talking to waiters, and speaking several times with Jeremiah. Kat and Elijah were arguing again, apparently they tried to dance and they both wanted to lead.

"I did *not* step on your foot!" Elijah insisted hotly.

"Did so, you've got a lead foot on the dance floor just like you do behind the wheel!" Kat screeched as they walked past us.

"Charming friends." Aldan smiled and his pale gray eyes twinkled.

"They're usually not like this," I told him, unable to stop snickering at the exchange.

"I see you get along pretty well with the local pack leader," he said conversationally, but I wasn't fooled. I didn't respond and he continued, "I can understand what you would see in him. You know Jacob always liked him, before he was turned."

"How long have you known my father?" I asked suddenly. I found it strange that he should know about who my father liked and disliked. It wasn't as if he spoke to everyone about

Marco. For that matter, it wasn't as if my father spoke to everyone, period.

"Why most of his life," he replied with a smile.

"He *knew* you were his uncle?"

"Of course." Aldan shrugged off the question as he finished off his coke and rum.

"Then why didn't anyone ever tell me?"

"You never asked?"

"Well, no. I honestly never considered I might be related to a wizard."

"Well, Jacob, as I'm sure you know is a visionary."

A visionary can see auras around people, and if they're really good, they know what every different shape, color, or design might mean. This didn't surprise me.

"I'd figured as much," I answered.

"So, Jacob wondered how he'd come across this ability. He traced his family history, and found yours truly," he explained, opening his arms wide with the statement.

"What about Mathias?"

"He has no idea about Mathias. You and I remain the only members of the family who know about that." Something in Aldan's voice said he wanted to keep it that way.

"How do you know I haven't told him?"

"Because telling someone you've inherited the power of The Seducer is not something most people would do. I especially couldn't see an attractive young woman telling her father this."

He was right. I didn't plan on sharing the information with anyone unless I had to. I wasn't ashamed of Mathias, I just didn't want everyone to know. It was personal.

Marco walked up then and flashed us both a wolfish grin, "Glad you could make it," he said to Aldan.

"You invited him?"

"Yes." He smiled, giving us both a glimpse of his teeth and his charm.

I didn't know what to think of this news, but before I could respond Marco asked, "Would you like to dance?"

He led me onto the floor, and a slow song began to play. Wasn't that awfully convenient? I looked up at him questioningly.

"We don't just play reggae," he said with a wink.

I was sure he'd told the DJ what to play before he asked me to dance, but I didn't care. I let the slow mellow rhythm flow over me, and rested my head against his chest. While Marco held me close I closed my eyes, and it wasn't too difficult to imagine for a few minutes that he was mine.

Too soon, the moment was over. I was staring up into his smiling chocolate eyes when Luther tapped him on the shoulder. I had known Luther since I was eleven, though we'd lost contact for about nine years, almost ten. During that time, he'd been turned into a werewolf, and I became a Hunter. Life is strange.

"We may have a problem," he said quietly, brushing his long white blond hair back from his face.

"Why, what's going on?"

"Back in one of the VIP rooms ... someone said...." He hesitated.

"Said what, Luther, is there a problem or not?" Marco asked.

Luther leaned in closer and glanced around to be sure no one was paying attention. "Someone said there was a vampire back there."

Marco and I exchanged a look. He took off toward the VIP rooms, and I followed him. Luther trailed behind saying, "It sounded like bullshit to me, but you never know. I mean, are vampires really, you know ... real?"

"You're a werewolf, Luther. Are you really that surprised?" I asked as we quickened our pace.

"You mean they're real?"

"Shh," Marco said over his shoulder, "You'll attract attention."

I understood what he meant, but it seemed stupid to tell Luther not to attract attention. He was six foot two with long blond hair, ice blue eyes, and an amazing collection of muscles. I think telling Luther to not draw attention to himself may have been a moot point.

We made our way to the top floor and walked down the dark hallway toward the very back room. There, Jeremiah seemed to be guarding the door. To my surprise, laughter could be heard inside.

"Is he in there?" Marco asked.

Jeremiah stopped him from entering and looked a little embarrassed. "It's some of my crew in dere."

"Are they high?"

Jeremiah nodded and Marco rolled his eyes. "I've ben keepin' it away from de guests," he said lamely.

Marco made a move for the door again and Jeremiah still stood in the way. "De reason dat I mention it is ... Dey be so high mon, dey don know what dey lookin' at."

Marco seemed to soften, but only slightly. "Don't worry about the weed, just get it out of here. As for your men, they knew better than to do drugs here on opening night." There was a threat in these last words and I knew without being told it did not mean good things for Jeremiah and his crew.

Jeremiah nodded his head gravely and asked, "If it tis a vampire, ya wan me to kill it?"

I answered, "If it's the vampire I'm thinking of, you wouldn't be able to." I walked past them both and opened the door. I wasn't ready for what I found.

The air was thick with smoke. There were six large werewolves sitting around a small table. On the table were various paraphernalia, including a bong. If I stood there long, I'd be high too. However, this was all taken in at a glance. What had really caught my attention was the other man in the room, and once I looked at him he was the only man in the room. There on the floor, lounging against a large black sofa was not only the man I had been hired to find, but the man whose visage graced the high ceilings back at headquarters, and the face that had haunted my dreams since I was sixteen years old.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Eight

"Red, don't touch him."

But Marco's warning was too late.

"It's you," I whispered as I knelt beside my tall, dark stranger. I couldn't believe I hadn't recognized him from the painting. But in my dreams, his face had never been clear. I just always believed that I would know him when I saw him, and I did. Maybe I had to see him in person in order to recognize him. If his face had been clear in my dreams, I would never have mistaken him. No one could forget those eyes.

"Who are you?" I breathed as I wiped a trickle of blood from the corner of his perfect mouth.

"You may call me whatever you wish," he sighed lazily, and his voice was like honey. "In truth, I have been known by many names. Call me whatever you like, it will not change who I am."

My voice came out soft, almost a whisper as I said, "You look like a fallen angel to me." I meant it, he did. A marvelous perfection of masculinity, carved by the hand of God, sent to torment me.

He smiled slightly, almost sadly. "Then we may have something in common, for you look like The Angel of Death to me ... long have I awaited your visit."

"I haven't come to kill you," I said softly.

"I know. They sent you for me?"

"Yes."

"What's been going on here?" Marco asked the men.

"We been havin' a party," one laughed.

"What's he doing here?" He pointed to the man beside me on the floor.

"Well, we take a hit or two, drink a little rum, and let 'im ave a taste," the werewolf answered with a shrug.

"You let yourselves be bitten?" Marco was definitely upset.

"Eeets betta dan sex, mon."

I heard Marco giving orders for Jeremiah to clear his men out of the room before he hurt them. "Lock them in separate rooms. Bring them to my office when the drugs have worn off," he growled.

I looked back to the dark stranger, and stared intently into his emerald green eyes.

"Are you high?" I asked.

"At long last, yes, I am high," he replied slowly.

He smiled again ever so slightly and it thrilled me to my toes. It wasn't that his smile was so lovely. What excited me were the emotions I could sense behind that subtle curl of lips.

"Didn't you say you had a number to contact that vampire woman?" Marco asked me.

I nodded, unable to speak just yet.

"Well, shouldn't you call her?"

The dark man looked to me pleadingly and I replied, "I can't let them take him like this."

"Why the hell not?" he demanded.

"Look at him." I gestured toward the vampire. "He's the original vampire. He's obviously important to them in some

way. Would you want to see someone that you respected like this?"

The man laughed at the word 'respected' and Marco looked even angrier.

"He can't stay here," he growled.

"Then, I'll take him with me." I spoke the words without thinking. There simply was no other option in my mind. He belonged with me.

"You'll ... what? You're going to take him with you? You don't know what he's capable of! What will you do with him? He could be dangerous. As a matter of fact, I'm *sure* he's dangerous, that's probably another reason they wanted him found."

"Then I'll put him in my dungeon, but I'm not throwing him to the wolves like this. No offense," I added quickly.

"You have a dungeon?" For a moment Marco smiled, then he seemed to remember we were supposed to be arguing.

"Let me send Luther with you," he said softly, the anger fading away. "I don't want you alone with him."

"Alright."

Luther, who had been standing at the door the whole time, entered the room and asked, "What's his name anyway?"

"Who knows?" I shrugged, turning back to the man on the floor. "On your feet, Dracula."

He smiled vaguely and said, "For that, I may need some help."

Without thinking I reached out my hand and he seemed surprised. "You trust me so easily?"

"I don't trust you. I'm offering to help you."

"All the same, exposing your wrist to me," he said as he traced his fingers lightly over the exposed skin and I shivered, "is not something many would do."

"Don't touch her," Marco growled, taking a step forward.

"I meant no harm," the vampire answered as he took my hand.

I pulled him to his feet and he swayed, leaning in enough that I could smell the rum on his breath mingled with blood, and the faint trace of expensive cologne. It wasn't entirely unpleasant. Once I managed to steady him I asked Marco, "Is there another way out of the club?"

"I can have someone bring the car around back," Marco said. "That is if you and Luther think you can hold him steady enough to walk out? It would not be good for business to have someone carried out on opening night."

"He doesn't need to be seen," I said. "If I found him this easily...."

"Does it really matter?" Marco asked.

"It might. How do we know he's not in danger from them instead of the other way around?"

"If you could help me with my cloak," Dracula whispered softly against my hair as he leaned on me for support. "I believe it will conceal me well enough."

Luther held him steady while I placed the long black cloak around his shoulders and pulled the hood over his dark hair. He looked like he'd stepped off the pages of an erotic novel. He wore one of those wonderful white shirts with ruffles around wrists which hung over the tops of his knuckles. The front of the shirt had laces between the ruffles, but they were

not tied, leaving the shirt open to reveal a portion of his beautiful body. The hood cast a shadow over half of his face, leaving only his full pink lips visible. But I knew somewhere in the darkness lay those piercing emerald eyes, and it made me shiver.

Luther snapped his fingers in front of my eyes and I blinked.

"You ok?" he asked.

I realized then he was waiting on me to take the vampire downstairs. Marco had gone and apparently the car was waiting on us. How long had I been standing there? I wasn't sure I wanted to know. I let Dracula put his arm around me. Without really considering what I was doing, I reached my hand inside his cloak and around his waist for support. His hand touched my bare shoulder and I wanted more. My mind was filled with visions that were not my own. His face hovered above me as his long dark hair cascaded over my eyes. His eyes burned like emerald fire. His shirt was open, I reached for him. I licked my way up his chest, over his throat. It wasn't enough, it would never be enough. I craved more of him, all of him, and the scent of that wonderful cologne.

I cried out suddenly and clung to his waist to prevent falling in the floor. I hadn't had an orgasm, but I was close.

Luther who had already turned his back on us was instantly beside me, "Are you alright? Did he hurt you?"

"No," I said quickly at the look he gave Dracula. "I'm not in any pain," I gasped.

"I told ya mon eets betta dan sex," yelled a voice from the next room.

"Even better than chocolate," I mumbled.

Only Dracula heard me and I looked up to find him smiling. "I am sorry. There are certain things I cannot control when I am...."

"Smashed?"

"Yes. If you wish, I can avoid touching your skin."

I thought of my sleeveless dress with its open back and replied, "If we did that, *I'd* have to wear the cloak."

"But ... what if it happens again?" he asked, and his voice tickled along the back of my neck.

Luther had turned around again and was already in the hall as I placed my arm around his waist again and answered, "At least wait until we're down the stairs, I don't want to break my neck."

He laughed and the sound flowed through my veins like fire. He was as tall as Luther and Marco so once I was tucked underneath his arm, the cloak covered part of me as well.

Marco was waiting at the end of the hall. "You are definitely *not* inconspicuous," he said. "How did you get in here?"

"I clouded your mind. I was not seen because I wished it so," Dracula replied.

"You clouded the minds of hundreds of people?" Marco sounded doubtful. "He's either nuts, or he's even more dangerous than I thought." He paused. "Red, are you sure you want to take this man home with you?"

"I'll be careful, Marco, I promise."

He touched my face gently and I couldn't help smiling. If I had to take someone home with me that night, it probably should have been him.

"Alright," he said softly. "The car is waiting out back. Jeremiah will drive you. Unfortunately, I've got to get back to the party. People expect to see me tonight." He looked to Dracula then and though his voice was calm when he spoke, his threat was clear. "I don't care who you are, or what your story is. I care about this woman and if you hurt her, I will find a way to kill you."

"I could never harm the vision that has haunted me for so long."

"All the same, keep your hands to yourself."

He nodded, but underneath the hood I saw the corner of his mouth twitch.

Marco walked back down the stairs and I watched as he turned back to check on me. He was trying to keep an eye on things without other people realizing what was going on. As we reached the foot of the stairs, Kat bumped into Luther. She had obviously had too much to drink. I tried not to laugh as she boldly stroked the front of Luther's shirt. "And just where are you going?" she asked.

"Lilith and I were just leaving," he said.

She still didn't seem to have spotted me. "You're leaving with *Lilith*? I thought you two were friends. Didn't you grow up together or something?"

"Oh, yeah." He smiled nervously. "I didn't mean for it to sound like...." Luther paused as a dark flush began to creep

over his face. "I'm just helping her with him," he said and pointed to the vampire.

Kat's jaw dropped. "Oh, my." She looked at me and asked, "Where did you find *this*?"

She looked like she was going to say something else, and before I could stop her Kat leaned forward and touched Dracula's bare chest where his shirt remained open. Almost instantly, she cried out and her knees buckled. Before Luther could catch her, Kat hit the floor.

"Oh, my God," she moaned. "Oh, my God."

People were starting to stare. I didn't have time to explain.

"Kat I'm sorry, I'll explain later."

Luther helped her to her feet and she practically lunged at Dracula. I stepped back quickly, just managing to pull him out of her reach. "Wait," she said desperately. "Just let me touch him again."

"I can't," I said, still trying to keep my voice down. "We've got to go. I promise I'll explain later."

Elijah walked up and Luther got him to take over holding Kathryn back so he could follow us outside.

"Take me with you!" she yelled after us. "Do you have any idea how long it's been since I came that hard? *Lilith*?"

It hurt my feelings to leave Kat that way, but there was no time to explain. I felt like the sooner I got Dracula out of sight, the better. We finally reached the back entrance of The Dread Moon and Luther opened the door. The rain had gotten harder. Luther ran out first and opened the back door of the limo. I followed with my arm still wrapped tightly around the vampire. As we stepped out, he hugged me tighter

The Dread Moon
by Tracey H. Kitts

underneath his cloak where the cold rain could not touch my bare skin. Suddenly we were blinded by dozens of flashing lights. Damn the press, they had been waiting for me.

Luther held the door while I slid across the seat. The vampire held his cloak over the open door for me to get in as if it were an umbrella. He slid in beside me like a dark cloud drifting on the wind, and I wondered for a moment how the man who could barely stand a few minutes ago could possibly be so graceful. The moment the door closed he nearly collapsed. "It would seem you are very popular," he said softly.

Luther got in the front seat and the car began to move. The vampire's head tilted back at what looked like a painful angle. I reached over and pulled Dracula down so that his head rested in my lap. His long eyelashes fluttered softly as he blinked up at me. "Why are you kind to me?" he asked.

"I don't know. Shouldn't I be?"

He looked sadly up at me as I brushed a stray hair back from his handsome face. His hair was not as long as it was in the painting back at headquarters. But, it was still just past shoulder length, and had natural waves though it was almost straight.

"Never mind," I whispered. "I don't know why, but I will protect you until you can protect yourself again."

"I want to die," he said, while I continued to stroke his hair.

"Is there nothing you can find worth living for?" I asked.

He didn't answer; he simply stared into my eyes with a sadness I could almost touch. Before I had time to think I

said, "The world should not be deprived of such as you. Why are you on the ceiling back at headquarters?"

"Because I am the first," he said faintly. "They made me."
Then he passed out.

I considered his words as we drove, but just couldn't seem to wrap my mind around the concept. I also couldn't take my eyes off of the man whose head rested in my lap. He was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen besides the picture of Mathias. His eyelashes fluttered and I wondered if he was dreaming. I wondered if my lashes fluttered the same way when I dreamed of him. It's a good thing he wasn't trying to talk to me then, because as I looked down at him, words failed me.

When we arrived at the house, Luther began to pull him roughly from the backseat and I stopped him.

"I've always heard terrible things about vampires," he replied with a shrug.

"So, you abuse the first one you've ever met, just because?"

"Sorry."

He flung the still limp body of Dracula over his shoulder and carried him into the house. Luther deposited him on the sofa downstairs and went back out to have a word with Jeremiah.

Dracula's eyes fluttered and I asked, "Is there anything else you would prefer to be called? I feel silly calling you Dracula." I paused. "Are you Dracula?"

He smiled faintly and my heart started beating faster.
"That is one of the names I have used over the years. You

The Dread Moon
by Tracey H. Kitts

may call me Vlad if you wish. It is a name I have used many times."

"You must have liked it. Was that your real name?"

"It might have been ... But that was many lifetimes ago."

I leaned over him and caressed his face as I tried to commit to memory every curve and line of the countenance I had waited so many years to see. "Look at me," I whispered.

"That would not be wise. I would prefer to have your permission for what would happen if I looked too long in your eyes."

"That's right, you can't control yourself yet, can you? You said earlier I had haunted your visions. What did you mean?"

"I have dreamed of you," he sighed and I felt warm hands caress my arms, but he hadn't moved.

"I've dreamed of you, too." As I whispered this, his eyes opened.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Nine

The door closed loudly and I jumped. Luther came back in, soaked through from the rain.

"So, what are we going to do with him?"

Obviously none of the things I had in mind were appropriate.

"I say we strip him naked and throw him in a cold shower, that'll sober him up," Luther suggested.

If seeing him fully dressed had me aching for more I knew I could never handle the sight of him naked. "At least leave his pants on. We do need to question him, but it seems wrong to take advantage of him."

Luther laughed. "I wasn't suggesting that we rape him, but now I know what's on your mind. That reminds me, what the hell did he do to Kat back at the club?"

"I'm not sure, but it happened to me, too."

"You had an orgasm from *touching* him?"

"No," I answered with a smirk, "but I was close."

Vlad smiled ruefully and said, "Then perhaps I *can* look at you, you must have a similar ability, or you could not resist."

I was terrified at the thought of having anything else in common with the vampire on my sofa. But we *had* both been dreaming about each other, there must be a reason.

"Well, where should we put him?" Luther asked.

Something told me that using Alfred's bathroom for such purposes would not go over well once he returned. "Take him upstairs, to my bathroom."

Luther carried him, more gently this time, and deposited him on my bed while he ran some water in the tub. Seeing his dark hair spill onto my red silk sheets did things to me I could not describe. He was supposed to be there. I had been waiting for him. As I moved forward Luther called loudly, "Lilith! You're not in there touching him are you?"

"No." But I had been about to.

My dress wasn't exactly the right choice of clothing for what we were about to do, so I walked through the bathroom to my closet to look for something else to wear.

"Where are you going?" Luther asked when I walked past him.

"To change. I don't think an evening gown is appropriate for flinging strange men into a bathtub, do you?"

He just laughed while I slipped into a pair of old jeans and a dark brown t-shirt. When I stepped out of the closet he asked, "So this guy really does it for you, huh?"

"I'm not sure what he does, but he does something ... I can't explain it, since I'm not really sure what happened."

"Did you enjoy it?"

"Yes. It took me by surprise, but ... it was incredible. What really scared me was, I wanted more. I still do," I said as I sat on the tub facing Luther. "I want to run in there right now, rip his clothes off and just ... *touch* him. Any part of him I can reach."

"Shit. No wonder Kat hit the floor. I wonder if that's something I could ever learn."

I laughed and he said, "I'm serious, that guy must get more ass than a toilet seat."

The Dread Moon
by Tracey H. Kitts

A warm honeyed laughter floated to our ears and I noticed that even Luther shivered. "I felt that," he said, looking surprised.

"Maybe he goes both ways," I teased. Luther looked shocked so when I got up I added, "Or maybe you do, and you just don't know it."

I walked back into the bedroom and found Dracula smiling up at me from where he sprawled against my crimson sheets.

"I had never heard that expression before." He snickered.

He seemed to drift off again and I was about to undress him when Luther came in and said, "Wait, I really don't want to have to pick you up off the floor, so why don't I do that?" I watched as he removed the long cloak and tossed it across the bed. My heart hammered in my chest painfully as Luther slid the white shirt with its many ruffles from Dracula's body. He looked even better without the shirt. He wasn't overly muscular, but beautifully toned and undeniably masculine. Every part that should be curved was curved, and everywhere there needed to be a ridge, that's what I found as my eyes roamed over him.

"I'll be right back." I walked to the closet in the hallway where I kept my painting supplies and slipped on a pair of rubber gloves. Before I could get back to the bedroom I heard a big splash and a deep voice screaming in a language I couldn't understand. But I didn't need to speak the language to know he was cursing Luther for all he was worth.

"That was cruel," I said, trying not to laugh at the smirk on Luther's face.

"So, what are we going to do with him?" he asked.

I looked at the vampire, wet and shivering in the frigid water and said, "I thought I'd put him in the dungeon."

He looked at me then and for a moment I could tell he was shocked. "I don't intend to torture you," I assured him with a smile.

"I knew this place was familiar. You live in Vincent Cole's old house."

"Yes. You knew him?"

"Yes," he said between chattering teeth.

"Luther is this really necessary? I think he's fairly alert now." I looked over and saw that Dracula's nipples were taut and I couldn't stifle a gasp of pleasure at this knowledge.

"I still wonder if I could learn that," Luther mumbled at my reaction.

"Don't get your hopes up, I think he's a wizard."

Dracula smiled at me appreciatively, but he didn't otherwise respond. It was evident he had no intention of revealing his life's story to either of us.

"So what he does is magic?" Luther asked.

"A form of it, yes. Whatever else it is will take time to understand. How is it that I didn't react as strongly as Kat?" I asked him.

He ran a hand through his wet dark hair and I felt my lips part in anticipation of his next move. "Too many questions, my angel," he purred as he smiled at me.

"My angel?" Luther looked questioningly at me.

"I overheard the lycans call you Death on more than one occasion," he explained. "I thought that Death had avoided me these long years, but she has been in my dreams. I

realized this when I caught a glimpse one night last year of the woman they called Death."

"How long have you dreamed of me?" I asked this at the same time Luther said, "Vampires can dream?"

"I can dream, my unfortunate children cannot."

"How long have you dreamed of me?" I repeated.

"You are not ready to know the answer to that question."

"Fine, what about Vincent Cole, the man who built this house? How did you know him?"

"We worked together in the middle ages. He and I hunted together across most of Europe and Asia."

"Was he a wizard?" I asked.

"No, he was an elf."

"An elf?" Luther and I both said.

"Yes. Why, did you not hear how he was killed?"

"In a bar fight on Terra," I replied.

"Yes, by a dwarf. They are notorious enemies. I would have thought that gave it away."

"Was he a friend of yours?"

"Yes," he said sadly, "he was a friend of mine."

There were too many things I wanted to know, many of which I had a feeling he knew something about. But, there was no point in asking every question in one night. Besides, he probably wouldn't have told me. I had noticed by this time that although he was still very attractive, I didn't want to jump in the tub with him. He must have been sobering up, and regaining control over his powers, whatever they were.

"How are you with silver?" I asked.

"It does nothing for my health, but it is not fatal to me."

"Good." I turned to Luther, "Will you get the air mattress from the closet in the spare bedroom?" He left and I turned back to Dracula. "I'm sorry to throw you in the dungeon, but it's the only place where there won't be sunlight. You *are* sensitive to sunlight, aren't you?"

"Yes." He seemed to hesitate before saying, "Thank you."

"You can stay here as long as you need to," I said.

"Why would you offer this to me?"

"So you can make up your mind. I'm not going to give you over to people you've spent such a long time avoiding without your consent. There must be a reason you've avoided them for so long?"

"There are many reasons," he said. "Your lover, he will not object to this?"

"How did you know I had a lover?"

"I saw him when I touched you back at the club." He smiled. "Apparently, I am not the only one with wizard ancestry." He rose from the tub and I watched as the water cascaded over him. Every curve of the pale perfection of his body seemed to glisten in the soft light. My eyes had always been sensitive, and I was glad for the soft glow the frosted glass bulbs created over his skin.

"May I have a towel?" he asked.

I handed him a large black towel and walked back to the closet. I had purchased a black robe a few years back on a whim. It was much too large for me, but I loved it. I had thought that perhaps my boyfriend at the time, the now notorious Bradley, would look good in it. But the more I looked at him, I changed my mind. At that moment, I couldn't

think of anyone it would look better on than Dracula. I discarded the rubber gloves. Now that he had regained some control, they shouldn't be necessary. I pulled the robe from where it hung in the back of my closet and admired it for a moment. It was made mostly of silk though the fabric was thick, with dark intricate embroidery. The inside of the robe was satiny smooth, and the deepest shade of blood red I'd ever seen. It was made to be worn open, so there was no belt.

If he was going to wear the robe open, he couldn't do so without pants. I had always preferred to wear men's pajamas. I liked the fact that they were big on me. I usually just rolled them down a few times around the waist so I wouldn't trip. I pulled out a pair of black silk pajama pants and walked back into the bathroom.

He was standing on the rug, so he wouldn't wet the wood floor. I watched for a moment while he dried his long dark hair with the towel. It would appear that the waves in his hair were closer to curls when wet. The dark pants he wore clung to his every curve and I was grateful to be standing behind him.

"You should get out of those wet pants," I said as I held out the robe to him.

His smile was all I had imagined it would be over the years that I had tried desperately to picture his face. "Thank you." He took the robe and began to unzip his pants. "Are you going to watch?"

"The thought had occurred to me." But I turned my back even as I said it.

"How did you know my size, or was it a guess?"

I heard the wet fabric sliding down his body and clenched my eyes tight against the images that tormented me.

"Apparently I started shopping for you a few years ago."

"Really?" I heard him sliding the silk pants up his long legs.

"I can't think of any other way to explain it. I bought that robe even though no one was around to wear it. Now that I look at you, I can't imagine seeing anyone else in it."

I heard a rustling of fabric, and felt his hands on my shoulders. He pressed his face to mine as he whispered, "You did not answer my question about your lover. How will he react to having me stay with you?"

"He won't be happy about it. Other than that ... I'm almost afraid to hear what Alfred will say."

"I thought his name was Marco? At least that is what they called him tonight."

My pulse quickened and I wondered exactly what it was Dracula saw when he had touched me earlier. Finally I said quietly, "Marco is not my lover."

"And yet you were at the club with him, and he admits to having feelings for you." He paused. "What does your Alfred say to this?"

"He doesn't know." As I said this I felt a pang of guilt.

"Really? Is he not here then?"

"No. He's back on Terra until Sunday."

"You weave a tangled web, my angel," he sighed.

"Don't remind me," I snapped.

"I was not judging, merely observing. Perhaps there is a solution you have not yet considered."

"I'm not going to discuss this with you."

"Why not?"

"Because it's complicated and I barely know you."

As I said this I turned to face him and instantly realized my mistake. He somehow never broke his contact with my shoulders and I now stood almost completely in his embrace. Strands of wet hair clung to his neck while one dark curl spilled onto his forehead and over his face. When I saw how good he looked in the robe, I knew I must have bought it for him. I couldn't imagine anyone looking better. His emerald eyes no longer held magic when I gazed into them, but there was a fire within that never completely died.

"You and I are not entirely strangers," he whispered. "I have known you in my dreams for some time. I cannot explain why this has happened to us both, but it has."

"I don't think you're here to solve my problems," I said, and my voice was barely above a whisper.

"Perhaps not, but it has been a long time since I have met an empath."

"That was my fault, I should have been blocking. I've accidentally read other people's minds before, but I've never had anyone read mine." I had the ability to feel other people's emotions through my touch, and from these feelings, I could see images.

"That is because I too was not blocking, and I have some empathic ability as well."

"The vision I saw was not a memory from your perspective." I still recalled vividly the images of him which had flooded my mind.

"No," he replied with a knowing smile. "What you experienced was a vision of what you would like to do to me." I could feel myself blushing.

"Do not be embarrassed. Your vision was the closet I have come to making love in centuries."

By what he said, I knew he wasn't referring to just the sex act itself. I also understood what he had said to me in the car. Dracula wanted to die because no one loved him.

"It must be difficult, watching everyone you love die."

What I said must have hit a nerve because I could feel him withdraw even though his hands remained on my shoulders.

"There is always something worth living for," I whispered.

His smile was both sad and condescending as he replied, "Hope is part of the naivety of youth."

"And age should bring wisdom," I snarled. "How dare you presume to judge me? You have no idea what I've been through."

"Then tell me, and I will know."

I opened his robe further and pressed my hands against his chest. His skin was cool to the touch and I tried not to think about how good it would feel to warm him. "A picture's worth a thousand words," I said as I plunged forward into the stream of my memories. I started with Peter. I had loved Peter more than life itself. Losing his love had nearly killed me. Through me Dracula felt what it was like to have the first man I ever loved call me a monster. He felt my fears, my

pain, my disappointment when I found out Bradley was married and the last three and a half years of my life had been a lie. Losing Bradley *did* kill me. Though I walked away from the experience, I was never the same. He felt my uncertainty toward Alfred, but he also knew that I had loved him for years. Marco appeared in my mind and my heart ached with longing. I let him feel all of the reasons I wanted to be with Marco, and all of the reasons I couldn't let that happen.

To my surprise, I could go no further. I just couldn't take any more. I reached around him inside the robe and felt his arms close tightly around me as I began to cry.

"I am sorry," Dracula whispered as he stroked my hair.
"You are not naive."

"What am I then, crazy?" I sniffed.

"You are wiser than I was at your age."

"Why, what did you do at my age?"

"I volunteered for the experiment that turned me into the monster you see today."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Ten

Before I could ask him to elaborate on this confession, Luther came back in. He gave me a rather wicked smirk and I realized I was still tightly wrapped in Dracula's embrace.

"Did I interrupt something, or can I watch?" He winked.

I pulled back from the vampire, reluctant to withdraw from his touch. There was a solace in his arms I had not expected to find. Who would have thought that being embraced by Dracula was more relaxing than any amount of meditation? Having him hold me was almost like that wonderfully relaxed feeling you get right after sex. Part of me was upset at Luther's interruption. But another part reminded me that this could be why the vampire was so dangerous. After all, I'm sure the apple looked very appetizing to Eve.

Luther carried the air mattress down the long narrow passageway to the dungeon, and stopped at the door.

"It hurts just to look at that thing," he said as he shined a flashlight on the solid silver door. "I'll wait back in the kitchen if it's alright with you?"

We could all see without the light, but I think it made him feel better to not be alone in the dark with a vampire. I opened the door with my silver key. Dracula carried the mattress for me along with the small air pump and a sleeping bag. I'd also brought a lighter and as we entered the dungeon, I lit some candles on a nearby table.

The Dread Moon
by Tracey H. Kitts

"I'm sure you can see without these, but I'd feel bad about leaving you down here in the dark," I said, gesturing toward the candles.

The large oak door at the back of the room was thick and heavy, covered in silver rivets and reinforced silver brackets. I opened this door with the same key, and as I pushed it open he said, "You can stay if you like. Or, was I wrong to think you found some comfort in my embrace?"

"I was hired to find you, not sleep with you," I answered.

"We do not have to sleep," he said, sounding like bottled sin.

"You don't know what you are asking for," I said as I inflated the mattress and tried to ignore him.

"And you do not realize what you are refusing," he pointed out.

"The things I would do to you tonight would not be kind, and I have no desire to use you," I replied.

"No one has had such consideration for my feelings in a long time. In fact, most people just assume I do not have any. I would be gentle," he purred.

"I would not." As I said this I walked purposefully toward where he stood beside the Garrotte. I walked over to the small highly polished wooden platform. Along the back of this, was an upright plank with a narrow seat attached. Above the seat, slightly more than shoulder height on most people was a leather strap. This strap was attached to a crank on the back of the board. I pushed him onto the seat and tightened the strap around his throat before he had time to object.

The Dread Moon
by Tracey H. Kitts

He did not seem alarmed in the slightest as I tied his hands behind his back around the board and took a seat on his lap. I opened the long robe and ran my hands over the smooth expanse of his chest. Fine hairs reflected in the candlelight which I traced with a finger to the top of his black silk pajamas.

"I've been told you have a thing for redheads, is that true?" I asked.

"Yes. I do love red hair. But that may be due in part to the length of time it has been in my dreams. Death has flickered through my mind for many years now, with flaming hair and amber eyes."

The urge to touch his hair was too much to resist. It was soft and damp, almost like wet silk between my fingers. "My dreams didn't do you justice," I sighed. "I have dreamed of you since I was sixteen, so I guess you could say I've known you for almost ten years now." I brushed my face against his as I said, "I always knew I would find you somehow, but part of me didn't believe you were really real. You have no idea how it feels to realize that the man of my dreams is real. My tall, dark stranger is finally at my fingertips and I cannot possibly allow myself to do the things I have wanted to do in my dreams, because I'll be honest, they weren't wet enough for me."

"It must feel something like meeting the woman of your dreams and having her tie you up instead of kissing you goodnight," he said softly.

"I can't kiss you," I breathed against his chest as I rubbed my face over the soft hair. "Because, I wouldn't be able to

stop." I rose from his lap with a sigh, released his wrists, and loosened the strap across his throat.

"Goodnight." He smiled sadly, still sitting on the wooden platform.

"Goodnight."

Leaving him was difficult, but I managed. When I walked back in the kitchen to replace the key to its usual hook Luther was waiting for me. Like the true friend he is, Luther didn't ask nosy questions about what had gone on in the bathroom while he was out of the room. He was loyal to Marco, but I had known him longer. That must have put him in an awkward position. We discussed the bizarre events of the night over some hot chocolate before realizing it was two o'clock.

"No wonder I'm tired," he said as he yawned. "Where should I sleep tonight?"

