

Midnight Showcase Presents

ISSN 1555-5496 Vol.107-19ED

Night Moves

Olivia Lorenz

JH Wear

Ravyn Reccio

Lil Gibson

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www.midnightshowcase.com

Night Moves Digest

Published by
Midnight Showcase
PO Box 300491
Houston, TX 77230 USA

www.midnightshowcase.com

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ISSN 1555-5496 Vol.107-19ED

Credits

Editor: Megan Hussey, Mae Powers
Copy Editor: Anna Fallon
Format Editor: Anna Fallon, Mae Powers
Cover Layout Artist: A. Bratt

Printed in the United States of America

Night Moves

The darkness moves in mysterious ways. Night can bring the greatest fear, and the greatest passion. And sometimes, both.

Noai'de, Olivia Lorenz

Lady Suvi is fascinated by wolf-shaman Kari, but when her people are attacked, will Kari be revealed as beast or man?

Dark Gift, Ravyn Reccio

Erotic dreams bring to life Dianna's deepest, and darkest, desires. Will she give into the haunting man, and accept his immortal gift?

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At The Edge Of Darkness, J H Wear

Can Rodney, a claustrophobic suffering vampire find romance? Rodney wants Irene. Her friend Shelly feels uneasy about him. And meet Sheldon, a whole other mystery.

Noai'de
by
Olivia Lorenz

Lady Suvi is fascinated by wolf-shaman Kari, but when her people are attacked, will Kari be revealed as beast or man?

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Olivia has recently moved from England to New Zealand. Trained as a Classical archaeologist, she's excavated sites in the UK and Greece. A former resident of Edinburgh, Scotland, her dubious claim to fame is that she used to go for coffee in Nicholson's at the same time as J K Rowling was writing the first Harry Potter book on the other side of the room. She speaks a number of dead languages with varying degrees of fluency, and travels extensively in search of inspiration for her stories.

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‘Softly, Softly, Catchee Monkey’ in Jaded Beasts V

Noai'de
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"I'm sorry, my lady." The apothecary shook his head, his smile tight. "We have only the same herbs and medicines as the last time you enquired."

"I thought you were expecting fresh supplies soon?" Suvi forced a smile in response, aware of the sympathy in the apothecary's eyes.

"That's true, but alas..." He shrugged. "The summer trade has been slow along the King's West Road these past few months. The skirmishes with the Novgorodians are a burden to everyone. Merchants tread warily in times of war, you know that."

Suvi nodded. She did know. Her father, Gustav Ahrenberg, served as the *jarl* of this prosperous market town in the central southern part of Eastland. To keep the town and its people safe, Gustav had ridden out with half of Häbo's garrison a little more than two months ago on a mission from the King of Sweden. He hadn't told his wife and daughter where he was headed, but Suvi knew it had something to do with the continuing clashes with the Novgorodians, the mighty dynasts who controlled most of Byzantine Russia from the fluctuating borders of Eastland to the Black Sea.

Eastland had been a reluctant battleground for longer than anyone in Häbo could remember. Absorbed into Sweden's outlying territories almost two hundred years before she was born, it was a place of emptiness and mystery, a country of vast forests and boggy fenland, where the snow lay cold for much of the year in the northern reaches, and where the sun set only for an hour or two in the summer.

Häbo was situated along the King's West Road, a trade route that ran between Oslo and Stockholm, across Eastland to Helsingfors and beyond into the Baltic countries and thence across Russia to the Black Sea. Although immensely profitable for all those who traversed the

route carrying amber, spices, furs, leather and silver, the fact remained that merchants dislike travelling through an unstable region.

Every resident of Häbo hoped that the *jarl* and his troops could push back the Novgorodians and secure lasting peace for the region. Suvi hoped for this, too, of course, but more than that, she wanted her father to return home before the lingering sickness took his wife—Suvi's mother.

Jona Ahrenberg had fallen ill with a summer fever only a few days after the men had marched out. As the weeks passed without word from Gustav, Jona had grown weaker and more dispirited. Suvi took charge of running the manor house and oversaw the numerous small disputes that the townsfolk brought to her.

At first, Jona helped her untangle the complicated ties binding the various merchant guilds, the laws governing itinerant traders, the taxes due to Häbo and the King, and other issues. But as Suvi's confidence grew in handling the *jarl*'s affairs, Jona's health deteriorated, and eventually, Jona took to her bed where she still lay, pale as the winter snow, more dead than alive.

Since then, Suvi came twice every week to the marketplace in search of a remedy for her mother's sickness. The town apothecary had been able to give her an elixir that seemed to improve Jona's health for a few days, but that had been three weeks ago; and now to hear that new medicine would be late in coming...

"There's nothing else you can recommend?" She tried to keep the desperation from her voice. "I'll try anything. Anything at all."

The apothecary spread out his hands in a helpless gesture. "I'm sorry, my lady. If I could help, you know I would do it. Have you tried the healer from Tulijoki?"

"Yes." Suvi closed her eyes briefly at the memory of what the old woman from the neighbouring town had diagnosed. "She said—she said..."

The apothecary bowed his head. "I'm so sorry, my lady. I will pray for your mother. We are all in God's hands, as the priests like to remind us. Perhaps He will look kindly on Lady Ahrenberg. Your father is so well-respected hereabouts, I am sure many people must pray for your mother's recovery..."

"I need something more than prayers," Suvi said, "but thank you all the same." She forced a smile to her lips again before she turned away. It would not do to show her unhappiness in front of the townsfolk. Even though the apothecary had spoken the truth, that the

people of Häbo admired the *jarl* and his family, her grief was something private. Her father had taught her to be strong, to be a leader in times of need, and she knew that the locals looked to her for an example.

If she could continue the pretence that her mother would soon be well, the town would thrive in her father's absence. If she fell apart, as she sometimes wanted to do, then someone from the merchant's guilds, or perhaps even the priest, Father Nordmann, would try to wrest control of Häbo from her.

Suvi wanted to spare her father more troubles to deal with on his return home. She could cope with this. Häbo was her town, the place where she'd been born. Even though she was half-Swedish, raised to respect that distant kingdom in learning and customs, she loved the Eastlanders who greeted her every day and whom she cared for in her father's place.

As she moved amongst the market stalls, she pushed aside her problems and concentrated on examining the goods laid out for sale. She had a cheerful word for everyone, from the tanners to the bakers, the seamstresses to the blacksmiths, and she made herself respond with easy smiles to enquiries after her mother's health.

A shout from the river drew her attention. "A ship!"

The cry was taken up around the marketplace, and soon a crowd of people, Suvi included, made their way down to the wharf.

Häbo lay on the north bank of the Hämyisä River, a wide, deep waterway that cut from east to west through southern Eastland. Although it was navigable by most Scandinavian craft, the majority of merchants preferred to transport their wares using the cheaper overland route of wagons and oxen. For this reason, a ship was an object of great excitement. Only the wealthiest of merchants sailed this way—or perhaps an occasional Swedish lord.

Suvi quickly joined the rush of people gathering on the bank. A tall, slender woman, she could see over the heads of the townsfolk surrounding her as they stared at the approaching vessel. Speculation ran amongst them. Someone voiced the opinion that the ship carried soldiers to help the *jarl*. Another believed it belonged to a rich amber merchant.

Suvi peered into the morning mist, shading her eyes with one hand as it cleared briefly, and the sun shone into her face. The ship emerged like a ghost, its sails furled and the rigging skeletal against the sudden glare of sunlight.

It was a longship, she recognised, but not of a kind she had seen before. A second glance told her that this was no mere merchant vessel. Instead of the wide-bellied hull and low draft, this ship was narrow in the beam, had a deep keel, and its prow stood much higher. Suvi shook her head at the fanciful, snarling image carved onto the curled head of the prow, and then counted the pairs of oars that dipped and splashed along the sides. This was a vessel built for speed, and although it sat low in the water, hinting at a heavy load, it was unmistakably a ship of war.

Suvi turned to one of the townsmen beside her. “Go to the manor and tell the steward to expect guests.”

As the man hurried away, Suvi brushed through the crowd and approached the narrow jetties that stretched out into the river from the wharf. The townsfolk drew back, recognising her right to greet the newcomers. They fell silent as the ship came about with a grace that belied her size. The oarsmen lifted their paddles in salute as they put in alongside the larger of the jetties. Ropes were thrown, securing the vessel to its berth, and then a plank was lowered and out came a wolf.

The crowd drew breath collectively. Suvi started back, astonished, as the animal—certainly the largest wolf she’d ever seen—bounded down the gangplank and onto the jetty, its nose up to sniff the air.

The wolf fixed its gaze on her. It trotted toward her, its pink tongue lolling out. Behind her, the crowd called to Suvi to step back, to come to safety. She stood her ground, determined to be unafraid of the creature, no matter how large and black it looked.

Her legs trembled beneath the full skirts of her fine woollen gown, but she did not move even when the wolf padded right up to her. The animal circled her once and then sat on its haunches, its big yellow eyes still staring at her with what looked like real intelligence. Then it lifted its right forepaw and caught at her sleeve. Instinctively, Suvi held out her hand, and the wolf set its paw into her palm.

Suvi had never been so close to a live wolf before. They were dangerous animals, killed by her father and his men to safeguard the cattle of Håbo’s outlying farms. Their pelts were sold in the marketplace to be made into clothing, blankets or rugs. She’d never expected to be greeted by one in so friendly a fashion.

The crowd behind her now muttered afresh. A tame wolf! Who would own such a creature? The answer came a moment later. The

wolf turned its head back toward the ship as a man followed it down onto the bank.

The master was no less strange than his pet. Suvi had seen plenty of traders from all along the King's West Road, but none like this man. The merchants she knew were weather-beaten and wore tough, serviceable clothes that stank of oxen and sweat. This man wore wolf fur: whole pelts of dark grey and fine white, a long coat of it that gathered around his throat like thistledown and swirled about his feet. Beneath the coat, she could see a pair of softly turned suede boots, strapped round and round with strips of black leather.

Clearly, this man was of some rank in whatever country he came from. Tall and straight-backed, he gave off an overwhelming impression of calm, collected coolness, an impression matched by his looks. He was disturbingly handsome, with strong, masculine features at odds with his pale skin. His strange, slightly slanting eyes were the colour of water over a polished blade, and his hair shone like frosted winter sunlight.

Strapped to his back was a bundle wrapped in bearskin. It did not seem to be an ordinary merchant's pack, and Suvi couldn't even begin to guess what it contained. From the whispers of the watching crowd, it seemed as if they, too, were full of speculation about the newcomer and his bundle.

Suvi was dazzled by his appearance, but had the presence of mind not to show it. She drew herself up to her full height and waited, stiff-backed, for him to offer greetings to her. To her chagrin, he turned his attention first to his wolf, whistling to it, until it trotted over to him obediently. He placed one hand on the animal's head, idly caressing the pointed ears.

"She does not like to be on the ship for so long," he explained in oddly accented Swedish in apparent response to Suvi's expression.

"Understandable," she replied.

The wolf turned its gaze on her again, apparently assessing her.

"I am Suvi, daughter of *jarl* Gustav Ahrenberg," she said, trying not to step back as the wolf sniffed her shoes with interest.

"Are you, indeed?" The voice sounded warm, not mocking, but Suvi had the impression that he found her amusing. "What I am is inconsequential. My name is Kari, and this is Aila, the finest of my wolves."

"Wolves?" Suvi felt her knees weaken at the thought of several of the beasts set loose around the town.

“Aila alone is with me,” Kari said in reassurance. “She will not harm anyone without my leave, do not fear.”

“I wasn’t scared.”

He gave her a slanting look and a little half-smile. “Good.” Kari paused long enough for her to be aware of him again, and then he asked, “Tell me, Lady Suvi, where is your father?”

“He is away on the King’s business. If you wish to trade here in Häbo, you must petition me in his place.”

Kari’s eyebrows rose. “A woman doing a man’s work? Unusual for the south.”

“I can assure you of a fair price for your wares.” Suvi lifted her chin proudly. “The townsfolk are honest men. You may examine the records, if you wish.”

“That will not be necessary. I trust you.”

He turned back to the ship, to where several men waited for his command. He waved to them, calling out something in a foreign tongue, and the men began to disembark. Like their leader, they were strongly built and attractive. Suvi caught a couple of giggles and sly whispers from the women in the crowd, and smiled inwardly to think of the welcome these handsome traders would receive in town.

Kari spoke then to his wolf, and it trotted back up the gangplank onto the ship, weaving deftly between the men’s legs. He watched the animal go, and then asked, “Which way is the marketplace?”

He set off toward the centre of town before she could reply. Suvi hurried to catch up with his long strides. “Where are you from?” she asked, guiding him through a narrow alley and out amongst the market stalls.

“We are Sami.”

She stopped in her tracks. Around her, the traders who’d overheard his reply gave him narrow looks and muttered. Suvi felt her pulse quicken as an idea came to her. Would he agree to it? She could hardly ask him outright, and yet... He was a Sami, and that had meaning beyond what she wanted. She had to think not just of herself but also of Häbo.

The Sami were the tribesmen of the far north, said to be the original inhabitants of Eastland who had retreated to colder and more inhospitable places, the better to practise their magic. They had rejected Christianity and led secretive, insular lives, but occasionally their skills as hunters and trackers could be bought. The

Novgorodians had used the Sami as mercenaries in the past. Their presence so far south on a ship of war suggested trouble.

Suvi took a deep breath. These men would not cause trouble in her town; she would make certain of it. “And why are you in Häbo?”

Kari gave her an unreadable look. “Many reasons. I cannot say them all. But we have furs to trade—wolves, reindeer, elk, winter fox and the white hare. Let that stand as our reason.”

Suvi narrowed her eyes. “You have no political motive?”

“Would I tell you if I did?” He swung round to face her, his silvery-blue gaze honest and direct. “We are not allied with the Novgorodians, if that is what you fear.”

“That is what you say.”

“It is the truth.”

She looked at him and surprised herself when she said, “I believe you.”

He smiled. “I’m glad. I would not have suspicion between us.”

She bit her lip, wondering what he was about. Kari seemed to be speaking of things already known to him that were still a secret to her. Suvi wondered if he could be her bridegroom, or at least a potential suitor, who’d been encouraged by her father. She was long of marriageable age and so far had not been required by her parents to contract a marriage alliance. Now she wondered if Kari was the one her father had chosen. The idea of giving herself to this man made her slightly breathless, made a pulse throb between her legs.

“Do you know my father?” she asked, her voice softening. Her hopes were dashed by his next words.

“No. I have heard of him, but never have I had the pleasure of meeting him.” Kari flicked a glance at her. “Usually, we take little interest in the doings of the southerners, but this is a journey we had to undertake.”

“Why?”

He did not reply. Instead, he gazed around the bustling marketplace, apparently oblivious to the stares that came his way. She knew he looked at everything—the central fountain with its water drawn from a well, the number of people buying and selling, the way the stalls were grouped according to their wares, and the presence of senior guild members as well as a couple of armed beadles in case of any trouble.

When he turned back to her, Suvi knew he was impressed. “My men can have a stall here?”

“Yes, once you have given me the details of your wares and fixed a price agreeable to the guilds.”

“And where would be the best place for us to stay in town?”

She hesitated, her earlier idea prompting her to speak up. “Usually, I would say one of the inns—The Lamb or The Black Horse both welcome traders and have fair rates. But I have a proposition for you.”

Kari looked her full in the face and smiled. “Oh?”

Suvi felt the blush rise to her cheeks and cursed her fair complexion. Handsome he might be, but she wouldn’t let him needle her. Meeting his gaze, she said calmly, “They say the Sami are great magicians and healers. I have heard that your people walk with the old gods and control the Northern Lights. My mother is sick, Kari of the Sami. Without a ready cure, she will die soon. My proposition is this—you will heal her, and in return I will provide accommodation for you and your men at my own expense in my father’s house.”

Kari’s gaze had grown watchful during her speech. Now he said, “What if I say I am no healer, my lady?”

“I cannot believe you would travel such a distance without one amongst your number who had some skills with healing,” she said with certainty. “But if that were true, I would direct you to one of those inns as soon as we signed our trade agreement.”

He smiled. “Clever and just, as well as beautiful. Very well, Lady Suvi, I accept your proposition. But be warned—while we Sami know much of the magic arts, we cannot work miracles. If your mother’s time has come, it is not my place to interfere with the natural order of things.”

Suvi nodded. “I understand. But I know you will save her.”

* * * *

The manor house stood farther along the river, set apart from the town but still close enough to be an imposing presence. A three-storey half-timbered structure upon a solid stone base, it provided shelter for the *jarl*’s family, their servants, and a small contingent of soldiers from the garrison. It also had a guest wing for visiting nobility, religious or favoured merchants.

As they approached, Suvi saw her steward, Paavo, waiting at the gate. His usually calm expression was twisted into a grimace, and Suvi feared the worst. Hurrying forward from the Sami men, she gripped Paavo’s sleeve and asked in an undertone, “My mother, is she...?”

Paavo shook his head. "It's not her ladyship. You have a visitor."

"A visitor?" Suvi looked at her steward sharply. It was unlike Paavo to be difficult about announcing a guest. Her gaze went past him into the courtyard, and she saw the cause of his reticence. "Damn," she muttered.

Standing in the centre of the courtyard and looking as if he owned the manor, Captain Jakob Lennqvist waited for her with a broad smile. A young man from a good but impoverished family from Stockholm, Jakob had joined the army in the hope of making his way in the world. So far he had yet to achieve anything but continual re-postings as his commanders despaired of him and passed him on to harsher taskmasters in the hope of instilling the young man with a backbone.

He'd been attached to the garrison at Häbo for the past eight months. Suvi had heard her father grumble about Jakob on more than one occasion, but he was too fair a man to send him on his way without due cause. Jona Ahrenberg had been amused by the young man's elaborate manners, but Gustav had described him as toadying, pretentious and without a scrap of common sense.

Suvi had found herself the reluctant object of Jakob's affections. Aside from the fact that she thought of him as less attractive than a pile of dung, abhorred his boasting talk about his alleged bravery and his lack of empathy with the Eastlanders, she also disliked the fact that he didn't hide his desire to gain her hand in marriage.

Regardless of the clumsy compliments he offered and the desire that came into his eyes whenever he looked at her, Suvi knew he wanted her only for the dowry. Her portion, as well as her family's connections at court, would be enough to lift the Lennqvists back into Swedish society.

Jakob had even made several outrageous hints about his intentions to her father, all of which were roundly ignored. Gustav Ahrenberg had said loudly one night that he would sooner see his daughter married to a mule than to Lennqvist.

But now here he was, when he should have been with her father on the mission for the King of Sweden. Nothing good could come from his presence here.

"Damn, damn, damn," she said again.

Kari heard her. "Trouble, Lady Suvi?"

"Nothing I can't handle." Turning to Paavo, she asked him to show the Sami men to the guest wing and to extend every courtesy to

them. "Invite them all to dine with the rest of the household tonight in the great hall," she added as an afterthought.

Paavo nodded, his eyes bright with curiosity as he looked from her to Kari. News of such favour would be around the town by nightfall, and that was how she wanted it. An example of friendship would be the easiest and quickest way to avoid any potential trouble between the townsfolk and the Sami.

"I'll tell Cook," Paavo said. He nodded surreptitiously into the courtyard. "And Captain Lennqvist?"

"He will not be staying for dinner." Suvi glowered at Jakob. "I imagine he's already overstayed his welcome."

When Paavo said nothing to contradict her, she sighed and started forward, ready to match wits with the Swedish captain. To her surprise, Kari followed her rather than accompanying his men to the guest quarters.

"I'll come with you."

Suvi gave him a quick, irritated glance. "I told you, I can handle it."

"I didn't mean the good captain." He sounded amused again. "I was referring to your mother. Surely you want me to examine her sooner rather than later?"

"Of course." Her irritation increased. "In fact, one of the maids will show you the way."

"I'd rather watch you deal with your visitor first."

Suvi huffed a sigh of annoyance, but secretly she appreciated his company. The presence of a strong, tall man by her side might give Jakob Lennqvist pause for thought.

Certainly, Jakob's smile faltered as he saw them approach together. Suvi mentally compared the two men: Jakob with his expensive, flamboyant clothes and round shoulders, and Kari in his wolf fur with power almost radiating from him as he walked. She knew which she would prefer in a mate. Quickly, she thrust the thought from her mind. Kari was a visitor to Håbo, and as a Sami, he was not for her. But still...

"Captain Lennqvist. How nice to see you," she said coolly, inclining her head only briefly.

Jakob seemed oblivious to the slight. He beamed and seized her hands in an enthusiastic grip; coming close enough that she caught a strong whiff of the flowery scent he wore to disguise his body odour.

“Lady Suvi, it is with the greatest pleasure that I return to you from...”

“From my father’s side,” she finished for him, pulling her hands free. “I expect you have a message for my mother?”

Jakob’s face fell. “Actually... that is to say...” He brightened again as if inspired. “I do have a verbal message. Your father bade me tell you and Lady Ahrenberg that he and his men are all in good health, and that he hopes to be home by midwinter.”

Suvi stared at him blankly. “Midwinter? But that is months away. Mother could be—”

She stopped herself, swallowing the words she feared more than anything else. Jakob looked at her in confusion. She felt a touch on her arm, and turned to see Kari beside her. His hand cupped her elbow, offering support.

“Lady Ahrenberg could be safely recovered by then, and ready to greet her husband in time for the Christmas feast,” he said quietly.

“Recovered?” Jakob’s gaze flickered between Suvi and Kari next to her. “Is Lady Ahrenberg unwell?”

“Perhaps we should talk of this elsewhere,” Suvi said belatedly.

“No, I think we should speak of it here and now,” Jakob insisted. He glanced at Kari again, unable to quash his curiosity. “Just who is this man?”

“My name is Kari, and I am a Sami merchant,” Kari said before Suvi could make the introductions. “I am here to offer assistance to Lady Suvi and to heal her mother.”

“A Sami! But they are all rogues and cheats.” Jakob drew back as if he feared infection. He turned to Suvi. “My dear girl, you must have lost your wits to agree to let this charlatan near Lady Ahrenberg. Everyone knows that the Sami are allied with the Novgorodians. This man will murder us all in our beds if you welcome him into the manor.”

“Don’t talk such nonsense! Kari and his men are my guests.”

“You should reconsider, dear Suvi. I have only your best interests at heart. After all, your father entrusted your welfare to me.”

She stared at him, praying that her shock didn’t show. “What did you say?”

Jakob’s smug grin threatened to engulf his face. “That was the second part of the message. Your father sent me back so I could protect you. And clearly I have arrived at a most opportune moment!

With Lady Ahrenberg ill, you must find it a trial, having to concern yourself with the town's business."

"It is no burden at all, I assure you." Suvi let her anger show in her voice.

Jakob seemed not to notice. "A young woman should have only the happiest of thoughts in her head. Thoughts of her needlework, her..."

She glared at him so fiercely that his speech wavered momentarily before he concluded: "And thoughts of her future husband."

Beside her, Kari snorted. Suvi bit her lip to stop herself from laughing. Schooling her expression into one of perfect blandness, she said, "I will marry only when I am ready, and that will not be until my mother is restored to health and my father returns home. Until then, I hold the manor of Håbo in the *jarl's* name."

Jakob applauded lightly. "Well said, dear girl, but you need not worry about the town. I am here now to look after you and your mother—and Håbo, of course. Your father insisted most particularly that I should guide your decisions."

Suvi didn't trust him for a moment. "I find it difficult to believe he would say such things to you and not send a written message detailing his wishes."

"Are you suggesting...No. Of course not." Jakob's smile looked forced. "I did have a letter, but I lost it."

Kari suddenly spoke. "If you cannot perform the simple task of delivering a message, then how do you hope to fulfil your duties toward Lady Suvi and this town?"

Jakob ignored him. Addressing Suvi, he said, "I have taken the liberty of installing myself in the empty room on the second floor."