"You can sleep with me," I said without thinking.

His eyes widened slightly.

"Don't look at me like that. I know pack members are comforted by being close to one another, and I'll be honest, I could use some comfort right now. Besides, I trust you. I can actually *sleep* with you."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence," he said with a sarcastic smile, "but you're not pack."

"I would have thought the same thing, but it worked with Marco." As I said this I knew I was admitting to having slept with Marco. Of course, we actually *slept*, even though I'm sure most of the pack thought otherwise. However, Luther

was never one to judge, which was one of the reasons we'd remained friends.

"Then lead the way, cause I'm exhausted," he said, yawning again.

Luther followed me upstairs and stripped out of his dress clothes to his boxer shorts and t-shirt while I put on some pjs. It might have been weird if I'd thought about it, but I didn't. It just seemed natural that I should be able to turn to one of Marco's wolves for comfort, especially Luther. I snuggled down underneath the covers facing the door and Luther crawled in behind me. Without hesitation he wrapped his arm around my waist and pulled me back against the curve of his body. Luther's long legs curled into the curve of mine and I sighed, enjoying his warmth.

"What shampoo do you use?" he sighed as he breathed against my hair.

"What does it matter?"

"I like it."

"Go to sleep prima donna. We can discuss beauty products in the morning."

"It is morning," he laughed softly.

"Go to sleep," I said as I yawned.

With that final request, Luther squeezed me tightly and I fell asleep.

* * * *

When I opened my eyes early the next morning, I was alone. I rolled to my back as I called, "Luther? Are you still here?"

"I'm here," he said, walking out of the bathroom. "You wouldn't happen to have an extra toothbrush, would you?"

"There's one underneath the vanity I haven't opened."

I stretched and yawned while Luther brushed his teeth. A few minutes later I heard him getting in the shower. Since there is a wall of rock separating my shower from the rest of the bathroom, I walked in and brushed my teeth without having to see my friend naked.

"So, what will you do with him?" he asked about Dracula.

First, I told Luther how long I had been dreaming about this man. Then I told him he appeared to be the first Hunter sent to Earth, though I wasn't sure how he ended up a vampire. Finally, I told Luther I had offered to let him stay with me.

"Well, I think Marco will be more understanding than Alfred," he said.

"Really? I expect they'll both want to kill me."

My stomach growled loudly and I decided to go start breakfast. I had just put on a pot of coffee when someone knocked at the door.

"Good morning, Kat," I said with a yawn as I stepped aside for her to come in.

Kat looked like hell. She obviously hadn't slept. Sure, it was Saturday morning, but she never wore sweats in public.

"Where is he?" she said immediately.

"Where's who?"

"The man you left with last night, where is he?" she insisted.

She looked almost desperate as I led her to the kitchen. I sat Kathryn down at the table and poured her a cup of coffee while I shared what I knew about Dracula.

"It looks like you were right about how soon I would meet him," I said.

"Huh?"

"Don't you get it, Kat? He's the man from my dreams."

"Mine too. So, where is he?"

"Have you heard a word I just said?"

"Of course. It looks like the first Hunter sent here was the first vampire too, but you don't know how yet because he wouldn't tell you. You've been dreaming about him since you were sixteen, and apparently he's been dreaming about you too, but you don't know for how long. AND, knowing your ability to find the wrong sort of man, he's probably heinously evil. So, where is he?"

"He's in the dungeon."

"Can we touch him?"

"No, Kat, we can't touch him." I laughed.

"Fine," she said angrily as she walked to the fridge. "I want an omelet then." She started putting ingredients on the counter about the time Luther walked in wearing my red bathrobe and a smile. Of course it only came to just below his knees and didn't close enough in front to cover his chest. Her jaw dropped.

"Good morning, Kat." He smiled and started pouring himself some juice.

"Just friends huh?" she bellowed, and Luther nearly dropped his glass. "You were helping her with *him*?" She

pointed in the general direction of the door that led to the dungeon. "I'll bet."

"Calm down, Kat, it's not what it looks like," I said.

"Well it looks like you had a nice *ménage a trios* going on here last night! You know what I had? I had to ride home with Elijah, king of the lead foot! He nearly ran us into a tree! I'm risking my life just to get home, and you're over here getting it on with a hot werewolf *and* a vampire."

By the end of this speech, she plopped down at the table again, put her head down, and started to cry.

"You think I'm hot?" Luther asked. I smacked his bare chest lightly with the back of my hand. "What?"

"Kat, first of all, we did *not* have a *ménage a trios* last night. Second, why did you and Elijah go together in the first place when you both argue so much about his driving? You know how you two get."

"Because he knew you'd be there with someone else," she sobbed, "and if anyone was there who knew Charles, I didn't want them to see me alone."

I knelt beside Kat's chair as I asked, "Have you tried talking to Charles?"

"I don't wanna fucking talk to him." She flung her arms around me and wailed. "He's just another lying son of a bitch."

"Do you love him?"

"No, I don't love him," she sobbed, "I'm just...."

"In love with him," Luther finished.

"Ah, I'm so disappointed." She sighed as she pulled back from me. "I really liked him, Lilith."

"I know." I got up and Luther cracked eggs while I looked for some cheese.

"I thought I'd finally managed to find a nice guy," she sniffed and stifled another sob. "And Marco said he probably faked sex."

Luther dropped an egg on the floor, but Kat didn't seem to notice.

"If it makes you feel any better, I know the guy got his ass kicked," Luther added hopefully.

"Really?" she asked, "By whom?"

"Marco, who else?"

"Did he hurt him bad?"

"He nearly killed him," Luther replied.

This was all news to me, so I asked, "Why would Marco do that?"

"He figured you would ask that if you ever heard what happened. What he told me was, 'I care about her and Kat is like her family.' Does that make sense to either of you?"

We both nodded gravely.

"Good, because I don't want to get into trying to explain Marco's feelings, like some fucked up therapist."

After breakfast Kat left and Luther had walked back into the sitting room when the door in the hallway banged open. I jumped as Alfred came storming through and flung something angrily onto the table.

"Alfred ... what's going on?" I had never seen him so upset.

"You made the papers," he hissed.

The Dread Moon
by Tracey H. Kitts

I picked up the paper with trembling hands and looked at the cover. One half of the page was me entering The Dread Moon with Marco. They'd managed to get a picture when I'd whispered in his ear. It looked very intimate, and we looked happy together. The headline read, *"Leader of the new organization H.A.V.O.C. openly admits to having a relationship with local pack leader, Marco Barak, owner of the new club The Dread Moon. This picture was taken of the happy couple upon arrival at the grand opening of the werewolf club with a Jamaican flare."*

I flipped numbly through the pages, not able to really read anything else. However, on page five there was another picture of me leaving the club, half concealed underneath Dracula's cloak with Luther just visible on the other side of us. The caption beside this picture read, *"Added security for the alpha's main squeeze, or is she leaving the club secretly with two men?"*

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Eleven

"Is this why you were so eager for me to leave town?" he yelled.

I couldn't deny there was some truth to his words. "Alfred, I—"

Luther came running in, still wearing my bathrobe, "What's going on, are you alright?"

The look Alfred gave Luther made me shiver. Never in my life had I seen such rage. "What the hell is going on here?" he shot at me and I jumped.

"It's not what it seems," I said in what I hoped was a reassuring tone.

"You've got about five minutes before you both see what I am capable of." His threat was unmistakable. It wasn't the fact that Alfred had made a threat that upset me. I was upset because he had threatened *me*.

"Don't you trust me any more than that? I found the vampire last night at the club. Luther helped me bring him here because I had nowhere else to put him until I could figure out what's going on."

Alfred was frighteningly silent and my voice shook as I continued, "Luther and I grew up together, Alfred. We're not having sex, he's like family."

He turned his gaze to me once again and the hatred I saw there hurt. "You have that monster in my house?"

"Now wait a goddamn minute," Luther began.

"I'm not talking about you," Alfred hissed, "one monster at a time. I'm talking about the vampire. Where is he?"

I didn't answer and he said menacingly, "Are you protecting him?"

"Alfred, you don't know anything about him."

"And neither do you! You don't know what he's capable of!"

"You can't kill people on principle!" I yelled. No matter how hard I tried to fight it I felt tears burning my eyes.

"I'm going back," he said, "Jacob doesn't know I'm here." He glanced at Luther and then back to me, "You take care of this shit, and I'll be back tonight."

He stormed out of the room before I could say anything and I jumped when the door slammed. It took me several minutes to realize Luther was holding me. I was shaking so hard I would have hit the floor otherwise. "I never thought Alfred would speak to me like that," I said shakily.

"The people we love always seem to hurt us the most," Luther said as he sank to the floor along with me. I couldn't seem to stop shaking. "Take me for instance, my ex-wife attacked me. I didn't even know she was a werewolf. I mean, I knew she was a bitch, but I had no idea she was the real thing."

I laughed in spite of myself. "I love you, Luther," I said as I wrapped my arms around him. "And I'm not going to attack you."

"I love you too," he whispered. "Do you need me to stay?"

"Maybe, but if you do, keep out of sight. I don't know how he might react if he sees you again."

Since it was still morning and Alfred said he would return that night. Luther left to get more clothes. While he was gone, I called Alek. I was so upset I could barely talk as I tried to tell him everything that had happened. Once I began to calm down a little, he said, "I'm glad you called. I've had a vision that I'm afraid might concern you." He described seeing a drawer with a small golden padlock. The moment he described it I knew where I had seen it before. In Alfred's bedroom, underneath the bay window, there was a small drawer with a lock just as he had described.

"After all that has happened, don't you think you should take a look?" he asked.

My heart was in my throat as I walked into Alfred's room. Before that day I would never have thought to invade his privacy. But after the way he had spoken to me, what else was he hiding? I hadn't known he was capable of being so cruel ... not to me. The phone was still in my hand as I knelt down and reached for the lock. I broke it loose without even bothering to look for a key. I was suddenly desperate to see what was inside.

A stack of ordinary papers sat inside the drawer. But my heart would not slow down. My pulse quickened to the point that I felt dizzy as I scanned the papers. "These are his orders," I said breathlessly to Alek. "It's from when he was first assigned to be my partner. Wait." I turned the page and found to my horror, the rest of Alfred's orders. I dropped the papers and threw up. I could hear Alek calling, but I'd dropped the phone. Right there in plain black and white, Alfred had been told that should my condition ever worsen,

The Dread Moon
by Tracey H. Kitts

should I ever exhibit any signs of becoming a werewolf, he was supposed to kill me. HE HAD SIGNED THE PAPER.

My hands shook so hard I could barely lift the phone as I told Alek between sobs what I had discovered. Before he could respond, I dropped the phone and ran into Alfred's bathroom to be sick again. The world spun before my eyes. This wasn't happening to me. I trusted him. I loved him. He would never hurt me, not Alfred. Not my Alfred. I couldn't breathe.

* * * *

Something cold touched my face and I was startled awake. I was still in the floor of Alfred's bathroom, and someone was holding a cool wet cloth to my face. I looked up into the most beautiful emerald eyes I had ever seen.

"You must have fainted," he said.

I remembered then what had happened and it felt like I'd been hit in the stomach. I practically vaulted for the toilet where I found I could no longer throw up.

"What is wrong?" he asked softly.

"You didn't see the papers in the other room?" I asked between dry heaves.

"No. I came looking for you," he replied as he continued to wipe my face.

"How did you get out?"

"You must have forgotten to lock the dungeon door."

I told him what the orders I found had said and about how Alfred had reacted to the newspapers.

"So, Dr. Alfred Moody is your lover and partner."

"You know him?" I asked before gagging again.

"I have heard of Vengeance."

Vengeance is what the lycans called Alfred, just as they called me Death.

"It makes sense, of course, that Death and Vengeance should be together. However, Death can show compassion, and Vengeance is blind," he said softly.

I kept thinking that this wasn't really happening. Alfred would never hurt me, he loved me. Alfred would be back any minute and he would love me, he would wake me from this nightmare.

"Your father would never give such orders." It was a statement, not a question.

"No, they were given by the former commander. He still had an advisory position for the first three years my father was in office, and because my dad's such a nice guy, he let the bastard keep the authority to issue orders." I stood up and staggered toward the sink. "What time is it?"

"It is four o'clock."

"Aren't you up early? There's still sunlight."

"Not today," he said as he placed his hands on my shoulders while I splashed water on my face. "Have you not noticed the storm?"

"No," I gasped. "Can you go outside? I need some air."

Dracula followed me onto the porch. The cold February wind hit us hard and I realized I didn't have on any shoes. The sky was so dark, it might as well have been dusk. He walked to one end of the porch to observe the lightning, and I propped against one of the columns near the steps. My

heartbeat had just started to slow down when the door opened behind me. It was Alfred, and he was early.

I hadn't expected to hurt so much just looking at him. My knees buckled and he ran to me. "Lilith, I'm sorry. I had no right to speak to you that way." He hadn't noticed Dracula standing on the far end of the porch, and I dared not glance at him for fear of what might happen.

"Don't touch me," I whispered.

"What?"

"Don't touch me," I said louder as tears froze against my cheeks in the icy wind. "I found your orders!"

For the first time Alfred looked afraid. "Lilith, I never meant for you to see those."

"No, shit! You wouldn't want me to know I'd been sleeping with my murderer!" I stood up and nearly fell down the steps. "Oh, my God. I've been sleeping with my murderer," I mumbled as I staggered into the rain. *"I've been sleeping with my murderer!"* I screamed as I fell to my knees in the mud.

"No, Lilith! I would never have hurt you." He ran down the steps, but Alfred didn't touch me. "I took the assignment so I could protect you. If I hadn't someone else would have, and they might have killed you!"

"You wouldn't hurt me, huh? Like you didn't hurt me today? Like you didn't think of me as human a few days ago? Alfred, I love you," I cried. "I trusted you...."

"I never intended to follow through with those orders."

"I'm sorry, Alfred, but I can no longer believe what you say."

Suddenly there were hands underneath my arms, lifting me from the ground, but they were not Alfred's. Dracula stood behind me, looking every bit as deadly as I was afraid he could be.

"Get out," Alfred hissed.

I looked at Alfred and was unsure whom I should fear more.

"I am sorry," Dracula's voice carried on the wind like thunder, "but it is not your house, and I will not leave her to her murderer."

"You're taking sides with this animal, this ... MONSTER?" he asked me.

"Alfred, I'm not taking any sides—"

"There are things about him you don't know!" Alfred insisted.

"And would you tell her?" Dracula interrupted. "Would you tell her what a monster I am when you could sleep with the woman you intended to kill should the need arise?"

"It's not like that, and I don't need to explain myself to the likes of you!"

"Why, am I not human enough to converse with?"

"You bastard!"

Alfred lunged toward Dracula and I ducked. However, it seemed as if the air itself picked Alfred up and flung him backward. He hit the ground just in front of the steps and we both stared at Dracula. The dark robe billowed out around him and like his hair it seemed to blend with the growing darkness. Lightning flashed over our heads and his emerald eyes began to glow.

"Don't you touch her," Alfred growled.

"You are far more dangerous to her than I could ever be," Dracula replied as another blast of wind knocked Alfred back.

"Don't hurt him," I cried.

Dracula's eyes never left Alfred as he answered me, "I have no intention of harming him. I am just keeping him away from you."

"How dare you?" Alfred snarled.

"Go back to Jacob," Dracula said, and his voice too began to blend with the storm, as if the wind were speaking to us. "Go back and tell him his daughter has found the first Hunter, and you simply cannot abide by what she does. Tell him you want to be his partner again, and that Lilith is capable of working on her own. Do not come back here with vengeance in your heart, or you will never be able to get through the door, do you understand?"

"Yes." Alfred sounded defeated. He looked to me then. "I'm sorry, Lilith. Don't tell Jacob about the orders," he pleaded. "He would kill me."

I nodded. "I won't. It would kill him to know you signed them, and I love my father too much to subject him to that."

Alfred turned his back on us and walked back through the house to the transporter. As I watched him leave I began to scream. I screamed as if someone were tearing my insides out and fell back down into the mud. I ripped my clothes and pieces of my skin along with them and for the first time ever, I threw back my head and howled. It was the most chilling and mournful sound I had ever heard.

The Dread Moon
by Tracey H. Kitts

I was losing my mind. My chest hurt and I tore my shirt as if to rip my heart from my breast. Dracula hovered above me, his emerald eyes burned into mine. "You must stop this," he said, "or you will destroy yourself."

"Kill me," I begged as I fought him in order to continue tearing my own flesh. "Kill me and save him the trouble."

"You do not mean that."

"Kill me! Kill me now! Save me from this slow death of disappointment," I cried.

He cradled me in his arms and the storm seemed to calm. The wind was not as harsh, and the rain didn't seem so cold. His grip on me tightened, and I welcomed it. I welcomed the press of his body against mine, and the comfort that I felt with his nearness.

"You told me last night that there is always something worth living for," he said softly.

"And you said that hope is a naivety of youth. You were right."

"No, I am just bitter. Do not let yourself become what I have been. It is somewhere you do not want to go."

He withdrew from me slightly and I panicked. I screamed and fought him as he held me down in the mud to prevent me from making another attempt at tearing out my own heart. Suddenly there were lights in my face and I heard Luther yelling.

"She is trying to tear her heart out," Dracula said in response to whatever Luther had been saying.

"Shit, Lilith. What's happened?" Luther asked.

But I couldn't answer, I fought them both with everything I had and I almost won. My weakness was, I couldn't cause grievous bodily harm to innocent people.

"Hold her feet," Dracula yelled as he sat on my waist and pinned my arms above my head. "Look into my eyes," he commanded.

"No, you're not going to hold me down and mind fuck me!"

"You leave me no choice. I cannot let you kill yourself."

"Then do it for me," I pleaded. "You made Alfred leave." It was not an accusation, but a statement of fact. I recognized hypnotism when I heard it.

"Yes. It was the only way. He would never have left willingly and I had no desire to kill him, or watch you kill each other."

Dracula squeezed my ribs tighter between his thighs as he commanded once more, "Look at me."

This time I looked. I jumped in response to the pain in my ribs and before I knew it, he had captured me. The world stood still. "Relax," he purred, and his voice seemed to float through my mind. "Relax. No one will harm you. Sleep, Lilith. Sleep, and know peace again."

With my own powers weakened so severely by grief and disappointment, I had little choice except to obey. I slept.

* * * *

Dracula's hypnosis could not hold me forever, for I was an unwilling captive. I knew what I wanted and I had to wake up or it could never be mine. "*Wake up*," I screamed to my body, "*Wake up!*" I sat up on my bed, gasping for breath and for a

moment it had all been a bad dream. But then I saw Alfred was gone, and I opened the clean pajamas I was wearing to find claw marks on my chest. I hadn't managed to finish the job, but neither had Dracula, because I was awake.

All throughout my unwilling slumber I had called to him, and unless I had grossly underestimated my powers of persuasion, the wolf king should be well on his way. I walked out onto the balcony in the midst of the storm that still raged, and leapt over the railing. I hit the ground with the grace of a cat and began to run through the woods. I knew Marco was close, I could feel him. I could see him ahead of me as if he were a dream, running full out to my rescue. But, Marco couldn't save me from myself.

I crashed into him, taking his body to the ground. "Lilith, what's wrong?" Marco never called me by my first name. I paused and he sat up. "What's happened? I saw Luther when he came back to get some clothes. He told me how Alfred reacted to the newspaper. Is there something else? For God's sake, Red, pack members could be dead right now and I came running to your rescue. What's wrong?"

"Pack members could be dead?" I was stunned.

"I'll explain it later. Did he hurt you?" Marco asked.

"He killed me." Unbidden tears started to fall down my cheeks and Marco reached for me. I explained to him what had happened as if I were talking about someone else. It still didn't seem real that Alfred had signed what amounted to my death warrant. He listened in silence until I asked, "What's happening to me? I think I'm cracking up."

"You're in shock," he explained. "Sever trauma of any kind has a tendency to bring out the beast."

"Are you saying I'm a beast?"

"No. I'm saying you are so upset that you're not thinking clearly. You're reacting now purely on instinct, like an animal. This could last a few hours, or it could last a few days."

"What calms the beast?" I asked.

"Food, sex, or violence normally," he said softly. "Go home, Red. Get something to eat, preferably something rare, and we'll discuss this later. You're in no condition to make any decisions right now."

"Kiss me," I whispered and I felt Marco shiver as my voice flowed over him. "Comfort me, Marco. I need to be held, to be touched. Let me draw strength from your desire." His lips were a warm promise in the midst of the cold rain. I tore his shirt open, sending buttons flying into the dark. "I've wanted you since the first moment I saw you," I breathed against his throat while my hands roamed hungrily over his chest. "Take me, Marco. Give me what I've been missing." I snatched his belt off and threw it on the wet ground.

"No," he panted as he tried desperately to restrain my hands.

"Why not?"

"I can't let you use me, Red. Like you once told me, I can't do this without it meaning something ... and I need it to mean something." I slumped against him as he continued. "You're saying all the right things, honey, but you're not in your right mind."

"Go save your pack," I whispered as I rose from his lap.

The Dread Moon
by Tracey H. Kitts

"Go home, Red. You'll be safe there. I'm sorry to have to leave you like this, but some people have been attacked, and I'm not sure how bad the situation is yet. I'll check on you as soon as I'm able, but I'll sleep better if I know you're with Luther."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Twelve

If I had been in my right mind I would have been grateful for Marco's concern and just gone home where I was safe. But, like he said, I wasn't in my right mind. My emotions were raw, and my mind was in shock. The beast inside of me demanded some sort of satisfaction, and I knew just where to find it. Marco watched as I started back home, but he had been wrong about one thing. Home was the worst place I could have gone.

I climbed the tree that Marco had often sat in and leapt onto the balcony where the doors remained open. Just as I closed the doors Dracula entered the room.

"Where have you been?" he asked, taking in my wet clothes and hair.

"Out."

"You should not be awake yet. Your state of mind could be dangerous."

"I know," I whispered this as I flipped the switch in my mind that unleashed the power of The Seducer. "In the past few hours everything I thought would never happen, has happened. First, I found you. Then Alfred turned on me. Next, it turned out he had actually been sent to kill me if I ever became more of a monster. And just now, Marco turned me down."

"What would you have of me?" he asked softly.

"I want the man I've been dreaming about. Not the magic, just the man. Don't play games with me." And as I walked

toward him I relented my own hypnotic power. "I'll do the same," I promised. "I want to know the man, not the monster."

"No one has asked for that in a very long time."

"What do you ask of me?"

"I do not expect you to love me in the morning," he said softly, "but pretend you do tonight."

He closed the distance between us and I opened his robe. "How is it you're not covered in mud and rain?"

"Have you never read my fiction?" He smiled. "Power over the storm and the beasts of the field," he quoted. "I never got wet."

"Well," I replied as I licked my lips, "we'll have to correct that."

I caressed his chest, barely resisting the urge to lick his smooth skin. I ran my hands up over his shoulders, pulling the robe down. He seemed shocked by my desire, but not intimidated. I snatched the robe down his arms, tearing a gasp from his perfect lips. I moved closer to him and traced those lips with my fingertip. I marveled at the feel of his skin beneath my hand as if I were in a trance. "I've waited a long time to see this face," I whispered as I caressed his left cheek. Everyone who had known this face as I would know it was dead. Of all who had once loved him, none remained. "How long has it been?" I asked.

"Since I first dreamed of you," he whispered.

"Too long," I breathed as I stood on tiptoe and pulled his lips down to mine. Kissing him was beyond anything I had

ever felt. Fire ran through my veins and I nearly fell to my knees. "You said you wouldn't use magic," I panted.

"I will control what I can, but some of it is just me."

"Then touch me," I whispered, "and let nature worry about the rest."

Suddenly, we were all over each other, grasping, tearing fabric, trying to get free of our clothes. He pressed me back against the silk sheets. As I looked into his dark green eyes I realized that what I saw at the club was not a vision of what I wanted to do to him, I had seen the future. His dark hair cascaded over my eyes and I reached upward to meet his kiss. I slid the silk pajamas over his hips as I took him in my hand. He was hard and warm, and practically throbbing against my palm. I caressed the length of him with my fingertips and was not disappointed. I was more than ready as I guided him toward me and arched my body to meet his.

He thrust into me in one move and it took my breath. He looked at me through the dark curtain of his hair as if asking my permission to continue. "Don't stop," I panted. "Take me like you never took me in my dreams." He pressed me into the mattress as he ground his hips against mine, leaving me delirious with desire. From that point, I remember nothing but the feel of him, the rocking motion of his body against mine. The sound of silk sliding against silk as I rose to meet his every thrust.

I turned my head to the side in order to breathe. His face was pressed against my cheek, fingers entwining through mine, gripping me harder, pushing me nearly through the bed. I couldn't think, couldn't breathe. There was only his

touch, his breath against my skin. I wanted to hear him scream. I pulled my hands away from him and ran my fingers through his hair. I got a handful of his thick hair near the nap of the neck and pulled his head back, exposing his throat.

I traced from his collar bone to his chin with my tongue and he moaned. It was enough for me. I couldn't hold out to hear him scream. I wrapped myself around him as wave after wave of orgasm shook my body. A warm rush flowed through my body like living flame. I felt this fire pass through me and into Dracula, tearing a scream at long last from his lips.

"Are you alright?" he gasped as he brushed the hair back from my face.

I nodded, but I could not yet speak. We both collapsed against the pillows and I felt like I'd been drugged.

"So, you *are* Mathias' granddaughter," he said.

"You knew him, too?"

"Everyone knew him," he replied with a satisfied smile. "I noticed the resemblance before, but now I am convinced."

"What made up your mind?" I asked as I tried to catch my breath.

"Your scratches have already healed."

I looked down at my chest. He was right.

"How well did you know Mathias?" I asked.

"We were friends before my ... breakdown in the Middle Ages."

"Then he probably told you the consequences of...."

"Someone having sex with him? Yes. I know about your ability to take on the characteristics of your lovers. I also know how you healed the scratches, so do not feel you owe

me an explanation. I am a grown man; I knew what I was getting myself into when I walked in the room."

"Is that so?" I sat up and my eyes provoked my heart to a faster rhythm as I gazed at the perfection of his body. "The night is young," I whispered as I rolled on top of him.

"Sex cannot heal a broken heart, my angel," he said softly.

"Are you refusing me?"

"Never," he whispered.

"If you get too weak, you can always go bite Luther and come back," I teased.

His laughter floated over my skin as I kissed the man of my dreams once again.

"There's something I want to know," I mumbled against his throat.

"What is that?"

"In all these years, is there anything you *haven't* tried in bed? Or, is there anything you haven't done in a while that you've missed?"

"I have done many things," Dracula said as he smiled faintly, "but there is nothing more arousing than a beautiful woman who genuinely wants to be with me. It does not matter what she does, just as long as she enjoys what she is doing."

"If you have no objections then, there's something I'd like to do you," I said silkily.

"I am yours," he sighed.

I reached in the dresser beside the bed and pulled out my black belt which I placed on the crimson sheets beside him while I once again straddled his waist. Bending low over his

body, I kissed every ridge and curve of his flat stomach. When I reached his nipple I bit down and he screamed, but not as if he were in pain. "Yes," he moaned, "bite me." I bit harder, pulling the flesh between my teeth. After a few short moments of this, he was ready for me again. To my surprise, I still ached with desire. I craved his touch.

Once again I took him in my hand and slid slowly down the length of him. I rolled my hips slowly, tentatively as I watched his face. Much to my satisfaction, his eyes rolled and his dark lashes fluttered. I contracted my muscles, squeezing him tighter inside of me and he cried out. Just as I had suspected, Dracula was a moaner. I like that. It's always good to have feedback. I ran my hands up and down his chest as I moved slowly against him. He was so long and hard that I could not sit up completely. So, I leaned forward, placing my hands against him for leverage as I quickened my pace. He moaned again, and my mind was lost to the rhythm as I ground my hips against him. I ached for him in a way I could not describe. It was like nothing I had ever felt and no amount of effort seemed to give me the release I needed. I reached for the belt and in the blink of an eye, it was securely buckled around his throat. To my delight, there was no fear in his eyes as I looked down at him, only trust.

I wrapped the belt around my hand and pulled it tight as if I were guiding the reigns of a horse while I rode him. His back arched as he grabbed fistfuls of my scarlet sheets between his hands. "Yes," he whispered, "yes." I pulled the belt tighter as my pace grew more frantic. "Tighter," he moaned as he threw his head back again, and I pulled the

belt tighter. "Faster," he gasped, and I went faster. I could feel the fire building within me, and I knew my release would soon come. A sensation began at the back of my spine, an agonizing tension that flowed into my hips as my muscles gripped him tighter. My back arched so suddenly I thought my spine might snap as orgasm overtook me. Once again, I felt the fire flow from my body to his, and Dracula's cries of release soon echoed my own.

I rested my face against his chest and unbuckled the belt. His neck was red from the pressure and he instantly gasped for air. "Was it good for you?" I teased. He laughed and I rolled beside him. His body glistened with sweat. I ran one hand over his slick wet chest as I asked, "Would you like to get in the tub with me, if it's not cold water, and I don't invite Luther?"

"I would love to," he sighed.

When I went to sit up I noticed my scars were exposed. I found it hard to believe that I had been so caught up in the moment I hadn't given them a second thought. Looking back at Dracula in all his pale perfection, I felt awful. I moved to cover my stomach and he stopped me.

"What are you doing?" he asked softly.

"My scars," I said trying to think of an explanation for my behavior, "I hadn't meant for you to see them."

"Do you think I do not have scars?" As he said this, he took my hand to prevent me from covering my lower abdomen. Dracula rose to his feet in front of me and turned around. His back was covered in long white scars. Thin lines in crisscrossed patterns marred the perfection of his skin.

From the look of it, someone had nearly whipped him to death.

"How did this happen?" I asked.

"Someone turned my own weapon against me," he explained as he turned back to face me. "A cat o'nine tails with bits of sharp silver on the ends."

"What did you do to them?"

"I killed them," he answered, showing no emotion as to how he felt about his revenge.

Dracula knelt in front of me and ran a hand over my scars. I tried to withdraw, but he would not allow it. "Are these from your attack?" he asked.

"Yes," I whispered.

The scars are a remnant of my attack. There are several vicious slashes across the right side of my stomach, beginning level with my belly button, and extending to the front of my upper hip bone. Three diagonal cuts above my navel, and three cuts at an angle on the left side. I watched with mingled horror and adoration as he pressed his lovely face against the ruined skin.

"You have no idea how beautiful you are," he whispered. "These scars are a small thing in comparison."

"They ruin me," I said quietly.

As much as I would have liked to remain emotionless, I felt tears sliding down my cheeks as he continued to rub his face against my skin like a cat. For lack of a better word, he was worshipping me and I was overcome.

"No. They make you who you are," he said, "and I would see all of you."

"How did I not see your scars before?" I asked, my voice still thick with emotion. "I was standing behind you when you had your shirt off."

"Because I did not wish to appear imperfect in the eyes of a beautiful woman."

"You clouded my mind?"

"Do you prefer to see the scars?"

"Yes."

"Do they add character?" he asked with a smile, and just that subtle curling of lips set me on fire all over again.

"They make you who you are," I said with a wink, feeling better about myself.

My knees wobbled slightly as I made my way into the bathroom. I let the water run while I lit the vanilla scented candles scattered about the room. Some sat on the floor, others across the vanity, and some were placed around the edge of the tub. Dracula turned off the light in the bedroom. I looked up as he walked through the door and my breath caught. He was every bit the dream I had held so dear. His naked body glistened in the candlelight, and strands of dark wet hair clung to his throat. He was formed of a devastating and heartrending beauty, making him almost painful to look upon. But pain and pleasure are sometimes separated by only a thin line.

"I believe this calls for music," he said.

I told him where I kept my collection of CDs while I ran vanilla bath oil underneath the faucet. The view as he left the room was almost better than when he had just walked in. I lowered myself slowly into the water and breathed deeply of

the soft fragrance. The smile was involuntary as Barry's deep mellow voice drifted in just before Dracula walked back through the door.

"Of all the music to choose from." I smiled.

"What? Everyone likes Barry." He winked.

The muscles of his upper thighs flexed as he stepped into the tub and my heart gave a painful jump. "Did you really think you would never find me?" he asked as he slid toward me through the water.

"I always knew deep down that I would, but part of me was afraid you were just a dream," I admitted.

"That is sweet for someone who is only pretending to be in love with me."

What could I say? In some way, I had loved the dark stranger of my dreams. But the man in front of me was definitely not a dream. He was real, and I barely knew him. It was strange to be with someone who was so new and yet so familiar. His presence was familiar to me like a favorite song, and I was at ease.

"Let me wash your hair," I whispered.

He turned his back to me. I traced some of his scars with my fingertips before pressing my face against his back. "What happened to you?" I asked. As I said this I knew he realized I wasn't talking about the scars.

"I was part of the original group of Hunters," he began. "Shortly after the first year of infection, my family was murdered. My mother, my father, and my sister. There were rumors of creating a weapon, the ultimate Hunter, some called it. But they needed a test subject. Most of them knew

who my grandfather was, and they were happy to take me on when I volunteered."

"Who was your grandfather?" I asked.

"I am a descendant of The Rainmaker."

The Rainmaker, like his name implied had power over the storm. That would certainly explain the display Dracula had put on earlier in the evening.

"The virus had begun to spread to Earth, and they felt that sending someone here who was better equipped to deal with werewolves would prevent more Hunters from losing their lives. I was given a synthetic twenty fourth pair of chromosomes. At first things worked as they were intended. I did my job and I enjoyed it. But, with every werewolf I slaughtered, I grew hungry for more. The thirst for blood was something they gave me, and they did so without my knowledge. Originally, the bloodlust was only for lycanthropes, an extra incentive to hunt them. But pretty soon, all blood started to taste like candy. Werewolves were just a little closer to chocolate. The superior night vision I was given became the extreme photosensitivity I have today."