"That is a liberty," she snapped. "I do not want you for my closest neighbour. You will move your belongings into the guest quarters immediately."

"And share with the Sami?" Jakob looked affronted. He leaned closer, as if to speak in confidence, although his voice carried clear around the courtyard to the servants who idled around in the hope of overhearing gossip.

"Let me tell you, Suvi my dear, the reason your father sent me back was because we had a skirmish with an advance party of Novgorodians! They had crossed the border and were moving deep into our territories when we spotted them skulking in the forest."

“Then why did you leave?” she demanded. “Surely, if you are my father’s most trusted captain, you should still be with him, standing strong against our enemies and protecting our borders.”

“Perhaps Captain Lennqvist had not the stomach for battle,” Kari suggested. “Or perhaps the *jarl* sent him back so as not to trip over the young greenhorn when the fight was joined. An inexperienced man has no place in a skirmish where skill accounts for everything and where the actions of one man could lead to victory...or to defeat.”

Jakob’s glance flicked to Kari again. This time, Suvi saw the blaze of fury in his eyes and realised with a shock that Kari had been right. Jakob had been sent back in disgrace—but had her father ordered his return, or had he simply slunk away from the field of battle like a coward?

While she pondered what to do, Jakob said, loud enough for the servants to hear, “The Novgorodians had a Sami tracker guiding them.”

Suvi sighed her annoyance. “Are we to accuse all Sami of being in league with the Novgorodians? Kari and his men are naught but peaceful traders.”

“So they claim. But perhaps, just to make sure, I will send some men from the garrison to search their ship. And their baggage,” Jakob added, eyeing the unwieldy bundle strapped to Kari’s back.

“You are welcome to search the ship,” Kari said politely, “as long as two guild members of this town are also present, along with myself. I have a full record of all the items stored on the ship.”

“I have no interest in stealing from you.” Jakob curled his lip in distaste. “I merely want to be sure that you are not carrying weapons to our enemies. In addition, I would like to search your personal baggage.”

Kari’s gaze narrowed. “I am sure my men will be pleased to oblige.”

“Let’s begin now, shall we?” Jakob took a step forward. “Your pack. Open it.”

“I regret that I cannot.” Kari stood his ground, staring down at the blustering captain. “This is not for your eyes.”

Sensing the enmity growing between the two men, Suvi tried to diffuse the situation. She smiled up at Kari, innocent and friendly. “Then perhaps I could look inside the pack.”

Kari shook his head, the long tumble of his fringe falling into his eyes. “No, Lady Suvi. You cannot see it either.”

She laughed. “Why not?”

He looked back at her, unsmiling. “Because it would mean your death.”

* * * *

The night-clouds had gathered, veiling the world, but she had no need of a torch to light her way. Suvi hurried across the courtyard and up the stairs in the guest quarters, tucking up her skirts in one hand as she ran. Jona had stirred into wakefulness an hour ago, and had been lucid enough to have speech with her daughter. Suvi had managed to feed her a bowl of thin gruel and two cups of water before Jona had settled back to sleep again. The maidservant attending Jona had declared it a miracle.

Suvi had agreed. Kari had worked wonders. She recalled her earlier apprehension when she’d shown him into her mother’s room and seen his grave expression. But he’d said nothing to alarm her, only asking for a jug of hot water. Into this, he’d sprinkled a few herbs he’d taken from a pouch at his waist, and then he’d held Jona’s head with care and dripped the potion between her lips, chanting something low and musical the whole time.

When she’d asked what he’d said, Kari told her he sang an ancient Sami song to chase out fever. Now they must wait and be patient, he told her. Suvi nodded, grateful for his help, and then had let him go to join his men in exploring the town.

By the time dinner had concluded—a meal enlivened by the presence of the Sami, who were all well-behaved and enthusiastic about their chances in Häbo—the maidservant had whispered to Suvi that Jona was awake and asking for her.

Now she made her way to Kari’s room to thank him personally. Paavo had told her that a number of the Sami men had gone out drinking in the town, and she hoped that Kari had not joined them. Her footsteps slowed as she reached his room, and she paused outside, head cocked, listening for signs of life within.

She tapped at the door and opened it cautiously. “Kari?”

Silence greeted her. She sighed in disappointment, and then, remembering the mysterious bundle that he’d refused to let anyone examine, she slid inside and closed the door behind her. Perhaps this was her chance to take a quick peek inside the bundled bearskin, to see what it was that a Sami leader claimed was so important that to gaze upon it meant death to an outsider...

She caught her breath guiltily when she saw Kari, draped in wolf pelts, sitting motionless on the rug beside a smoky brazier.

“Kari?” She’d never seen anyone sit so still before. Quickly, Suvi crossed the room, wafting away the smoke with one hand. “Kari, are you all right?”

He didn’t stir.

She dropped onto her knees in front of him, frowning. He seemed to be asleep. Did people sleep sitting up, so straight-backed? It didn’t seem right for him to rest here when a narrow truckle bed, stuffed with fresh straw and covered with woollen blankets, stood not three feet away from him.

“Kari. Wake up.” Suvi tentatively reached out one hand and then drew it back before she could touch him. Surely he would hear her, be aware of her presence...but still he didn’t move.

She gathered her courage and gently shook his shoulder, her hand on the silky wolf fur. The pelt slipped slightly, revealing pale flesh beneath, and she caught her breath. He was naked under that fur. Her mind rioted, and when she drew back her hand, she realised she was trembling.

Suvi scolded herself for the lewd thoughts that passed through her head. Kari was an honoured guest. She had no right to imagine how it would feel to have him kiss her, how his body would feel pressed against hers. A blush rose to her face and she knew she had to wake him before curiosity got the better of her and led her to look further beneath the fur.

“Kari!” She put her hand out again to touch his skin, and then gasped in horror. He felt icy cold: as cold as a corpse.

Suvi jerked back, appalled. It was impossible: he couldn’t be dead! She rocked forward and hurriedly ran one hand down over his chest, her desire forgotten as she felt desperately for his heartbeat.

Nothing.

“No...” she moaned, frantic, and moved her hand up to search for the pulse at his throat. Her fingers dug into his pale skin and she pressed against his jugular, praying that he would be well, that his energy would return.

At first, Suvi didn’t feel the distant throb of his heartbeat, thinking it was an echo of her own thundering pulse through her fingertips. Then she realised that it was a much slower beat than hers, as deep and sluggish as a river under winter ice. She sighed in relief, raised her head, and then froze.

Kari was looking at her.

“I – I’m sorry,” Suvi managed to stutter, paralysed by his eyes and the way he stared at her. Slowly, she removed her hand from his throat, unable to tear her gaze away. With a little kick of fear, she realised that his eyes weren’t human. No: he had wolf’s eyes.

She started back, rising to her feet as she realised she must have interrupted him in some kind of Sami trance. Certainly he seemed more animal than human, and his eyes—wolf’s eyes, and not those of the man who’d looked upon her with interest and appreciation. Now his gaze narrowed, tracking her, and then he growled and reached out for her.

Suvi exclaimed in shocked protest as felt his hands grasp her waist, her hips, and then she was falling, driven down onto the rug by the weight of his body. “No!” she cried, struggling and pushing at his chest as the wolf pelts slid from his shoulders. For a terrible moment, she thought he would attack her—but then, as she lay turned on her side beneath him, a change seemed to come over him.

Kari snuffled at her hair and nuzzled her neck. He licked her cheek and growled low in his throat. She gave a helpless moan as he pressed his lips to her neck again. The soft tumbling strands of his hair tickled her skin as he moved his head. The warmth of his lips and the contrasting coolness of his breath excited her, making her forget her fleeting fear. She was aware of the almost silent purr he made, the sound deep and low in his throat, resonating in the solid heat of his chest.

And then he moved, his mouth opening over the nape of her neck and his teeth sinking into her skin with a swiftness that startled her.

Suvi gasped. It didn’t hurt, although his teeth were sharp and his grip strong. The shock was more primitive. She had a vague recollection that male cats held their females captive by biting their necks when they mated. Perhaps, she thought dazedly, Kari-wolf was the same.

His hands slid around her waist and pulled her back against his body, his teeth sinking deeper into her neck until she whimpered and squirmed in his grasp. He growled in response, his hands coming up to cup her breasts in a hungry, possessive gesture that excited her all the more. The wool of her gown whispered over her skin and clung to her heated body, her nipples hardening to points beneath the fabric to push at his palms.

His hands tightened, squeezed; and then he licked at her neck again, his tongue tracing the neat imprint of his teeth in her skin. Suvi shuddered, still unsure whether he was wolf or human or something in between. He kissed the side of her neck before he nibbled at her ear.

“Kari?” she asked, her voice soft and hushed.

Another little growl in response. His fingers moved, stroking over her nipples with a light touch. She caught her breath, forgetting her rank, the differences between them, and pushed against him eagerly. He rewarded her, rolling her nipples between thumb and forefinger until streaks of fiery pleasure shot through her. Suvi moaned as the pads of his thumbs stroked delicate circles over her sensitive flesh, and now she hated the sudden encumbrance of her gown between them.

Kari kissed her shoulder and nuzzled at the neckline of her gown, the bodice held together by velvet ribbons. She thought he’d unlace them, but instead he stroked a hand over her body to lift the skirts of her dress. Suvi sighed as he drew up her undershift and touched naked skin, and then she drew in her breath as his fingers moved up her leg, toward the damp, silken heat of her.

“Oh, Kari...” she murmured. She leaned her head back against his shoulder and arched her hips toward his questing hand. She cried out softly as he slipped a finger between the lips of her sex and began to caress the tender bud of her clitoris. His other hand resumed its teasing of her swollen breasts, tormenting her nipples with exquisite pleasure-pain.

Suvi’s eyelids fluttered closed and her lips parted as she made tiny sounds of enjoyment. Kari shifted position, bending his head so his hair trailed against her face and over her neck as he kissed her throat. He stroked her slowly and leisurely before he slid a finger inside her. She trembled in his arms, a moan of helpless delight breaking from her.

“Kari, please—” she begged, although she wasn’t sure what she was asking him. She parted her thighs farther so he could thrust his fingers back and forth. He flicked the pad of his thumb across her clit and she gasped, whimpered in response, urging him onwards.

She stretched out on the wolf fur as he pushed her skirts up above her waist and buried his head between her thighs. Suvi clutched at his pale blond hair, raking it with nerveless fingers as he licked at her, his tongue hot and rough. Kari held her hips when she tilted her body up

to him and thrust against his mouth as he forced her closer and closer to the edge of orgasm.

And then she came with a tiny gasp and a tensing of her muscles, her thighs tight against his head, her back arched and her body trembling very finely as he held her there and kept her at the height of pleasure for long, endless moments.

Kari drew away from her as she lay panting on the wolf pelts. Heedless of his own needs, he settled down, pillowed his head on her breasts, and heaved a deep sigh of satisfaction.

As her heartbeat slowed, Suvi lay still and wondered what would happen next. The silence stretched out between them. She said his name, her voice sounding loud in the quiet of the room. Gently, she smoothed back his hair and said his name again.

He stirred, lifting his head to give her a puzzled look from eyes that were now most definitely human, not wolf. She read the alarm and surprise in his gaze even before he asked, "Suvi? Why are you here? What..."

She looked at him steadily. "I came to tell you that my mother awoke last night," she said. "You were asleep, but your body was cold. I was afraid..."

"You touched me," Kari said softly.

Suvi blushed. "Yes, but—"

"I have killed men for less." He stared at her, unblinking, and then looked away. He seemed perplexed. "Did I frighten you? I am sorry." Kari slid his fingers over her cheek and down her throat, into the curve of her shoulder to linger at the crumpled neckline of her gown.

"I thought you were unwell. I was worried."

Kari stared at her, his eyes glittering. When he shifted his weight over her, the fur slid down, reminding her forcefully of his nakedness. "Thank you for your concern. Healing your mother sapped my energy. I had to slip into a trance to revitalise myself, and when that happens, my body is protected by my totem animal."