I could feel how painful it was for him to talk about his past, and I held him tighter as he continued, "They needed someone who could heal quickly in order to withstand a werewolf attack. The people unfortunate enough to have inherited my curse die with the dawn. However, I go into more of a regenerative coma during most of the day. It is not a true death, but closer to sleep."

"When did you first realize something was wrong?"

The Dread Moon
by Tracey H. Kitts

"I looked in the mirror one day and realized I had stopped aging. I looked young, even for a wizard. Forever trapped at thirty-something." He smiled ruefully. "In trying to make me stronger, they had made me immortal. That is when the thirst became stronger. For a time I lost control completely. I was horrified, not only at what had been done to me, but by what I had become. I was more of a monster than anything I hunted. I was also more contagious than I had thought. But it was too late. Vampirism was already spreading beyond my control. I tried to kill myself several times. I have stayed out in the sun until I caught fire, only to regenerate at sundown."

"What made you volunteer for something like that?"

"Revenge," he said vehemently. "When I learned the werewolf who had killed my family was still free, I went into a rage. I did not understand how God could allow this to happen to good people. So, I decided that if God would not grant me vengeance, I would take it for myself. But I was a fool. I found the one responsible." He paused and placed his hand over mine against his chest. "I slaughtered his family first ... like cattle, and then I went after him." He was quiet for several heartbeats before he continued, "But it was not enough. Too late I learned that there is no revenge for what was done to my family. Do you know why I am an idiot?" he asked suddenly. "Because vengeance is MINE sayeth the Lord."

"And this is why you believe you're cursed?" I asked softly.

"This is why I *know* I am cursed." He sighed. "I have done horrible things, Lilith."

"I'm not your judge," I whispered as I reached for the shampoo.

He grew quiet once more while I washed his long dark hair. When it was time to rinse, he slid forward and dipped back in the water, putting his head in my lap.

"How did you go from such hatred to getting high with the Jamaicans?" I asked.

He smiled sadly as he replied, "Like I said, there is no revenge to satisfy such injustice. I eventually began to understand that every werewolf was not my enemy. Many were just as cursed as I."

"You pitied them?"

"No, I understood them. They had not asked for what happened to them. At least I had the opportunity to volunteer."

"And the one who gave you those scars?"

"Those scars are the handy work of a *pack* of werewolves. They caught me by surprise, chained me to the ceiling, and nearly whipped me to death. They cut me loose, thinking it would be ironic for a vampire to bleed to death, I suppose. But that was their mistake."

"Your turn." As he said this Dracula sat up and faced me again. Water flowed smoothly through his hair and down his chest, making me hungry for him again. I rested my head against his chest as the vampire's long fingers massaged their way across my scalp. "Do you have any body oil?" he asked.

"Mmhm."

"I would like to rub you down once we get out," he said, and made it sound like a delightful sin.

"That sounds great, but why?"

"Like I said, I do not expect you to love me in the morning. This might be my only opportunity to do the things to you I have dreamed about. I would not want to miss my chance."

I slid down in the tub to rinse my hair as I considered what he had just said. Would it be his only chance? I simply couldn't say. "For all we know, the world might end before morning," I said as I turned to face him again, "and we might all never have another opportunity to do the things we didn't have the nerve to do today."

He reclined against the tub and I leaned into his embrace. Without warning tears began to fall from my eyes and my vision blurred. "I miss Alfred," I whispered.

"I know," he said softly as he held me tighter. "You probably always will."

I looked up into his emerald eyes as I pleaded, "Heal me from this pain. Make it go away."

"My angel, I cannot."

"Yes, you can," I insisted. "You can heal a broken heart, I know you can. It's one of the things I sensed about you in my dreams. That's why I always dreamed about you more after a bad relationship, or after someone hurt my feelings. You *can* heal me, you just don't want to."

"I cannot make your pain go away," he admitted, "but I can help to make it more bearable."

"Then help me," I begged.

"I do not have the strength," he said sadly.

I straddled his waist as I looked deeply into his eyes, "Then take my strength."

The Dread Moon
by Tracey H. Kitts

"No."

"I would give all I have to be rid of even a fraction of this pain," I cried. "Please, help me."

"You do not know what you are saying."

"I'm a grown woman," I said, echoing his earlier response, "and I knew what I was getting into when I brought you home."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Thirteen

"I do not think anyone ever knew what they were getting into when they brought me home," he said with a smile.

Instinctively I knew how to coax him into agreeing to my request; I would have to seduce him. But if I used my power, he would know. He kissed my cheek and I pulled his lips to meet mine. The faint salty taste of my tears mingled with his own tantalizing flavor and I moaned in spite of my heartache. "Help me," I breathed against his lips. "I can help you as well. Through my touch, I have the ability to ease the pain of others, but I cannot help myself."

When I looked into his eyes again they were filled with tears. "No one has offered to relieve my pain since before Mathias passed. I thought I was the only one left with such ability. You would do this for me?"

"Yes," I sighed and kissed him again. "I will take your despair if you'll take my heartbreak."

"We might end up draining each other completely. I have never attempted anything like this before, and I am weakened."

"Take me," I insisted again. "Take what strength I have and use it."

He held my face between his hands and his eyes glowed the deep and solid emerald they had before when he became a part of the storm. No pupil was visible as I gazed into his eyes. "If you are sure," he said, making it a question.

"Yes," I answered, "but don't hypnotize me."

"It will hurt."

"I want to feel it," I insisted, "I want to be aware." He kissed me again and I reached underneath the water between our bodies. "And I want you inside of me." He grew hard as if by my command, but not quite as hard as before. I think he was running low on blood. Once more I slid him inside of me as I pressed my hips against him.

He moved down my throat, kissing softly, moving closer to my jugular. My heart beat faster and I wasn't sure if I was afraid or excited. He nibbled and sucked at my throat as I quickened my pace. The anticipation made me frantic with desire. He moaned against my throat as my muscles squeezed him tight and I couldn't hold back any longer. It was too much. I felt my muscles spasm around him as he sank his fangs into my neck. The pain was immediate and sharp. But no sooner had it begun than it started to subside. It felt as if he were pulling me into him with every breath, and with every pull another wave of orgasm shook me. He held me tighter as he drained my blood and I felt him grow harder inside of me. My arms grew limp where they had gripped his shoulders and he released me instantly.

I gasped as he thrust into me and ran his fingers through the back of my hair. "Do not fight it," he whispered near my ear. "I will not kill you." He thrust into me again, harder this time and I screamed, but not with pain. Dracula wrapped his arms more securely around me and I began to feel the tightness in my chest lifting. The horrible cold ache in the pit of my stomach began to subside and I started to cry with the release.

The Dread Moon
by Tracey H. Kitts

He deserved to have the favor returned. I placed my hands firmly on his back once more and unlocked the power inside of me. I felt the loneliness of centuries that began to pour into me. For a brief moment I knew desperation so intense I would have done anything to escape it and realized this must have been the feeling that made him try to end his life.

"NO," Dracula cried as he pulled back enough that I lost contact. "You cannot take it all, it would destroy you."

"Did I help?" My voice sounded weak. "Do you feel better?"

"I am fine." He smiled. There was a warmth in his eyes I hadn't noticed before. If possible, he seemed more beautiful, and more alive.

A rush of weakness ran through me and I fell against him. "It is alright," he whispered softly. "This is normal, you will be fine."

Dracula continued to murmur words of comfort as he wrapped me in a towel and carried me to bed. I sat up and used the towel to dry my hair while he lit the bedroom candles. "This light is easier on my eyes," he said as he continued to smile at me.

"*You're* easy on my eyes," I sighed as I stretched out on my stomach across the bed. "How long will you stay?"

"As long as you need me to. Actually, I own some property not far from here, an hour's drive maybe. I bought it around the time Vincent built this house," he said as he gestured around the room. "Are you cold? It is normal after losing blood to have a chill."

"A little," I answered.

The house had a few central fireplaces which ran through more than one room. The one at the foot of my bed also ran through Alfred's room downstairs. I felt a loss when I thought about him, but I no longer wanted to tear my heart out. "Thank you," I said, my voice still sounded faint. "I feel better."

"You are welcome." As he began to build a fire he confessed, "I have not felt this good in centuries." He walked to the corner where I kept a large basket of neatly folded blankets. "Come here," he said as he spread a black velvet throw in front of the fire.

The candlelight reflected in his eyes seemed appropriate for he must have been the devil. Nothing that bad for me had ever looked so good. As I stretched out in front of the fire I noticed he had already located the bottle of body oil and had it warming beside the hearth. I lay on my side, staring into the flames for a few minutes before saying, "I'm sorry. It was wrong of me to take advantage of you."

He pulled me to a sitting position again and looked me in the eye. "How sweet. You are genuinely concerned for my feelings. I assure you," he said with a slow, sensual, smile, "I wanted to be taken advantage of." I must have still looked doubtful because he added, "You have not used me, my angel. I do not expect your undying loyalty in exchange for my body tonight. I understand that you are hurt and you have unresolved feelings for the werewolf. You can get back to me." He winked. "I have all the time in the world."

"You're very understanding."

"I have my moments."

The Dread Moon
by Tracey H. Kitts

He motioned for me to lie back down and I stretched out on my stomach again. The fire was warm against my back. The feel of the hot oil combined with his knowledgeable touch was better than any sleeping pill.

"Do you wish me to stay with you until the morning?" he asked.

"Won't you burn in the sunlight? Even with the curtains closed, there's still a good bit of light in here."

"As long as I am not in direct sunlight, I will be fine. I can rest in soft light. Besides, it should still be raining tomorrow. I doubt we will see the sun."

"Will you stay with me then?" I asked, and my voice sounded more wounded than I would have liked. I needed him with me, and it was obvious by the way I asked him to stay.

"Of course. Sleep," he said softly as he massaged the backs of my shoulders, "it is only an hour before dawn. I will put you in bed when the oil has dried."

For a moment I listened to the crackling fire and breathed in his scent as he bent down to kiss my face. It seemed only minutes later I was in bed. Silk sheets felt smooth against my skin as I curled underneath the covers. I saw Dracula sitting at my writing desk, and for a moment I thought he was talking to someone on my communicator. I convinced myself this was a dream and closed my eyes.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Fourteen

Last night the dark stranger in my dreams had done something I had waited years for. At long last his face was made clear to me along with every inch of his beautiful body. He had made love to me as if my body was the only thing standing between him and his sanity. My heart beat faster and I opened my eyes to find the arms that held me were no longer in my dreams.

The curtains were closed, and though a storm rumbled outside, a soft light still crept across the floor. The clock said it was nearly noon. As I recalled, Dracula didn't wake before four o'clock, so that gave me plenty of time to just look at him. He had slipped back into the pajamas, and I ran my hand over the dark silk covering his thigh. I removed his arm where it rested across my shoulders in order to get a better look at him. He didn't look a day past thirty five. I brushed a stray hair back from his face and smiled to myself at the memory of the night before. What had I gotten myself into? I couldn't keep him forever, especially with the way I was sure Marco would feel about the situation.

He was right, I did have unresolved feelings for Marco. But, looking down at the man in my bed, I couldn't bring myself to feel more than a passing twinge of guilt. Alfred and I were finished. No matter how much the thought hurt, it was true. I knew Marco cared for me, but we were not promised to each other. He might not feel the same way, but last night I was a free woman, and I had freely given myself to Dracula.

The Dread Moon
by Tracey H. Kitts

He had helped to ease my pain and reminded me I was desirable. With Marco I felt loved, but with the vampire, I had felt cherished. I rose slowly even though I knew I wouldn't wake him and went to my writing desk. Images of candlelight and his gorgeous body filled my mind as I wrote:

Devil

The candlelight reflected in your eyes

seems appropriate, for I've always seen the devil in you.

My polished red apple, my original sin.

You manage to entice me with your charming grin.

I hadn't submitted anything for publication in a while. Something told me the media had not yet realized I was also a poet. It didn't matter. I liked the poem and intended to submit it to my publisher as soon as possible.

After putting down my pen and paper, I walked back to the bed. I couldn't seem to stop looking at him. What would I say to Marco? I didn't want to hurt him, but I wouldn't lie and say I hadn't wanted Dracula. Needing to tame the beast had only given me a convenient excuse. The only times I had ever felt anything similar to what Marco referred to as the beast, I had been fighting for my life. Maybe that's why I hadn't noticed it so much. He said violence would calm the beast, so in those instances it had been immediately satisfied.

Nothing could have prepared me for what had happened with Alfred. I just wasn't ready to let go of him, but I had no choice. I also wasn't ready to give up Marco. But after spending the night with Dracula, I might not have a choice there either.

The Dread Moon
by Tracey H. Kitts

I leaned over the sleeping vampire and pressed my ear to his chest. A faint heartbeat could be heard and I almost cried at the thought of that heart ever stopping. He had been lonely for so long. I would not insult him by pretending I hadn't enjoyed being with him. He had been so willing to accept whatever I wanted to give, and that meant something to me. No one had ever trusted me so completely. Was it just because he had nothing more to lose, or had he known I wouldn't hurt him?

When I lifted my head I found him watching me. He remained completely still, but there was a smile in his eyes before it ever reached his lips.

"Did you think you had killed me?" he asked with a slow smile.

"No, but isn't it early for you?"

He looked to the clock and grew very serious. "It would seem I have gained something from you," he said softly. "I have not risen before late afternoon for a very long time." He looked back to me then. "Do you feel alright? Have I ... harmed you in any way?"

I considered the question for a moment. "Actually, I feel good, very good considering how yesterday went."

He fell back on the pillows again with a relieved sigh. "You will let me know if that changes? I would hate to think that the first person in centuries to care if I lived or died suffered ill effects from spending the night with me."

"The only ill effect I'm suffering right now is starvation."

"Did you work up an appetite?" His smile was both wicked and charming all at once.

"Do you want to come down with me? I can cover the windows if I need to."

He looked out at the dark blue gray sky and said, "I should be fine."

Dracula put back on the long robe with its blood red lining and lounged in the chair beside my writing desk while I got dressed. I found another pair of comfortable pajamas. Seeing as how it was going to storm all day, I didn't see the point in wearing anything else. I wasn't planning to go out. Watching him sit at the desk prompted a memory from the night before also. "You weren't on my communicator last night, were you?"

"Yes." His answer surprised me. "I hope you do not mind?"

"No, not really. But, what were you doing?"

"I did something I had not done in a long time, I reported to the commander."

It took a minute for his words to sink in. "You called my father? Why? He would have recognized the inside of my bedroom! What did you talk about?"

"Calm yourself, my angel, I thought of these things. I told him who I was and we discussed my circumstances briefly. Then I told him you had been sedated since you were so upset by Alfred's behavior, and I had just put you to bed. We discussed at some length how Alfred reacted so violently to anyone who was not strictly human."

"What did he say?"

"Alfred is undergoing psychiatric evaluation as we speak."

"Shit." I sat down on the bed, feeling sick. "He doesn't know about Alfred's orders, does he?"

"I left that out. But, you have to admit, with H.A.V.O.C. now in effect, we are not just hunting werewolves anymore. Now, we are all expected to get along and Alfred's attitude does not exactly agree with that policy."

"We?"

"Yes, that is another thing we talked about. You see, I know why you were hired to find me. Call them, whoever your contact is and let them know I will be speaking to the council on their behalf. I have known for some time that they were tired of living in hiding."

"Then why didn't you do anything about it?"

"You just helped to lift me from a two hundred year funk last night. At the time they brought this to me before, I did not care. Before last night, I simply wanted my long life to end."

"And now?"

"Now, Jacob is arranging for me to speak to the council. Apparently your uncle is Aldan Medwin, and Jacob believes he would be most interested in hearing what I have to say."

"Anything else?" I asked numbly.

"Yes." He paused. "I have asked to be reinstated."

"You want to hunt again?"

"Actually, if you will have me ... I would like to be the first member of your H.A.V.O.C. team."

"Vlad, I don't know what to say."

"Well, the fact that you call me by first name says a lot."

He was right. Even though he said I could call him Vlad, I'd kind of warmed up to the idea of referring to him as Dracula. After all, that was one of the names he had used in the past.

If truth be told, I believe the idea of Dracula simply appealed to me. I really was attracted to tall, dark, and creepy, no matter how much I might have denied it.

"I just can't believe you called my father."

He held his arms out to me, and like an obedient child I went to him. "After Alfred returning the way he did, I knew your father would be worried."

"Why would that concern you?"

"Because I would not want him to think I meant to hurt you. It is no secret how the commander feels about his daughter. Anyone who protects you instantly puts themselves in his good graces."

"You manipulative son of a bitch." I couldn't resist smiling when I said this.

"That is not why I protected you, however, that is the reason I called Jacob before dawn." He looked at me then and seemed unsure how to proceed. "He thanked me for my help, and asked that I keep an eye on you."

"Why would he ask you to keep an eye on me? No one has heard from you in years. How does he know he can trust you?"

"I placed the call from your bedroom. What choice did he have?"

Dracula reached out his long fingered hand and touched the poem on the desk. "I am familiar with your work," he said. "This is beautiful."

"Thank you."

"Do you always write poetry after a night like we shared?"

His smile did things to my heart that it had no right to do. "I wouldn't know, nothing like that has ever happened to me before."

He told me on our way out of the bedroom that he had arranged a time for Alfred to come back to collect his things. I had to hold onto the railing at the mention of Alfred moving out, but I managed to make it downstairs. I would make a point to not be there when he came. It wasn't that I didn't want to see Alfred again, I just didn't think I could take the pain.

We entered the kitchen to find a very disheveled looking Luther clutching a coffee mug between his hands and propping heavily on the table. "Well, how was it?" he asked perversely. "Hmm? You guys have a good time? You know, I hear it's rare to find a guy who can go all night."

"Do you have a point, Luther?"

"Must you always have sex when I'm in the next room?" he burst out. "Oh, and I found your stash of cigars," he added.

"You don't smoke," I laughed.

"After listening to that all night, I do. Son of a bitch." He turned to Dracula who seemed to be enjoying the conversation. "What exactly did you do to her?"

"Nothing that will cause permanent damage," he replied, smiling wickedly. Luther looked at my throat and Dracula added, "The bite marks will heal in a couple of days."

"I'm afraid I might be gay," Luther said to me suddenly. "Because I was this close to running up there and asking him

to bite me last night." He made a gesture with his hand as he said this and I snickered.

"Any time you are ready," Dracula said as he opened his arms wide.

Luther gave a sort of horrified yell and left the room.

"I like him," Dracula laughed. "Do you suppose I should explain to him that enjoying the bite of a vampire has nothing to do with sexual preference?"

"No," I giggled. "He'll figure it out."

Luther came back in after a few minutes and informed me he had also cleaned the entire downstairs portion of the house the night before since he couldn't sleep. He even cleaned the floor where I had been sick in Alfred's room. He told me Marco had warned him that because of the trauma of Alfred's reaction I might not be in my right mind.

"So, you expected me to calm the beast by attacking *you* last night?"

"Not really, but Marco thought you might."

"And he sent you back knowing this?" I raised one eyebrow with the question.

"He knew I would be able to resist," Luther responded with a shrug.

Dracula's deep throaty laughter floated over us from where he stood in the doorway. It was a knowledgeable, masculine laugh and it made the muscles in my stomach clench with excitement. "Do not be so confident," he taunted. "Had I wanted to, I do not believe even *I* could withstand the power of The Seducer."

"Bastard," Luther mumbled. "I should never have let you check on her."

"She would have killed you last night," Dracula answered. "As it is, I was nearly drained dry."

I could feel myself blushing and knew I must look as red as the dark lining of his robe. Luther rolled his eyes and said, "Did you even talk, or did you just immediately jump her when you opened the door?"

"Actually, we did talk," I said trying to lighten the mood.

"About what?" Luther asked sarcastically while Dracula raised an eyebrow as if to say, "We did?"

"Yes. We had a lengthy discussion about his ... whip appeal," I said with a smile.

Dracula burst out laughing and Luther mumbled, "Goddamnit." But, but he was smiling. After that, Luther and I cooked breakfast while Dracula informed me Alfred would be there at around four thirty. I decided that would be a good time for me to visit Kat and see how she was holding up. Elijah's sister Mary had recently moved to town and Kat was in the process of showing her the ropes. Mary had just finished her degree in interior design and would be helping Kat run the shop as well as freeing up some time for Kat to work on her new project next door, "The Pussykat Café."

It took me a while, but I finally found my favorite pair of jeans. They were old and the knees were worn, but I liked them. "Press be damned," I said to myself as I put on my favorite t-shirt which read, "Pour some sugar on me." The shirt was a deep navy blue and it came to the waist of my low cut jeans, preventing me from exposing my scars in public.

Still, I didn't want anymore pictures like the one Lola had taken to end up in the papers, so I added a short black blazer to the ensemble. The temperature was only going to reach into the fifties, so I put on a pair of boots to match the jacket. It was definitely not a day for sandals.

I had finally purchased a cell phone after becoming addicted to talking with Alek so often. I slipped the thin phone into my coat pocket and went back downstairs. There I found Dracula patiently explaining to Luther, "You are not gay."

"Are you sure?" Luther asked anxiously.

"If you have to ask yourself the question, I really would not worry about it. Besides, enjoying the bite of a vampire has nothing to do with sexual preference. You think that room full of Jamaicans was all homosexual?"

I walked over to where they sat on opposite ends of the sofa. Dracula was draped in all his casual elegance over the golden throw on one end, while Luther clutched a pillow to his chest looking afraid at the other.

"As much as I would love to hear the rest of this fascinating conversation, I'm going to visit Kat. You have my number?" I asked Dracula.

"I will call you when he is finished," he said.

I kissed Luther on the forehead and whispered to Dracula loud enough Luther could hear, that he was not to molest him while I was gone. Dracula laughed, but Luther didn't seem to get the joke.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Fifteen

The drive into town wasn't as bad as I had expected, but walking past Alfred's Hummer to get to my car had nearly done me in. It was a cool drizzly afternoon. I was worried about what Marco had said about pack members being hurt, but didn't think I should call him. There was no telling what he was in the middle of and having to deal with me might only hinder him. I would wait for him to call me.

As I parked in front of Kat's shop I realized I had forgotten to cover the bite mark on my neck. I definitely did not want *that* in the news. I pulled the blazer more tightly around my throat and stepped out of the car. The bell above the door chimed, letting Kat know someone was in her shop.

"Can I help you?" a sweet voice called from the back.

A young woman in her early twenties stepped from behind the counter. She was about my height with long blond hair and green eyes. I knew she must be Mary.

"That's Lilith," Kat yelled from the door to her office. "She can help herself."

Kat approached me with a smile which faded the closer she got.

"What's wrong?"

We went in the back to her office and I told Kat everything that had happened. She seemed more shocked than I had been. "I can't believe that Alfred would...."

"Me either," I agreed.

"He always seemed to adore you!" Kat had begun to pace the room as she tried to rationalize things out loud. When she sat back down she looked at me and I cracked.

"I was really happy," I cried as she leaned in to hug me.

Once I had managed to calm down several minutes later she asked, "So what was it like?"

"Having my heart torn out?" I said sarcastically. "It sucked."

"No stupid, being with Dracula," she asked, smiling. "Perverved minds want to know, so give it up. It will make you feel better."

"It already did," I confessed with a wicked grin. Kat was right, telling her about my night with Dracula drastically improved my mood. "Oh, Kat," I sighed. "I just can't put it into words."

"Well, you've done a pretty good job, *not* telling me about it. I'd hate to hear you describe it accurately," she snickered. "You bitch, you goddamned bitch," she laughed.

"You know," she remarked thoughtfully, "after dating a werewolf, I just don't think I can go back to normal men."

I laughed, but then she asked, "What will you do about Marco?"

"I don't know. I'm hoping he will be more understanding than Alfred."

"Maybe so," Kat said comfortingly. "He's a good man. Besides, he should know as well as anyone what the beast is capable of."

"I hope you're right."

"So, Dracula is cool with everything?" she asked.

"Yeah, he understood that I have feelings for Marco. He seems fine. I just hope I haven't ruined everything."

Kat smiled sadly as she said, "I think it'll take more than that to change the way Marco looks at you."

Before I could respond the phone vibrated in my pocket and I jumped while Kat yelled, "Shit!"

"It's Alek," I said as I read the caller ID. "Shit, I forgot to call him back."

"Hello."

The signal was terrible. In the two minutes we tried to communicate I understood four words, "I'm on my way."

"He's coming here," I told Kat frantically. "I'd better go."

"If he's hot will you call me?" she asked. I gave her a scathing look and she said with a smirk, "You're on a roll. I just want to know if the wizard is hot, that's all."

"You're scandalous," I laughed as I ran to the door.

Fortunately, no one was on the street to see me leave in such a hurry. I'm not sure how, but I knew Alek would beat me to the house. The rain became harder as I reached the long gravel driveway. I pulled up in front of the house to find a motorcycle parked beside my steps. Then I saw him, a tall thin man in a long leather overcoat. He was standing at my front door, soaking wet from the rain he had driven through, looking exactly like the kind of man my mother warned me about. The fact that he would drive through the pouring rain to show up at my door was touching to say the least.

He looked good for his age, late thirties to early forties maybe, though I knew he was much older. The fine lines around his eyes seemed to lend him a certain dignity that a

younger version of himself might not have possessed. His eyes were brown, but not ordinary brown, more like a pale honeyed tea. He had the look of wisdom that a wizard should have, a look that says they know well the power they can wield, and it is not an easy burden. As I approached the door, I recognized him instantly as the man with kind eyes I had sketched last summer.

He had thick, dark blond hair, graying around the temples and worn slightly longer than was fashionable. Long enough to be tucked behind the ears, and stick out above his collar. His eyebrows, like his hair were thick, though slightly darker. They seemed to highlight the pale brown of his eyes. He had a long, almost aquiline nose which cast a slight shadow over his lips. His lips though far from thin, and not large enough to be considered full, remained in a perpetual pout. His perfect posture seemed to lend his tall, slender frame a dignity his tousled hair could not distract from. The fine lines around his eyes and mouth enhanced his charismatic features. His face, like his long leather coat, had an appealing, lived in look that matched his voice so very well. No matter the subject his voice held a quality which said, "There is nothing you can do or say that I haven't done before." Though Alek was much older than me, I found it difficult to see him as an old man.

"Lilith, I presume," he said with a smile.

"Alek," I sighed as I threw my arms around him. "You didn't have to come."

"Of course not, but I couldn't leave you like this."

"Aren't you missing shining armor or something?" I asked.

"It would rust in this weather," he said silkily. "Now tell me, what have I missed?"

I told Alek everything that had happened just before and after our last conversation. I trusted him and wanted his opinion. Though I felt a bit guilty for leaving him hanging, I was glad he had come. Alek and I had become nearly as close as I was to Kat, and it did me good to see him. I had first heard the story of Alek Ambrose and his defeat of Tavarius Maeryn when I was thirteen. I blushed as I remembered my silly fantasy of him coming to my rescue, like a knight in shining armor. In a way, Alek had been my first crush. It was nice to finally have a man to match with those feelings.

As I continued my story, I paused when I got to the part where I spent the night with Dracula. "Oh, Lilith," he sighed as he touched my cheek. "You slept with the vampire didn't you?"

"We didn't sleep."

"I thought you might do that," he said calmly. "It would make sense with the state of mind you were in and the powers he's rumored to have. I can understand where you might find comfort there."

I must have looked surprised because he smiled at me kindly and said, "Did you expect me to be angry?"

"I'm not sure what I expected, but...."

"I'm your friend, Lilith, not your judge," he said softly.

I hugged him again, and let the wet wizard in my house. The moment we set foot inside I remembered why I had been away, but it was too late. Alfred stood in the middle of the

foyer staring at us with what could only be described as hatred.

"What's he doing here?" Alfred asked.

The harshness in his voice nearly made me cry, but I kept my cool.

"He's a friend of mine."

Alfred cursed loudly in Italian before saying, "Do you realize who he is?"

"Yes, he's Alek Ambrose."

"He's The Dream Weaver, Lilith! No wonder you've been acting so strange, you've been listening to him!"

"*Me* acting strange?"

"That's right, *you* acting strange. Did you know he has the power to manipulate people through their dreams? That's right, he can access the subconscious mind and plant thoughts there, *like turning against me!*" Alfred yelled.

"Now before you get your knickers in a twist, let me explain," Alek drawled in his slow British accent.

"I'm waiting," I said, obviously surprised by this information.

"It's true, I am known as The Dream Weaver. However, for me to have influence over someone as psychically powerful as yourself, would have taken more effort than I'm willing to admit." He looked me in the eye as he continued, "Lilith, I'm your friend. I saw no need to mention this ability first of all because I have not lived among my kind for many years now, and I'm not used to referring to myself that way. Second, because I haven't nor do I ever intend to manipulate or mislead you."

I believed him, it was just that simple. I couldn't explain it, but I knew Alek was telling the truth and Alfred was overreacting. Dracula walked up behind Alfred as he said, "And you're going to believe that?"

"Yes, I believe him." Dracula and I made eye contact and seemed to share a thought. "Maybe I should leave until you're finished."

"No," Alfred said quickly, and his tone was less harsh. "Don't leave."

He looked at me, unable to continue whatever he was going to say, and I almost ran to him. I almost threw myself into his arms and asked him to stay. But then I remembered he had agreed to kill me when I was only seventeen years old. He had signed the death warrant of a seventeen year old girl who blindly trusted him. Remembering this helped me to stand my ground. He walked away and my vision blurred.

"He is almost finished," Dracula said as he put his arm around me.

"What about the lab?"

"He will work on that tomorrow."

I nodded and to my embarrassment a few tears escaped before I quickly wiped them away. Alek walked into the sitting room and I heard him introducing himself to Luther as Dracula whispered for my ears only, "Do you wish me to stay another night with you?" The answer was yes. Yes, I wanted him to comfort me, but I didn't want to further risk losing any chance I had with Marco. "Do not worry, we will let your friend sleep tonight. I am merely offering comfort, though you may always take whatever you need from me."

I took a deep breath in order to keep from crying and leaned into his embrace. Dracula bent down so that my face rested against his throat as he wrapped me in his arms. "It will get easier," he said softly, "I promise."

"And what promises are you making?" Alfred said bitterly from the other end of the hallway. "Would these be promises like you made Jacob? Keeping an eye on his daughter, huh? You filthy—"

"Careful how you finish that sentence, Alfred." The words were out of my mouth before I took time to think what I was saying.

"You're actually defending this monster?" he asked in amazement.

"*This monster*, prevented me from tearing my heart out after you left last night," I said quietly. "Don't talk about things you don't understand, Alfred."

"I thought I understood you," he said softly as he turned and left once more.

"Come on." Dracula put his arm around me and led me onto the porch. Normally, there would have still been daylight at five thirty in the afternoon, but the storm prevented any light from passing through the clouds. We walked to the swing on one end of the porch where he sat down and held his arms out to me. The heavy silk robe fell open to reveal his body. The deep red lining contrasted nicely with the black pajamas against his pale skin. The wind was cold and I was beginning to get a chill.

"Take off your shoes," he said, and I obeyed even though my feet were cold. I snuggled against his side and he hugged

me close, as he covered me with the robe in one melodramatic swish of fabric. He took my feet and pressed them firmly against his inner thigh.

"You're warm," I said, sounding a little surprised.

"Did you expect the cold touch of death?" he whispered against my hair.

"Maybe," I said, as I pressed my face against his throat again. He no longer smelled of expensive cologne, but that did not mean he didn't smell good. I breathed deeply as I pressed my face into his hair and he leaned over to accommodate. Dracula had his own scent, not unlike the werewolves. He simply smelled the way a man should smell, and having his soft dark hair covering my face I was lost in the feel of him. The cold rain beat down on the roof above us and fell loudly to the ground. The icy wind whipped past our faces, but it went unnoticed. I pressed my lips to the warm skin beneath his earlobe and ran my arm around the ridges of his stomach. I could feel his pulse beneath my lips, and as I accidentally brushed across one nipple, it grew faster.

"Will you comfort me tonight?" I asked softly.

I was beyond caring what anybody might think. In his arms I found some release from the awful pain inside of me. If I was ever going to get a good night's sleep again, I needed him beside me to do so. I wasn't sure if I would ever be able to sleep alone again. As long as I wasn't alone, I had something else to think about. If I was by myself, I was afraid I might fall apart.

"Of course," he said as he rubbed his face against mine.

After a few minutes Luther came outside, I didn't even notice until he cleared his throat loudly. "He's gone." At this announcement I felt suddenly empty. Alfred was gone. What did that mean? I couldn't seem to wrap my mind around the concept. I withdrew from Dracula's embrace and put my shoes on before walking numbly back into the house.

The two men followed mutely in my wake until we reached the sitting room where Alek stood trying not to drip on the floor. "Oh, Alek, I'm sorry. Do you need a towel?"

"That would be preferable," he answered with a sarcastic smile.

While Luther helped him bring in the two bags from his motorcycle and park it in the garage, I fetched them both a towel. I pulled Alek aside and told him how much it meant to me that he had come riding to my rescue.

"I'm just keeping a promise I made a long time ago to an old man who was concerned about his great, great granddaughter."

My eyes widened. "You knew Mathias too? How come you never said?"

"You didn't ask," he replied with a wink. "Besides, I was afraid you might use your powers on me and have me wearing ladies underwear on my head and doing the cha-cha in frilly pink knickers."

I giggled and hugged Alek again. "Would you like some coffee or tea?"

"Tea would be wonderful." He smiled as I led him to the kitchen.

He removed his wet coat and I went to hang it in the laundry room to dry. I walked in to find Luther stripped down to his undies. He jumped all over when I opened the door. "Gees don't do that!"

"What's wrong with you?" I laughed, tossing him another towel. "You can't go around naked in my house," I teased. "You know I'm grateful for the company, but how long will you be staying?"

"Marco wanted me to stay until things settle down with you." He shrugged. "I'm pretty much here till he says he needs me back. That is, unless you want me to leave."