"A wolf."

He gave her a crooked smile. "Exactly so. Very few people have lived to tell the tale after disturbing a *noai'de* from their trance. The question is, why did you escape unharmed?"

"You recognised me," she said. "You knew I meant you no harm."

"Perhaps."

He did not seem convinced, but now she knew he was distracted by her proximity. She tried to cover her lower half with her hands as he unwrapped the fur from her body.

“Don’t. You’re lovely.” His eyes darkened to the colour of the river as he ran a hand down from her throat to circle her breasts. His fingertips brushed lightly over her nipples. She caught her breath as they tightened in response to his touch, still tender from his earlier attentions.

“What’s a *noai’de*?” Her breathing quickened as his hand moved lower, his long fingers describing slow circles around her navel.

“You southerners like to say we do magic,” he said, shifting position so that he leaned on one elbow above her.

“Are you a magician, then?” Suvi asked, her voice husky as his fingers trailed lower, urging her thighs apart again.

Kari looked at her, amusement warring with desire in his eyes, and he smiled. “Yes. I have been called a magician before.”

He lowered his head slowly and she gasped as his mouth fastened over hers in a deep, passionate kiss. At the same time, his fingers slid between her legs and explored, moving gently. When the kiss ended, Suvi opened her eyes, dazed. She smiled when Kari moved over her, his face flushed with arousal and his eyes dark with desire.

“Now,” he said, gathering her close, “let us both make magic, my lady.”

* * * *

A large crowd had gathered in the courtyard by noon.

Suvi had spent part of the morning attending her mother, who woke and managed to break her fast. Kari had called to see them both. He was gentle and respectful toward Lady Ahrenberg, his fingers deft as he examined her. He’d pronounced himself satisfied with her progress, although he warned that it could still be a few weeks before Jona was fully cured.

Just as he’d done the previous evening, Kari finished the healing session with a Sami chant. Suvi had watched carefully, as if she could see the energy flow from Kari into her mother. She was certain she could see Jona’s improvement as soon as Kari finished the chant.

He’d looked up then and held her gaze. Suvi had blushed, reminded of their intimacy last night and their loving just before the household stirred at dawn. Of course, he hadn’t said anything, and she didn’t know if what they’d shared had been a unique experience or if they could repeat it.

She hoped for the latter, but while her mother still lay sick and her father remained absent, Suvi knew she had to be careful. She had to present the image of a decorous maid and dutiful daughter. If news got out that she'd spent the night with a man—and a Sami, at that—her reputation would be ruined.

So it was that, when Paavo came to her with news of the disaffected crowd waiting in the courtyard, Suvi smoothed her skirts and went outside with her head held high, ready to deal with whatever distressed the townsfolk.

The crowd quieted when she appeared on the steps of the manor. At first glance, she saw that the majority of visitors were traders from the town. Thinking that a dispute over goods had taken place, Suvi asked for an account of the grievance.

One of the town beadies stepped forward. "Lady Suvi, what we have to tell you is strange and some may say unbelievable, but it is the truth nonetheless."

The man paused, and a few others from the crowd muttered, "Aye, it's true" until he spoke again. "Last night, Antti Tanner from Boar Lane went drinking with friends. As he made his way home along the riverfront, he was attacked, his face and chest torn – by a wolf."

Suvi couldn't help her start of surprise. Forcing an expression of calm to her face, she said, "A wolf? Are you certain? It is well-known that Antti Tanner rolls home drunk every night. Indeed, it is a miracle he never falls into the river! So how can he be sure that a wolf attacked him? Perhaps it was a large dog."

A ripple of laughter went around the crowd, and she relaxed slightly.

The beadie looked determined. "My lady, if it was just the witness of Antti alone, you know we would not trouble you. But the fact is, two other men who'd been drinking alongside Antti Tanner also were attacked last night. Both say that a large, ferocious beast leapt upon them from behind and bore them to the ground. The animal had heavy paws and weighed as much as a man. It had hot, stinking breath and slaverling drool. They felt its fur and its claws. Lady Suvi, they swear they were the victims of a wolf attack."

Suvi shook her head. "There are no wolves in Häbo."

"Begging your pardon, ma'am, but a wolf arrived here yesterday," a man said from the crowd. His words were greeted with nods and murmurs of agreement.

“The wolf was sent back onto the Sami ship,” she declared. “It did not seem to be a wild animal. Many of you saw how it came to me, as docile as a lamb, and how it obeyed its master.”

“Aye, and if he told it to be sweet to you, he could tell it also to attack the men!”

Suvi acknowledged the remark. “Perhaps so, but why would Kari wish to harm any resident of our town? He and his men have come here to trade in peace.”

“That’s what they say.” Jakob Lennqvist’s voice cut across the courtyard. The crowd turned to watch him stroll toward them, a smirk on his weak-chinned face. A couple of the merchants muttered and smiled, apparently pleased that a man had arrived to deal seriously with their complaints.

Suvi narrowed her eyes as Jakob pushed through the crowd and hopped up onto the steps beside her. Casually, he rested his hand on her shoulder, an indication of possession and control. Equally casually, she shrugged him off. His cocksure attitude irritated her. Of course he would want to make trouble for the Sami, after Kari had guessed his shame yesterday. Jakob was a prideful man, and the thought that a social inferior could name him as a coward would act as a spur for revenge.

But still, Suvi couldn’t see Jakob as being clever or vicious enough to set up the Sami. She knew him as an idle, opportunistic man. Last night’s attacks, whether carried out by a wolf or a dog, had simply given him an opportunity to rid himself of a troublesome opponent...and a love rival. Suvi tried not to think about that.

Jakob addressed the crowd, although he looked at her when he spoke. “I myself find it suspicious that a Sami should own such a dangerous animal as a pet. Besides, I believe one of the victims, Petr Shoemaker, described his assailant not as a wolf, but a wolf-man.”

“How ridiculous!” Suvi exclaimed.

The beadle nodded. “It’s true, my lady. Petr did say that. At first he thought it was an animal, but he caught a glimpse of it as it ran away. It moved like a man, he said, on its hind legs, but its body and method of attack were those of a wolf.”

Suvi controlled herself with difficulty. “Superstitious nonsense! Men cannot turn into wolves and wolves cannot turn into men. There is no such creature as a werewolf. Last night was dark, and all three victims had been drinking. It’s quite probable that they were all

attacked by a large stray dog, and they're too embarrassed to admit that when they can claim a Sami wolf did it instead."

"Still," said Jakob, "dogs usually bite, and the men have been scratched by a beast with sharp claws. I say we examine the Sami ship to see if the wolf is still onboard. If it was responsible for last night's attacks, we will find evidence...and then we can destroy the animal."

On the edge of arguing with him, Suvi stopped. Although she wanted to defend Kari's pet, there was a possibility that the wolf had attacked the townsmen—her people. Her duty lay with Häbo, not with her Sami lover.

Jakob seemed to take her hesitation for agreement. "We should also investigate the whereabouts of the Sami men last night. A number of them were drinking in the town, but no one saw their leader."

"Kari tended my mother," Suvi said.

"That was before dinner." Jakob's gaze rested on her steadily. "Can you vouch for him after that?"

To do so would reveal how she'd passed the night. Suvi swallowed hard and prayed that she wouldn't blush. "I don't know. I believe he retired to bed early."

"So he could have slipped out and roused his wolf, or," Jakob added slyly, "he could have transformed into that dread animal and gone prowling the streets."

More murmuring from the crowd greeted this comment. Suvi had the feeling that matters could slip away from her unless she took a stand. Superstition was always a difficult enemy to fight. Despite the hold of the Church, many Eastlanders still clung firmly to the old ways, which saw a god in every tree and a demon behind every rock.

She raised her voice. "Until we can discover the type of animal responsible for the attacks, I suggest that Antti Tanner and his friends should avail themselves of the best care possible. Animal scratches can be dangerous if left to fester. I will see to the payment of any medical costs."

The beadle smiled his approval, and there were cries of "God bless Lady Suvi!"

She held up her hands for silence. "Captain Lennqvist will accompany a senior guildsman and two Sami men aboard the ship to examine the wolf. They will report their findings to me by this evening."

“And,” Jakob added, timing his speech so naturally it looked as if he and Suvi were of one accord, “I will post a dozen soldiers around the town for extra protection tonight. The gates will be locked as usual, but instead of one guard on each gate, we will have two—and a patrol will march through the town at intervals, to be sure that all the residents of Håbo sleep safely in their beds.”

The crowd seemed pleased with this promise, but Suvi felt a clutch of fear. She’d never ordered out the few men left manning the garrison. Military matters were her father’s domain and she had neither the right nor the desire to interfere in it. Even to agree with Jakob’s suggestion made her feel as if she’d overstepped her boundaries.

“Jakob, I’d rather not...” she began low-voiced.

He turned to her, his expression bland but his eyes gleaming. “What is it, my dear—would you rather have further attacks upon the innocent people of this town?”

“Of course not!” Her voice dropped to a furious whisper. “But to call out the soldiers... We are not that desperate, surely?”

“The Sami are our enemy,” Jakob said. “We must be rid of them.”

“How do you know it was the Sami wolf?” she challenged.

The look he gave her was one of pity. “My dear girl, who else could it be?”

* * * *

Autumn was almost upon them. The forest floor had already turned gold, russet and brown as leaves drifted from the trees, and the bracken, so thickly clustered in spring, began to die back.

A bird shrieked from the branches above her. Suvi shivered, clutching her shawl about her shoulders. She looked into the wicker basket looped over her right arm and counted the few mushrooms that lay there. It was a poor haul for the time she’d spent gathering them, but her thoughts had been far away.

Whenever she felt unhappy or confused, she went into the forest to think. Conscious of the dangers, she never strayed far from Håbo and used only the well-trodden paths that other townsfolk walked in search of berries, fruits and mushrooms, depending on the season.

Today her thoughts turned on Kari and his men. The Sami had received a cold, grudging welcome in the market. She’d seen the locals avoid their stall, even though it was heaped high with gorgeous warm furs and skins from the north. Only outsiders passing through

Häbo had approached the Sami. She'd seen it for herself, and felt the injustice keenly.

But she couldn't blame the townsfolk. Perhaps the beast that had attacked those three men last night really had been Kari's wolf—but why would any stranger to a town allow their animal to roam wild? The Sami could gain nothing from Häbo's fear.

Then she thought of the way Kari had been last night, before she'd touched him. That strange trance he'd been in, when his eyes hadn't looked human and when he'd acted more like a wolf... Suvi frowned as she bent to pick another mushroom. As she understood it, a werewolf was a man who turned into a wolf and vice versa, not a man who acted like a wolf. It seemed to be an important distinction—or perhaps she was just fooling herself.

Suvi knew that Kari could not have been responsible for the attacks last night. They'd been together the whole time. But perhaps he was not the only Sami who could fall into a trance and call upon his totem animal. Perhaps it was another man who'd done it.

She sighed, determined to uncover this dangerous mystery before anyone else could get hurt and before Jakob succeeded in winning over the town. She strayed away from the path as she caught a glimpse of a crop of shining white mushrooms beneath a tree.

Jakob was another problem. He appeared to be so much more resolute now her father was absent. The townsfolk had never really taken to him before, except for a few toadies who'd follow anyone who paid for their ale, but now, while mistrust and fear surrounded the Sami, it seemed that all of Häbo was looking to Jakob as their saviour. Already the merchants favoured his opinion over hers. Suvi could only imagine what her father would say when he returned to see Jakob seated in the *jarl's* place at the head of the table, dispensing advice and making new laws.

She would not let that happen. Jakob Lennqvist was a spineless fool.

Her skirts whispered through the damp grass, and within a few minutes her toes felt cold and wet as the dew soaked through the thin suede of her boots. She approached the tree and then shook her head as she recognised it as an oak, its deeply scalloped leaves warning her not to touch the mushrooms that grew at its base.

Suvi went further. She negotiated a fallen elm and found a clump of chanterelle beneath its broken branches. She crouched and picked the fungi, dropped them into her basket, and moved on. As she

wandered deeper into the forest, she found more mushrooms. The simplicity of her self-appointed task cheered her. She realised that it had been silly to search at the edge of the woods, where the market traders had already cleared the best patches. Suvi determined to remember this little glade for future reference. One or two more mushrooms, and she would head back to the manor house.

She sat back on her heels and brushed a leaf from her skirt. Only then did she notice the silence of the forest. The air around her seemed heavy with quiet, but, curiously, it did not feel restful. Unease pricked at her and she felt as if the trees were alive, watching her, urging her to leave. She rose to her feet, picked up the basket, and began to hurry from the clearing, resisting the temptation to look behind her.

She headed back the way she had come, looking for the path that led out of the forest. Surely it was just past this mossy rock? Or perhaps beside this stump? The sudden harsh cry of a bird made her halt, her heart pounding, and she turned full circle, staring at the wall of trees around her.

She was lost.

Suvi suppressed a surge of panic. She hadn't come far: she knew the town lay to the southeast. She just needed to orient herself. Lichen always grew on north-facing surfaces, so she looked at the nearest tree. It seemed to have lichen all the way around it. She moved to the next tree, then the next, conscious all the time of the fact that she could be going deeper into the wood in the wrong direction.

The forest was immense. It could be days before she got out. And animals lurked in the forest: wild boar with their deadly tusks, territorial stags, and shambling brown bears... Suvi shuddered at the thought, and then her heart stopped as a piercing howl rent the silence around her.

Wolves.

How could she be so stupid! She had no weapon, no tinder—and the twigs and branches at her feet were too damp for her to make a fire to scare away the creatures. She stumbled, her clumsiness adding a sudden lurch of fear to her predicament. She knew she could be only a mile or so from Häbo, and yet it felt as far away as Sweden as the forest closed around her in an impenetrable wall of fading green.

Suvi pushed her way through a tangle of brambles, still hearing the echo of the baying cry ring about the forest. She spotted a crevice beneath the roots of a large tree. Pushing the basket inside, she

managed to squeeze her body through after it. Inside, it was damp and cold, but it might give her some protection.

Suvi shuffled deeper into the darkness, still clutching the basket, and then she fell backward into a ditch, too startled even to cry out. Wet leaves slapped her face as she rolled and her hair caught painfully in the branches. Finally she came to a halt, winded, and she blinked around her.

A large laurel bush hung overhead. The basket lay near her knees, the mushrooms scattered around her. She sighed and sat up cautiously, bruised and shaken, and started to pick them up.

Then she heard a voice outside the shrub, and she stilled. She parted the thick, glossy leaves and peeped out. Her eyes widened and she almost cried out in relief.

She saw a clearing surrounded by ancient, gnarled oak trees, interspersed with more laurel bushes. In the centre of the clearing stood a dolmen, its stones weathered with age. Beside it sat Kari, wrapped in his furs, talking to his black wolf.

Suvi pushed back the instinctive desire to rush out of her hiding place. At first she watched, wondering if the wolf was the same beast that had attacked her townsfolk. The animal seemed placid enough now, more like a large hound than a wild creature. She supposed she could step out and question Kari, perhaps warn him of Jakob's intent, but still she crouched beneath the laurel.

She was curious, she acknowledged. Not just about the wolf, but also about Kari. She watched as he stood up and walked to the dolmen, wagging one finger at the wolf as it turned its head to watch him. Suvi had no idea what he was saying, but his tone of voice seemed troubled. He ducked his head beneath the capstone of the dolmen and lifted out a bundle, wrapped in bearskin and tied with hemp.

She recognised it as the mysterious object that had so interested Jakob and the townsfolk. This was the item Kari had guarded so closely yesterday, that was so important to him that he'd told her it meant death to anyone who saw it.

Holding her breath, Suvi leaned forward for a better view.

Kari laid the bundle on the grass in front of the wolf, apparently undecided about opening it. The animal put its head on the ground. Kari laughed, reaching down to caress the pointed ears. He spoke to the wolf, although his gaze remained on the bundle, his expression

one of misgiving. After a pause, he began to untie the ropes fastening it together, and then turned back the skin.

Suvi stared as he took something small from the bundle. It seemed to be a number of wood cylinders lashed around with leather thongs. He began to fit them together, bending his head low so his hair fell in his eyes as he concentrated. Then he unwrapped a narrow tube and unrolled a circular piece of painted hide. He stretched it across the top of the cylinder, fastening the hide to the wood by means of several small clips attached to the frame.

Suvi frowned. It looked like a drum. Why go to the effort of hiding it in small pieces? What was so special about it? A drum was just something that made a noise.

She watched as Kari ran his fingers experimentally over the hide, his head cocked as he adjusted the clips so that the drum's note went from dull and flat to sharp and clear. Finally he appeared to be satisfied, setting the drum on the ground between himself and the wolf. He reached out and stroked the animal's neck, catching hold of something hidden in its thick black fur, and Suvi was surprised to see him draw a thin cord from around its shoulders, upon which glittered a gold ring.

He sat there for a long time. Suvi shifted restlessly in her hiding place, uncomfortable. Her feet had gone to sleep, and she was getting cold. As she moved, a twig snapped beneath her. She froze.

In the clearing, both wolf and man looked in the direction of the laurel bush.

Slowly, her heart beating faster, Suvi edged backward. Kari stood up and began to walk over to the shrub. She scrambled up the slope, not wanting to be caught spying on him. She scabbled at the roots, her fingers digging into the soft soil between them, and then she was back in the narrow crevice at the top of the ditch.

Her skirt caught on a branch as she crawled out, and she tugged at it, tearing the cloth slightly. Suvi cursed, and then started to run.

Behind her, the black wolf burst out of the undergrowth. She screamed, more from reaction than fear, but as her cry rang around the forest, Suvi began to feel genuinely afraid.

The animal did not run straight at her, but dodged and weaved, keeping pace as she ran faster and faster, her feet slipping on the mulch and the brambles tearing her limbs as she hurtled through the woods. Branches whipped at her face, and still the wolf was with her.

She could see it at the corner of her vision, following her, tracking her.

Suvi's lungs ached with effort as she began to tire. She slowed down slightly to risk a glance behind, looking for the wolf. She couldn't see it. Relieved, she swung around again and shrieked when she saw Kari standing just in front of her, his eyes blazing with fury.

How did he get there? How did he move so fast?

Her next thought was that the superstitions must be true. What she'd seen last night, the wolf-trance, must only be a part of it. Somehow, Kari was the black wolf.

A growl sounded behind her and the wolf appeared, driving her toward its master. Suvi looked from Kari to the beast and then back again. She made a break for it through the bracken. The wolf howled, and she slipped. Her hands went out to cushion her fall, and she landed in a heap, twisting her ankle painfully.

She lay in the bracken for long moments, waiting for the wolf to pounce on her, or for Kari to drag her to her feet. She gasped, her breath rasping in her dry throat, the adrenaline turning sour in her belly and making her legs weak. She knew he was there, and she shivered uncontrollably.

After a long time, she dared to raise her head.

He was crouched a few feet from her, his silvery-blue eyes intent. "Why were you watching me?"

Suvi tried to think clearly. "I wasn't... I was gathering mushrooms. I got lost. I heard the wolf..."

"You were watching me." His voice was cold. "That is the second time you have done so. I should have killed you the first time."

Her blood turned to ice. "Killed me?" she whispered, terrified. "I don't understand..."

Kari's eyes appeared flinty. "I told you. I am *noai'de*. In my country, the price for disturbing the *noai'de* is death."

Suvi shuddered. "But this is not your country," she said. "And I thought..." She trailed off, biting her lip.

"You thought what? That I cared for you?" His expression softened. "My lady, I cannot get entangled with you, even though I wish for it. It is forbidden to the *noai'de*. I should never have touched you."

Suvi gazed at him, tears filling her eyes. "Then why did you do it? Why?"

He looked away. "I do not know."

"You're inhuman! A—a savage!" she cried, furious more with her own foolish hopes than with his reply.

Kari came closer and lifted her chin with gentle fingers. "I am all too human," he whispered. "You must believe me. I never meant to hurt you."

"Hurt me?" she spat. "You have ruined me!"

He looked wounded. "You are young and beautiful. There will be someone else for you."

Suvi hurled a handful of leaves at him. "I might be the *jarl*'s daughter, but my life is governed by rules laid out by men and society, rules that demand I should be a maiden when I go to my husband—otherwise he could turn me away, and I would bring shame to my family," she snapped, trying to make him understand.

"Perhaps I should have stopped you, but I wanted to know what it was like to be with someone out of—of affection and enjoyment, rather than from duty. But I made a mistake when I chose you as my lover. What kind of future do I have now you are suspected throughout Håbo as a monster?"

"A monster?"

Suvi glared at him, her brief flurry of tears banished. "They think you are a werewolf."

He gave her a sharp glance. "And you?"

"I think you are just a man."

She said it witheringly, and he smiled in acknowledgement. "Even the greatest *noai'de* are just men."

"You never did tell me. What is a *noai'de*?"

His smile vanished. "A shaman, you would say. A man or woman of the Sami who can foretell the future, cast magic, encourage the crops and destroy enemies. We can talk with the gods and summon demons. We can cure illnesses as surely as we can cause them. We speak through animals and birds and divine the very essence of Nature. The Church calls us witches. The southerners say we're magicians. In truth, we are both these things and more—we are the *noai'de*."

Suvi drew in a deep breath. "And to disturb a *noai'de* is punishable by death."

He nodded. "You have done it twice, now."

"Will you kill me?" She was proud that her voice didn't wobble when she asked the question, but inside, Suvi trembled.

Kari glanced away. "I should. But..."

The black wolf suddenly padded forward to interrupt. It lay down beside Suvi and put its chin on her lap, looking up at her before it shifted its gaze to Kari.

"Aila does not want you to die," he said softly. "It is not my wish, either, but the law is the law. You saw what was in the bundle?"

Suvi patted the wolf's head, the motion masking how her hands shook. "A drum," she said. "I saw a drum."

"A shaman drum, sacred to the *noai'de* and the Sami," he said briefly. "You saw it, and so the drum can decide your future. That is fair, surely?" Kari stood up and pulled her to her feet.

"A drum cannot predict the future," she protested, wincing as she tried to put her weight on her injured ankle.

"They can when played by a *noai'de*," Kari said. "Come with me."

Suvi tried to walk, but her ankle twisted again and she stumbled. He caught hold of her and lifted her up in his arms, cradling her against the wolf pelts. "Put me down. I don't want to go with you!" she cried, appalled by the way her body reacted to him. She wanted to strike out at him, but for some reason her arms went around his neck. She couldn't resist him, and he knew it.

He carried her back through the forest to the clearing and set her down beside the dolmen. She looked around for the wolf, but Aila had gone. Her nervousness increased at the thought that they were alone.

"What happens now?" she asked, as Kari placed the little drum before her, dropping the golden ring on top of the hide.

He gave her one of his slanting looks and rested his fingers on the edge of the drum, away from the dozens of red and black images painted on the surface. He closed his eyes and after a moment, it looked as if he was asleep. Suvi watched him, and then glanced about the clearing. It was so quiet, so still. The forest seemed to be leaning in toward them, listening.

She jerked her attention back to Kari as his fingers twitched, the faintest tattoo emerging. It sounded like falling rain through the leaves. A pattering, which grew into a more solid rhythm, and his fingers shifted across the hide, the gold ring jumping with the beats that got stronger and stronger, changed tempo, began to slow, then quickened again.

Suvi watched the ring spin upon the surface of the drum. She wondered if it would jump right off, but then the beats slowed, deepened, and came to a dead halt.

The echo of the drum stopped. Kari opened his eyes and looked down at the painted hide. Suvi could see that the ring had landed on one of the images, but she couldn't make out what it signified, whether it boded good or ill.

Kari stared at the drum for several seconds, his expression utterly shocked. He picked up the ring and then traced his fingers over the pattern on which it had fallen, shaking his head in disbelief.

"Impossible," he whispered. "It cannot be true. Impossible..."