"No," I said quickly. "I like having you here."

"You just want my body," he teased as he pulled on a dry pair of jeans.

I walked slowly toward him, hooked one finger in the waist of his jeans and jerked him toward me as I whispered, "I think you're gorgeous, Luther. But if I wanted your body, I'd have had it by now."

"Are you so confident?"

"Yessssss." As I said this I let the very essence of sex flow through my voice and watched Luther quiver. "Get dressed pretty boy, I'm starving."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Sixteen

I met Alek coming out of the half bath underneath the stairs as I rounded the corner. He had changed into a pair of jeans and a thin white shirt. It was one of those shirts that are meant to be worn untucked, with ruffles around the collar which he had left open. There were no ruffles around the sleeves as with Dracula, but it was no less appealing. I had to say, Alek looked good for a sixty year old wizard.

"Are you hungry?" I asked.

"Ravenous," he said, smiling.

"Come on, the water should be hot by now. You can have some tea while I decide what's for dinner."

He seated himself at the table beside Dracula while I started looking through the cabinets. I still loved Italian food, even without Alfred around to cook it, and I had a craving for angel hair pasta and shrimp.

"Do you like spice?" I asked Alek.

"I adore it," he replied with a smile as I handed him a tea cup.

"Good, we'll be having *Gamberi del Diavolo*, tonight."

"Shrimp of the Devil." Dracula smiled. "You do live life dangerously."

"Do you mind us eating in front of you?" I asked. "It feels sort of awkward to not offer you some."

"It is alright. I got used to things like that a long time ago. If it makes you feel better, I lost my taste for food long before you were born."

"Don't you miss anything?" I asked.

"Chocolate," he said with a wink. "Actually, I was thinking that if you wish me to stay longer, I might go and get some of my things while you have dinner tonight."

"Oh, alright. I'd forgotten you have a place only an hour away."

"Would you like me to get the wine before I go?"

Dracula left to get the wine while I placed the shrimp in a bowl of cold water and added some sugar and salt.

"You keep wine in the dungeon?" Alek asked.

"It seemed the ideal place." I shrugged.

Dracula had just reentered the room with a nice white wine, when I heard Luther opening the front door. By this time Alek was dipping a bag of tea into a cup of boiling water and reclined casually at my table with one bare foot tucked underneath him.

Kat walked in and immediately blurted out, "I leave you alone for a few hours and here I find a case of blatant tea bagging in your kitchen."

Alek threw back his head and laughed while Dracula bit his lip and shook his head. "Alek, this is my friend Kathryn Roberts. Kat, this is Alek. I believe you've met Dracula." He bowed gracefully, and Kat took a seat at the table, probably to keep from falling. She shook hands with Alek while I commented, "I'm not sure where to put you."

"Excuse me?" Alek laughed.

"Well, Luther's in the guest room, Dracula's in the dungeon, and ... it just seems wrong to put someone in Alfred's room."

"I was thinking that since your dungeon is large, and it would appear your friend spends more time upstairs than he does below," he raised an eyebrow as if challenging me to say otherwise, "perhaps we can share the dungeon. If you will have me, I'd like to stay for a while and it would be ideal for my equipment."

"You can stay as long as you like." I looked to Dracula and he nodded. "What will you do while you're here? I mean, what about your theatre?"

"I've left things in the hands of my capable assistant. This will be his big break. Besides, I can still write plays here, which is truly my first love."

"You are in theatre?" Dracula asked. Alek nodded. "I would like to discuss some things with you later if you do not mind?"

"Certainly," Alek said as he began to sip his tea.

"Now, if you will excuse me." The vampire leaned in close as he handed me the wine and whispered, "I will be back in time for bed." I shivered as his voice seemed to curl around me like a lovers arms. I turned around, still not touching him, but it was hard to ignore how good he smelled. He smelled like chocolate tastes.

"Do you need to borrow a car?" I asked breathlessly.

"Just leave your balcony door open," he said with a wink.

Kat sighed loudly as Dracula exited the room with a swish of his long robe.

"Ah, melodrama," sighed Alek. "What do you want to bet he's been in theatre at some point too?"

"I'd bet my ass," Kat mumbled.

"If I thought you were serious, I might have a go," Alek laughed.

"Oh." Kat blushed. "I didn't mean to say that out loud."

"Well," I said, "the night is young, and the shrimp need to set for thirty minutes. What say we open the wine? You will be staying for dinner, won't you?" I asked Kat.

Since there wasn't enough room for everyone at the kitchen table, we moved to the sunroom. Alek and I sat on the sofa with our backs turned to the large glass wall overlooking the woods, while Kat and Luther sat in chairs on opposite ends of the long coffee table. We had all just poured ourselves a glass of wine when Alek commented conversationally, "I've found it to be very difficult for lycanthropes to become intoxicated." He flicked his wrist over my glass. "Now try it." I took a sip while he did the same to Luther's glass.

Luther took a large gulp and said, "It's stronger, but it tastes the same. How'd you do that?"

"PFM," Alek explained, his voice dripping with sarcasm. Luther looked confused. "Pure fucking magic," he elaborated with a smile.

At least forty minutes later we were all well on our way to being drunk when I asked Alek, "How exactly did you get here, and don't say PFM."

He put his arm around me as he said, "My darling, I knew you were in trouble, and I came running. Of course the shinning armor was too difficult to run in, so it had to be left behind."

"I thought you said it would rust?" I teased.

Kat laughed and poured herself another glass while he said, "Well, there's that. I thought it would be rude to teleport into your house, so I took the first flight I could find. The closest airport is at least an hour from here, however, something that I did years ago suddenly made sense."

"What's that?" I asked.

"I bought that motorcycle," he said, pointing through the glass wall toward the garage, "and put it in storage near the airport."

"Why?" Kat asked.

"Because I felt that I should."

"A man who listens to his feelings, are you gay?" As soon as Kat said this, Luther launched into his fears of being gay because he had found the thought of Dracula's bite appealing. I took this as my cue to start cooking. Alek soon followed.

I began warming some extra virgin olive oil in a large sauce pan and adding garlic, oregano, and red pepper flakes.

"I like your friends," Alek said, smiling as he propped his back against the counter beside me. "Are you planning to molest the vampire again when he returns?"

"No," I snickered as I added a can of stewed tomatoes.

"But he *is* spending the night with you?"

"That's right, and I'm not having sex with him. Is there any particular reason for this line of questioning?"

"I might be a little jealous," Alek said with a casual tone while he emptied his glass.

"Or, you might be a little drunk," I teased.

We had dinner in the sunroom around the coffee table with another bottle of wine, which Alek was kind enough to keep

spiked. By the time Dracula returned we were dancing around trying to do the *Hookie Jookie*. All of the sudden, Alek threw a spoon at Luther and yelled, "Oh come off it, you're not gay! Here," he said impatiently and put Luther's hand on Kat's chest. "Does that appeal to you?"

"Umm," Luther said awkwardly.

"There, you see? Not gay."

Luther removed his hand quickly, apparently afraid of the look Kat had given him.

"Well, I have missed all the fun," Dracula's soft sexy voice called from the doorway.

I looked up and my heart stopped. He was wearing black slacks which appeared to be made of thin comfortable looking cotton. The tunic style shirt he wore matched the deep green of his eyes, making them appear to glow. The waves of his dark hair fell over the tops of his shoulders where it contrasted well with the tunic. The shirt hung open in a deep vee to reveal part of his chest. Had I really said I didn't plan to molest him? Surely I was mistaken.

He flowed into the room with a casual elegance I had begun to admire. "I got my fill of reggae at The Dread Moon," he said as he looked through the CD's we'd brought down from my room. My heart beat faster as he paused for a moment on the music we'd listened to only the night before. Flashes of his naked body appeared before my eyes and I had to sit down.

Butterflies assaulted my already battered heart when he started to play the exact song we had referenced earlier when discussing his "whip appeal". It was one of my all time

favorite R & B songs. "I do not believe we finished our discussion." He smiled as he held his hand out to me.

Dracula had slipped off his shoes by the door, he had nice feet. It suited him to be standing there in my sunroom, with the storm billowing past the glass windows, barefoot and sexy. Luther snorted loudly in protest and Dracula said softly, "Indulge me for a moment."

I took his hand and we danced while Kat excused herself to the bathroom, Luther went into the kitchen, and Alek helped himself to another glass of wine. Even without the shoes, Dracula was tall, and I only reached his chest. He held me close and I noticed he once again smelled of expensive cologne. Muscles which had previously been still began to clench simply from his nearness.

"It is alright," he said comfortingly. "You can get back to me."

By the end of the night, I'd taught Kat and Luther the thriller while Dracula and Alek, who already knew the dance, had a good laugh. Kat passed out in the sunroom while Luther fell asleep on the sofa in the sitting room, and Alek seemed to be asleep in a chair by the fireplace.

"Alone at last," the vampire whispered softly.

In the few moments it took us to walk upstairs, I thought my heart would leap through my chest. At the very least it had made its way into my throat. I watched as he checked to be sure all the doors and windows were locked while I changed into my pjs. Three large leather bags sat in front of the balcony, and I found I rather liked the idea of his things

being in my room. He drew the curtains closed as he said, "The sun will be out tomorrow."

He looked better than I could put into words as he stretched back against my pillows and said, "How about a bedtime story?"

That was probably the best suggestion I had heard all day. No one had read to me since I was little. I selected a large book of fairy tales from the shelf and curled up next to him, placing my head more on his stomach than his chest. I wrapped myself around him and sighed as he flipped through the pages. We were just getting into *The Sleeping Beauty* when someone knocked at the door. Luther stood there looking depressed as he whined, "The wizard snores."

"Come on," I said, yawning. "I hope you like fairy tales."

I curled back up against Dracula and Luther snuggled against my back. I could tell by his breathing that Luther was asleep almost instantly. Dracula explained to me quietly, "I think he just feels safer to be near you."

"That's sweet, but why?"

"Are you not the alpha female of his pack?"

"Not exactly."

"But you are the next in line?" It was more of a statement than a question.

"Yes," I sighed as I snuggled closer against his side.

In a way what he said made a lot of sense. It did seem strangely normal for Luther to be sleeping with me. Once again, I was afraid of becoming more like a werewolf, but I seemed to have little choice in the matter. Besides, I'd never

really liked sleeping alone. Dracula continued his story, and I think I fell asleep before Beauty woke up.

My dream began with me standing in the woods. The dark stranger from my dreams stood before me, and his face was clear. He began telling me about a beautiful rose. There was a large oak tree further in the woods. This rose was growing behind it. He said he'd never seen anything like it.

"It is beautiful," he said. "You will not believe it. The rose is growing all over everything."

When I asked exactly where it was, he told me. As he described it, I realized I had planted the rose, and then forgotten about it. While he spoke I got a picture of the rose in my mind. I even remembered telling my father about how well it was growing. I couldn't believe I had forgotten it. I saw the rose only inches from the vine reaching the road. It was beautiful. It seemed to have grown very rapidly. All the leaves I saw appeared to be new growth.

This picture in my mind became clearer as he described the scene. I never actually saw the rose in person. I remembered it being the most beautiful color, a color I cannot describe. Though it was rich and deep, I cannot say for certain if it was red or pink. It was love. If I had to give it a name, the rose was the color of love, and it surrounded and covered all. I could see it clearly, filled with blooms. He took me to see the rose, but I don't remember walking there. My train of thought seemed to shift before I physically saw it, but I *felt* the rose before awakening.

* * * *

The bedroom door banged open and my first thought was I'd forgotten to lock it behind Luther.

"I don't believe you!" Kat screeched. Luther and I both jumped, but it was still a bit early for Dracula. "You've got a wizard downstairs, who's hot by the way, and you didn't call me, and you're up here sleeping between a werewolf *and* a vampire, and Marco's at the door."

"What?"

"Marco, he's waiting for you on the porch."

The moment I had dreaded since I'd first brought Dracula home had finally arrived. I thought I might be sick before I could put on my bedroom shoes and make it down the stairs. Even though it was nearly ten o'clock, Alek was still snoring loudly from the chair by the fire. The situation was not without humor, but I was too afraid to laugh.

When I opened the door and looked at Marco I was not intimidated by the look on his face, I was terrified. As I stepped onto the porch I turned to Kat who was right on my heels. "Can you give us a minute?" I asked.

"What am I supposed to do, listen to Alek snore?" she grumbled.

"I don't know, go touch the vampire or something." I waved my hand at Kat to speed her along.

"Really?" She beamed.

"Sure, just give us a minute."

I turned back to Marco and found I couldn't breathe.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Seventeen

Marco backed me into the door and pressed his face against my stomach. He sniffed his way up to my throat with a growl as he said, "Who's been sleeping in your bed besides Luther?"

"Dracula," I answered. I decided if he could be man enough to ask the question, I could be woman enough to give a straight answer. "When you turned me down, I couldn't control the beast. He was on his way into my room to check on me when I came back in through the balcony." Marco's expression looked pained, but I continued before he could stop me, "It was only one night, Marco, but I won't lie and say I didn't want it, because I did." He growled threateningly and I held up a hand. "Let me finish. I wanted to spend the night with him, and I did. But you know what has been on my mind ever since? I've been hoping I haven't missed my chance with the man who makes my heart beat faster every time he's near me. The one who makes me want to do stupid things like trust, and share my feelings, and love." I wiped at a tear and kept going. "The one who makes me feel like I'm the only woman in the world when he looks at me. Fuck me; I hope I haven't missed my chance with Marco."

I watched as his eyes which had blazed amber before faded back to a warm chocolate brown. "Damn it, Red," he swore and turned his back on me. "If I had known, I would have—"

"Probably done the same thing," I interrupted. "You wouldn't have risked the lives of your wolves for your personal pleasure, and you know it."

"Not theirs," he said fiercely as he turned to me, backing me into the door again, "But my own. I would risk all that I am," he said as he grabbed a handful of my hair and jerked my head to the side, "to erase these marks." He kissed the bite the vampire had left on my neck as he growled, "You're mine, Red. You have always been," he said as he looked at me, and his eyes filled with tears, "and you always will be *mine*."

He kissed me with a ferocity born of need and depravation and I clung to him. When Marco finally released me I staggered. "What happens now?" I asked breathlessly.

He took a shuddering breath before he said, "I'd like to date you." That was a response I hadn't expected, but I held my piece while he continued. Marco had obviously put some thought into what he was saying. "You've given everyone else the chance that should have been mine."

"How long have you been wanting to ask?"

"Since you went with Julius Blight back when you were in training. But it wasn't appropriate for a twenty six year old Hunter to ask out the commander's seventeen year daughter, so I kept it to myself." He closed the space between us again and propped a hand on either side of the door, pinning me once more. "Well, I'm not keeping it to myself anymore, Red." He pointed upstairs suddenly. "As long as he sleeps here, Luther stays."

"Alright."

"Red," he said more softly as he nuzzled against my cheek, "Let's take it slow. After so many years of every woman having your face when I closed my eyes, I want to wait a while before we're intimate." He pressed himself against me and I felt with some shock that Marco was very aroused. "When I make love to you, I want you to know it's me, and not someone else when you close your eyes."

I didn't know what to do besides hug him. I had never meant to hurt Marco. After a few moments silence, I asked about the pack and we sat in the swing while he explained. Bade and his followers, who were still split from Marco's pack, had been unsuccessful in catching Dr. Bill Williams, a madman who had been conducting experiments with werewolf DNA. Dr. Williams had managed to extract the part of the lycanthropy virus that is wolf and replace it with the genetic material of other animals. Apparently since he had escaped capture last summer he had been attacking people and spreading all sorts of variations of the virus.

In a bizarre turn of events, a werelizard had attacked some members of the pack a few nights ago. They were torn up pretty badly, but they would all recover, apparently with no ill effects. One member of the band from The Oasis, Creature Comforts, had had his leg torn off at the hip. Being a werewolf, he would regenerate, but it would take at least a month, if not longer to regrow such a large appendage.

"What happened to the lizard?" I asked, still a little shocked about what had happened to the band member.

"I killed him," he answered simply.

"You showed up just in time to save their lives, didn't you?"

"Yes," he said quietly.

Once again, Marco had bigger problems than Bade Garren to worry about. Bade had once been Marco's second in command. However, some time in the last year, he had split from the pack and formed his own small group of followers. He disagreed with some of Marco's policies, like not keeping a harem for himself, and not allowing higher ranking wolves to have slaves. In short, Bade didn't feel that Marco was tough enough. If Bade ever openly challenged Marco for the position of wolf king, I believed Marco would kill him. But he didn't want to.

He said they had also found a wereleopard named Judas. Since Judas appeared to be the only one of his kind, Marco had let him join the pack even though he wasn't a werewolf.

"How does everyone else feel about this?" I asked.

"Some of them don't like it, but they'll get over it. All animals seek others of their kind, and Judas has none."

"And you couldn't leave him there, could you?"

"No, I couldn't. He was injured trying to help my wolves. I owed him."

About that time we were both startled by the sound of a masculine scream followed by Luther's laughter and an incoherent female voice.

"Would you like to come in?" I snickered.

"Unfortunately, I've got some business to attend to." I walked with him to the top step where he kissed my forehead as he said softly, "I'll call you."

My head was still spinning with all that had just happened. When I saw Dracula dash past me and into the hall closet, I realized Marco and I had been talking for at least two hours. It was noon, and Kat had apparently taken my suggestion of touching him to heart.

"What is going on?" I asked.

Luther and Alek had an arm around each other and were laughing to the point of tears. Kat was clawing at the door that Dracula seemed to be holding closed from the inside.

"I woke up just in time to stop your friend from putting her hand down my pants," Dracula said through the door.

I looked to Kat who blushed and shrugged.

"Could you do something about her please?" He sounded desperate. "I am flattered, really. I would just like to wake up without being molested. You know, this is why I used to sleep in a coffin."

Luther and Alek gave a collective howl and sat down on the floor. I looked at Kat pleadingly and she said, "Oh, alright. I'll stop trying to touch him."

Dracula cracked the door and looked outside. "Promise?" he asked.

"I promise," Kat sighed.

"Good, because your hands are cold," he teased.

Kat took off her shoe and threw it at him. He ducked well in advance of the offending accessory and laughed.

"Could you help me find my cloak, please?" He directed this question to me. "I am sure it is in your closet, but there is a nasty shaft of sunlight in my way."

While we were alone, I used the opportunity to tell Dracula what had just happened with Marco. He listened quietly as he threw the cloak over his shoulders with a dramatic flare I would have had to practice.

"Thank you for telling me," he said as he reclined on my bed once again, "but you do not owe me an explanation."

"Would you rather I kept it to myself and let you wonder?" I snapped.

"You misunderstand, my angel. I knew the moment we met that there was unfinished business between the two of you. I did not expect you to fall into my arms and forget whatever you had before. However, do not be mistaken, I would love nothing more than to hear the werewolf was so insanely jealous he gave up entirely." A wicked smile curled his lips and his laugh floated over my skin like a caress.

"Have no fear that I will try to steal you away. If the time is right," he said with a wink, "*when* the time is right, you will come to me."

I crossed my arms underneath my breasts and just stared at him for a moment. His smile was contagious, mostly because I knew he was being an ass on purpose. He obviously enjoyed stirring things up. But, I suppose one has to find new ways to amuse oneself over several thousand years.

"It sounds like you've got it all worked out. Why not just make an ass of yourself now and take me away to a dark castle somewhere?" I purred sarcastically.

He smiled again as he opened his arms slowly. "What can I say, my angel? You make me want to be a better monster."

"You're a sick bastard," I said, but I moved to hug him anyway.

"Yes," he agreed. "And to everyone else, I always will be. Running off the werewolf would hurt you, so therefore, I refrain."

While we lay there for a moment, he told me his meeting with the council was scheduled for next week. However, he would only be gone for a day since his case was well known to the council. I think my uncle Aldan had just hurried things up for him.

"How do you know? When did you have time to talk to anyone?" I asked.

"When I went to my 'dark castle,' I also retrieved my old communicator."

"Do you really have a castle?"

"Worry not, my angel, I shall show you some day," he purred. His words were both a promise and a threat.

When we went back downstairs, I found Alek and Luther arguing over what to fix for lunch while Kat searched frantically for some aspirin. Alek was about an inch shorter than Luther, making him around six foot one. Luther used his inch or so height advantage to hold the tea out of Alek's reach. Dracula pulled up the hood of his long cloak and stood in the corner to avoid the light streaming through the window. He watched the scene for a full minute before saying, "You are a wizard, remember?"

Alek pressed his finger to Luther's side and he dropped the tea as if he had been hit with a stun gun. I gave Kat the

aspirin and told them to shut up and cook something. Alek finished my sentence with, "or you can bloody well starve."

Luther made BLT's while I told everyone what Marco had shared with me about the pack.

"Which band member exactly?" Kat asked anxiously.

"The drummer. Why?"

"He hurt Beau?" she asked in a panicked voice.

"He'll be alright Kat. They got him medical attention in time, he didn't bleed to death. Now all he's got to do is regenerate. I never thought I'd say this about anyone, but lucky he's a werewolf." I eyed her suspiciously and added, "Beau, huh? On a first name basis are we?"

"What?" She gave me a sly smile. "It's short for Beauregard. They did some work for me last Halloween, remember?"

"I'll bet," Luther snickered.

Dracula moved behind me and said softly, "If you will excuse me, I am going down to the dungeon to prepare my statement for the council."

As he walked past Kat he pressed the tip of his index finger against her throat and whispered, "This should take care of your headache." Instantly, she fell forward, gripping the table and screaming like a banshee.

"Fuck me," Luther exclaimed while Alek asked, "Do you make house calls?"

Dracula's laughter floated through the room as he walked toward the dungeon door. He must have removed the key without anyone noticing.

After lunch, Kat announced she was going home. I followed her onto the porch and told her what had happened with Marco. I also shared with her Dracula's reaction. Her eyes sort of glazed over as she said, "See, I knew Marco cared more about you than that. Wow. How romantic. You told him the truth and he still cares. Do you think he gives lessons?"

"Unfortunately, no."

"As for Dracula, I expected as much. There's more to him than we'll probably ever figure out. But one thing I do know, he's got it bad for you. Maybe even worse than Marco, but I doubt it." She rubbed her neck where he had touched her earlier. "If that's his idea of revenge, maybe I should piss him off more often."

"Actually, I think he was hoping to embarrass you by making you have an orgasm in a room full of people."

"Doesn't know me very well, does he?" she laughed.

After Kat left I remembered Alfred was going to finish moving his things out of the lab that day and I felt sick. When I looked at the clock I realized he was probably already there. He was right beneath me and I couldn't go down and talk to him. I would never again run down the steps to see what Alfred was doing, or see him smile when I walked into the room. I would never watch the way his hair shined like polished obsidian in the morning light.

Alek's warm hand on my shoulder brought me back to reality.

"Once Alfred's done, Luther and Dracula have agreed to help me transport my things from London." He brushed away

the tears that seemed to always be present lately as he said, "You look tired."

"I am," I said softly. "Not being alone has helped, but I'm still not getting enough rest. It's almost like when I'm recovering from an injury."

"That's because you are," he said kindly. "A broken heart is one of the most grievous injuries known to mankind, and yet it is the one so many people treat as a flesh wound. Or worse, they simply ignore it." Alek led me toward the couch as he said, "I can help if you will let me, if you trust me to do so."

"What do you suggest?"

"I have a potion that will provide you with restful sleep, perhaps the most restful sleep of your life."

"Are there any side effects?"

He raised one eyebrow, as if considering how much he should tell me before he continued. "None, but you will not dream. The potion prevents dreams and focuses on resting the mind and body."

"A potion to prevent dreams?"

"Well, I am The Dream Weaver," he said with a smile. "Will you try it?"

I agreed to try the potion and Alek informed me he had brought some with him. Once again his explanation for this was he felt like he should bring the potion, so he did. Alek suggested I take a bathroom break and rejoin him in the living room when I was ready. Dracula was still in the dungeon, and Luther was cleaning the kitchen.

The Dread Moon
by Tracey H. Kitts

When I reentered the room I found Alek standing in front of the fireplace. In the few minutes it had taken me to return, he had a blazing fire which added both warmth and atmosphere to the large room. In his right hand was a small purple bottle. It glowed and shimmered in the light as he beckoned me forward.

He put his arm around me and held the potion to the firelight. "Do you see those flecks of light?" I nodded. "Every one of them is an eraser."

"Eraser?" I looked up at him and found his brows knit in concentration as he stared at the bottle. Alek looked very serious and very much like a wizard. Wisdom seemed to be etched in every line of his face as he considered the small glistening bottle.

"They are not permanent," he said at last, his sultry voice making me want to hear more. "The dreams you would have had will eventually surface. But for now, they will erase your dreams." I wasn't sure I liked the idea of my dreams being erased, but at the same time, I didn't want to have nightmares about Alfred leaving. Alek looked at me closely, and I got the distinct impression that he could read my mind. "Keep in mind, my dear, that one man's nightmare is another man's dream. What would haunt you today, when it surfaces later, will be but a memory."

"How long will I sleep?"

"Long enough to ease your mind, and give you rest." As he said this I took a deep breath and fell in love with Alek's cologne. It didn't have the rich expensive smell that Dracula's did, it was softer. The scent was subtle, gently stirring the

The Dread Moon
by Tracey H. Kitts

mind as well as the body. It was at once new and familiar. Maybe it was just the way a sexy wizard was supposed to smell.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Eighteen

Alek tipped the bottle against my lips to be sure I got the proper amount. I asked whether or not I would go into a comma and he informed me very seriously that he hadn't given me that much. I wished I hadn't asked. I reclined comfortably on the sofa while Alek covered my feet with a blanket. He explained that my body temperature would drop lower than normal due to the deep level of relaxation I would attain. I was a little scared, but it sounded wonderful.

Alek took a seat on the coffee table in front of me and said in a dreamy hypnotic voice, "Close your eyes." A more sensual command had never been uttered. I knew in that moment if Alek Ambrose possessed the voice of seduction, we would all be in serious trouble. There was magic in his voice, though of a different sort. However this was combined with his naturally sexy voice, making his every word seem like a blessing.

"Relax," he purred. "There is nothing else for you to do." His voice seemed to float from one ear to the other as if he hovered over my left shoulder, and then my right. I felt myself begin to float down, as if following the sound of his voice deeper inside myself. Though I knew the room to be well lit from the two large bay windows, I saw only darkness, the softest most velvety darkness. His voice was my guide, taking me to my refuge. When I thought I was as relaxed as possible his voice floated through my mind asking, "Would you like to go deeper?" The answer was yes, yes I would.

The Dread Moon
by Tracey H. Kitts

"Deeper now," he whispered. His voice was seductively honeyed, like a silken balm to my ears.

"Yes," my mind echoed. "Yes."

* * * *

It was two o'clock the following afternoon before I was aware a world existed outside of Alek's voice and the solitude of my mind. I blinked a few times at the clock on the mantle to be sure I had read the time correctly. It appeared that rain was in our forecast again, judging by the clouds gathering outside. I stared out the window for several minutes before I sat up and saw Alek dozing peacefully in a chair by the fire. He was wearing another tunic which looked even better on him than the first. This one was a deep shade of midnight blue and devoid of ruffles though the top laces hung open as before. His dark blond hair stuck out at odd angles giving him a rather wild appearance.

I rose slowly and walked over to where he rested. He was slouched down with his hands and ankles crossed. His head was tilted back, and his mouth hung open, but he wasn't snoring.

"What web are you weaving?" I asked softly.

He sat up straight and a slow smile spread across his lips. "Was I snoring?"

"No."

"Good. I wouldn't want to listen to Luther complain anymore. Actually, I only snore when I'm drunk or having an allergy attack." He stood up and tilted my face so he could look into my eyes. "How do you feel?"

I thought it over a minute before answering, "Fine." He looked at me for a moment longer, as if searching for some ill effect of the potion. "I love your voice," I commented with a sigh.

The corners of his mouth twitched. "Why, thank you. But, everyone loves my voice when I'm putting them under."

I took another deep breath of his cologne as I said, "It's not so bad now."

"You flatter me."

"Thank you for the rest." As I walked toward the kitchen I looked over my shoulder and said, "And just so you know, I don't flatter anybody."

His laughter echoed across the foyer as I started looking for a snack. Alek had tea while I had coffee, and we shared some fruit. He started telling me what had been in the news since I had been asleep. Reports of dead animals were turning up everywhere and several people had been attacked, some at night clubs, others in broad daylight.

"They're expecting H.A.V.O.C. to take some action," he said.

"They think this is the work of a werewolf?"

"Well, they wouldn't really know, would they? Most people don't have experience with this sort of thing."

"Shit. I suppose we'll have to investigate just to *prove* it isn't a werewolf. This is all we need. We've got to find Dr. Williams. I'm positive it's him."

"Yes," Alek agreed. "From the sound of it, someone should put him down like a rabid dog." He said this with such a

serious expression I was shocked at the sudden change in subject. "You know what else has been in the news?"

I was afraid to ask. "What?"

"Your little interlude yesterday," he said, twitching his index finger back and forth in the general direction of the front porch.

"My what?"

"You know, when you were talking to the werewolf." He retrieved a paper from the counter and laid it on the table.

I slid the paper toward me with an overwhelming feeling of dread while Alek asked, "Who would have been here to do such a thing?"

"That fucking bitch!" I yelled as I looked at the photo. There on the front cover of a well known and widely distributed newspaper was Marco pressing me flat against the front door. To my further embarrassment, I didn't exactly look like I objected.

"And which fucking bitch would this be?" Alek asked calmly.

I reminded him about Lola. As much as we had talked, her name had come up before during a conversation about "people who chap my ass."

"Ah," he sighed, "*that* fucking bitch."

"Shit," I said with feeling. "Do you think Alfred saw this one too?"

"Of course. The Hunter's have this paper delivered."

"How in the hell do they have this paper delivered on a different planet?"

"You push a button, throw the paper on a transporter, and viola! Instant paper." He shrugged.

"Oh, my God," I moaned miserably.

Then I decided to read the headline: *After openly admitting to having known the new leader of H.A.V.O.C., Lilith Mercury, for some time, Marco Barak is seen here proving how well they get along.*

"Oh, my God," I groaned again as Alek put another paper in front of me. This one had the same picture with a caption that read: *Is there such a thing as safe sex with a werewolf?* Underneath this was a blurb about another article where a woman claimed to have slept with a werewolf. It was called "Wildman In My Bed."

"There's more," he drawled sarcastically.

The third paper featured a picture of Marco and I sitting in the swing. He had just reached over to take my hand as he was telling me about pack members being attacked. It was an intimate moment, and I hated Lola for stealing it, but not as much as I hated her when I read the caption: *Here alpha werewolf Marco Barak is seen quietly courting Lilith Mercury, leader of the new organization H.A.V.O.C. It looks like the only thing she's hunting these days is a hot werewolf.*

"Goddamnit, this is my private life!" I screamed as I flung the paper across the room.

"But you are seeing him, aren't you?"

"Yes, I'm seeing him, I'm not *fucking* him on my front porch. Damn, Lola. I'll get that bitch if it's the last thing I do." I was suddenly reminded of my neighbor, Marcy Johnson's

promise to do the same thing. I needed to call Marcy, but I had some things to take care of first.

After taking several minutes to collect myself, I called Annabel, the vampire who had visited me nearly two weeks ago about finding Dracula. I relayed his message about speaking to the council on their behalf and she thanked me profusely. "Whatever you did to convince him, we will be eternally grateful."

Before I could stop myself I confessed, "It was my pleasure."

"I'm sure it was," she purred before hanging up.

As soon as I hung up with Annabel I began looking through the phone book for Marcy. Marcy Johnson and I weren't exactly friends. She taught elementary school and I hunted werewolves, we didn't have loads in common, even if she had bought my cover story of being an artist. Fortunately, even though she was my closest neighbor, Marcy was several acres away. She and I had gotten off on the wrong foot when she moved into the neighborhood last year and immediately started coming on to Alfred. I later found out she had done this on the recommendation of Lola. Out of this situation, Marcy and I had developed an understanding. She had assured me she would get Lola for making her think the worst of me and embarrassing herself. If she was still looking for an opportunity, I was about to give it to her.

I explained to Marcy as briefly as possible what was going on. I told her Alfred had moved back to Italy, since she didn't know he was from another planet. I also shared with her that I was actually dating Marco Barak, but that was a recent

development. Since she wasn't my friend, Marcy didn't ask for details, and I was grateful.

She said she wasn't really surprised to find out I wasn't an artist, though she had liked my paintings. She told me she hadn't believed the crap in the papers and had already begun to suspect Lola of spying on me. It so happens that Lola had befriended Marcy before she figured out what kind of person Lola was. However, they hung out long enough for Marcy to know where to find her. She suggested we follow Lola to a club and wait until the right moment to catch her in a compromising position. It was the best idea I could think of too.

* * * *

So there we sat in the bushes outside a sleazy club on the outskirts of town. It was a little hole in the wall where local riff-raff went to get stinking drunk. Marcy's frizzy blond hair was pulled back in a tight pony tail and for once her makeup didn't look overdone. A tall biker drove up close to us.

"I'll be right back," Marcy whispered. She sprung from the bushes and began talking to the man. I saw her slip him something and return to sit beside me with a satisfied smirk.

"What have you done?" I asked.

"I paid him fifty bucks to get Lola to give him a blow job right in front of these bushes," she giggled.

"You what?" I laughed. "That's brilliant."

We sat there for about twenty minutes, both of us huddled in our thick jackets against the cold night air, and in spite of ourselves, huddled close to each other.

"Here they, come," she whispered.

I handed Marcy the camera and she put a finger to her lips for silence before popping the lens cap off and adjusting the focus. It was all I could do not to laugh. As the scene unfurled before my eyes, I was torn between disgust and morbid curiosity. The man wasn't bad looking. My heart gave an unpleasant leap when I heard him unzip his pants, and I couldn't help taking a peek. Marcy looked at me and mouthed, "Holy shit." Part of me couldn't help thinking someone needed to show Lola how it's done, but I kept that to myself.