Suvi couldn't bear it. "Am I to die, then?" she asked, her voice tiny.

He raised his head and gazed at her as if she was a total stranger. "What?"

She tried again. "When you kill me, will you be quick? I don't want it to hurt."

"What are you talking about?" He still looked dazed, and ran a hand through his hair distractedly.

Suvi wondered if this happened every time he cast an augury. "The drum. What did it say?"

He glanced at the instrument and shivered. "You live," he said, so quietly that she wasn't sure she'd heard him correctly. "You live."

Suvi knew there must be more to it than that. She'd never seen anyone look so stunned before, but she didn't want to push her luck. She sat back against the cool slab of the dolmen and held her tongue.

Kari finally gave himself a little shake, his wits returning. "Forgive me. Your ankle... It must hurt."

She shook her head. "It's not important. What did you see?"

He started to unclip the skin from the drum. "Something I thought was impossible."

"What?"

Kari looked straight up at her. "A relationship. With me."

Suvi caught her breath in astonishment. "But why is that impossible?"

He sighed deeply. "The *noai'de* are bound by vows so powerful that to break them is to invite the retribution of the gods. Chief amongst these vows is that of chastity."

She stared at him. "But..."

“Yes. I have been a very poor example of chastity since I met you.” Kari’s expression was wry. “To be a *noai’de* is not a life to be taken lightly. It is not a life to be shared. You understand?”

She met his gaze. “I understand. But I still want to be with you.”

“It is not the kind of life a *jarl*’s daughter should live.”

“I don’t care.” Suvi felt certainty swell her voice. “I will make my own life from now on, Kari—with you.”

* * * *

The following morning, the crowd in the manor courtyard had swelled in number. No longer comprised of merchants and beadles, now it contained any number of ordinary townsfolk. Women clasped their children to their skirts. Blustering words could be heard on the lips of the men. Occasionally, someone would shout out from the crowd, calling a demand before they were hushed into silence.

In her mother’s room, Suvi opened the shutters a crack and looked out. The restless noise of the crowd hadn’t disturbed Jona’s sleep, but Suvi could hear the sound clearly, as uneasy as a wasp’s nest stirred with a stick in late summer. She looked at the size of the crowd and knew she would have to go down to hear them. For a moment she felt afraid. Her father would know what to do, but he was not here. As for her mother...

Suvi turned from the window to glance at Lady Ahrenberg’s pale figure lying beneath the heaped blankets and furs. Kari had given her new furs with thicker pelts, the better to sweat out the remainder of the fever. Last night had been a turning point for the sickness, with Jona raving and struggling in her delirium. Suvi had feared that her mother would die, but Kari had sat with her, holding Jona’s hand and murmuring the low-voiced chant of the *noai’de*.

Watching him tend her mother with such gentle respect, Suvi knew she’d lost her heart to the Sami shaman. His body, yes, that was very pleasing, but now she recognised a strong spirit and a worthy mate. He would make a fine husband and a loving father. At that thought, she’d felt heat burn inside her, and she’d placed a hand on her belly.

Now she touched her belly again, a brief caress over the woollen gown as if to give herself courage. With a last look at her mother, sleeping peacefully amidst the furs, she went to the door. Outside, a maidservant waited to go in and sit with Lady Ahrenberg. Suvi lingered for a moment to give the maid instructions, and then she walked down the main stairs and pushed open the doors of the manor.

The droning noise reached its peak and then fell into silence. The crowd turned to face her. Suvi clenched her hands into fists briefly to stop them from trembling. Whatever news the townsfolk brought, it would not be good.

The beadle who had spoken yesterday pushed his way to the front and told her what had happened that night. Suvi listened, detached and horrified, at the news. A young soldier from the garrison, on duty alone at the postern gate, had been attacked and now lay close to death. Two more men had been injured by the wolf-beast as they left a tavern and walked across the marketplace. Worse still was the news that a woman had been attacked in her bed while her husband patrolled the streets.

But the tale that aroused most interest and sympathy was that of Teppo Silversmith, a burly man of few words who spoke simply of waking to find the wolf-man within his house, stealing his baby from its cradle. Gasps of shock rang around the courtyard. Suvi took two steps down toward the crowd, shocked. Teppo ignored the cries of horror and reported that he'd given chase, following the wolf-man to the river. There, the beast had dropped the baby onto the grassy bank.

Teppo admitted that he was more concerned with the safety of his child than with catching the wolf-man. When he had his baby in his arms, he'd tried to discover where the creature had run, but he could find no trail.

"And you are sure it was a wolf-man?" Suvi asked, her voice trembling a little.

Teppo Silversmith nodded. "Definitely a man, my lady."

His gaze was steady as he looked at her, and Suvi had the impression that he wanted to say more to her. She gestured to him to come closer so they could speak privately, but not before Jakob strode through the crowd and hopped up onto the steps beside her.

"People of Häbo," Jakob cried, "our way is clear! After another night of attacks, each more brutal than the last, it seems we are no longer safe in our homes, for the beast has entered two dwellings to cause injury and distress. Even now, a soldier lies dying. Listen to me, good people—the Sami wolf has vanished from their ship. Yesterday, when we searched, it was there...but this morning, after its frenzy of last night, it has gone. Doubtless it hides in the forest where we cannot find it! But this is proof enough to me—indeed, to anyone of sound mind—the Sami came here not to trade in peace but to cause chaos!"

Suvi listened open-mouthed to his tirade. “Jakob...”

He ignored her, his face shining as the crowd roared its approval of his words. Encouraged, he shouted, “Let us eject the Sami from our town today, so we may live in safety once more!”

Several men broke from the crowd and ran toward the manor’s guest wing. Suvi yelled at them to stop, but they did not listen. Within moments, the Sami men were bundled out into the courtyard where they stood silent and grim, surrounded by a baying crowd.

Suvi shoved her way past Jakob and hurried over to the Sami. Teppo Silversmith took her arm and whispered urgently, “Don’t speak in their favour, my lady. I have news for you.”

She gave him a startled glance, but then the crowd pushed them apart and she found herself at the edge of the circle surrounding the Sami. The men looked cold and determined, agreeing something amongst each other. Kari came forward, and while her heart lifted for the joy of seeing him, Suvi couldn’t help but fear for him, too.

He looked tired. She knew it was because he’d been tending her mother for most of the night, but the townsfolk would believe it was because he’d taken on wolf-form and spread a reign of nocturnal terror throughout Häbo.

Kari held up his hands. “Silence.”

His voice sounded so commanding that the crowd quieted immediately. He looked around and his gaze lingered briefly on Suvi before he glanced away. She felt hurt by the apparent rejection, but tried not to show it.

“People of Häbo,” he began, echoing Jakob’s speech, “we thank you for your kind hospitality these past two nights, and for the opportunity to trade in your market. Clearly, our presence here has made you uneasy. The rumour of Sami involvement with the Novgorodians has not furthered our cause, although I assure you, we have nothing to do with your enemy and came to the south purely to trade.

“We are innocent of the crimes of which you accuse us. We are guests here, and guests do not behave in so poor a manner towards their hosts. But since you will not believe us, and will think only the worst of us, then we will leave today.”

Suvi took a step forward, her heart thudding in her chest. She wanted to protest, to declare his innocence, but then she felt a tug at her sleeve. Turning, she saw Teppo Silversmith. His gaze warned her not to do anything rash, and so she subsided.

Several people had noticed her involuntary reaction. Kari turned to her and bowed slightly. “Lady Suvi, I would ask that you allow us to board our ship and leave in peace. I regret that I must leave you before your mother is fully restored to health, but rest assured she will recover within the week.”

Muttering arose from the crowd. Suvi stood her ground, her head held high, even when her neighbours spoke of witchcraft and suggested that Jona didn’t have long to live if Suvi was desperate enough to trust a Sami to heal her.

Suddenly, Jakob shouted, “But what is this? Here comes our priest, Father Nordmann. He was with the doctor, attending the young soldier so grievously wounded last night. Perhaps he brings good news!”

The crowd turned toward the manor gates where Father Nordmann, his grey beard and black cassock flapping, came shambling into the courtyard. Suvi stared at him with mistrust. She’d never liked the priest, who preached of earthly sins and the terrors of Hell in such graphic detail that he terrified the youngest members of Häbo’s congregation. The feeling was mutual; Father Nordmann never made a secret of his disdain for Suvi, and every time they met, he would rail at her for her forwardness in governing the town, and would speak in slighting terms of her father for permitting it.

“What news? What news?” Jakob cried as the priest approached.

Father Nordmann stopped. Drawing himself up to his full spindly height, he gestured with his hands to set his cassock fluttering again. Thus assured that all attention was upon him, he spoke in his best pulpit-voice. “I bring grave tidings. Our brave soldier, Timo Riikonen, has died.”

Somewhere in the crowd, someone wailed in dismay.

Father Nordmann looked annoyed at the sound of grief. He spoke again, quickly, before anyone else could interrupt with weeping and sighing. “But even with his last breath, Timo proved his worth to our town. Cut down whilst standing guard to protect us, he fought back bravely—and he saw the face of the wolf-man.

“Aye,” the priest almost shouted over the rising murmur of the crowd, “Timo saw him— and recognised him. And with his dying breath, he named the culprit—Kari, the leader of the Sami, is the wolf-man.”

* * * *

Suvi sat in the *jarl*'s chair at the head of the great hall. The empty room seemed full of reproach, full of the whispers of the townsfolk. She rubbed her forehead wearily, curling a strand of bright red-gold hair around a finger until it pulled taut against her scalp. The brief pain was enough to stop her from wallowing in unhappiness.

She sat up straight, her toes skimming the floor. She'd been foolish to think she could rule in her father's place. At the first sign of trouble, the people looked to a man, any man, who could lead them, and they disregarded her. The unfairness of the situation made her want to break something, preferably a chamber pot, over Jakob Lennqvist's head.

The image made her smile. Suvi curled up in the chair and rested her chin on her hand as she pondered her next move. She had to find a way of setting Kari free. He wasn't the wolf-man—how could he be, when for the past two nights he'd been in her company? True, for the sake of her reputation she couldn't admit to the first night, but when she had told the crowd that Kari had been with her and Lady Ahrenberg on the second night, her words had been all but ignored.

A few people had glanced at her, apparently considering what she'd said, but then Jakob and Father Nordmann had shouted louder, inciting the crowd to action, and before she could make herself heard again, Kari had been arrested and the rest of the Sami men had been driven out of Häbo.

She'd sent her steward into town to find out what he could about Kari's plight. Perhaps he'd be kept imprisoned in the garrison until her father returned home. Then she'd be able to plead on his behalf. But somehow, she knew that Jakob wouldn't be content with mere imprisonment. Not after she'd shown such favouritism to Kari.

Suvi bit her lip as she remembered how she'd flung herself in front of him when Jakob and a number of other men had advanced. She blushed to recall how she'd spat abuse at them. She could not have been more obvious in her affections if she tried.

Kari had gently put her aside, his gaze steady and loving when he looked at her. He'd told her all would be well, and she believed him. Then the men had taken him away, followed by most of the townsfolk. A few had hung around the courtyard, aware of another drama unfolding—that between Suvi and Jakob.

She ground her teeth at the memory of his odious smile and his smug expression as he'd approached her. To her shock, Jakob had

proposed—and he made it very clear that he would not brook a refusal.

But refuse him she did, violently and with disgust. She'd turned away, only to be brought up short when Jakob had threatened her with Kari's safety.

"You care for him, don't you?" Jakob had guessed. "If you care for him, you will do well to accept my proposal. Otherwise, your Sami will regret the day he laid eyes on you."

She hadn't thought through her response. Whirling around, she'd snapped, "I love him. And you will do well to remember that, for if you hurt him, I will make sure that you regret the day you came to Häbo."

They'd stared at each other then, two opponents bristling with fierce determination across the cobbled courtyard, and then Jakob had turned on his heel and walked away in silence.

Suvi wasn't so foolish as to think that she'd won a victory, but she was glad that Jakob had walked away first.