I had to give Marcy credit, I needed look away, but she kept taking pictures. Once they were done and we were sure they were out of earshot we both fell back on the ground laughing.

"Well, it was a good night for him, huh? He just got paid fifty bucks to get a blow job," I laughed.

"How do you know he didn't give the fifty to her?" Marcy said nastily.

"This will teach that little slut to mess with my private life," I growled.

"And mine too," Marcy said as we rose from behind the bushes.

"You could have picked someone uglier," I said. "It would have been more humiliating."

"Yeah, but as long as we had to watch, why not pick someone decent looking?" she said with a shrug.

Fortunately, no one saw us. That's all I needed, reports of me at a sleazy club in the bushes with another woman. Marcy

made sure the pictures were distributed to every paper that had printed the stories about me and then some. The photos were displayed along with an article about how Lola had been obsessed with me since we were in high school and she hadn't made the cheerleading squad that I captained. It painted a picture, thanks to Marcy, of a true lunatic. It also helped to discredit anything she had spread about me. When it was in print two days later, I had a box of chocolates delivered to Lola along with a copy of every paper informing her that if she ever pried in my personal life again, I'd send them "the money shot."

What I needed now was some *good* publicity.

* * * *

True to his promise, Marco called me Wednesday morning.

"Hello, Red," his rough sexy voice greeted me early that morning. "Did I wake you?"

"Not really. I was dreaming about you anyway." He laughed and I confessed, "Actually, I couldn't sleep and I was just making some coffee."

"I couldn't sleep with Luther either," he laughed.

Since he was in a good mood, I didn't point out that Dracula was still sleeping with me, and I had left him and Luther in the bed. It may sound bizarre, but it wasn't sexual. Dracula was still taking the news about Marco and I dating quite well. His hearing with the council was coming up Friday afternoon, and he'd been spending a lot of time preparing for it. It just seemed natural that he should be with me. He had been a part of my dreams for so long, that despite how it may

The Dread Moon
by Tracey H. Kitts

sound, it wasn't strange having him in my bed. But more and more I remembered when I was in bed with another man.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Nineteen

My week last summer with Marco had never been far from my thoughts. Technically we hadn't had sex, but it was close enough to let me know what he was capable of. In the two days since he'd shown up on my front porch, I hadn't managed to wrap my mind around the concept that we had agreed to date. With the new laws in effect, it was actually possible for me to date Marco without having to abandon my duties to The Hunters. On the other hand, I wasn't sure how some of my colleagues would take the news. Though I doubt any of them could react worse than Alfred.

My father had yet to mention the articles which I was sure had made it past his desk by that time. I hoped his silence was just his way of giving me space to work things out. At the very least, I knew my father loved me and would be understanding of whatever happened. He was the one person other than Marco who had never judged me. I honestly didn't believe he would freak out when I told him at least some of the rumors were true.

"What are you doing after your coffee?" he asked softly.

"I was planning to work out and read a book. After that, I'm meeting Kat for lunch."

"Can I come over?"

That was a loaded question. Should I have Marco over? Considering some of my house guests, I wasn't sure that was a good idea. But, as was always the case, I wanted to see him.

The Dread Moon
by Tracey H. Kitts

"We can still have lunch with Kat," he said. "Actually, I've got some things to take care of today and I'll be in the area shortly."

"Where are you now?"

"The Dread Moon. So, what do you say?"

I couldn't refuse him. "When can you be here?"

"Within the hour. Wear something comfortable, Red, we're going for a ride," he said suggestively. Marco hung up before I could respond, but my heart was beating so fast I was afraid he could hear it through the phone.

It was still very early. I left a note for Luther, and changed into jeans and a comfortable baby doll style t-shirt. My mom had gotten it for me a few years ago as a joke. It was black with the golden outline of an apple core with a worm wrapped around it. Underneath this it said, "Rotten to the core." The weather was still cool. I kept most of my jackets in the coat closet downstairs. I selected a long leather coat that was so worn it appeared more charcoal gray than black. Instead of a regular seam running down each side on the front, there were tan colored laces which ended with the pockets. I was just putting on the coat when I heard a noise outside.

As I stepped out I realized my ears had not deceived me. I'd heard the unmistakable rumble of a motorcycle. Marco pulled in front of the steps on a motorcycle. It was a newer model, with more sleek lines than the classic styles. Yes, the bike was nice, but that wasn't what had captured my attention. I was more interested in the man walking up my steps. Just the sight of him did things to my heart.

Marco Barak had to be one of the sexiest men to ever draw breath. His faded jeans revealed every curve of his sexy body without being too tight. Marco had looking good in jeans down to an art form. His tight white t-shirt clung to the curves of his chest, revealing his flat stomach in the process. The long coat he wore reached just below his knees and billowed in the cold wind as he walked toward me. The tan leather went well with his dark chestnut hair. The combination of those earthy tones seemed to soften his deep brown eyes as he smiled at me.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

I almost told Marco he should be careful what he asked me, because I wasn't capable of saying no to him. Instead I answered, "Yes."

The smile he gave me lit up his eyes before he turned back toward the steps. The wind caught his long coat once again and unfurled it like a cape. His scent drifted back to me with the breeze and I breathed him in like it was my last chance.

Marco straddled the bike with practiced ease and motioned for me to join him. My stomach did an awkward sort of flip flop at the thoughts of his body being pressed against me. Once I got on, I gripped him with my thighs as I reached around his waist with trembling hands. I laced my fingers together and Marco placed his warm hand over both of mine.

He looked over his shoulder and asked, "Are you cold, Red?"

"No, I'm ok."

"You're shaking," he said softly as he rubbed the backs of my hands with his fingertips. I wasn't sure how to respond.

After a moment he said kindly, "I won't hurt you, Red. You're safe with me."

"Fear has never been the reason I tremble when I'm near you, Marco." I rose slightly and kissed the side of his face. He was warm beneath my lips, and I could tell by the smoothness of his skin that Marco had just shaved.

"Careful, Red." His voice sounded calm, but I could tell it took effort. "I might think you're trying to get into my pants."

"They're not my size," I teased, "but they look good on you."

His laughter made me feel wonderfully light and happy. It had been a long time since just the nearness of someone made the world seem like a better place.

"Hold on tight," he said as he started the engine. "I'll keep you warm."

He was right about that. In more ways than one, Marco was always hot closer to the full moon. In two weeks the pack would have their usual full moon gathering, except in February, Marco would lead the pack on a hunt in honor of the Hunger Moon. Some of the wolves already hunted together on the full moon, but Marco had always preferred to hunt alone. He had invited me to the gathering once before, and I wondered if he would ask me to go this time. I still didn't feel like I belonged there. I hadn't agreed to be his mate, or to help him lead the pack.

The icy wind whipped past us and I pressed myself tighter against his warmth. He smelled of fresh air, and fur, and leather. But underneath that was the familiar smell of Marco. Each werewolf had their own unique though similar scent. The

way Marco smelled was as closely tied to my memory as his face.

I noticed we were taking a tour of my property. He slowed down so we could speak comfortably without having to raise our voices. "How have things been going around here?" he asked.

"Are you checking on me?"

"Yes. I think it's finally safe to say that you are mine to protect." He touched my hand again and I heard the rest of his thought, *"You always were."*

"Things are fine," I said, making an effort to block my mind reading abilities. Being near Marco made me open up, almost like a flower opening at sunrise. But there were some things that should remain closed. I would let him say what he wanted to, and keep his thoughts to himself.

Almost as soon as I answered him I remembered something Marcy told me a few nights ago. She had found a dead deer not far from her house recently. I shared the story with Marco and he was quiet for several minutes.

"My wolves know better than to hunt here," he said finally.

"And why is that?"

He looked over his shoulder again, as he growled sexily, "Because I'm The Big Bad Wolf, and this is my territory."

"Well, you better put your sheep suit on if we're going to have lunch with Kat."

He laughed at my reference to the song he had dedicated to me last Halloween about a little girl in red and a wolf. However, the conversation remained fairly serious as we both discussed our theories as to who was behind the recent

attacks on both humans and animals. If any of his pack members ever found Dr. Williams, they had orders to kill him on site. That being said, they had also been told not to act alone. No one was sure exactly what he was capable of and Marco didn't want anyone to risk their life foolishly.

"That includes you," he said. "As a matter of fact, *especially* you."

"If I get word of where he is, I'll call for backup," I promised.

"If you can't get me, call Luther," he said. "He'll either know where to reach me, or come himself. But call me first, Red."

I assured him I would. After a minute's pause he asked if Marcy would mind us looking over her place too. I didn't see why she would, considering there was some sort of monster on the loose, so we headed in that direction.

Marcy didn't mind, but what I didn't know was, school was out that day. She was standing on her front porch in a pink bathrobe that matched her powder blue pjs and fluffy pink slippers. We stopped in front of her steps and she stared for a minute before plastering a smile on her face.

"Marcy, this is Marco Barak," I said. "Marco, this is my neighbor Marcy Johnson."

She smoothed down her bushy hair before offering him her hand. "Yes, I remember you from the papers," she said. "It's a pleasure."

"And I believe that was your handy work in today's paper."

He smiled and Marcy practically beamed. "Did you like that? It was both of us really," she said, gesturing toward me.

"How did you know?" I asked, because I hadn't gotten around to telling him yet.

"Luther told me." He winked.

I had a sudden vision of Luther sneaking around corners with the phone to make regular reports to Marco. No wonder he said Luther would know where to reach him. Even with Luther staying with me at the moment, he knew more about where to find Marco than I did.

"You two watched the whole thing, huh?" He turned his wolfish grin on both of us and Marcy giggled. "I heard you have an animal problem?" he asked her.

Marcy blushed, revealing what she was thinking before she hit upon what he had actually meant. "You mean the deer?"

"Yes. Do you mind if I have a look around?"

"No, go right ahead." She motioned toward the house.

Marco's long coat billowed around him as he walked around the corner of the house. Marcy immediately turned to me and hissed, "I hate you." But she was smiling.

"I didn't know you'd be sitting down here in all your frumpy school teacher glory when we drove up," I taunted.

"Frumpy? You bitch." She shook her head. "So, was this his idea or yours?"

"His, but I was worried, that's why I told him."

"You'd really care if I got attacked by a wild animal?"

"Unfortunately, yeah." I smirked. "You're growing on me."

"You too," she said and nodded at me, "like a damn fungus." As Marco walked back around the house, she asked, "So, do you have an animal problem too?"

"You're looking at him."

Marcy giggled again as Marco came closer. "You should be fine," he said. From the look of things, whatever killed the deer was just passing through."

"How can you tell?" she asked.

"A wolf knows these things." He winked. I elbowed his ribs and he elaborated, "The animal that did this didn't leave anything behind to mark its territory."

"So what, it just stopped for a snack?"

"Most likely. But, if you don't mind, I'll have some of my wolves keep a check on the area."

"I don't mind," Marcy said, smiling.

After another vicious glare toward me, Marcy walked back up on the porch and waved us goodbye. We set off toward Kat's shop with time to spare, so we decided to take our time. It was a crisp beautiful day. The sky sparkled a soft clear blue and leaves were still falling. I loved it when fall sort of hung over the way it had this year. As we drove leisurely down an old dirt road Marco asked, "You will have dinner with me this weekend, won't you?"

"And why would I want to do that?" I teased.

"It's Valentine's weekend, Red, you can't deny me."

He didn't know how close he was to the truth. "Actually, Valentine's Day is next Tuesday."

"But who wants to go out on a Tuesday night?"

"What did you have in mind?"

He stopped at the end of the road and looked over his shoulder. "Something intimate and isolated." He smiled wickedly.

"I thought you wanted to take things slow?"

The Dread Moon
by Tracey H. Kitts

"Keep your mind out of my pants, Red. I am capable of romance." I smiled at him and tried to look doubtful. "Why don't I pick you up around five thirty on Friday?" Marco looked like he'd forgotten a dentist appointment as he added, "I just remembered. There are plans for a big bash down at The Dread Moon. We'll have to make an appearance."

"That's alright," I said as I brushed a strand of dark silken hair from his eyes. "I don't mind being seen with you."

His smile was worth all the bullshit I had suffered to bring me to that point. All the torment of the past few weeks melted away with that smile. At the same time, it broke my heart. I swung a leg over the bike and made sure we were the only ones around. Marco switched off and turned on the seat to face me.

"What's wrong, Red?"

"Marco, I'm so sorry," I said, and put my arms around him. As I looked into his eyes I could tell he didn't understand what I was apologizing for. I ran my fingers through his hair and said, "I should have taken your advice and gone straight to the kitchen Saturday night, or killed a rabbit or something. But I didn't, I went back to my bedroom, and—"

"It's alright, Red," he said softly.

"No, it isn't. I won't deny that I care what happens to him, but I—" I hesitated, before I said too much. "It should have been you," I said. "I know I wasn't in my right mind that night, but that doesn't mean I didn't know what I was saying to you. I've wanted you from the first moment I saw you. I've never stopped wanting you, and I'm sorry I didn't act sooner. I'm sorry it took me so long to see what was in front of me."

The Dread Moon
by Tracey H. Kitts

I'm sorry for all the nights I could have touched you, for all the times I could have looked into these eyes and saw what I see now." I rubbed my fingertip across his lips as I said, "I'm sorry for everything these lips have touched before they found their way to mine." Then I did something I thought I would never do. I kissed Marco with the thrilling knowledge that he was mine.

He pulled me against him, and we were lost in the moment. The heat of his body seemed to burn me through our thin shirts as Marco ran his arms around me underneath the jacket. I kissed him with a passionate tenderness I didn't know I was capable of. I had never felt this way before. I didn't just want to touch Marco, or to be with him, I wanted to be his. No man had ever made me want to sacrifice my independence. I was my own woman, and no one could ever change that. But I wanted to be his woman. I took all of my emotions and put them into that kiss. I felt the desire flow from my lips to his and Marco pulled back with a gasp. "I always knew you cared," he said breathlessly.

"I never said I cared." I smiled. But I knew the truth was in my eyes. I never could lie to Marco. He kissed me again and a small helpless cry escaped my lips. He growled in response and tightened his grip around my waist, reminding me forcefully that I wasn't dealing with an ordinary man.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Twenty

Before I knew what had happened, Marco was on his feet and standing between me and something hissing in the woods. I was still shaken from his kiss and shook my head in order to clear my thoughts.

"What is it?" I asked, watching him sniff the air.

"It's not a werewolf. Show yourself," he growled. It was unmistakably a command, and Marco's voice said he was used to giving orders. Marco slipped his coat off, but his eyes never left the tree line just in front of us. I heard a cracking noise and looked down to see the bones in his hands lengthening and reforming into massive claws.

"I always knew you were trash," a distorted but recognizable voice hissed from just beyond the trees. It was Alex Belcher, dean of the department Richard worked for. Dr. Richard Stacey and I had been friends since I rescued him several years ago. One of his colleagues, Dr. David Kane, was a new werewolf at the time and had wolfed out on him in a bar. Fortunately, all Richard got out of it was a broken nose. Alex was in close with Dr. Williams, though I hadn't previously thought to associate him with what had been going on.

"What are you doing here, Alex?"

"You know him?" Marco growled. For a split second Marco's eyes darted toward me and Alex sprang from the trees.

I screamed in spite of myself. He was naked and his skin was a scaly reptilian green. His chest and inner thighs were a slightly lighter shade, though still definitely not human. His

face was elongated and he had golden snake eyes with slits for pupils. His nose was nonexistent, only nostrils remained on his snake like face.

I ducked behind Marco as his claws penetrated Alex's side and he flung him over the bike into the road. Marco stalked toward the fallen snake man, might and menace etched in every line of his body. I felt a wave of power ripple across my skin and knew I was, for the very first time, getting a taste of what Marco was capable of. I had known he was powerful, but I had never felt power like this before. The sensation was so intense I thought my skin would crawl off my body.

The snake man was on his feet again and took a swing at Marco with claws of his own. Marco ducked the blow and kicked him in the chest. The reptile went flying and landed on his face in the dirt.

"Who are you, and how dare you talk to Lilith that way?" Marco's voice was frightening. Though all but his hands still looked human, I could hear the change in his voice.

"He works with Richard," I explained, but still kept my distance. Marco and Richard had never actually met, but they knew each other through me.

"Yesss, that's right," he panted. "I know her precious Richard. If it weren't for him, Mallory would still be alive."

I had killed Mallory Monroe last August when she'd made the mistake of kidnapping my friend Richard Stacey. Richard was like a brother to me and I wasn't about to leave him to that bitch, not when I could save him. With the help of Bade, who had been on his way to see Dr. Kane, we mopped the floor with Mallory and her bitches.

"Mallory didn't have a chance," I said as I stepped from behind the bike, "and neither do you."

He laughed and blood flowed more freely from the gashes Marco had made in his side. "You expect me to believe you did that to Mallory single handedly?"

"Oh, I had help," I said silkily, "but not with Mallory. I beat her to death with a chair, and I enjoyed it." He hissed and a long thin tongue darted out of his mouth threateningly. "That's right," I taunted, "I get all tingly just thinking about it."

"That doesn't surprise me," he sneered. "I always knew what you were. Richard wasn't enough for you, so you moved on to the wolf king."

He had barely finished the sentence before Marco backhanded him so hard I thought for a moment his neck was broken.

"You always knew shit," I said viciously. My hatred for Alex Belcher was fully renewed. "In the years since I saw you last, I had forgotten how much I hated you." I moved closer, but Marco made a point to stand between myself and the snake man. "Here's a news flash, *I never had sex with Richard, you stupid mother—*" He dove for me and Marco clotheslined him across the throat.

"Where is Dr. Williams?" Marco growled as he kicked Alex in the ribs so hard he lifted off the ground. Blood dripped from the corners of his mouth, but he didn't speak. "Where is he?" Marco kicked him again, knocking him another six feet or so down the dirt road.

"You'll never find him in time," Alex groaned.

I ran forward. "Never find him in time for what?"

Alex only laughed as Marco approached again. "We won't get any answers from him, and taking him someplace to torture isn't practical," Marco growled.

Alex looked up at me from the ground. "Are you just going to let him kill me?" When I didn't respond he said, "So, you're letting the werewolf fight your battles for you?"

"Yes," I said quietly, and turned my back. I heard a horrible crunching noise and didn't dare turn around. There were scraping noises, and I knew Marco was dragging the body off the road.

I heard some limbs crack as he asked, "Do you have your cell phone?"

"Yes."

"Call Luther, tell him to take care of this."

I took the phone from my pocket and looked around to see what road we were on. Luther didn't even tease me about being off with Marco. Once I told him the situation and that I was calling for Marco, he wrote down the directions and hung up.

"If you'll look in my coat pocket, I should have a handkerchief," Marco said. I hadn't realized he was so close, and jumped at the sound of his voice.

I went back to the bike, and handed him the handkerchief. "I didn't mean to upset you, Red." His voice was soft and normal again.

"You didn't upset me," I said as I watched him wipe the blood from his hands that were also normal again. "I'm upset

because we just had to kill someone that I knew. I didn't care about him, I didn't even like him, but I knew him."

"You knew Mallory too," he pointed out softly.

"Yeah, and just so you know I didn't really get off on killing her either."

"I figured as much." I heard him put the coat back on, then suddenly his arms were around me, strong and comforting. "You sure you don't want to rethink the reason you tremble?" he whispered against my ear.

"I'm sure," I said. "Come on, Kat's waiting."

"You still feel like eating?"

"Don't you?"

"Well, yeah, but—"

"But, nothing, I'm starving." He looked both surprised and amused. "Look, he was a horrible asshole; I guess I had hoped he would come around one of these days, that's all. Richard always made the effort to get along with him anyways." I shrugged.

He looked at me seriously. "Are you sure I haven't—"

"It's going to take more than that to change the way I look at you, Marco," I interrupted. "Besides, I knew you were a werewolf when I picked you up." I winked.

We got back on the bike and started to drive off before he asked, "What makes you think you picked me up?"

When we finally arrived in town, Kat was waiting out front with her arms crossed, looking angry.

"Well," she said with a smile, "at least I know why you're late."

"Where do you want to eat?" I asked, trying to change the subject.

"Admit it, you were off in the woods somewhere fornicating on the back of a motorcycle."

Without missing a beat Marco replied with a smile, "If that were the case, it would have taken longer. Now, where do you want to eat?"

Kat seemed at a loss for words, but finally suggested a place about thirty minutes out of town. We followed her on the bike and I took the opportunity to grope Marco. My hands were freezing and about halfway to our destination, I ran them underneath his shirt. I felt his sharp intake of breath, but then he relaxed against me. I caressed the ridged muscles of his stomach, tracing the hair that ran down from his chest in a fine line to the top of his jeans. No matter how good a condition you're in, when you sit bent over on a motorcycle, you're bound to have a wrinkle or two. Admittedly, they were hard to find on Marco, but I managed to get enough skin between my fingers to pinch.

He laughed and said, "Are you trying to tell me I should order a salad?"

I just giggled. Harassing Marco's sexy body was the most fun I'd had in a while.

After we sat down and ordered our drinks, Luther called. He asked me first to put the phone on speaker and I informed him we were in the middle of a restaurant. So, I held the phone out slightly and Marco and I pressed our heads together to hear. Luther had taken the snake man back to

what used to be Alfred's lab and thrown him in the incinerator.

"Good thinking," Marco answered at the same time I said, "You took that thing in my house?"

"I didn't make a mess," he assured me. "Hey, was he wearing any clothes when you guys saw him?"

"What, you think I stripped him?" Marco asked with a smirk.

"I was just curious," Luther said. "It's not like he had anything worth flashing, if you know what I mean."

"Unfortunately, I do, but I was trying not to think about it."

Marco laughed at us both before ending the conversation by saying he was starving and if he didn't eat soon he might grow paws in protest. After overhearing one side of the conversation, Kat was full of questions. I let Marco tell the story while I read the menu. As he spoke I ran my hand absently over his thigh, enjoying the powerful feel of his muscular leg next to mine. I looked up and saw people watching, but I didn't care. There were worse places to touch someone in public. Besides, it felt good to touch Marco. Having my hands on him felt as natural as breathing, and just as necessary.

He ended up ordering a rare steak and shrimp, Kat had a salad and a margarita, and I had blackened chicken with angel hair pasta.

"I'm so glad I don't know any of these people," Kat said finally about the lunatics Richard had worked with. "So, you guys got any big Valentine plans?"

Marco's smile looked positively sinful as he replied, "I've got some things in mind."

"That sounded like a threat," she said conspiratorially to me.

"Oh no," he said slowly, "it's a promise."

"So, once you put a beating on his ass, are you planning to come by The Dread Moon?"

Marco threw back his head and laughed. It was a deep sexy sound that was at once completely wicked, and completely masculine.

"What?" Kat said. "It sounds like fun. It's sort of like a semi-formal rebellion against a traditional Valentine's Day."

"How is it a rebellion?" Marco asked.

"Well, because everyone there can't be part of a couple. How many people does that place hold?"

"Two thousand, if it's packed to the rafters," he said, while flagging the waiter down for more tea.

"See, you get two thousand people in there, you get them drunk, you get them dancing, and it's bound to be fun, even if you're not with someone."

"That's not a rebellion, Kat," Marco commented kindly. "By the way, Beau said he was glad to see you."

"Really?" She beamed.

"Oh yeah," he said with a wink. "Unfortunately, his leg hasn't regenerated enough for dancing." He sighed, "I tell you what, the press will be there, so we'll have to put in an appearance. Why don't you save a dance for me?"

"Well, you're a sweet little wolfman, but I don't need your charity," she said as she emptied her drink.

"Perhaps I can offer you a ride to an AA meeting then?" She glared at him. "Look Kat, either talk to the man, or move on with your life." We all knew he was talking about Charles. "Beau likes you, why don't you go see him for Valentine's Day?"

"I might," she said dejectedly. "He is kind of cute."

"I've literally had to beat women off of him with a stick before." Marco grinned. "Somehow I think cute is an understatement."

I definitely agreed. Beau was somewhere around Marco's height with light shaggy blond hair, an ass like muffin tins, and beautiful baby blue eyes.

"Maybe you should go, Kat. It couldn't hurt, and I'm sure Beau is lonely. How did you know where to find the clinic anyway?"

The werewolf population has their own clinic. Even though they could go to a regular hospital, most of them preferred not to for obvious reasons. Many didn't want others to know what they were, and some were just afraid of receiving poor treatment due to prejudice. The doctor who runs the place is a werewolf, and so is his brother who is a nurse practitioner. But no one knew what they really were either, it would have ruined them. They ran the clinic in a large metal building on the back of several acres of private property.

"Marco told me," Kat answered.

I looked up to find Marco smiling at me. I never figured him for playing matchmaker, but it was sweet that he wanted to help Kat get over Charles.

Before we left Kat pulled me aside and asked, "If that weirdo hadn't interrupted, *would* you have been late for fornicating on a motorcycle?"

"I don't think so," I laughed. "He said he wanted to take things slow, remember?"

Kat looked at Marco walking ahead of us as if she was still hungry and he was desert. "How slow can you go with that man?"

That was the sixty four thousand dollar question I contemplated on our drive home. I rested my face against Marco's back, enjoying the smell of man and leather, as well as the protection his body provided from the wind. I put my cold hands on his stomach again and he only squirmed a little bit. I had almost been lulled to sleep by the nearness of his warmth and the hum of the engine by the time we started up the long gravel driveway in front of the house.

I got to my feet reluctantly and noticed Marco hadn't switched off the engine.

"I'm sorry, Red, but I've got to be going."

"That's alright," I said as I ran my fingers through his hair again. "I'd probably just molest you anyway," I teased, "and we can't have someone taking unnecessary liberties with the wolf king, now can we?"

"You can't take advantage of the willing, Red," he said with a grin. "But unfortunately, I do have to go."

"I'll see you Friday," I whispered as I leaned in to press a kiss against his soft lips. Marco growled and I trembled once again. Pulling myself away from him was difficult, but I managed.

The Dread Moon
by Tracey H. Kitts

On my way to the door I noticed Richard's car parked beside my house. I hadn't seen Richard for nearly six months, and we'd spoken only briefly. He had been pretty shook up about being abducted by one of his fellow professors who turned out to be a werewolf intent on murdering him to hurt me. The only thing more disturbing than that was she was in cahoots with another professor who had experimented on himself with a strand of the lycanthropy virus he had personally altered to contain snake DNA. Dr. Bill Williams was definitely a sick son of a bitch.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Twenty One

As soon as I walked through the door, it was obvious I wasn't going to have the happy reunion with Richard I had been expecting. Dracula met me at the door with a finger to his lips for silence. He had a very grave expression on his lovely face, and I was suddenly afraid. He pulled me aside, his long cloak flowing over me as he put his arm around my shoulders and led me to the sitting room.

"What's going on?" I asked. "Has something happened? Where's Richard?"

"He is in the kitchen with Alek." He paused and took a deep breath. "He has been telling us about what happened to him last fall."

"You mean when Mallory and Bill tried to hurt him?"

Dracula gripped my shoulders tightly as he said, "They *did* hurt him."

I tried to break free of his hold and run to the kitchen, but he held me tight. "No," I moaned miserably. "What did they do to him? When did they hurt him? I saved him," I cried as I beat my fists against Dracula's chest. "I saved him."

Once I calmed down enough to be coherent, Dracula took me by the arm and led me into the kitchen. Richard was facing Alek with his back turned to me. My heart hammered in my chest. He looked normal, but when I rounded the table and saw his eyes, Dracula had to support me. Richard looked up at me with the cold yellow eyes of a snake.

"I hate snakes," he wailed sadly.

The Dread Moon
by Tracey H. Kitts

I staggered toward Richard, even though my legs were weak with shock and threw my arms around him. He cried like someone had torn his heart out, and I joined him. Several minutes later I sat down beside him and asked what had happened. He said Dr. Williams must have injected him with the virus immediately after knocking him unconscious, just before Bade and I had come running through the door.

"We were too late," I said. My voice sounded far away, like I was watching this happen to someone else's friend and not mine.

"You saved my life," he said gently.

"If I had only gotten there sooner...."

"We could drive ourselves crazy with what might have been," he said. "I've been talking to Bade, and he thinks he may be able to help me control the change."

As I recalled, Bade and Richard had seemed to hit it off, but I was a little surprised to find they had been talking to each other.

"How did you even know how to contact him?"

"David told me."

Dr. David Kane was also a werewolf. He was still part of Marco's pack, though he had been interested in Bade's research to develop a pill that would suppress the transformation. That was the business they'd had together the night we tried to save Richard, and that was the reason Marco had kicked David's ass. David insisted he wasn't taking sides, he'd merely been interested in the drug. However, he was consorting with someone who openly challenged Marco's authority as king, and that constituted a beating.

"Where's Luther?" I asked Alek, who was sitting quietly with his chin propped against his interlaced fingers and listening.

"He's gone to get Richard a sedative."

Since Alfred had gone, I didn't have anything in the house strong enough for a werewolf, or a snake man. Luther had probably gone to the clinic, and that was a twenty minute drive. Richard's hands shook badly as he reached for the glass of water Dracula offered him.

"Your friend Luther told me about what happened today. I'm glad he's dead," he said with a touch of hiss in his voice.

"Richard, you don't mean that."

"Yes, I do. That bastard knew what had been done to me, and he taunted me with it at work. He called me into his office before the first full moon to ask how I was feeling. I felt fine. I hadn't begun to notice any changes yet, so I had no idea what he was talking about. Then he told me. *He locked the fucking door and transformed in front of me!* He showed me what I could expect in a week or two." Richard's voice shook worse than his hands as he said, "Yes, Lilith, I'm glad the son of a bitch is dead."

"I'm so sorry," I whispered.

"I'm only sorry you didn't get Dr. Williams too. I want him dead. *I want revenge!*" he yelled.

"Vengeance is never enough," Dracula said quietly from the corner where he stood just out of the reach of any sunlight.

"At least you got the opportunity to see if it was enough," Richard spat.

Dracula touched my shoulder comfortingly as he explained, "I shared with Richard my experience with injustice while we waited for you."

"The truth of the matter is, there is no revenge for what was done to you," he said to Richard. "You cannot reclaim your humanity any more than I can raise the dead."

"But I don't want to be a monster," Richard whimpered.

"Then do not be one," Dracula said forcefully. "Do not become a monster by taking your revenge on this man, I tell you the only thing it will change is *you*. It will start you on a dark path you do not want to travel."

"Then what should I do?" he said quietly.

"Let us take care of it. I have killed so many, one more will not break my mind. You are not a killer, Richard, and that is not an insult."

About that time I heard Luther coming through the front door. He hurried into the room and removed a large blue pill from the bottle he was holding.

"What is it?" Richard asked as Luther handed him the medication.

"Werewolf valium. The doctor said it should work on you just the same."

Richard's hands shook so badly he could hardly lift the water to his lips. "That's probably why my eyes are changing so early, I'm cracking up."

"You're not cracking up," Alek said calmly, "you've just had a terrible experience."

"So what about you?" Richard said with a shaky smile. "I don't see you for a few months and you're living with a

vampire, a werewolf, and a wizard. Not to mention if there's any truth to the papers, you're dating Marco Barak."

"Well, there's some truth to it." I started telling Richard all he had missed in the last six months or so since we'd seen each other in an effort to distract him long enough for the medication to take effect. Once he began to calm down I asked Alek, "Will your sleeping potion work on him?"

"I was just thinking the same thing."

Alek explained the potion to Richard who was all too eager for some sleep that didn't include nightmares. Alek saw Richard to the guest room and came back in a few minutes to tell me he was asleep.

"Poor guy," Luther said. That statement seemed to reflect everyone's thoughts, because no one could think of anything else to say.

* * * *

That night I left Dracula working on his presentation in my bedroom while Luther watched television downstairs. Richard would most likely sleep for a few days. I took the opportunity to talk to Alek about something that had been on my mind. It was late, and I walked into the kitchen to find him making tea. He was actually wearing a nightshirt. I had read in historical novels about men wearing nightshirts, but I'd never thought I would actually see one.

The shirt came to just below his knees with a small split on each side. It was a deep midnight blue that looked good with his hair. I also noticed it had those wonderful ruffles around the wrists. As he turned to face me, I saw the ruffles were

sewn along the deep vee of the neck line as well. This shirt, like the others Alek wore, had laces, but they were untied.

"Nice legs." I smiled as I walked toward him.

"Why thank you," he purred. "If I'd known you would be coming back down, I would have worn a robe." He looked at me for a moment and took a sip of his tea before asking, "What brings you my way so late?"

"I've got a dream I'd like to discuss with you. Actually, I'd like to show it to you, if you don't mind."

"Not at all. It's been a long time since someone has asked me to have a look at their dreams. Though I know a method that might be better than me reliving your memories. If you'll be so kind as to accompany me to the dungeon," he said as he put his arm around me.

We stepped into the long dark passageway and with a wave of his hand Alek lit the dozens of torches along the wall. I hadn't known the stairway leading to the dungeon could be so well lit.

"Wow," I said softly.

He smiled and began to explain dream visitation. "It's a method I haven't used for several years now, though I'm quite proficient. I'll guide you through the process and you can invite me into your mind. I much prefer to be invited than to simply force my way in."

"Have you ever done that before?" I asked as we reached the dungeon door.

"Yes, but only in an emergency. For instance, a few years ago my neighbor's house was on fire. I knew help would

never reach him in time, so I appeared in his dreams and told him to get up because his house was on fire."

"What happened?"

"Can you believe the fat bastard rolled over?"

I giggled as he lit the second set of torches.

"So, then I go screaming through his mind, *Get your fat ass up or you'll be just as burned as the chicken you ate tonight.*"

I laughed again and he said, "That worked. Of course on his way out he saved the cat and was hailed as a hero with remarkable intuition." He snorted with laughter and I couldn't help but wonder how many other people would never realize Alek had helped them.

Along one wall previously occupied by only The Iron Maiden, Alek had placed a table covered in various unrecognizable wingdings. Several sinister looking liquids bubbled in containers of different shapes and sizes while little puffs of smoke floated over some other unusual contraptions.

All of the original torture equipment I had kept when I bought the house remained in place and seemed to strangely blend with the new décor. Behind the table along the same wall, hung a magnificent tapestry. It was covered with knights and dragons, castles and unicorns, and other various fantastical scenery. I loved it.

I followed Alek to the large dungeonesque door at the back of the room. The dungeon was at least two thousand square feet, leaving a rather sizable apartment behind the thick door. As Alek opened the heavy door, I saw that the entrance was

covered by lush blue drapery. He parted the curtain and beckoned me forward.

The bookshelves that had looked odd and bare along the wall were now filled with numerous leather bound volumes of all kinds. In the opposite corner of this room sat a large oak desk with an elaborate chair that looked more like a throne. A spacious gold rug covered a good portion of the floor and made the room look less bleak and not at all like a dungeon anymore.

We walked through the open doorway into Alek's bedroom, and I looked around in awe. He flicked his wrist toward the fireplace at the foot of the bed and lit the room. A large four-poster bed sat against the wall. It was covered in rich looking sheets of cerulean blue. The canopy was slightly darker and reminded me of a clear night sky.

"I love what you've done with the place," I said as I looked around. "But, how did you get all of this down here so quickly?"

"PFM," he teased. "Well, that and the vampire carried most of it. Actually, that impressed me very much."

"His strength?"

"His power. I knew he had inherited power over the storm, but not even the great Rainmaker could manipulate the very air to rise up and do his bidding."

I was also impressed to hear that Dracula had levitated Alek's furniture.

"Come here," he said as he sat on the edge of the bed. "Unless of course, you're afraid you cannot keep your hands off of me, in which case, I fully understand."

I laughed and walked around to the other side, "I'll take my chances."

"Make yourself comfortable," he said while he rummaged in a small nightstand.

Alek reclined on the pillows beside me holding a small silver pouch in his hand.

"I'd like to show you something," he said as he reached into the bag. I watched him blow the sparkling dust from his hand as the canopy above us came alive with thousands of stars. It looked as if we had opened a window straight into the night sky.

"What is that?" I gasped.

"Stardust," he said as he settled himself back on the pillows. "Aldan thinks he's so clever," he mumbled. "Now then, I want you to close your eyes and remember as completely as possible this dream you would like me to see. Once you get a clear image, think of me. Don't just see me, feel me. Remember everything about me that makes me who I am to you. Make me as real as I am lying here beside you, and once you're done, look into my eyes. You will feel a connection, then you may show me your dream."

"Alright." I closed my eyes and remembered the dream about the beautiful rose I had forgotten I'd planted. Once this was accomplished, I saw Alek standing before me, just as he had been in the kitchen. I saw his disheveled blond hair and the deep blue of his nightshirt. I even imagined the feel of the fabric beneath my hands. I approached him in my mind as I recalled his cologne. The scent was subtle, gently stirring my mind and body, as I was reminded once more of the way a

sexy wizard is supposed to smell. Then I saw him turning toward me and the moment I looked into his eyes, I felt as if I was falling. My heart leapt into the pale honey brown eyes, and we were suddenly standing in the woods in my dream.

We watched the rose together as it bloomed, covering everything with its rapid growth. Everything the rose touched was improved by its appearance. Once again, I couldn't believe I had forgotten about planting it. The magnificent vines stretched before us as I marveled at the deep rich color that I once again could not name. It simply *must* be the color of love, there was no other explanation for something so vibrant and alive. It hardly seemed a color, it was more of a life force.

When the dream was over my mind went strangely blank. The next thing I knew Alek was shaking me gently. "It seems fairly clear to me," he said with a yawn. "You forgot the seeds of love you planted somewhere along the way."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"It means that you felt something for someone, and you hid it. You hid it so well that even *you* forgot about it, and now it's free. This love that you concealed, and even forgot to cultivate has begun to bloom. It consumes all, covering everything in its path."

"I'm terrified of all consuming love," I said quietly.

"I know," Alek said kindly. "I wouldn't worry about it."

"How can you tell me something like this and then say, 'don't worry about it?'"

"Because worrying will do no good. How do you feel?"

"Good."

The Dread Moon
by Tracey H. Kitts

"Then don't worry about it," he replied sarcastically.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Twenty Two

After thanking Alek for his help, I made my way back up the long staircase and through the house. Luther was sleeping soundly on the couch, and I threw a blanket over him on my way upstairs.

When I entered the bedroom, I found Dracula deeply engrossed in a conversation with my father. The holograms produced by the communicators are three dimensional, so I stayed behind the door for a moment before remembering I could enter my bathroom from the hallway. I wasn't sure how to feel about my father helping Dracula with his presentation to the council. They had obviously been caught plotting together.

The door that opened from the bathroom into the bedroom was closed, so I didn't have to worry about being overheard as I stripped down for a shower. My head was still spinning from the moments spent alone with Marco, and my stomach was still churning from having to witness someone I knew being killed. Alright, so I'd looked away before the final blow, but I could hear well enough to get a good idea what had happened. From the blood on Marco's hands, I was betting he had ripped Dr. Alex Belcher's head clean off. The way Richard talked, he deserved it, but it still bothered me. I suppose if I ever reached a point that such things didn't bother me, I'd be in serious trouble.

After the candles around the room were lit, I breathed deeply of the soothing vanilla fragrance and turned on the

shower. Scented candles always seemed to calm my nerves, and so did a good long shower. I wasn't upset with Marco, he'd done what he had to do. I think I was more upset that I had thought Dr. Belcher wasn't so bad, and he'd apparently been a monster even before his transformation. The more I thought about it, the more I convinced myself that was why I felt so awful. I was upset to think what Richard had been forced to endure. Richard was a good man, and one of the kindest people I knew. It hurt me to see him reduced to tears. As was often the case when I saw people hurting, I wished I could erase his pain like an unintended mark on a piece of paper. But, I couldn't do that. I might be able to ease his misery, but I could never reverse what had been done to Richard.

The heat from the shower was already beginning to fog the mirror when I finally stepped underneath the water. No sooner had I done so, than I heard Dracula enter the room. I could hear the silk pajamas sliding down his legs, and knew the moment his long robe fell to the floor. I didn't turn around when he walked into the shower, but I leaned against him when he held me. Marco would have had a fit if he knew, but there was nothing sexual in his touch, so I didn't object. The way he held me didn't feel like I was being unfaithful. Giving me his body, in whatever way I needed, was the only way Dracula knew how to comfort me.

"I am sorry about your Richard," he said softly, and I felt his embrace tighten.

The kindness in his voice seemed to melt me, and I began to cry. I had cried with Richard earlier, but I'd held back. I

still wasn't used to crying in front of people. That had been a fairly recent development within the last year. I turned in his arms, and Dracula leaned forward, so that my face rested against his collar bone. He held me for several minutes before saying, "Jacob says as soon as the council approves my plan, I will be reinstated." I sniffed in response. "I will help you find the man who hurt Richard," he said softly, but with feeling.

"So, you do still have it in you to protect the innocent," I commented with a sigh.

"If the innocent are left to defend themselves, they will end up as jaded as me."

I looked up into his emerald eyes as tendrils of dark wet hair fell forward, framing his face. "But who will defend you?" I asked.

"Death has long been my mistress," he sighed, "and now, she is my champion."

"I'm nobody's champion," I said as a few involuntary tears slid down my cheek. "I couldn't even save Richard."

"Perhaps not," he said as he pulled back slightly, "but, you have saved me."

Dracula bent down and pressed a soft kiss against my lips. Once again, the touch was not sexual. He was genuinely thankful, and expressing his thanks the best way he knew how. I knew with that kiss that he cared for me. He would be content to care, even if I never touched him again. The kindness I had shown him had healed some of the pain he had suffered. It made me feel better to know I was good for something, and my mood was lighter as we finished our shower.

After drying off, I slipped on my favorite black robe. As I did so, I happened to brush my hand across Dracula's shoulder. Without the hot water beating down on us, I realized how cold he was. I looked at him more closely, and saw he was paler than usual.

"Are you alright?" I asked.

"I have not fed since the night you and I were together."

That had been several days, and I felt guilty for starving him. "I'm sorry, I'm not used to living with a vampire. You must be starving."

"Your blood does sustain me longer than most, but yes, I am starving."

"Let me feed you," I said without hesitation.

"No, my angel. What would your lover say?"

"I'm not asking you to have sex with me," I said reasonably. "You kept me from tearing my heart out, you offered to help Richard, and managed to keep him calm until he could be sedated." I took a breath before finishing, "and you can't even eat my cooking, it's the least I can do."

He laughed and said, "The werewolf will not be pleased."

"His name is Marco, and no, he won't like it. I'll just explain to him that I couldn't let you starve."

"He will most likely say you could have sent me out to find another willing victim, instead of yourself."

He was probably right. Part of me said it was just the right thing to do, since he was my guest. But the rest of me knew I was jealous at the thought of him biting some stranger in the night.

"As soon as he sees the bite on your neck, he will be angry," Dracula continued reasonably. "Then again, we could just put it somewhere he is not likely to see any time soon." I looked a question at him and he explained. "It takes two days for a lycanthrope to heal a vampire bite. You are close enough to that category that this applies to you."

"Get to the point," I prompted.

"You said he wished to take things slow, correct?" I nodded. "Then if you will allow me, I can bite your inner thigh."

I thought it over for a moment before agreeing. "Alright," I said as I locked the door. "But, it wouldn't do for Luther to walk in on this."

"As you pointed out, my angel, we are not having sex."

I recalled the feeling his bite had given me before. "Close enough."

I put on a pair of black silk panties. It wasn't like he hadn't seen everything before, but with me dating Marco, I didn't feel right just sprawling out naked in front of him. "I understand," he assured me with a smile, "it is the principle of the thing."

I wasn't nervous as I lay back against the silken red sheets. In fact, it wasn't until Dracula hovered over me that a fine tremor went through my body. He ran a hand through his damp hair and smiled at me reassuringly. "Do not worry," he sighed, "I will be gentle." He leaned over, as if he was going to kiss me, but stopped just short of our bodies actually touching. It was a very intimate reminder of the night we had

spent together less than a week ago. "I could hypnotize you," he offered, "and you would not feel a thing."

"No."

"But it will hurt," he whispered seductively, brushing his face against mine.

"The pain doesn't last," I said.

"Very well," he sighed, "but it was never my desire to hurt you."

He moved slowly over my body, hovering above me only long enough for me to feel his warm breath against my silk panties before he moved to my inner thigh. His long damp hair touched my leg and I shivered. I was trying not to jump, but I was nervous, almost afraid of the pain I knew would soon come. I was feeling foolish about not wanting to be hypnotized, but I wanted to be aware. I wanted to know what was being done to me, and by whom. He began to nibble my inner thigh. He sucked the flesh between his teeth, teasing me, arousing me to the point that I forgot to be afraid. I moaned, and he bit me. The pain was sharp, but before I could cry out it was gone. I could feel his lips gently sucking against my thigh and growled as I gripped the sheets between my fingers. With every pull, I was brought closer to the edge. The third time he drank from me, I came. Orgasm crashed down on me like a wave. My back arched, and though I tried to scream, I had no voice. All I could do was gasp for air. It was as if my life was being drained, and I was being refilled with pleasure. Orgasm after orgasm bowed my spine before he released me.

"I am sorry," he panted, "I did not mean to take so much."

My voice was faint as I answered, "Will I live?"

He laughed softly. "Of course, but you will be weak. You might sleep as long as I do this time."

My eyes were already beginning to lose focus when he reclined beside me and pulled the covers up to my chin.

"I will build a fire," he assured me as he pressed a kiss to my forehead. "And I will unlock the door. If Luther comes up here before morning, it would not look good for us to be behind locked doors together."

The mattress moved slightly as he slid back beside me. I could hear the crackling of the fire, and knew I must have drifted off for a few minutes already. I blinked heavily and looked into the beautiful face of the man beside me. "You look much better," I whispered.

"Thank you," he said. He pulled the covers up over my shoulder again, and pulled me against him.

* * * *

When I awoke the next morning, a storm rumbled outside. I checked the clock and saw I had still overslept, though it was several hours before Dracula would be awake. I felt weak, and I was starving. I staggered a bit as I walked to the closet and slipped on a pair of jeans and a dark blue t-shirt.

As I reached the foot of the stairs, I heard voices coming from the kitchen. Apparently, I wasn't the only one who was hungry. Luther was complaining loudly to Richard that he couldn't find the sugar, and he hoped everybody liked bacon, because that's what he was cooking.

"Good morning." They both jumped at the sound of my voice. "How are you feeling?" I asked Richard. He assured me he was better than the day before.

"Where's Alek?" Luther asked.

"He's probably sleeping in, I had him up late last night." Luther raised an eyebrow and I informed him that I had asked Alek's help interpreting a dream.

"It's only nine o'clock," he commented while rummaging in the refrigerator. "I'm surprised you're awake on a day like this. Marco always says this is sleeping weather."

"It is," I agreed. "But I've slept too much lately. I needed to get up."

"There's no such thing as too much sleep," Richard said.

I got shakily to my feet and helped Luther with breakfast, mostly because I wanted something besides bacon. After waffles and some fruit, Richard said he was going back home. I told him to call me if he needed to talk. I walked him to the door, and we parted company with our usual hug. I didn't feel right about Richard leaving, especially not after the way he had acted the day before. I was worried about him, but Richard was a grown man, and there wasn't a hell of a lot I could do about it.

* * * *

Two days later, I was getting ready for my date with Marco, and noticed the bite marks on my thigh were still visible, though only slightly. With the help of Kat, I had selected a sexy gown for the evening. It was so deeply blue, it was nearly black, and made of silk. The back dipped low,

stopping just short of indecent exposure. The neckline was just low enough to reveal a taste of cleavage, and the little straps that held the dress in place were barely visible. I also wore what was in my opinion, one of the neatest inventions in years, a strapless, backless bra. It was literally suctioned to my breasts, and did a remarkable job of keeping everything where it needed to be. I had just slipped on a pair of dark blue heels I'd bought for the occasion when I heard a knock at the door.

I had time for one last glance in the mirror. My short hair was worn in its usual style, with the ends tipped out slightly. It was a bit wild, but seemed to suit me. My makeup was not as conservative as usual. I'd gone heavier on the eyeliner, giving my hazel eyes a smoky appearance that I hoped looked sexy. Dracula had left an hour before for his hearing with the council, and Luther was at club Red, Marco's other popular establishment which I had been startled to find was named after me. Since I was sure Alek would be in the dungeon that left Marco waiting for me to open the door.

After grabbing the small matching purse, I hurried down the stairs. I noticed the velvet scarf Kat had insisted was perfect with the dress and snatched it from the back of the sofa on my way out.

I couldn't have asked for a better view. Marco was leaning in the window of a sleek silver sports car. The black dress pants he wore clung to the curve of his ass like a mold. I was rather disappointed when he stood up, but only until he turned around. His eyes sparkled as he walked toward me with a bouquet of red roses. I never thought I would see

The Dread Moon
by Tracey H. Kitts

anyone who looked better in black than Dracula, but I was wrong. The black suit Marco wore must have been made for him. The top few buttons of his shirt were open, and I had a burning desire to crawl inside that opening to find the man beneath. Sex incarnate walked up my steps and handed me the roses.

"Hello, Red." His customary greeting seemed to move me more than usual that night. I reached up and ran my fingers through his soft dark hair and pulled him toward me. I kissed him gently, but passionately. I had first met Marco nine years ago, and I couldn't remember a time during those nine years that I hadn't wanted him. My heart fluttered as I pulled back to look at the handsome man standing before me. I would probably wake up soon, but that was alright. For now, he was mine.

"Hello, sexy," I purred, in mock imitation of his greeting to me.

"Are you ready?" he asked with a smile.

Once again, I realized if he asked me to get naked in the frigid night air on my front porch, I couldn't refuse him. I was afraid of not being able to say no to Marco. But at the same time, I trusted him not to ask for more than I would be willing to give. My resistance was weakening along with my knees, and it was only a matter of time before we crossed one line or another.

I placed my small cold hand inside of his, and was instantly warmed in more ways than one. Just the feel of his hand touched me in places he had never been, including my heart.

"I'm afraid of falling," I said without thinking.

Fortunately, Marco thought I meant the steps, and offered me his arm for support as we walked to the car.

"I don't think I'd have much success walking in heels either," he teased as he helped me with the door.

While he walked to the other side, I took a deep breath and told myself I should be more careful with what I said. We were going to his apartment above club Red for dinner, before coming back to The Dread Moon to make an appearance later in the evening. I listened quietly while Marco told me the latest goings on in the pack and tried to school my heart to beat more slowly. Club Red is a good drive from my house. We were halfway there when Marco took my hand and asked, "Are you alright?" He pressed the back of my hand to his lips. "You're trembling," he whispered.

"I'm terrified," I confessed.

"Don't be afraid of me, Red."

"I'm not." It was true. Marco was not what I was afraid of. "I'm afraid of what I feel every time I'm near you."

He continued to hold my hand, but refrained from pushing the subject further as we finished our drive. Part of me kept wondering if it was wrong to have such feelings so soon after Alfred's departure. But then I remembered my feelings toward Marco were not new, I had simply suppressed them in order to move on with my life. But there was no suppressing what I felt when I looked at the man sitting beside me. The full moon was a week away, and Marco's usual sexy scent was even stronger. I wanted to jump him in the middle of the interstate traffic. I respected his wise decision to take things

The Dread Moon
by Tracey H. Kitts

slowly, but I was beginning to think I wasn't capable of waiting too long.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Twenty Three

The parking lot of club Red was nearly deserted. The only car I recognized was Luther's. Marco opened my door as he sighed, "Ah, no press."

"Well, if there's no press and no pack members to speak of, what exactly are we doing here?"

His laugh was everything you'd expect from the devil as he answered, "We're having dinner in my apartment."

Once we were inside, Luther met us at the foot of the stairs to inform Marco that dinner would be served shortly. Marco thanked him and Luther turned away without so much as an obscene gesture. Marco must have threatened him.

Marco placed his hand against the bare skin of my lower back and led the way to his office. A large mahogany desk stood near the back of the room. Behind the desk and along one wall were rows upon rows of law books from both planets, and history books detailing different wars.

To my left, sat a large tan leather sofa, with dark suede pillows nearly covering it from view. Against the opposite wall was a matching chair and ottoman with a deep crimson blanket flung across it that reflected in the highly polished wood of the floor. The chair was pulled alongside a black marble fireplace. The last time I had visited Marco's office, we were in the middle of a scorching summer. But due to the cold that night, a fire blazed in the hearth, casting a haunting light over the room which reflected in his dark eyes.

He walked with a smile to the bookshelf along one wall and removed a copy of book. I watched as he pressed a small indentation in the wood and the bookshelf slid to one side to reveal a staircase. The top of the staircase opened directly into Marco's living room. It was a large loft style apartment covering nearly the entire space with one expansive room. There was a half wall divider that separated the kitchen and a massive dungeon style door at the far end.

The walls had been torn away to display the faded reddish brown brick beneath. The floor was made of old wooden planks that looked well taken care of. I had only seen windows like his in pictures before. They were made of wrought iron and consisted of at least fifty small square panes each. The color scheme matched that of his office. The windows were adorned with lush red, expensive looking drapes, each with a large golden cord to pull them shut. Tall iron candle holders were scattered about including a few candelabras, all holding cream colored candles, whose soft light filled the room. A fireplace stood near the entrance along the same wall as the hearth in his office. This one was not marble, but was made of the same brick as the walls. In front of the fireplace was an empty patch of floor. Here a blanket of deep red velvet had been spread, just out of reach of any sparks that might leap from the fire.

The room was divided by the placement of the furniture into three areas. The space near the fireplace had a long dark leather sofa draped with a cream blanket that looked to be made of fur. Matching cream colored pillows were thrown at odd angles across the leather. In place of a matching chair,

there was a massive scattering of faded red and gold pillows. This tied in with the piece along the mantle. There, a faded red peapod shaped basket with black iron accents held a collection of cream, brown, and gold décor balls. Beside this lay several boughs of crooked willow dyed a deep crimson, and layered with pussy willow.

In the far left corner stood a lamp that looked like an odd flower curving over a tan suede chair and ottoman. Like the one downstairs, this chair had a crimson blanket thrown over one arm and draping over part of the floor. With its back turned to the fireplace and the small reading area, sat a blood red love seat with faded gold, almost bronze colored pillows. This area in particular drew my attention as it had during my earlier visit, for on the wall in a large space between the windows hung an enormous painting of *me*.

On my first visit, Marco had told me that in the year he had kept my great, great grandfather's journal before delivering it to me, Mathias had told him where to buy the canvas. He had also directed him where to find the proper paints. The canvas was enchanted, and designed to show whomever used it the deepest desires of their heart. Just like last time, I was at a loss for words.

I stood so that only my back and the left side of my face were visible. To my chest I clutched a long crimson piece of material which seemed to flow over the canvas. It draped around me so that my entire back could be seen. My head was tilted slightly downward as if I were in the process of turning back to someone who stood behind me. The painting was so life like that I expected to see myself finish that turn

at any moment. A tall ornately carved candle holder stood on either side adding their soft illumination to the revealing portrait.

Marco's warm hand against my back brought me to reality. "I managed to persuade your uncle Aldan to enchant a few bottles of wine." He smiled. "I hope you don't mind?"

"Not at all," I laughed. My mood seemed somehow lighter at the mention of my recently discovered relative. "It will be nice to get drunk like a normal person."

I followed Marco to the blanket in front of the fire. I threw the scarf and my purse on the sofa and slipped off my shoes. The dress was long enough that I could sit comfortably without flashing the fact that my underwear also matched. Marco poured us both a glass of chilled red wine, as I stretched my feet toward the fire.

"I have to admit, this beats the hell out of chocolates," I said with a smile.

The mood was more relaxed than I had expected. Even though I was very attracted to Marco, there was no pressure to rip his clothes off in front of the blazing fire. I just enjoyed being with him. From the look on his face, I think he felt the same way about me. Our conversation didn't really stick to one subject. We discussed trying to get Kat to hook up with everyone from Beau to Jeremiah down at The Dread Moon.

"I can hear him now, 'dis be one crazy bitch mon,'" Marco said with a laugh.

"That's mean," I giggled as Luther came up the stairs.

He was carrying a tray of food, and looked every bit the charming waiter. The wonderful smell reminded me I had

been too nervous to eat before, and my stomach picked that moment to voice its protest.

"Apparently, you're right on time," Marco commented with a smile.

Luther placed the tray on the blanket between us. Marco had been served another rare steak, and it looked as though Luther remembered one of my favorite seafood dishes, garlic shrimp with angel hair pasta. Marco thanked him and asked that he come back when it was time to leave for The Dread Moon. Luther left once more without an obscene gesture. I was beginning to feel snubbed.

Dinner with Marco was one of the most pleasant experiences I'd had in a long time. We laughed and talked, and he made fun of the way I ate pasta. He insisted, "It was meant to be slurped." However, I usually cut pasta to avoid slurping in public.

After dinner and several glasses of wine, we were both feeling pretty good when Marco moved closer to me and said, "I'd like to kiss you."

"I'm not stopping you," I teased.

"Maybe we should sit on the couch," he suggested. "It would be too easy to tackle you on the floor."

I laughed more from the wine than his expression. One look told me how serious Marco's comment had been. I flopped down on the couch with a swish of fabric. The moment Marco joined me, his lips seemed to devour mine. What began as a gentle kiss became a tangle of lips, and teeth, and tongue. He began to slide the silk dress further up my thigh and I stopped him.

"Please," he begged, "let me touch you."

He kissed me more gently as his hand roamed up my inner thigh. The warmth of Marco's hand through the thin lace panties set me on fire, and I arched hungrily against him. He ran two fingers between the soft fabric and my body and began to rub against me. Only moments before I had been cold, even with the fire. Now I was breaking a sweat.

Just when I thought he only meant to tease, Marco slipped one finger inside me. My cry of pleasure was drowned in his kiss. With a thrill I realized it was the first time that any part of Marco had penetrated my body. I wanted more, and I wasn't the only one.

"Let me taste you," he whispered against my lips.

I had no objection. If The Big Bad Wolf wanted to eat me, I wasn't about to stop him. He slid from the couch to a kneeling position in front of me as he flung his jacket onto the floor. Marco placed his hands behind the backs of my knees, and slid me toward him with a hungry growl.

With a hand on either thigh, he slid the dress up to my waist.

"What the hell is this?" he growled.

It took me a moment to understand he had found Dracula's bite.

"Let me explain," I stammered.

"Make it fast, Red, my patience is wearing thin."

"Here." I grabbed his hand, and let Marco see enough of my memory to understand the situation. I let him see that I hadn't wanted Dracula to starve, and I had worn panties rather than display myself for him. I also made a point of

showing Marco the part of my memory where I clearly said, "I am not asking you to have sex with me."

He pulled back and growled, "Alright, fine. But no more. The next time that bastard is hungry, tell him to go suck on someone else."

"He's moving out after the hearing," I said, trying to calm the beast I had obviously agitated.

"Really?" He seemed to brighten. "Good," he growled.

Before I had a chance to realize Marco intended to go through with what he had been planning, he snatched the lace panties around my ankles and buried his face between my thighs. He made one tentative lick over my skin before devouring me with a tongue that felt too long to be human.

I screamed as Marco pulled my flesh between his teeth with a growl, licking and sucking places that ached for his attention. I could feel the tension building in every muscle as his uncommonly long tongue slipped inside me. I grabbed a handful of his hair and pushed him harder between my legs as I ground my body against his face. Once it seemed that release was within my grasp I heard a startled cry from the staircase.

I turned to see Luther looking pleased and a little embarrassed. Marco snatched his head from underneath my skirt at the same time he pulled the fabric over my thighs. It was both comical and endearing.

"I'm really sorry," Luther snickered, "but you said I should come get you when it was time to go."

"Fine," Marco sighed dejectedly.

"Well, if we're gonna go, we'd better beat it, I mean we'd better get going," Luther laughed.

Marco snarled in his direction and Luther announced as he ran down the stairs, "I'll have the car waiting out front."

"I'm sorry," he said softly.

"It's alright," I said as I put my heels back on.

"I didn't mean to embarrass you."

"You didn't," I laughed. "If anyone else had walked in, yes, I'd be embarrassed. But not Luther. I've known him for too long, and know too many stupid things he's done."

Marco looked relieved. "To be continued," he said with a smile as he helped me to my feet.

My knees were still a little weak as I walked through the door at the far end of the apartment to Marco's bathroom. I admired the large bed on my way through his room and figured I should hurry up before he joined me. If he caught me in the bedroom, we'd never make it to The Dread Moon.

After freshening up and cooling off, I walked out of the bathroom to find Marco waiting by the door with a smile.

"I should probably brush my teeth before going out," he said with a grin.

I walked back over to the fire to wait for him while I blushed dark enough to match the red velvet blanket.

The ride to the club was surprisingly not tense. I felt closer to Marco after our shared, though interrupted intimacy. The night was clear and bright. We spent most of the time looking out the windows at the sky, while Marco pointed out different star formations.

Our arrival was greeted with flashing cameras and a swarm of reporters who were immediately held back by several buff looking bodyguards. I must have looked as miserable as I felt at the prospect of facing the media again. Marco squeezed my hand comfortingly and said, "We'll try to walk fast."

He traded places with me so that he could get out first. Luckily, the windows were tinted dark enough that no one could see him crawl over me. Once the crowd was secured again behind a velvet rope, he opened the door and put on a happy face for the press.

He extended a hand to me and as soon as I stood up someone shouted, "How does it feel to be the first Hunter to shag a werewolf?"

I laughed, and it was a wicked sound that made the people closest to me shiver. "Who says I'm the first?" I replied smoothly.

"That doesn't answer the question," Lola said as she pushed her way to the front of the crowd.

Just looking at her was enough to put my blood pressure through the roof. What was it going to take to make this woman go away? Enough was enough. I'd had more than my fill of trying to act nice just because other people were watching. *"Let them watch,"* I thought. *"Maybe it will discourage the next Lola wannabe."*

What I hadn't planned on was my thoughts passing to Marco. I was still holding his hand and I could feel him stiffen just before I said, "Well, why don't you tell us how it feels to

be the first person to give a biker a blow job on the front page of the paper?" I sneered.

"She's right," someone else yelled. "Who are you to judge?"

The crowd erupted in shouted questions and insults. I managed to hear someone call Lola a slut before Marco called for silence.

"Please," he said loudly, and the crowd began to calm. "I'm sure none of us enjoys having our private lives on display. My business with Lilith Mercury is my own, and it is intensely private."

The crowd seemed to take his statement for the threat it was and quieted down for us to enter the building.

* * * *

After several drinks I noticed Kat on the dance floor. I had seated myself at the bar while Marco made a point to speak to people. Even though Lola had been put in her place, I was livid. How dare that bitch even speak to me? I was watching Kat attempt to look happy while Luther stopped to talk to her. Poor Kat, it was obvious she was acting. Marco's warm hand on my shoulder made me jump.

"Poor Kat," he said, echoing my thoughts.

"Yeah, she's trying."

Kathryn had improved since her breakup with Charles and seemed to be enjoying herself. Anyone who didn't know her would think so, but I could tell she still missed him.

"You want me to go hit the bitch?" Wauneta the bartender asked.

"Excuse me?" Marco said as he looked at us both.

"Oh, not Kat," I laughed. "I was just telling Wauneta about Lola."

Wauneta was yet another acquaintance I'd made from rescuing someone. I found her last summer in a parking lot surrounded by several men intent on raping her. She was beginning to change when I found her. Though I did most of the work, between the both of us, the men were put in their place: six feet under.

Marco then laughed at the suggestion, but didn't object.

"If the opportunity ever presents itself." I smiled sadistically, and Wauneta returned the look with unmistakable relish.

The rest of the evening wasn't so bad, and my mood improved drastically after dancing with Marco. Overall, I had a really good time. It was one thirty in the morning when I told Marco, I had to get some sleep. He kept another car at the club besides the limo Luther had driven us in. We were attempting to sneak out the back door when we were swarmed once again with reporters. At the front of the group was Lola. As she opened her mouth to speak, a big black fist came flying over my shoulder and busted her right in the mouth.

"How dare you give my boyfriend a blow job you dirty slut!" Wauneta yelled as Luther pretended to restrain her. Marco and I, who knew the biker had nothing to do with the bartender, fought back tears of laughter. We seized the opportunity, and escaped to his car. Once the door closed, we both erupted with laughter.

The Dread Moon
by Tracey H. Kitts

"I should give her a raise," he chuckled.

"Yeah, I'll be sure to send her a thank you."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Twenty Four

Once we arrived at my house, Marco walked me to the door. When he kissed me goodnight, the exhaustion that had filled my body only moments before was replaced with desire.

"I'm exhausted," I moaned.

"I know," he said softly. His dark eyes sparkled with mischief as he said, "Get some sleep, Red. We'll continue this later."

After watching Marco's taillights fade into the distance, I went back in the house, and up the stairs. My shoes were left by the door, the dress made it to the foot of the bed, and the suction cup bra was peeled off as I entered the bathroom. Apparently I'd left my lace panties back at Marco's apartment. The warm shower seemed to relax me further, and I stumbled when I reached for my towel.

A few minutes later, I staggered into the bedroom, pulled on my favorite pair of silk pjs and went to crawl in the bed. When I turned around, I found Dracula reclining against my pillows, and smiling at me as if he'd just done something wicked. He was still wearing the stunning outfit he had worn to see the council. It was a shame I couldn't do to him the things that came to mind. He was wearing black dress pants that fit tight enough to show off his physique. The deep red of his shirt, seemed to blaze against the black, and complemented his hair. I also noticed he hadn't bothered to remove his knee high boots before stretching himself across my clean sheets.

"How long have you been here?" I asked.

"Long, enough," he purred. He held out his arms to me, and I snuggled up against him.

"How did it go?"

"Very well, I think."

"I told Marco you were moving out," I admitted reluctantly.

"I thought you would. I take it he had no objections?"

"No," I said with a half hearted laugh.

"Since I will be leaving tomorrow evening, I wish to give you something. That is, if you can stay awake for a few more minutes?"

I sat up as he removed a piece of what looked like parchment paper from the inside pocket of his long black coat.

"If you ever need to talk to me, you can write me a note."

He smiled sadly as I reached for the paper. However, he did not immediately release the parchment. He moved to hand it to me, but instead he held my hand for just a moment longer than necessary.

"How does it work exactly?" I asked.

"Whatever you write here," he began as he took out another piece of paper, "will appear here. Once I have read your message, or you have read mine, you just shake the paper like so," he said and wiggled the parchment slightly, "and the words will erase themselves, so you can respond. Unless, you do not have much to say, and we can just keep talking for a while on the same page."

"Okay," I yawned. "You and I seem to be on the same page a lot, so that shouldn't be a problem."

The Dread Moon
by Tracey H. Kitts

He smiled at me while he got up to place the paper on my writing desk. I hated to spend my last night with Dracula sleeping, but I was so tired. I watched him change, and couldn't help smiling at the fact that our pajamas matched. I scooted out of the way so he could turn down the covers, and hugged back up against him with a sigh.

"I'll miss having someone to sleep with," I said as I breathed in his familiar cologne.

"Oh, I do not think you will have a problem convincing your werewolf to take my place."

I rephrased the comment and said, "It's you I'll miss, not just a warm body beside me."

"Then rest, my angel. I wish for nothing more than to spend my last night watching you sleep."

His words seemed to pierce my heart. Maybe I was just tired, or maybe I had become more attached to Dracula than I wanted to admit.