Her reverie was interrupted by a knock at the door. Suvi raised her head and called out a welcome. Expecting to see Paavo returned from town with news, she was surprised to see Teppo Silversmith ease into the room.

"Lady Suvi." He came toward her and bowed. "I'm sorry we couldn't speak much beforehand."

She smiled slightly. "What's on your mind, Teppo?"

He stood straight and looked at her. "It's about the Sami man, Kari. I know he's innocent."

Suvi sat forward on her father's chair, her hands gripping the ends of the armrests. "You know this—how?"

"You heard what happened to my family last night," Teppo said. "The wolf-man broke into my house and stole my little girl right out of her cradle. When I gave chase, he led me a merry dance through the streets before we got to the riverbank. He dumped my baby like she was a piece of rubbish – but I'm certain he only did it because I was gaining on him. I'm a big man, Lady Suvi, but I can run fast, faster than the wolf-man bargained for, I think."

"He dropped your child so you'd stop and rescue her, and he could make his escape," Suvi said.

Teppo nodded. "Aye, I'm sure of it. And as soon as I had my baby tucked up in my arms, I went looking for him—but he'd gone. Vanished into the darkness. Now I'm a simple man, Lady Suvi, I

know my trade but pay attention to aught else, but it strikes me that those Sami men wouldn't know their way around a town the size of Håbo so quickly when they'd only been here little more than a day."

Suvi stood up and paced back and forth. "Unless they'd studied a map before they arrived here."

"Even so," Teppo said, "a map wouldn't show all the alleyways, only the main streets. And how would a stranger here know about the new drainage ditch cut through Fishpond Lane, and that the best way to detour around it is to go through the tanner's yard rather than Potter's Way?"

Suvi stopped pacing. "You think the wolf-man is a local."

Teppo gave her a grim smile. "He's got to be, my lady. He has a knowledge of the town that no stranger could have, even if they'd been studying maps for a month."

"But who would want to do such a thing?"

Teppo rocked back on his heels, his expression going blank. "There's something else, my lady. It could be nothing. It might not have anything to do with this wolf-man business, but... well, you never know."

Suvi stepped down from the dais and laid her hand on Teppo's arm. "Tell me."

"Yesterday, I was looking out of my shop window and minding my own business," Teppo said, a flash of humour brightening his eyes, "and who did I see but Captain Lennqvist and Father Nordmann standing huddled in an alleyway across the street. Now the captain had a cloak pulled over his head, but anyone would recognise him by his fancy boots and the cut of his breeches. Father Nordmann didn't try to disguise himself at all. The two of them were talking, a deep conversation by the look of it, and then Captain Lennqvist handed over a moneybag. Nice and full it was, too, if I'm any judge of it—and being a silversmith, I know a full purse when I see one."

Suvi stepped away from Teppo and looked up at her father's chair as if seeking guidance. Thoughtfully, she said, "Father Nordmann supports Jakob's suit for my hand. They are not good friends, however. So we must assume that the money was a bribe...but for what?"

Teppo shrugged. "Perhaps he wants a Mass saying to save his black soul."

She laughed. "That wouldn't surprise me. But maybe there's something more sinister going on between them. That announcement

today about the soldier's death—there was something almost theatrical about it, I thought. As if it had been arranged in advance. Perhaps the bribe..."

Suvi shook her head. These were wild thoughts that couldn't be proven. She looked up at Teppo again. "Do you think Jakob Lennqvist is behind the attacks of the wolf-man?"

"Truly, I don't know. But my suspicions run in that direction."

"Who else thinks like you?"

Teppo considered. "More than half the town, my lady. Get the merchants away from the alehouse and talk some sense into them, and you'd have most of the town believing that the Sami is innocent. No one in Häbo likes Captain Lennqvist. Jumped-up little prig, he is. He's not like you and your parents, Lady Suvi. He doesn't care for us Eastlanders and he doesn't care for the town. Power and wealth are all he wants. But while the *jarl*'s away and when there's terror in the night, the people will follow the voice that shouts the loudest. Better the devil you know than the devil you don't, Lady Suvi. I hope you can see that, and not judge the townsfolk too harshly."

Suvi smiled a little. "Sheep will always follow a shepherd, whether he is good or bad. Thank you, Teppo Silversmith. I am glad you did not follow the other sheep."

He bowed. "You have done a good job holding this town for your father. The *jarl* will be proud of you when he returns."

"I must make sure he has a town to which he can return," Suvi said. "The wolf-man is dividing us. I must discover the truth of it, and soon. Teppo, will you help me further?"

He clasped her hands. "My lady, of course I will."

* * * *

By midmorning the following day, Suvi had already made a good start on her investigation. The night before, she'd disguised herself in lad's clothes, her hair coiled up beneath a cap pulled low over her eyes and grime smudged on her smooth cheeks. Accompanied by Teppo, they'd gone to each of the taverns in town in search of information. In The Lamb, Teppo had indicated a group of off-duty soldiers well on the way to drunkenness. A free round of drinks and the soldiers became more garrulous, telling anyone who'd listen about Timo Riikonen. Suvi had learned that Timo hadn't been a particularly good soldier, fit only for guard duty. He'd had a taste for gambling, and the day before he died, he'd been bragging about his sudden good fortune.

“Funny thing is,” one of the soldiers had remarked, “Timo was never lucky with the dice. Strange that his fortune should change just a few hours before the wolf-man attacked him.”

Suvi hadn’t been able to restrain herself. “Perhaps he was bribed,” she’d suggested. Teppo had shot her a quick look, and into the silence that fell following her words, she’d added, “You never know. Maybe the wolf-man gave him money to play the victim, but it got out of hand.”

The soldiers had considered this, their faces grave. “Maybe,” offered one, and then they’d gone back to their ale.

Teppo had escorted her back to the manor house with a promise to continue the investigations on his own. He held the opinion that it was too dangerous for her to do anything else, and he advised her to stay with her mother until he could bring her more evidence.

But she refused to sit still. This wasn’t just about clearing her lover’s name. She wanted to protect Håbo and its people from an unscrupulous crook—and if that crook turned out to be Jakob Lennqvist, she would take every satisfaction in banishing him from the town.

As soon as the day dawned, Suvi kissed her mother and hurried out of the house to continue her search. It soon became obvious that the night had passed peacefully, with no further attacks. As she walked through the streets, she heard the townsfolk agreeing that Kari must indeed be the wolf-man. Otherwise, the attacks would have continued. Captain Lennqvist had imprisoned the true criminal.

Suvi supposed that in simplistic terms, this seemed to be true. But she also knew Kari was innocent. She needed to find more evidence. She visited the woman who’d been attacked in her bed, and found her eager to relate her experience. When she questioned her, the woman told Suvi about something strange she’d noticed about the wolf-man.

“You’d think that a werewolf would smell of, well, wolf, wouldn’t you?” the woman said. “I expected him to leave his horrible stink all over me like a randy fox. But you know what? He smelled of flowers.”

Suvi stared at her. “Flowers?”

“Yes.” The woman nodded. “A strange flowery smell. Like something you’d use to disguise bad odours.”

Suvi remembered Jakob’s expensive flowery cologne and thanked the woman for her help. Then she went to call upon Håbo’s brewer, one of the men attacked by the werewolf. As soon as the

brewer seated his visitor in the parlour, he complained at length about a land dispute with his neighbour. Only when Suvi guaranteed to resolve the argument did he settle down and answer her questions.

Yes, the wolf-man had attacked him. He'd been down by the river, close to where Antti Tanner had met with similar misfortune. No, he hadn't been drunk, just a little tipsy. He remembered everything clearly. He'd been surprised that the Sami man had been accused, because the creature that had leapt at him seemed small and runtish, not a big strapping thing.

"But you never know," the brewer continued. "Maybe a big man turns into a small wolf. These things are a mystery to me. Anyway, Lady Suvi, I fought back. I'm not like Antti Tanner, who rolls over at the first sign of trouble. No, I punched the beast, I did, and got it in the belly. I managed to pull some fur from its pelt. Mangy-looking, it was."

Suvi controlled her expression, forcing herself to show only polite interest. "Oh? Do you still have the fur, by any chance?"

"Happens that I do." The brewer opened a drawer and pulled out a hank of grey fur. He held it up. "I saw the Sami come ashore a few days ago with his wolf. His animal is black, not grey. If the Sami is truly the wolf-man, why does he have a totem-animal that's a different colour?"

Suvi took the clump of grey fur and turned it over. She snorted. "This pelt has been cured. Skinned from a wolf and then hung to dry. You can feel its age, too. This isn't a new pelt but one that's been used as a covering!"

The brewer nodded. "That's what I thought. Something suspicious is going on here, Lady Suvi, and the Sami man is set to take the blame."

"Are you prepared to speak for him?" she asked, handing back the tattered piece of fur.

He looked at her. "If it's important to you, then yes, I will."

Suvi inclined her head. "Thank you," she said quietly.

She left the brewer's house, excitement singing through her. The evidence continued to stack up in Kari's favour—and it pointed to Jakob as the real culprit. Now she planned on confronting Father Nordmann and asking him what he and Jakob had been plotting together. She looked forward to making the miserable old priest squirm.

On her way to the church, she saw Teppo hurrying toward her. She hailed him, eager to tell him of her discoveries, but before she could speak, he grabbed her arm and started to tow her down the street in the direction of the marketplace.

“What is it?” she demanded, catching his sense of unease. “Teppo, what’s happened?”

“Come quickly, my lady,” he said, almost out of breath as he dragged her after him. “It’s Jakob. He’s rousing the soldiers against your Sami man. If you don’t stop them, someone’s going to get hurt.”

* * * *

Suvi couldn’t remember seeing so many people gathered in one place. Teppo pushed through the throng of people, clearing her way, and then she saw it: a large cage on the back of a wagon, the kind used to transport prisoners consisting of a box of solid oak about a foot thick with iron bars set on three sides. The fourth side was reinforced with iron plates and locks. Reasonably fresh straw lay scattered on the floor.

She leaned against Teppo for a moment, peering over the heads of the crowd in front of her to catch a glimpse of the prisoner. When a few more people moved aside for the burly silversmith, Suvi could see more clearly, and what she saw took her breath away.

Kari lay in the centre of the cage, drowsy and slumberous in the midmorning heat. Curled beneath a heap of wolf fur, he seemed unaware of the townsfolk staring at him. Suvi tried to gauge the mood of the crowd, who muttered and mumbled to one another. Some of them had been told to go to the marketplace, while others had just followed their neighbours. To Suvi, it was obvious that someone intended to manipulate the situation for their own gain.

Only a couple of soldiers stood beside the cage. She would have to act quickly before any more arrived from the garrison. Suvi stepped forward, her head held high. Pitching her voice loud enough that the crowd around her would hear her words clearly, she ordered, “Guard, release this man.”

The soldier stared at her for a moment before he recognised her. Then he made a clumsy bow. “Beg pardon, Lady Suvi, but I’ve got orders. Can’t let this criminal out, not on your say-so.”

Suvi put ice into her gaze. “I hold Häbo for my father the *jarl*. You would disobey me?”

“Sorry, my lady, but this is men’s work.” The soldier looked uncomfortable. “Captain Lennqvist said you might come here asking

us to set the prisoner free. Said you were soft on him. A woman's word isn't to be trusted, he said."

Teppo stirred, sounding angry. "What nonsense is this?"

The soldier turned to him. "It's just what I've been told. Captain Lennqvist said that the Sami sorcerer bewitched Lady Suvi and so we should ignore everything she said to us. He said she didn't know what she was doing, that she was an easy target for this silver-tongued devil on account of the *jarl* being away and Lady Ahrenberg being so sick."

Suvi narrowed her eyes. "What else did Captain Lennqvist say?"

"That you'd try to free the prisoner. That the prisoner was conspiring with the Novogodrians and you'd agreed to hand over control of the town to the enemy."

Teppo took a menacing step forward. "You fool! You value the words of that Swedish worm above the woman we all know and respect? Lady Suvi would never betray this town!"

"No, I would not," Suvi said, her voice loud and clear. She saw the soldier wince awkwardly and so pressed her advantage while the crowd seemed to be on her side. "And I assure you, Kari has harmed no one. He is innocent of any wrongdoing in this town."