* * * *

Tuesday morning found me in an almost solemn mood. With Luther and Dracula both gone, I felt strangely alone. Of course, I still had Alek, but we didn't sleep together. He was good company when we spoke, but I still felt like something was missing.

I opened the door, thinking that the fresh cool air would help to wake me up, and found a dozen red roses waiting on my welcome mat. I picked up the card with a smile and read:

Don't get any ideas, Red.

This still doesn't count as conversation.

*Happy Valentine's Day,
Marco*

I carried them to the table with a smile and wondered if Wauneta had received my thank you note with the chocolates I'd sent. I started making French toast about the time Alek came in the kitchen.

"Well, the werewolf's a romantic, is he?" he said with a sarcastic smile.

"Shut up, Alek."

"Yes," he drawled, "and a Happy Valentine's Day to you also."

With that, Alek began to boil water for his morning tea while I went back to cooking. I'd hardly gotten started for the second time before Marco called. He wanted to be sure I'd gotten the roses.

"I hope you don't mind," he added, "but I had some sent to Kat from both of us."

"That's sweet, thank you."

What he didn't tell me until a few minutes later was, they were being personally delivered by Judas, the wereleopard. As it so happens, Judas was in the process of putting himself through college when he was attacked last year by Dr. Williams.

"And what exactly is his day job?" I inquired.

"He's a stripper," Marco said quietly, but I could hear the smile in his voice.

"You sent my best friend a stripping wereleopard for Valentine's Day?" I laughed.

"It's the thought that counts," he said sarcastically.
"Besides, I didn't tell him to take anything off."

We hung up about the time breakfast was ready, and I met Alek's knowing smile across the table.

"What?"

"You're in love with him," he said softly. I couldn't think of a reply. I kept questioning what I felt for Marco, but the more I was near him, I didn't have to wonder. "You don't have to respond," Alek said kindly. "It's really none of my business anyway."

He got up to fix his tea and I tried not to think too much about what he'd just said.

* * * *

That afternoon I took a nap on the couch and woke up with the strangest feeling. I felt like I should go down to the transporter. It was so bizarre, I didn't know what else to do. Besides, if I didn't go, the feeling would bother me the rest of the day. I was halfway down the long staircase before I realized this would be my first trip to the lab since Alfred had moved out. I felt strangely numb as I opened the door and looked around at the bare room. The room was large, and with nothing to obstruct my view, I could see a piece of paper lying on the transporter.

I walked forward and removed the handwritten page from the tiles.

Dear Lilith,

I know that we are not involved, but I cannot get you off of my mind. I have seen, felt, and have knowledge of things

The Dread Moon
by Tracey H. Kitts

that I choose not to forget. Who among your friends knows you more intimately than I? They've not seen the side of you that I have. I feel as if a spell has been cast upon me. You must know how much I want you, and in spite of myself, cannot seem to let you go. You don't have to respond to this letter. I've been up all night, and I had to say something.

I apologize, because I'm sure this will catch you off guard. We never have to speak of this lapse of conscience and reason of mine. Not to mention pride. I am often reminded of the "Golden Rule." You know, do unto others, and all that rot. It has kept me from doing some really stupid things in my life. It has also reminded me how stupid I was after doing others. I cannot change the past. My only defense is stupidity. I never expected to love you.

Thank you, for allowing me to know things that I had no right to ask. Please allow a stupid old fool his jealousy, and if you can, forgive me. You will remain a familiar smile, and a constant fantasy.

*Love,
Alfred*

As I read the note, I walked over to where his desk used to be, sat down on the floor, and cried. I will miss Alfred until the last breath leaves my body, and this world no longer has to put up with me.

Alek found me with my forehead resting against my knees and took the letter from my hand. "Fool," he mumbled as he glanced at the letter before folding it in half. When I went to wipe my face I realized I had cried until my eyes were

swollen. "Come on," he said gently, putting an arm around me. "You can't sit down here in the cold."

Alek was wearing a long red robe embroidered with gold, and he wrapped it around my shoulders as he hugged me tightly against his side. "Is there anything I can do?" he asked.

"You can give me a dream," I sniffed.

"Are you sure that's what you want?" he asked.

I put my arm around Alek's waist as he led me back up the stairs and said, "Come on Mr. Sandman, show me what you've got."

I had been in the lab crying long enough that dusk had fallen by the time I got back upstairs. Alek hesitated at the foot of the stairs, but I pulled him with me to my room. "Is that all you think I'm good for?" he teased. "Putting you to bed?"

I gave him back his robe, and left him waiting while I changed into a scruffy old pair of sweatpants and a t-shirt. I felt like shit, and my appearance probably reflected it. Alek was reclined on top of the covers against the pillows, and pulled back the sheets as I approached. As I looked up I realized he had spread stardust on my ceiling. I was still staring up at the artificial heavens when he asked, "What kind of dream would you like to have?"

"Anything, except my own tonight," I said sadly. "I'm tired, but I'm afraid to go to sleep," I confessed.

We went through the same process as before, and I invited Alek into my mind. He appeared with his flowing red robe and

The Dread Moon
by Tracey H. Kitts

took my hand. "Since you do not wish to have your own dreams, with your permission, I will give you one of mine."

He stretched out his hand, and the scenery began to form around us as if a canvas were being painted by an invisible hand. It took me a moment to recognize the woods surrounding the Council Tower. A young man was leaving the back of the building. He was tall and slender, dressed in black. My heart gave a leap at the sight of a younger version of Alek Ambrose. Alek was still good looking in my opinion, but a few years ago, he may have looked even better. It was night, and we followed him through the dark woods. Here and there a flicker of light could be seen as a swarm of fairies flew past.

There was a glow in the distance, and I knew it was coming from the lake. The lake that resides in the council woods is surrounded by moon flowers. These strange purple blooms only open at night, and give off a soft glow, much like tiny purple lanterns. They surround the lake, making it the ideal place to swim at night. As we moved closer, laughter could be heard, and we slowed our pace, so as not to disturb whoever was there.

As the younger Alek drew closer to the noise, he parted the bushes blocking his view, and we both looked over his shoulder. I had a feeling what I would be witnessing, but nothing could have prepared me for the sight of Julius Blight naked again after all these years. He was on the far side of the lake from where we stood, his beautiful porcelain skin appeared almost luminous in the faint light, and my heart beat faster. I remembered how impressed I had been with his

The Dread Moon
by Tracey H. Kitts

beauty. The scars from his vicious werewolf attack could not be seen from where we were, so there was nothing to mar his perfection. He stretched out his long angelic wings and with very little effort swooped down in front of where I stood.

It was strange to see a younger version of myself standing across the lake. My hair was longer, and in my opinion, I was thinner. I had just slid out of my leather bodysuit and was removing whatever had held back my hair. Like amber fire, the shoulder length mass glowed under the soft light. Julius ran his fingers through my hair and kissed me. I blushed as I remembered how much I had enjoyed that kiss. According to my recollection, nothing more embarrassing happened that night. My scars were also not visible from a distance in the dim light. For the first time, I got to see what I might have been like, had the awful scars and the infection they carried not become a part of my life. I longed for the image I saw to be true, to not be a ruined beauty. I smiled as I watched Julius lounging in the grass with his sketchbook while I stretched out across a large rock. I lay there, smiling and laughing, perched like a mermaid while he brought the image to life on paper.

When we finally started to swim Alek asked me, "I've always wondered, how is it that he doesn't sink?"

I laughed, "Because the oil on his wings keeps them from absorbing the water."

"Well, that makes sense," he said as the younger Alek made his way quietly through the trees. "Did you have sex in the lake?" he asked.

"You should have waited around to see," I teased.

The Dread Moon
by Tracey H. Kitts

"Now that you have seen one of my favorite dreams, I think it is time for you to sleep."

"Why is it one of your favorites?"

"Because for an hour I got to watch a beautiful woman who had no idea that she's beautiful. The Icarum could not have looked more like an angel than you did that night. Now sleep," he said forcefully, and I did.

* * * *

After that night, I didn't have any more trouble sleeping. With Alek's help, I could finally rest. I hadn't had time to meditate enough to communicate with Mathias for a few weeks. I felt sick at the thought of explaining to him what had been going on. Then again, he could see the future, so he knew what would happen with Alfred and I long before I did. The son of a bitch could have given me some warning. But he would have considered that screwing with fate, I'm sure. Besides, I wouldn't trade the happy memories with Alfred for all the warning in the world. My heartbreak would just become another scar that I carried.

* * * *

Saturday night would bring with it the Hunger Moon of February. Marco was preparing to lead the hunt for the pack on this night, so I wasn't expecting to hear his voice when I answered the phone late Thursday.

"Can you come down here?" I assumed he was at The Dread Moon.

"Why, what's wrong? Are you ok?"

"It's not me, it's Richard."

"Richard?"

"Yeah," he sighed. "He showed up down here a few hours ago. He's shit drunk, and really depressed."

"Where is he now? You didn't leave him alone did you?" Even as I asked the question, I knew Marco wouldn't have been irresponsible enough to leave a depressed snake man alone.

I was in the process of looking for something to wear when he answered, "No. Dracula is with him." The emphasis he placed on the name let me know he wasn't happy about it. I wasn't sure what would make Marco tolerate Vlad in his club, and I didn't think the time was appropriate to ask.

"I'll be right there."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Twenty Five

As soon as I hung up I snatched the first thing out of the closet that looked like decent club wear. I didn't want to draw more attention to myself than necessary by not fitting in. The Dread Moon was a little more upscale than the almost goth punk look club Red had going on. I snatched on a pair of black leather pants and a blood red button up shirt. The shoes that I only stopped at the front door to put on were a sort of short dress boot. I snatched my keys while I yelled to Alek in the kitchen, "I've got to go, Richard's at The Dread Moon, and he may need my help!"

It's a good thing I'm friends with at least one local cop, because I practically stood my car on its head to reach the club. I pulled around back and saw Marco open the door almost as soon as I got out of the car.

"Thanks for calling me," I said as I hugged him.

Marco was wearing another black suit, and had I been there under different circumstances, I might have suggested we retire to his office. He looked tired and worried, but the smile he gave me seemed to erase most of that.

"It's good to see you, Red."

He kissed me softly and I asked, "Are you alright?"

"I'm just tired," he said. Marco placed his hand in the small of my back and began leading me upstairs. "Aldan has been asking my opinion on the proposals made by the vampires."

That surprised me. "Wow. Who would have thought a member of the council would ever ask the opinion of a werewolf? My uncle must really like you."

"He does." Marco smiled down at me. "Besides, he's not like wizards used to be. He actually treats people equally. It hasn't exactly made him popular in some circles, but for the most part, people appreciate what he's doing. He has a lot of influence over the current president, whose vote is crucial in all of this."

The recently elected President of the United Continental Terran Federation was Tynan Theron, and he was a djinn. He was the first of his kind to ever be elected to office, and had been relying heavily on the advice of Aldan Medwin. Since wizards and djinns both had powerful magical abilities, the council seemed to get along better with Theron than any of the previous presidents they had served with.

"Actually, I've got a meeting with Aldan tomorrow night."

"The night before the full moon? That doesn't sound like a good idea."

"It probably isn't, but I can control myself better than most. It should be fine. He just wants to be sure that the rights the vampires have proposed will not give them anything that we don't have. From what I've heard so far, they aren't asking for anything extra. All they really want is to just be tolerated."

"Isn't that what everyone wants?" I said sarcastically as we approached the same room I had found Dracula in before.

"Now, before we go in," Marco said, "Richard is very distraught. I just want you to be prepared."

The Dread Moon
by Tracey H. Kitts

He opened the door, and I found Richard sitting at the table the drunk Jamaican werewolves had previously occupied. Dracula was standing over his shoulder and appeared to be trying to talk some sense into him. Where the lighting had been set to dim the last time I was there, the room was brightly lit on this occasion. Every worried line on Richard's face seemed to stand out in stark contrast against the dark blue shirt he wore. Normally, Richard looked good in blue, it brought out the color in his blue gray eyes, but not now. His eyes were the cold yellow of a snake once again, and he looked like he'd been crying.

"I ran some tests on myself," he explained shakily as I sat down across from him. "As you know, the lycanthropy virus lengthens the life span. Well, apparently there's something in reptilian DNA that lengthens your life even more." He paused to take another gulp of his drink and drained the glass. "I'll likely live three hundred years or so with this fucking curse," he sighed miserably.

I looked up at Dracula, and he nodded as if to say it was true.

"But, who knows if my calculations are even accurate? I might end up living forever, just because I don't have the balls to kill myself. I don't want to live forever, Lilith," he sobbed.

"Neither do I," I said softly as I took the glass away from Richard.

"You do remember Mathias's ability to take on some of the characteristics of his lovers?" Dracula asked me.

"Of course."

"Well, my angel, after all we have.... "He looked to Marco and seemed to reword his statement, "*discussed*, I am afraid that might be a moot point."

"*Fuck.*"

"Yes, that is why it may be a moot point."

To my surprise, Richard threw back his head and laughed at this, but Marco didn't look nearly as happy about it.

"You're the only person, whose life might be more screwed up than mine," Richard chuckled. "But I doubt it."

"Oh, ye of little faith," the vampire drawled sarcastically as he took a seat beside me on the wrap around sofa. As he sat down, I took a good look at him. He was wearing a long black coat, and tight black pants that hugged his lovely thighs. His shiny knee high boots seemed to set off the ensemble almost as much as the bright red shirt that fit close around his throat, and had no collar. We matched.

"Maybe I should color my hair," Richard mumbled. "It's prematurely gray anyhow. Can you imagine living three hundred years with gray hair?" he snorted.

Since he seemed to be calming down somewhat I looked to Marco and asked, "Did you give him anything?"

"A sedative, it's probably starting to work."

"Ya shoulda let 'im ave a smoke wit us mon," one of the Jamaican's said from the doorway.

Marco pushed the man back down the hall while Dracula laughed. His voice floated over my skin and I tried to pretend like I didn't enjoy it. I had missed him, but I wasn't going to say so, especially not in Marco's presence.

"I'm not going to encourage someone else to start your bad habit," Marco said. "And put that thing out while there's still guests downstairs." Marco didn't do drugs, and I was surprised he tolerated the behavior in some of his employees. I think it might have been as I favor to Jeremiah. According to Marco, they went way back. If Jeremiah said they were harmless, then I guess they were. It wasn't like they were selling anything.

"What brings you here?" I asked Vlad.

"I came to feed." Marco glared at him and he added, "On willing victims, of course."

"On the stoned Jamaican's again?"

"No," he laughed. "I got a taste before they started tonight."

"That sounds dirty," Richard giggled.

"Should I take him home?" I asked about Richard.

"Jeremiah said he could stay here tonight," Marco sighed. "He should be alright now."

I left Richard to chat with the vampire and went downstairs with Marco. "I'm sorry I called you out here for nothing. I didn't realize he would calm down so easily, but he was asking for you earlier."

"It's alright," I said, placing my hand on his shoulder. "I'm glad you did. I've been worried about Richard. Actually, I'm more concerned about him talking to Bade, than anything else."

Marco and I had already discussed Richard's strange friendship with Bade Garren, and he didn't appear to be as concerned as I was.

"I really don't think Richard would join with him to try to overthrow me as king," he said. "Besides, for someone like Richard, Bade would probably be a good mentor for learning the change."

"What do you mean someone like Richard?"

"No offense, but he's very submissive. I think that's why he gets along so well with Bade."

"He's not gay," I said almost forcefully in my friend's defense.

"Gay hasn't got anything to do with it." He smiled seductively with these words, and I forgot what I was about to say.

Since there wasn't an event at the club that night, there were no reporters to be seen. Marco and I had a few slow dances together, before I decided to head back home. He walked me to the back door where I paused to caress his weary face.

"You look so tired," I whispered.

Marco leaned into my hand and kissed my palm. "I'm exhausted," he said.

"Don't worry," I teased. "I'm not going to molest you."

His laugh was pleasant, but obviously weakened from his usual rough baritone. Marco kissed my forehead as he purred, "Goodnight, Red."

As I drove home, the scent of Dracula's cologne lingered on my shirt, and the feel of Marco's lips pressed against my forehead lingered in my mind. When I took a deep breath, it felt as if the vampire was still sitting right beside me. But if I

closed my eyes, even for a moment ... I could still feel Marco's lips. What the hell had I gotten myself into?

I tried to redirect my train of thought and said a prayer for Richard. I was nearly home by the time I finished.

After giving Alek a brief rundown of what had happened, I went upstairs, and called it a night.

* * * *

Alek and I were having dinner Friday night when someone began beating frantically at the front door. Dracula planned to visit that night, and was expected any minute, but I'd left my balcony window open for him. Alek motioned for me to stay seated, and he went for the door.

Richard came running in, gasping for breath, and followed closely by Alek.

"What's the meaning of this?" the wizard asked.

"It's David," Richard gasped. His clothes were torn, and he had a cut on his forehead that had he not had the ability to regenerate, might have left a nasty scar. Richard dropped to his knees in the doorway as Dracula appeared behind him. His face was blank and unreadable as he looked down at Richard.

"They've taken him," he panted.

"Who? Richard, what has happened to David?" I pressed.

"Williams," he gasped, "they took him. I tried, but I wasn't strong enough."

"Where did this happen?" I asked.

"University," he wheezed.

"Richard, did you *run* all this way?" Alek asked incredulously.

Richard nodded. "I panicked. I didn't know what else to do, you've got to help me. They'll kill him!" he pleaded.

"Why do they want him?" I asked, still too shocked to be upset by the news.

"He's planning to take control of the entire 'animal population' as he calls them. He wants to kill someone close to the only two known alphas in the area, so he took David for Bade."

My heart lurched painfully. "Who else did they take?" I asked.

"They're going after Luther next."

"No," I roared. Before anyone could blink I was on the floor shaking Richard by the shoulders. "Where are they?" I growled. *"I'll kill them."*

"I know," he said, cringing at the sight of my outburst. "I can take you. I overheard them saying. They're at an old farm house near where your friend Kat lives."

"Shit, Marco's on Terra tonight. He had a meeting with Aldan. He said we shouldn't take on Dr. Williams alone, but he also said to call Luther if he wasn't available. *We're fucked!*" I yelled, slamming my fist into the table.

"Take me with you," Dracula said quietly as he stepped forward. "I would be glad to help."

"And me," Alek said.

"Alright," I sighed, regaining some of my composure.

"You might be able to get Bade," Richard suggested.

Since I hadn't seen either Alek or Dracula in action, and could remember vividly Bade's ability, I thought that might

not be a bad idea. However, as I pointed out to Richard, "I wouldn't even know where to find Bade."

"I would," he said as Alek helped him to stand. "He's at a place not far from here called The Dungeon." I cringed at the name, and Dracula smirked. "They won't let me in," Richard continued.

"Mason does not let just anyone in," the vampire purred.

"You know him?" Richard asked.

"Yes," we answered together.

Dracula raised an eyebrow at me and I explained. Though I was loathed to admit it, I knew Mason. He was a vamp who ran a questionable establishment about a twenty minute drive from my house called The Dungeon. The Dungeon, like its name suggested, was not a place for the faint of heart. It was a hardcore whips and chains kind of operation. I knew Mason, because it was my business to know what creatures other than humans were in my area. I had also received numerous personal invitations to his place of business. It really didn't surprise me that Bade would be there.

"Well, if you're going, I suggest you wear vinyl if you've got it," Richard said. "You'll have a better chance of getting in."

"I don't need vinyl to get past Mason," I growled, though I knew force would not be my best bet either.

"Here," Dracula said, holding out his hand. "I have a gift for Mason. Give him this for me."

He touched my hand, and a fire went through my veins. My body shook, and the pleasure that coursed through me nearly brought me to my knees.

"Shit," I gasped. "How exactly do you know Mason?"

"I made him," he said simply. "He was one of the men that I accidentally turned on the battlefield years ago."

"And why would you send him sex?" I asked, still shaken from Dracula's touch.

"Because that is how he operates. Do not worry," he assured me with a wink, "we were never lovers."

Dracula promised to meet us outside the club, and I went upstairs to change. As quickly as possible, I put on my black vinyl catsuit. I'd had another made since my favorite got shredded last summer. I strapped on my numerous blades, laced up my knee high boots, and set off for The Dungeon with Richard and Alek.

I tried not to let it show, but I was terrified of Mason. It wasn't his appearance, or any of his abilities that frightened me. I was afraid of the things I wanted to do to him. That was the main reason I had never responded to his invitations: I was afraid I might like it too much.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Twenty Six

From the outside, The Dungeon looked like an old abandoned castle, which was odd enough in Florida. My heart began to beat faster, and I tried to tell myself I wasn't excited about seeing the inside of the building. Alek and Richard agreed to wait in the car, and with as much courage as I could muster, I began walking across the dark parking lot. The front door was massive, and looked almost like a drawbridge covered in iron bars. A slot on the door opened, and a pair of dark eyes peered down at me from much higher up than I had expected.

"What's your business here?" a deep man's voice asked.

"My business is pleasure," I purred, as I switched on my seductive power. "I've come to see Mason."

The door began to open slowly, but almost instantly after I made my request. Apparently Richard and Alek were hanging out the windows because I heard him ask the wizard incredulously, "How'd she do that?"

As I walked through the door, I was greeted by the sound of goth metal music echoing off the walls. Tall stone columns lined the long hallway, and dim lanterns hung from the ceiling in small bird cages. To my left stood the enormous bouncer who had answered the door. He seemed to be looking at me in anticipation of my next words.

"Where is Mason?" I breathed.

He closed his eyes and gasped at the same time I looked down the hall, and my question was answered. A very tall,

very thin, dark figure was making his way up the hall toward me. He seemed to glide over the floor, but I knew there were feet underneath his long robe. Mason was over six feet tall, and wearing platform boots. When he came to a stop only a few feet away, he towered over me. The black robe he wore was covered in feathers around the collar and lapel. It looked almost like he was wearing a feather boa over a cloak. The robe fell open to reveal his lean toned body, and the tight vinyl pants he was wearing. The pants hung low enough to show the curve of his muscular hip bones, and I tried hard not to stare. His long dark hair blended with the feathers on the robe and made his porcelain skin seem much paler than it was. His eyes were brown, though they appeared black when surrounded by his usual dark eye makeup. Mason was not unattractive by any means, but he was a freak in every sense of the word. He scared the shit out of me.

"Well, well, if it isn't little red," he purred as a slow smile curled his lips. Mason's voice was sexier than I remembered from our one previous meeting. He had a deep voice that always seemed to emerge as a soft, almost hoarse whisper from his cherry red lips.

"I'm not *your* little red," I answered, forgetting my powers for a moment.

"Much to my disappointment," he said as he ran a hand through his long glossy locks. "So, my pet, what can I do for you?"

"I've come for Bade. Someone told me he was here."

"Did they? And why should I let you have him? Bade is one of my best customers."

I moved forward and fought the urge to scream as I opened his robe. Mason made no move to stop me. I closed my eyes and fought to control my fear as I switched on my power once again. The seductive fire that had now become familiar to me flowed through my veins as I stared up into the eyes of the scariest man I'd ever met, human or otherwise. "I've got something for you," I said silkily. When he only closed his eyes in response I continued, "A gift from the original."

"You lie," he hissed.

Rather than answer with words, I pressed the hand Dracula had touched against the smooth skin of Mason's stomach. I watched as a look of complete rapture passed over his features, and felt the firm muscles beneath my hand contract.

"Now, where's Bade?"

"Oh, you're good," he purred smoothly. "But I don't give in so easily."

"What do you want Mason? Time is short tonight."

"Are you asking me to name my price?" He smiled wickedly.

"Within reason."

"Reason is a relative term." He seemed to consider the situation for a moment. "Let's just say, you'll owe me one." I didn't like the idea of owing Mason anything, and it must have shown in my expression. "Don't worry your pretty red head," he said seductively. "I won't make it anything unpleasant." Mason walked around me and placed his hands on my shoulders as he whispered in my ear, "I see the way you look

at me." I glared at him over my shoulder and he laughed. "Don't let it embarrass you. After all, beauty has always been drawn to the beast."

"This way," he announced suddenly and started back down the hall. I followed in his wake and he seemed to slow his long legged stride so I could catch up. I followed Mason through a large room with a high cathedral ceiling that sported a bizarre stained glass dome. The artwork covering the glass made it look like the night sky, with thousands of glittering stars reflecting their light through the large dome and onto the floor. It beat the hell out of a disco ball. There was a large variety of patrons seated about the room, all of them watching the woman on stage. I paused to watch for a moment as the tall blond worked her way expertly up and down the pole while two brunettes danced in cages on either end of the platform. They were all dressed in fishnets and vinyl, and if I had to guess, I'd say they were vampires too.

"This way," Mason's sultry voice whispered close to my ear. I tore my eyes from the scene, and followed him down a hallway lit with torches. We stopped at a door at the end of the long passage. We were far enough away from everyone else that the loud music was only a faint noise in the background. "I should warn you," Mason said with a smile, "he may not want to leave."

He swung the door open and for a minute I didn't know if I was shocked or aroused. Bade was restrained by silver chains on each wrist. These chains attached to the ceiling, leaving anyone shorter to hang in midair, though Bade's feet touched the floor. He was completely naked, and I must say it was an

impressive sight. I had seen Bade naked in his wolfman form before, but never as a human. His back was turned to us, and a leather clad woman stood on either side with a whip. From the mild pink marks on his skin, I could tell they had taken it easy with him.

Mason snapped his fingers, and the women started to leave the room. I stopped one, and held out my hand. Without asking why, she turned over her whip to me, and I stepped into the room. My boots were relatively silent on the cold stone floor, unlike the spiked heels the other women were wearing. I wondered if Bade even knew I was there.

"Sending in reinforcements?" he asked playfully.

I looked back to Mason and held out my hand for him to keep his distance. Bade's body was a beautiful thing to behold. He had shoulder length hair of the palest gold, and a creamy white complexion. I fought the urge to stroke the lovely muscular dimples along the sides of his ass. Bade was not the sort of man I would ever want to be involved with, but for a moment I wished I could just have my way with him. Since I knew Marco would never forgive me even if I forgave myself, I decided to taunt him a little instead. I cracked the whip viciously across Bade's back and managed to break the skin, though only slightly. Bade gasped, but didn't cry out with pain.

"Well," he said breathlessly, "I wasn't expecting that."

As I approached the naked man in chains, I felt my eyes bleed to amber. In the blink of an eye, I had the whip across his neck and pulled him back toward me. I ran my tongue

over the mark I'd left on his back and a low growl escaped my lips.

"Lilith," he said, but it wasn't a question. "I never thought I'd find you here."

I released Bade from the near strangling hold and walked around to face him. I wasn't sure what possessed me, but I couldn't resist the urge to touch him. I ran my hands over Bade's beautiful tall body and let the whip fall to the floor. The warm flesh beneath my hands was every bit as firm and smooth as I had imagined it would be.

"Nice," I sighed, as I looked down his body.

"Glad you approve," he said, smiling down at me. "But what brings you here, love?" he purred with his thick Australian accent.

His ethereal golden hair shined underneath the light, and his pale blue eyes seemed to twinkle with desire. As I looked up into his handsome face, Bade gave every appearance of an angel, but I knew better.

I put as much sex into my voice as possible and said, "I came for you, Bade. I need your help."

"We're even, remember? I don't owe Marco anything." I could tell Bade was fighting his reaction to me, but his body didn't lie.

"This isn't for Marco," I whispered as I leaned in closer to his silver nipple ring. "It's for me. Please, Bade," I sighed, brushing my face against his chest like a cat. "I need your help."

"Why me? What has happened?"

I explained the circumstances to Bade as briefly as possible, after which I added, "If you don't cooperate, I could always bite your nipple off again." I punctuated my threat by flicking my tongue across the silver stud and he shuddered appreciatively. I took it as a yes. "I knew you'd see things my way."

Mason stepped forward to release Bade, and I handed him the whip. His eyes had turned a pale frightening blue that seemed to glow in the dim light.

"What do I owe you?" I asked softly.

"We're even," Mason sighed as he caressed the side of my face. "Though I do hope this will not be your last visit to my dungeon."

"Just pray you never visit mine," I threatened seductively.

Mason's frighteningly sexy laughter followed me into the hall where I waited for Bade to get dressed. I wasn't sure how much longer I could look at Bade without giving in to my baser desires. It was definitely time he put some clothes on.

Bade emerged a few minutes later. He was wearing faded jeans with strategically placed slashes. They were probably designed that way. The dark blue shirt he wore clung to his every curve and seemed to make his pale eyes more startling in contrast. We saw ourselves out without another word to Mason or each other. The second the door closed behind us he took my wrist to slow me down.

"That was impressive, love."

"Don't get your hopes up."

"Not just my reaction, but the way you handled Mason. He doesn't let anyone off that easy, not if they owe him

something." I stopped to look at Bade and he winked. "He must like you."

"No offense, Bade, but I'm trying really hard not to think about what Mason likes."

His laugh was a throaty masculine sound filled with sinful knowledge as he sighed, "Don't worry about it, love. It's the night before the full moon. Anything that flipped your switch before will really set you off tonight." I rolled my eyes at him and he teased, "Like Mason."

"Mason does not flip my switch," I said defensively.

"You're a bad liar," he said with a grin. "Don't beat yourself up over it," Bade continued as he patted me on the shoulder. "I can understand the attraction."

"Then explain it to me, oh wise one."

"It's simple, really. He's tall, dark, and dangerous. He's everything you've ever been told was bad for you. You're scared to death of him, and you can't stand it. You don't like being afraid of anything. Therefore, the only way to conquer your fear and consequent strange attraction is to fuck the shit out of him."

"Forget I asked," I said as I opened the back door and motioned for Bade to get in.

The problem was, Bade had cut pretty close with his reasoning. I stayed quiet and let Richard explain more of what had happened to Bade while I drove. Alek asked halfway down the driveway, "So, how did you get in and out so quick? Richard has been telling me about the place, and I was afraid we might have to force our way in after you."

"Don't ask," I mumbled.

"Oh, you should have seen her," Bade taunted from the backseat. "By the way, my name is Bade," he said, extending a hand to Alek. They exchanged greetings before Bade continued. "But, in all honesty, it wasn't fair to send little red here in against Mason."

"Why not?" Richard asked.

"Because he can't refuse her."

"That's enough, Bade," I almost growled.

"You didn't have sex with him?" Richard looked appalled.

"No, Richard, I didn't have sex with him," I snapped.

I glared at Bade in the rearview mirror and he agreed with a smile, "She's telling the truth. She didn't do Mason." His grin was nothing sort of evil as he said, "Left a hell of a mark on my back though."

"I hate you," I laughed as Alek and Richard both shot questioning looks between myself and the werewolf.

"You had sex *in front* of Mason?" Richard asked.

"*NO*," I growled. "Now drop it, Richard, and I mean fucking drop it or I'll run this car in the ditch."

Bade laughed, Alek buckled his seat belt, and Richard shut up. We had just reached the end of the long driveway that led to The Dungeon when a dark shape fluttered to the road in front of us. With a startled gasp I recognized Dracula. He was wearing another pair of even tighter black pants that clung to his long muscular legs. The tight fitting coat he wore buttoned up the front then parted above the belt line to hang to his knees in back. It was embroidered with intricate stitches along the seams. Around his throat he had tied a long black scarf which seemed to blend with the cape that trailed in the

cold wind, caressing him like the darkness that surrounded the car. His knee high boots glinted in the headlights as he approached my window, and I saw a whip attached to the belt that rode low on his slender hips.

"You did not wait for me," he scolded softly as I let the window down.

"I'm sorry." As I apologized, Richard opened the door so that he could get in the backseat. When he got in, I introduced him to Bade before pulling onto the main road.

It seemed like a matter of minutes before we were pulling onto a deserted narrow trail that led deep into some woods.

"Stop the car," Richard said. "From the way they were describing the place, there should be a clearing ahead. That's probably where they are."

"That sounds reasonable." I pulled to the side, almost between some bushes. We all exited the car as quietly as possible.

"I'll scout ahead," Bade said, as he scented the air. "There's definitely more than werewolves out tonight." He took off inhumanly fast, but didn't make a sound as he moved through the woods ahead of us.

"I'll follow him," Richard said. He moved in Bade's footsteps, though at a slower, human pace.

"Well," said Alek. "I suppose if we're going to surround them, I'll go in this direction, around the side." He sat off to our left, moving quietly through the dense brush.

"I guess that leaves us to bring up the middle somewhere," Dracula said softly over my left shoulder.

I turned to look at him again before we followed the others. "Thank you for coming tonight," I said softly. "You look good," I couldn't resist adding. He did. The sight of him in all that tight fitting black made muscles twitch that should keep to themselves.

"So do you," he said as he caressed my vinyl covered hips, "and you are most welcome."

The gleam in his eyes was almost sexual, but not quite. "You've missed the hunt, haven't you?"

"Yes," he admitted. "Shall we?"

The vampire and I made our way quietly through the trees until we came to a clearing just as Richard had described. Directly in the middle of this opening were large piles of sticks and straw. It looked like they were getting ready to light a couple of bon fires. That's what I thought until I noticed the two large posts set in the middle. Luther and David were restrained by silver chains a short distance away, both fighting to get free. They were going to burn them alive.

I nearly leapt from the bushes where we were crouched, but Dracula caught me by the wrist and shook his head. He pointed along the right side of the woods, and for a second I saw Bade's blond hair glint in the moonlight. Then he pointed left and I saw the bushes twitch slightly, giving away Alek's position also. They were waiting on us for a sign.

In the middle of this bizarre gathering I saw what had to be Dr. Williams. He was a massive, muscular monstrosity. The dark skin of his snakelike body reminded me of an anaconda. His head was slender and long atop his broad shoulders, just as Dr. Belcher's had been, but Bill was ten

The Dread Moon
by Tracey H. Kitts

times more frightening. I took a good look around. Amongst the various scattered freaks, I recognized another face, but this one was still human. Dr. Russell Sanders was helping to pile the brush even higher for their fires. I'd never liked him, but I hadn't thought he'd be in on this. There were probably a dozen people present, including Dr. Williams. Some were werewolves already changed to their half wolf form. Others were snakes of various colors, sizes, and skin textures, and one was a lizard nearly as large as Bill.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Twenty Seven

I waited until I saw them start to move David and Luther, and couldn't hold back any more. I leapt from the bushes with a furious battle cry, followed immediately by Dracula. As I ran I extended both of the blades that were fastened to my forearms, and slashed my way through the tall lizard. He screamed with pain, as I jumped onto his back and began stabbing him repeatedly in the ribs. Hot blood spilled onto my catsuit, and seemed to burn my thighs, though I knew it couldn't penetrate my clothing.

I heard the crack of a whip and saw Dr. Sanders go flying past me with a vicious slash across his face. Rain began to pour softly, and as I brought the lizard down, I looked up in time to see Dr. Sanders change. Hair began to grow over his hands. He ripped open the front of his shirt and roared as the bones of his face and hands lengthened, punctuated by painful cracking noises. I chopped the head off the lizard and stepped out of the way.

Dracula's eyes were once again a solid emerald green that glowed in the night. His long billowing cape began to blend with the rain and darkness as he cracked his whip in challenge and hissed, "Come on, I have not fed tonight."

The now fully transformed werewolf leapt at him. The whip cracked once again, and in midair wrapped around the animal's neck. The vampire gave a violent jerk, and the werewolf dropped to his knees, clawing at the whip. Bits of silver glinted on the cat o' nine tails as Dracula pulled the

whip tighter. He grabbed the werewolf savagely, and snatched his head to the side. As he did so, the vampire threw back his head, and fangs longer than I recalled being used on me extended from his lovely mouth. Without warning or mercy he tore into Dr. Sanders' throat. Crunching gurgling sounds could be heard as the werewolf fought to keep his throat from being torn out.

Dracula pulled back his head with a roar as he flung the dying werewolf to the ground. He turned his face upward to the storm, and let the rain wash away some of the blood. He looked to me then, and his eyes appeared normal once more as he wiped the blood from his mouth. I watched him for a moment, standing in the rain, my blood stained fallen angel. I should have been horrified, but I wasn't. It was a terrible sight, but I couldn't bring myself to be afraid of Dracula. I knew the pleasure his powerful body could bring, and therefore couldn't bring myself to fear the pain.

His whip cracked past me and I jumped as he pulled another werewolf toward him. I turned back to the right and saw Alek freeing David and Luther while a fully transformed Bade took on two snake men. Richard helped David and Luther to the safety of the trees while I looked in time to see Dr. Williams going for Bade's unprotected back.

Quickly, I snatched the blade strapped to my left thigh and threw it. The weapon lodged itself deeply in the thick hide of Bill's back. He screamed and fought to reach the blade while I closed in on him.

To my surprise and horror, he began to laugh at the sight of me. "What do you think you're doing?" he hissed down at me.

"I think I'm looking at a new pair of boots," I snarled. I felt my eyes burn amber as I extended my blades again and braced myself for his attack. Before he could come at me, Bade's massive body stepped in the way. He had sustained some minor scratches and cuts, but no major damage.

"If you're anything like your snake men," he growled, "this should be no problem."

"Excuse me, but I believe I was here first," I said, stepping up beside him.

"Are you always this competitive?" he growled as Dr. Williams took a flying leap at us both.

"Yes," I grunted as I stabbed the back of Bill's thigh. My blade had some difficulty penetrating his skin, and the wound was not as deep as I'd have liked. "This could be bad."

A massive black hand caught me square in the chest and I went flying backward through the rain. I hit the ground hard and went sliding across the wet grass. As I gasped for breath, I looked up to see a female werewolf flying through the air toward me. She burst into flames a second before she would have hit me, and I rolled out of the way. The shewolf lay writhing on the ground. No amount of rain seemed to extinguish the flames. I looked around for their source and saw Alek watching me from a few feet away.

"Thanks," I panted, offering him a weak smile.

I turned back to Dr. Williams, determined to not be outdone as he sent Bade flying through the air as well. The impact of Bade's massive physique sent me sprawling.

"Get your hairy ass off of me," I growled.

Bade rolled to the side and put his big hands around my waist. "Is anything broken?" his deep voice rumbled while he continued to feel up and down my ribs and torso.

"Probably, but I can still breathe," I gasped.

Truthfully, my body hurt so bad, there was no telling what damage had really been done. But as long as I could stand, I intended to keep fighting.

Dr. Williams came charging through the rain and clotheslined Luther who was running to my rescue. From his position on the ground Luther grabbed Bill's ankle, and started trying to chew his way through the snake man's thick hide. After some effort, Bill shook him loose. Luther hit the ground, and immediately began to transform. I didn't want to watch my friend become a werewolf. Fortunately, something else caught my attention.

"Lilith!" Richard screamed.

Richard was clawing his way through the mud, trying his best to escape the clutches of a yellow snake woman. I started running to him, but the ground was now so wet that I slipped. I had gained enough momentum that I slid right between the legs of the snake. I thrust my hips upward at the same time I spread my legs wide, knocking her off her feet. She bounced back instantly, and I scrambled to my feet, ducking her first punch. I nearly tripped over the still prone Richard before David pulled him out of the way. The woman

was much taller than me, and I needed a good head shot to keep her down for more than a second. As she came at me again, I jumped as hard as I could into the air, and caught her under the chin with my knee. I heard something crunch and the woman fell to the ground, spitting out teeth. Before she could recover again, I was on her chest, with a blade to either side of her throat. I closed my eyes as I sliced off her head. The warm spray of blood across my face sickened me in contrast to the cleansing rain.

I wiped my face on the back of my arm and looked around for Dr. Williams again. Two more snakes burst into flames, as Alek rose to Richard's defense somewhere to my right. A pain filled howl echoed through the night, and for a second, everything stood still as I looked for the victim. It was a wonder I could distinguish one ragging howl from another, but it just seemed wrong somehow.

To my left Dracula brought down two more werewolves, but I was still looking for the source of that awful noise. Then I saw him. Bade staggered from behind Dr. Williams. As he moved, another wolf dove after him, and Bade swatted the beast like an insect. He was still fighting, but wounded horribly. A long, thick wooden poll was lodged completely through his back, and protruding from the right side of his chest.

"NO!" I screamed, running forward to slice the hands from the wolf who meant Bade further harm. It did something to me to see Bade hurting. I wasn't sure why, but I couldn't stand it. I hacked the fallen werewolf mercilessly. Bade's big hand on my wrist finally stopped my brutal assault.

"I think you got him," he said weakly.

Dracula's whip cracked past me again and I heard Bill scream. Bade had done a lot of damage to the snake man, but not enough to bring him down. The vampire moved with the agility of a big cat stalking its prey. Back and forth he paced, cracking the whip in his wake. All the while, his eyes never left his enemy. The rain had soaked him through, and his wet hair clung to the sides of his face. His eyes glowed the familiar deep green that was both frightening and sexy. Anyone who wasn't on our side was already dead or dying, and we all stopped to watch the show.

Dr. Williams was fast, but Dracula was faster. He moved with a speed I had never witnessed, but every step seemed to be calculated. No move he made was an accident, no snap of his whip out of place. We watched with rapt attention as he finally brought the snake man to his knees. I had unconsciously moved closer to the scene, and when Bill reached out a hand toward Dracula, I cut it off. He screamed miserably as I stepped forward, extended the blade on my right arm, and sliced his throat. The cut would have decapitated anyone without Bill's thick skin, but he just started bleeding. The vampire fell upon him, and drank from the wound.

"Wait, wait," Bill pleaded weakly.

I put my hand on Dracula's shoulder, and pulled him back.

"What?" I asked.

"Surely, we could work something out," he wheezed. "It doesn't have to be this way. Is there something you want? Is there nothing that would make you spare my life?"

I looked at the snake man for a moment, as if I were considering his offer. I hated to kill people who begged for their lives. Even if they were the scum of the earth, it haunted me. I didn't want to loose more sleep over some jerk that deserved what he got, but I couldn't be the one to finish it this time. I almost felt sorry for him, but then I remembered what he had done to Richard. "You know what I really want?" Bill looked to me expectantly. I leaned toward him conspiratorially and whispered, "I want a pair of snake skin boots."

"No!" he screamed as the vampire fell on him again.

Just as I turned my back on the gruesome scene, Bade dropped to his knees. I ran to him and slipped in the mud as I tried to kneel down.

"Bade," I said, taking his face in my hands. Even in his half wolf form, I could read his expression enough to know he was fighting to stay conscious. "We've got to remove the pole," I said.

Luther stepped up to help. He was covered in soft white blond fur. He was an impressive sight, though not quite as tall as Bade. He got on his knees in front of the fallen werewolf and gripped his shoulders.

"I'll hold him," he growled softly.

Bade leaned forward and took hold of Luther's shoulders for support. I took the massive poll in my hands and he whined like an injured dog. I didn't want to hurt him more than was necessary, but the poll had to be removed. I braced myself for the task. Without warning, I placed my foot on Bade's back and snatched. The pole came loose as Bade's

pain filled roar echoed through the clearing. Luther released him, and he fell to the ground.

"Shit." I dropped the bloody pole in the mud and ran to lift Bade's head. "Can you transform?"

He blinked at me a few times before answering. "Why? That would take energy I'm going to need."

"Because I can't heal you like this," I answered, biting back a sob.

"Why would you heal me?" he asked softly.

I tried to apply pressure to the wound, but blood continued to flow, leaving the werewolf increasingly cold to the touch.

"Because this is my fault," I almost whispered. My tears began to mingle with the rain as I looked down at him. "You wouldn't be here if I hadn't come looking for you. You'd be back at The Dungeon with Mason."

"A cheap thrill," he coughed. "You didn't force me to be here."

"But, it's my fault," I insisted.

"Who'd have thought I'd bleed to death trying to save Marco's wolves? Talk about irony."

"You're not going to bleed to death. Please, Bade let me help you."

"Will your loyalty to Marco allow you to heal me?"

"This has nothing to do with Marco."

That was a lie, and we both knew it. Saving the only alpha who challenged his power might not go over well with Marco, but I couldn't watch Bade die. "Please, Bade," I whispered softly, as I rested my forehead against his. "Please."

I felt the hair that touched my forehead begin to retract, and I kept my eyes closed. My ears were filled with the sound of Bade's bones breaking and reforming. His shoulders which were pressed against my legs began to shrink. The pointed ears that had been beneath my hands seemed to slip through my fingers. In a matter of minutes, I was holding handfuls of Bade's golden hair and looking down into the pale blue eyes of a man I should have let die.

"Sit up," I said.

Bade got shakily to his knees before me. The cold rain poured over every ridge and curve of his naked body. He was a vision of sinful desires, glistening in the pale moonlight. Only the gaping wound in his chest ruined the illusion. Truthfully, I wasn't sure if I could heal Bade or not. I had never tried to use my abilities to heal anyone's physical injury before. I had healed my own wounds, but not consciously. Whatever happened, I had to try.

The warm sensual power flowed through my body as I looked at Bade. I called on that part of myself that had been passed down from The Seducer. I might not know how to heal him, but Mathias did. I knew he did, and he was a part of me. That meant somewhere deep down, I knew how to heal Bade. It was just a matter of tapping into that knowledge. Time was short, and I decided to let my instincts take over.

Steam began to rise from my body where the cold rain touched me. A fire such as I had never felt before burned within me. I reached out my right hand, and placed it over the grisly wound. Blood seeped through my fingers, and I

fought back more tears of regret. Bade wasn't going to die, not when I could save him.

"I thought you didn't have any hang-ups about killing me," Bade said gently.

"Things change," I breathed as I pulled him toward me. His full lips were soft and tender as they pressed longingly against mine. With my other arm, I hugged Bade against me and he trembled. Through my direct contact with his skin, I knew Bade did not shiver with cold. He wanted me that much. I hadn't realized. I felt his desire as if it was the tide coursing through him, and crashing against my lips. I called it to me. I pulled Bade's desire from him to fuel the fire inside of me. Through his lips, I drank him in, pulling him down like a moth into my flame. I thought of everything I'd ever wanted to do to Bade, and I used that energy. I let that desire build until I thought the fire would consume me. I released the flame, and felt it course through my body into his. The wound began to close underneath my hand. Bade threw back his head and cried out, only this time, his voice was not filled with pain, but pleasure.

I dropped down in the mud and looked up at him in amazement. The wound was not completely healed, but the hole in his chest was closed. There wasn't a scab and the skin was still raw, *but the wound was closed*. Bade looked down at his chest with a startled expression. He reached behind his back, obviously looking for the other hole and withdrew his hand without a trace of blood.

"I don't understand," he said as he toppled over into my lap again.

"Neither do I, but you're not going to bleed to death tonight."

Bade was still very weak from his injury, and probably against my better judgment, I decided to take him home with me. Luther and I helped to support Bade back to the car. Alek, Dracula, David, and Richard all followed while Luther and I argued.

"Marco is *not* going to like this," he insisted.

"Well, I don't like people dying because of my poor decisions. What happened to Bade is my fault and I'm not going to send him off like this and just hope for the best."

"He's Marco's challenger!"

"And he was *my* responsibility tonight! It doesn't matter who he is, he risked his life to save other people that should count for something."

Bade remained quiet through all of this, mostly because he was slipping in and out of consciousness. Once we got him in the front seat, I took a blanket from the trunk and covered him. It wouldn't do to have someone see me with a naked werewolf in my car.

Just as I was wondering how everyone would fit in the backseat, David said, "One of them actually stole my car, so someone could ride with me. It's just over on the other side of those trees," he said, pointing in that direction.

Alek went with David, and Richard and Dracula crawled in the backseat. We hadn't gotten far before I saw flashing lights behind us.

"Son of a bitch," I said as I beat the steering wheel in frustration. "This is just all I need. Alright," I said, turning to

The Dread Moon
by Tracey H. Kitts

the men in the backseat, "you two try to look respectable, and don't say anything."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Twenty Eight

Dracula wiped frantically at his mouth to remove any last traces of blood, while Richard tried unsuccessfully to manage his wild gray hair. They looked like exactly what they were: a vampire and a mutant scientist sitting in my backseat.

"You want a breath mint?" Richard offered Dracula.

I couldn't control the laughter that erupted at this suggestion. I made a quick attempt to cover the wound on Bade's chest with the blanket as I pulled to the side of the road. The officer approached the car slowly with his flashlight shining directly at me. I lowered the window and said the first thing that came to mind. "Is there a problem officer?"

"Well, that all depends on the reason you were driving so fast," he said.

From the few glimpses I got of the cop's face around the bright light, he looked young. Maybe I could charm him.

"I've got a sick friend," I said as sweetly as possible.

He shined the light over Bade about the time he took a deep breath. The blanket slipped just enough to reveal the still raw wound in his chest.

"Ok, ma'am, you need to step out of the car."

"Wait a minute, I'm Lilith Mercury. I'm the leader of H.A.V.O.C., and this is official business, I swear."

He took a step back and yelled over his shoulder, "Elijah, you better have a look at this!"

Elijah! Was I ever glad to hear that name? Elijah Jasper was a friend of mine. We'd spent a lot of time together that

past summer, and become fairly close. Truth be told, I'd sort of dated him while Alfred was out of town for three months. Since nothing was set in stone between Alfred and I at the time, I figured it couldn't hurt to spend some time with Elijah.

"Lilith," he greeted me with a smile. "Put that away," he said, pushing the other cop's light away from my face.

"Thanks," I said, returning the smile.

"So, what's going on here?" As Elijah asked this he shined his flashlight in my backseat. There sat Richard with his clothes torn to shreds and a visible cut on his forehead. Then on the other side was Dracula with blood stains at the corners of his mouth. "What the hell is going on here?"

I summed up the evening as best I could for Elijah without incriminating myself, or anyone else in the car.

"So, your friends were taken by this snake man that's been on the loose and you went to rescue them, in your official capacity," he added the last quickly.

"That's right."

"Then how do you explain the naked man in the front seat?"

"Oh." I blushed. "That's Bade. He's a werewolf who was injured tonight. I'm taking him to have his wounds treated."

"Correct me if I'm wrong, but isn't Bade the one who had us both kidnapped last year?" Elijah's voice told me he knew exactly who Bade was, and he was aghast that I would have him in my car.

I explained to Elijah that Bade had nearly been killed trying to save some of my friends that night. He seemed to

understand that I couldn't just leave him there, despite our past.

"Alright," Elijah sighed after a minute's pause. "Get going then, I'll see you later."

Once we got back home, Alek and David were waiting on the front porch. Since the police hadn't stopped them, they'd arrived first. Alek and Richard moved Bade to the couch while I went upstairs with Dracula. He kept a spare toothbrush in my bathroom cabinet. I unzipped the front of my suit to look at the purple bruise on my chest where Bill had hit me.

"Do you think anything is broken?" he asked around a mouth full of toothpaste.

"I don't know." I tried to stretch and winced against the pain in my ribs. "Maybe."

He put away the toothbrush and pulled me closer. "I would be glad to help you recover," he suggested smoothly.

"Though I doubt your lover would approve."

The smile was involuntary as I took in his lovely features. "I appreciate the offer, but you're right about Marco. I don't think he would tolerate me spending another night with you."

"What about the other werewolf staying here?"

"His name is Bade, and we'll jump off that bridge when we come to it." He looked confused by the expression. "I'm not going to worry about it now," I explained.

"Oh, I had never heard that expression before. You know, I do not get out much," he said with a grin.

After I assured him we would all be fine, I walked Dracula to the balcony. He gave me a chaste kiss goodnight, and

leapt over the railing. I heard the swish of his cape, and he was gone.

By the time I got back downstairs, I was already starting to ache. I knew what would work best for Bade and myself, but I wasn't sure I had the nerve to suggest it. Richard and David had already gone, and Alek was examining Bade's injuries.

"It's impressive work," he said, "but he's still weak, and there's a chance these could reopen." Alek stood up and turned to me. "What will you do with him?"

I looked to Luther before I said, "I was thinking he should sleep with me."

Alek looked a bit startled and Luther started to protest loudly.

"I don't mean have sex with him," I yelled over Luther. "I mean literally *sleep*. It worked before when I had been hurt and I slept with Marco. He said that werewolves heal more quickly when they are next to other werewolves."

"Yes, *pack members*," Luther said. "He is *not* a member of the pack. You can't be seriously suggesting this!"

"Well I am," I snapped. "Bade is near death, and that is my fault." I unzipped the front of my suit enough to show some of the massive bruising without exposing myself. "Look at this. There's no telling how many internal injuries I've sustained. It hurts to breathe, I can taste blood when I cough, and I'm starting to feel dizzy." I closed the zipper as I said, "You can stay too, if you feel better about it Luther, but I'm sleeping with Bade tonight. Otherwise, I'd hate to think how we'd end up by morning."

Alek helped Luther bring Bade upstairs before he excused himself to treat his own minor wounds and get some rest. "I'll check on you in the morning," he assured me with a kiss on the forehead.

"What do you want me to do with him?" Luther asked sulkily.

"Put him in the tub."

Without another word Luther began to fill the large tub while I tried to sit in the chair by the door. It was difficult to find a position that didn't cause immediate and sharp pains in my ribs. I think Dr. Williams had hurt me worse when he flung Bade on top of me. Bade had come to again and he sat on the floor propped against the tub while I explained to him what we were doing. He was covered in dried blood, and there was no way he was going in my clean bed without being washed. Besides, the wounds still needed to be cleaned.

Bade laughed and then frowned at the pain it apparently caused. "You have no idea how long I've waited for an invitation to your bed, love. Though I'd much prefer it to be under different circumstances." His charming Australian accent seemed to be even thicker when he was in pain.

"I'm flattered, but I can barely move." I smiled weakly. "Don't get your hopes up."

"Marco is going to *shit*," Luther said angrily. He stood beside the tub with his hands on his hips still pouting.

"Then don't tell him about it yet," I said. "I think that once I explain the circumstances he'll be more reasonable than you think."

"Tomorrow night is the full moon gathering. He'll expect me to be there. Once you two are out, you're likely to stay that way for days until you're healed. What the hell am I supposed to tell him?"

"The truth," I gasped as another sharp pain hit me. "I never want to lie to Marco. Tell him the truth." I collapsed against the chair and gave up on trying to remove my boots.

Luther knelt at my feet and started taking off my shoes. "Maybe he will understand," he said more gently. "You do seem to have a way with him, but he would definitely beat my ass for this."

"You won't be hurt for helping?" I asked.

"Not for helping you," he said, "but I don't know how he'll feel about me helping Bade."

"Tell him I asked you to. Besides, you haven't been helping Bade really. You've done all of this for me. You were helping me, and by staying tonight, you'll be helping me to heal."

"What about Bade? He'll be in the bed too, won't he?"

"Just don't touch me," Bade suggested.

"There you go," I said, gesturing toward Bade. "Problem solved. Now the question is: will you mind seeing me naked, because I can't get myself undressed?"

Luther laughed softly and said, "I think I can handle the shock."

"I've got scars, Luther. I'm not perfect." I felt awkward at the thought of Luther seeing my scars, but I was in too much pain to let it bother me as bad as it normally would have.

"Nothing's perfect, Lilith." He smiled kindly as he reached for me. "I can't imagine there's anything underneath your clothes that will change the way I feel about you."

"Unless you're gay, I think you're wrong," Bade said with a smirk.

"That's not what I meant, you pervert," Luther retorted. "Lilith and I grew up together, I love her. Nothing will ever change that. Of course I find her attractive." He winked at me as he said, "But that ship has sailed."

"Can you stand up, love?" Bade asked.

I managed to get to my feet, but it took effort. I swayed slightly while Luther unzipped the catsuit and peeled it from my upper body. He removed my weapons and placed them in the chair. "Here," Luther said as he turned me around, "prop against the wall while I help you step out of this." He slid the suit down the rest of my body and helped to steady me with a hand on my thigh while I stepped out of it.

When I turned around, I couldn't bring myself to look Luther in the eye. I was too worried about what he was thinking about my unsightly scars.

"I've seen worse," he said softly as he tilted my chin upward. "It's the bruises that concern me.

I looked down at my ribs and groaned. My entire torso was scattered with bruises. It looked like someone had splattered me with purple and black paint. "I don't remember taking this much of a beating," I said as I leaned on Luther for support.

"Your ribs are probably broken."

"Probably. But I can't go to the hospital, and neither can he." I gestured toward Bade. "There'd be too much explaining to do."

"So, what now?" Luther asked.

"Well, I was planning to take a shower, but seeing as how the pain keeps getting worse, I suppose I'll have to get in the tub with Bade."

Bade grinned from ear to ear while Luther sat me on the tub and helped me to get in. Bade was much paler than usual. He'd lost a great deal of blood, and even an alpha werewolf has his limits. I really wasn't concerned about being naked with him. Bade didn't have the strength to hurt me.

"I guess I'll take a shower then," Luther said while I slid down into the water.

I sighed as the heat helped to ease some of the terrible pain. I could hear Luther stripping behind me, but didn't look. The water was almost too hot, however the slight tingling sensation helped to distract me from the stabbing pains in my ribs.

"Here," Bade said softly, "let me help you."

I turned around and let him wash my back and hair. When it came time to rinse, I wasn't capable of leaning back to dip my head in the water, so Bade poured handfuls over my head.

"Will you let me check to be sure you aren't cut anywhere?" he asked.

I looked over my shoulder at Bade and he didn't appear to be teasing me. He placed one of his big hands at the back of my neck and said, "Relax, I've got you." With that, Bade

lowered me back into the water. While I floated with my head in his hand, Bade examined my ribs with something close to expertise.

"You seem to know what you're doing," I sighed.

"My mother was a nurse."

It seemed strange to hear Bade mention his family. I hadn't really thought of him as having family, but that was stupid. Everyone had a family, even if they weren't still together.

"Where is she now?" I asked.

"She died," he said quietly. "You know," Bade said as he ran his hand over my lower abdomen, "these aren't that bad."

"They're not on your body."

He helped to bring me to a sitting position and I realized Bade had not once tried to grope me.

"Her and Marco were the same, really," he commented nostalgically, "always trying to see the good in people. But, all people are not good."

Strands of wet golden hair clung to his face, and I reached up almost involuntarily to brush them back. "And some people, are not all bad," I said softly.

I helped Bade to wash the rest of the dried blood from his back. He slid down in the water so I could wash his hair. For a few minutes, I forgot how awful I felt and lost myself in the beauty of Bade. Even if he was still my enemy, there was nothing wrong with admiring him. His golden hair slipped through my fingers like spun silk. The otherworldly color never failed to give me pause. It complemented the pale icy blue of his eyes.

"Is this your natural color?"

The look on Bade's face was wicked as he smiled up at me.
"Haven't you noticed?"

I looked down the length of his body and felt myself blush.
"It matches."

His smile let me know he would have laughed had it not caused so much pain. I continued to scrub gently over some small cuts near his hairline.

"What are we doing here?" I asked softly.

"Bathing."

"No," I sighed. "I mean us. How did you and I end up in a tub together?" I ran my hand down his chest and rested my fingers above the silver stud in his left nipple. "Even with the enactment of the werewolf code, you are my enemy."

"Then why did you save me?"

"Because you didn't deserve to die tonight. I'd never forgive myself if I'd left you to bleed to death in the mud like a dog."

"I'm just an animal, love," he said gently, putting his hand over mine.

"You're wrong, Bade." After a minute I asked, "How did your mother die?"

I thought he wasn't going to answer at first, but then he said, "She was working at a clinic in Sydney. They treated werewolves secretly. Lycanthropy is much more wide spread in Australia than most people are aware of." He paused to stroke my hand. "She was attacked by one of her patients. I found her."

I wasn't sure what to say, nothing seemed adequate. "I'm so sorry, Bade," I whispered.

"I was eighteen," he said. "Her car was in the shop, and I'd gone to pick her up that night. The same wolf attacked me, only I survived."

"That's awful."

He rose slowly from the water and ran a hand through his long hair. "It's been ten years, and I still miss her," he confessed.

"You were attacked the same year I was then, I was fifteen."

"I couldn't even get drunk properly for my twenty first birthday." He smiled sadly.

"How did you end up here?"

"I moved to be with her sister who lived in Miami. Of course, I refused the offer to live with my aunt and uncle for fear of attacking them. Eventually, I found my way here."

"All of this heart to heart stuff is touching, but it's above and beyond your call of duty," Luther said to me sarcastically.

I hadn't even noticed he was out of the shower. I turned to see him wrapped in a red towel, and standing over my shoulder. He helped Bade and I out of the tub and dried me while Bade propped against the door frame and dried himself.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Twenty Nine

"What about the full moon tomorrow night?" I asked as Bade slid underneath the scarlet sheets.

"What about it?"

"You'll still transform, right? Isn't that a bit messy for silk sheets?"

"Not for me," Bade said, "not for Marco either. We can both shift form without the um ... mess," he assured me with a smile.

"So, what will happen tomorrow night?" I asked.

"I'm not sure really. I've never been injured this badly just before the full moon. But, I suspect you'll just have an oversized teddy bear to keep your warm," he teased.

I couldn't help giggling at his description, and it hurt. I had seen Bade's wolfman form before, and he was definitely not a teddy bear. Luther helped me to the edge of the bed and announced, "You two make yourselves comfortable, I need a drink."

"Is he really that afraid of what Marco will do to him?" I asked Bade.

"Yes. But I think you're right about Marco. He wouldn't have let me bleed to death in the mud either."

I crawled painfully forward, and Bade moved back the sheet for me. "Let me press myself against your back," I whispered. "Most of the bruises are on my chest and ribs, and your entry wound is on your back. I think if we press those parts together, it will work to our benefit."

"I know I'm hurt bad when I don't even feel like pointing out how dirty that sounds," Bade sighed as he rolled over to face the door.

I slid up onto the pillows and pressed my breasts against his back. "By the way, stop trying to fight my battles for me."

"You noticed that, huh?"

"You weren't exactly subtle." I wrapped my arm around his ribs and placed my right hand over the injury on his chest.

"There's only one alpha male for me, Bade."

"Things change," he said softly as he placed his hand over mine.

* * * *

My injuries must have been more severe than I had suspected. I went into an almost comatose like state as soon as I closed my eyes. I slept through the full moon completely. I came to once for a few minutes and recognized Luther's scent as he curled up behind me. Bade was still unconscious, and I buried my face against his hair before dozing off again. I could feel a scab underneath my hand where it still rested against his chest.

I didn't know how much time had passed when I recognized another familiar scent. It was clean, like aftershave mingled with soap. But underneath all of that was the smell of fur, and leather, and Marco.

"Hello, Red," his rough sexy voice whispered against my ear.

"Marco." I almost got up, but he stopped me.

"Shh, you need to rest. You were hurt pretty bad."

"How did you get in?"

I felt him smile against my cheek. "Fear for your safety gave me wings," he teased. "I jumped through your balcony window. You really should learn to keep that thing locked. Don't worry, no one will know I'm here. I'll leave the same way. One of these days, you'll let me in your front door, Red. I wouldn't want to spoil that moment by walking out of it before I'd been invited in."

I could feel Bade's slow even heartbeat beneath my hand and was suddenly afraid of what might happen to him.

"What about Bade?" I asked as I watched the way his hair reflected like brightest gold in the morning sun.

"Luther told me what happened," he said softly. "I couldn't have left him to die either. How can I be angry at you for not doing something I couldn't have done? I'll be gone before he wakes up," he sighed. "I'd rather he didn't know I was here."

"Why *are* you here?" I snuggled back against him and realized that Marco had once again separated our bodies with a sheet.

"Because the only way for you to heal faster than sleeping with an alpha werewolf, is to sleep between two of them."

Bade and I dozed off and on for the rest of the week. When I woke up, Marco was gone, and my balcony doors were still unlocked. Bade left fully recovered except for a slight pinkish tint to his skin where the gaping wound used to be. He assured me that would fade soon also, and thanked me for my "mercy on an unworthy animal."

That night I started to write to Dracula and found a note waiting for me.

The Dread Moon
by Tracey H. Kitts

Write me when you are awake.

I wrote back to let him know I was alright, and we somehow got into a discussion about the letter Alfred had sent me on Valentine's Day. I still cried when I thought about it. Dracula seemed a most likely choice of confidant when it came to understanding heartbreak.

I am truly and deeply sorry that you chose to trust someone who was too much of a fool to see you for who you are and what it takes for you to trust someone. Does he not realize that he will never find another woman like you? I have looked, and they do not make them. Everyone else is like a sugar substitute in a world where all you want is some real sugar to make your damned coffee less bitter. Sorry, but I am no poet. (By the way, I did love coffee before everything started to taste like ash.)

I would threaten all manner of vengeance, but you made it clear I cannot fight your battles for you. I am not your avenger. Now, this is the part that you have no doubt been dreading. If I did not write this part, I could not rightfully call myself a man, now could I? So, I will make this as sincere and to the point as I can manage ... know that anytime you remember the feel of my arms around you, it need not be only a memory. Think of me for comfort, for solitude, let me be your refuge. Know that whatever he made you feel, I am also capable of, both good and bad. However, I would never intentionally cause you harm. Let me hold you until his memory fades, till the nightmare you suffer is only a distant dream. I am haunted by the sweet smell of your hair and the way you sigh in your sleep ... I meant this letter to be of

some comfort, but now I am starting to whine. If you need more than a memory to comfort you ... you can call me, any time.

Sincerely,

D

My response was:

Thank you. I know your offer still stands. Please understand that I cannot accept it. I am grateful for your friendship, and your understanding, but I cannot offer you anything more. You told me what you wanted me to know, and it tore my heart out. Now, it's my turn ... know that when I think of you, a memory is nearly more than I can take. If your memory still makes me tremble inside, I cannot imagine what the real thing would do. Part of me would love to see you again, but I could not bear to watch the way you look at me, knowing that I cannot offer you what you need. I never meant to cause you any pain. I am haunted by the fire in your eyes, and the gentleness of your touch. I do think of you for comfort. I imagine you holding me in solitude. Perhaps things could have been different between us in another time, another place. Know that I will never be over you, that I will always want to run to you, to let you take me away from everything ... I simply can't.

He answered:

"I understand, my angel. I will continue to be your friend, or whatever else you need me to be. The truth is, I will never be over you either."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Epilogue

Richard seems to be coping better with his changes. He's more willing to talk about things now, and comes over more often. It's almost like having the old Richard back.

It seems Marco's Valentine's gift to Kat was right on target. She announced to me last week that she is now dating Judas, the stripping wereleopard who delivered Marco's roses.

Thanks to the persuasion of Aldan Medwin, the laws of vampiric tolerance were passed, allowing vampires to finally live in the open. This announcement didn't cause the media sensation that the werewolves had. I suppose people were still a bit numb from the shock of it all. Dracula was reinstated as a Hunter. He was also assigned to be my new partner at his request. I am honored to have the first Hunter as my partner, and the first member of my H.A.V.O.C. team. Alek has also joined H.A.V.O.C. and is still living happily in my dungeon.

As for me personally, I'm afraid to admit how happy I am. Life is strange. I never expected to be happy again after losing Alfred, but I am. After all these years of wanting him, Marco Barak is finally mine. I want to jump up and down and scream every time I think about it, but I'm also afraid of having it taken away.

Bradley told me once that when I reached a point that I was happy with myself, I could decide how much of me to give to someone else. He was right. The thing that really bothers me is how could such an asshole know so much about

The Dread Moon
by Tracey H. Kitts

human nature? Of course, it suited his purpose to know what people felt. He needed to know how their minds worked in order to manipulate them. That's a lot of trouble to go to just to hurt someone. I would never take the time to find the strings around someone's heart only to pluck them so violently. That is truly evil. I take some small comfort in knowing that I am not like him. I want to do right by Marco. I know how deeply he cares for me, I just don't want to screw it up.

As for Bade, I received a birthday present from him a month early: a brand new pair of snakeskin boots.

The End

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