"I don't know anything about the werewolf business, but since he's been here, the Sami's been trouble." The soldier gestured to the other guard on duty. "Matti had to be stitched up last night when he took food into the cage. That's not a man in there, it's a bloody savage."

"What do you mean?" Teppo demanded.

"The prisoner attacked Matti without warning and, well, I don't know how he did it, but he cut the poor lad open. Like he had claws."

Suvi felt dizzy. "Like a wolf?"

The soldier nodded. "Exactly. He's not fully human, that one. Captain Lennqvist wanted to cut his hands off when he found out, but until then, we've hit on an idea that might just work."

Suvi stopped listening, her attention caught as Kari curled his chin down into the fur and then stretched. The pelts slid back as he moved and he wriggled, rolling slightly on the floor of the cage so that he was bathed in sunlight.

She stared at him as he stretched again, waking up, his hands raised high above his head and his toes pointing; chest thrust out and the muscles of his torso rippling as he moved. Only the tiniest scrap of a loincloth at his waist prevented her from seeing him completely naked, but her memory supplied her with the rest.

Suvi thought her heart was going to explode; it beat so fast she could scarcely catch her breath. She licked her lips unconsciously, taking in every detail of his body, of his slow, sleepy movements. Suvi felt completely and utterly dazzled. Just as she was about to step forward, Kari opened his eyes and looked straight at her.

For a split-second, time stopped. Suvi tried to tell him with her gaze that she'd come here to help him, but when he turned away from her, his expression blank, she felt a physical pain at the slight rejection. Of course, Kari was a proud man. She imagined how he must feel, displayed like an animal in a cage in the marketplace for the amusement of the townsfolk.

A commotion in the crowd signalled the arrival of more soldiers, who came bearing spears and a tray of food. They appeared to be drunk, red-faced and reeling, elbowing each other and guffawing. Jakob walked behind them at a more sedate pace, his face flushed with a combination of ale and, Suvi suspected, delight at the idea of revenge. She was certain he hadn't forgotten—or forgiven—her declaration of love for Kari yesterday. She should have guarded her tongue. Now Kari would pay for her slip.

Suvi marched forward to confront Jakob, flinging out her hand in an imperious gesture. The soldiers stopped, confused by her action. They blinked at her, uncertain how they should respond. A couple of them bowed to her, but then Jakob planted himself square in front of her, his expression nasty.

"Kari is innocent," she said, low-voiced.

"Do you really want to make a scene here?" Jakob gestured to the crowd, who pressed closer in a shameless attempt to hear their conversation.

"You're a coward, Jakob. Kari was right about you. What really happened on the mission? Did my father send you back or did you run away?"

Jakob looked down his nose at her. "You've become so impertinent since your father went away. It's most unbecoming in a female. The sooner we're married, the better. You will learn your place then."

Suvi gasped and then laughed harshly. "I will never marry you!"

"I will make certain of it." Jakob gripped her arm hard.

She tried to shake him off, but he held on tight. Only when Teppo stepped forward did Jakob release his grasp.

“Don’t provoke him,” Teppo whispered to her. “We can’t accuse him of anything yet. We don’t have enough evidence.”

Suvi trembled with rage. Loudly, she said, “The Sami is innocent. He is not the wolf-man.”

Jakob spoke even louder. “Hear that? The Sami has enchanted Lady Suvi. He’s bewitched her with his magic!”

Suvi expected him to reveal more than that, but Jakob stayed silent. No doubt he thought to save her reputation so he could marry her. She knew she should speak out and declare her love for Kari publicly, but she was afraid of what the townsfolk would think. Most of the people around her had watched her grow up. They thought they knew her. She didn’t want to see their affection change just because she’d fallen in love with a man accused as their enemy.

She stayed silent, her mind whirling with indecision. Jakob smiled unpleasantly and gestured to the soldiers. Two guards snapped to attention and levelled their spears through the bars of the cage.

Suvi put a hand to her mouth in horror. Beside her, Jakob chuckled.

“Don’t worry. It’s just a bit of fun.”

One guard prodded Kari with the point of the spear. Irritated, the Sami snarled and seized the haft, holding it steady as the guard tried to pull it back between the bars.

“Now the other side,” Jakob ordered, and the second guard nudged Kari in the ribs with his spear until he grabbed it, holding both pikes away from his body.

“That’s impressive,” Teppo said from behind her. “He’s stronger than he looks.”

Suvi bit her lip and nodded. She supposed Teppo was telling her this so she’d understand that Kari could look after himself, but she had no need of such a reminder. She remembered exactly how strong he was, remembered the unearthly power he possessed at times... Suvi shivered, shaking her head to clear her mind as the crowd started to heckle.

The two guards tugged at the spears, trying to make their prisoner topple over or let go, but Kari stood calmly, waiting for the next act. The food tray arrived, brought by a nervous-looking soldier who clambered up the wheel of the wagon and opened the door of the cage. The crowd yelled, then, as the door clanged shut behind him, they fell silent.

Suvi recognised the change in Kari when it happened. She'd seen him slip into the *noai'de* trance before, and saw it now in the coiled tension of his body. The soldier with the tray knew it, too. He scuttled across the cage floor and dumped the food down before he ran back to the door.

Kari growled very, very softly—and then came a sudden splintering snap as he broke both spears with a single twist of his wrists. Kari threw himself at the retreating soldier with a roar of fury, his hands outstretched, his fingers splayed and hooked like claws.

Suvi thought she caught a confused glimpse of shining silver unsheathed from his fingertips, and then came a slash and gush of blood as the soldier slammed back against the bars.

"I suppose this is your way of proving to the townsfolk that he's dangerous," she snapped, glancing at Jakob. "Goad any man enough and they'll turn on you. This proves nothing!"

"It proves that he's dangerous," Jakob said. "Didn't you hear? He attacked his guard last night, too. Your Sami is just an animal. Watch this."

He whistled, and from the body of the crowd came a group of five armoured soldiers, carrying something hidden in a sack. They marched at double-time, reaching the cage and opening the door just as Kari threw the hapless soldier inside across the width of the floor for a second time.

Kari turned to assess this new threat, head going up as if he could scent the intruders, his silvery eyes blank with battle-madness. Seeming to decide that his first victim no longer presented a problem, he backed away from the five soldiers, watching them warily.

The crowd urged the men on, laughing as one of the soldiers fainted left and received a blinding hook from the enraged Sami. Another ran at him, head down, and Kari sidestepped neatly, sending the soldier spinning into the bars of the cage.

"He's very good," Teppo muttered. "Even unarmed, he's more of a fighter than most of the garrison left here. He'd be a worthy addition to your father's troops, my lady."

Suvi only half-heard the conversation, so intent was she on following each move that Kari made as he kept the soldiers at bay. She could see his nervousness now in the way he rocked on his toes as he waited for the next attack. His hair hung in his eyes and he paused to flick it back with a toss of his head more animal than human.

The soldiers cornered him, forcing him into a patch of sunlight. Suvi stared at his body, powdered with dust and cut through with sweat, gleaming in the light. His eyes still held the dazed silver of wolf-trance, and he bared his teeth as three of the soldiers advanced upon him.

The crowd roared encouragement. Kari leapt at them, bringing one down immediately while the others tried to scramble free. The remaining two soldiers busied themselves with the contents of the sack and then they joined the melee, shouting and cursing as Kari was borne to the floor, fighting furiously.

Suvi could barely watch. She turned away to see Jakob observing it all with a look of enjoyment on his face.

"I think we've seen enough," she said coldly, but Jakob shook his head, pointing to draw her attention back to the cage.

"Now they'll chain him, as befits a wild animal." He sneered as the five soldiers in the cage managed to hold Kari down long enough to snap an iron collar about his neck. The free end of the chain was hurled to the guards outside, who caught it amidst sardonic applause from the crowd.

"Could this get any more barbaric?" Teppo muttered. "Come, Lady Suvi. Allow me to escort you home."

She risked another glance at the cage, torn between a mixture of admiration and pity for her man. Still angry, he lashed out at the soldiers within his reach and clawed at the collar and chain in helpless rage. The guards rushed to wrap the end of the chain around the wheel of the wagon. By tightening the chain, they could pull their prisoner back against the bars of the cage, rendering his struggles and angry attacks completely harmless.

Suvi jumped as the guards did precisely that, tugging at the end of the chain so hard that Kari's head snapped back and he dropped to the floor of the cage.

"No!" she protested, her hands to her mouth and her eyes huge as the soldiers advanced upon him.

"It's the only way he'll learn," Jakob told her, as if Kari were indeed some sort of animal rather than a *noai'de* reacting instinctively to a threat.

The mood of the crowd shifted like clouds blown by the wind. They had wavered between cheering for the prisoner and then for the soldiers, but now Kari was chained and helpless, their shouts became

ugly. Responding to the feeling, one of the soldiers kicked Kari in the ribs. The rest joined in as he tried to retaliate and defend himself.

“For God’s sake!” Teppo bit out, appalled.

Suvi willed Kari to fight back, to break the chain, but it seemed as if the trance left him momentarily. She cried out in horror as he shot her a sudden, panicked look, and she shouted, “No! Stop! *Stop!*”

Several other voices took up her cry, and then the rest of the crowd followed as the mood changed in favour of the Sami again. The guard glanced at Jakob, who finally nodded. The soldiers were ordered from the cage and the crowd muttered and booed, before slowly beginning to disperse and seek entertainment elsewhere.

“Is he—Will he be—” Suvi darted glances back over her shoulder, her heart aching as Teppo pulled her away from the cage.

Kari lay slumped in a heap beside the bars, the chain still pulled tight. She thought she could see blood mixed with the dust, sweat and straw that covered him.

“He’ll be all right, Lady Suvi,” Teppo murmured in her ear as he took her arm. “Captain Lennqvist misjudged the townsfolk. It’s only a matter of time before we have all the evidence to set Kari free.”

Suvi looked back again. She knew Teppo spoke the truth. She should bide her time, but the way Jakob stood outside the cage, his face ugly with a hatred he didn’t bother to hide, made her fear for Kari’s safety.

* * * *

That night, Suvi turned restlessly in her bed, unable to sleep. She heard a sound, the soft squeak of her door as it opened, and then a long, dark shape padded into her room. Immediately she sat up, reaching for the little knife she kept beside her bed. A low growl answered her movement and she realised that her nocturnal visitor was friend, not enemy.

“Aila?” she whispered.

The black wolf came closer to snuffle at her outstretched hand. Suvi felt the warm, rough tongue sweep across her palm. She tentatively caressed the wolf’s head. “What brings you here? I thought you’d gone to the forest to hide.”

Aila made a grumbling sound. Suvi shook her head. Perhaps Kari could understand his wolf, but she couldn’t. “I’m sorry,” she said, “but...”

She broke off with a gasp as Aila took a mouthful of the hem of her nightgown. The wolf tugged at her, pulling her toward the door.

“You want me to go with you,” Suvi guessed. “To Kari?”

Aila’s eyes gleamed and she let go of the nightgown.

Hurriedly, Suvi pulled on her shoes and wrapped a cloak around her nightgown. She’d almost run from the room when she remembered the soldiers harming Kari. He’d be filthy and maybe injured. She went back to her dressing table and grabbed a basin and cloth to tend his hurts.

The moon hung high and full over Häbo, casting black shadows and illuminating patches of the ground to an almost painful brightness. Suvi merged into the darkness, the sponge and basin tucked under one arm as she drew the cloak’s hood over her head with the other. She didn’t want to attract any attention from drunks still abroad at this hour. The wolf trotted ahead of her, seemingly scouting out the streets and alleyways.

In the marketplace, Suvi spotted a lone guard dozing at his post beside the wagon. Doubtless he thought he could take a rest because his prisoner was chained. She frowned, wondering how she would get past him, and then she paused a moment beside the fountain. She filled the basin with cool water, trying to think of her next move.

Aila nudged at her leg and so she shifted sideward, giving the wolf room to drink. When the wolf raised its head and stared at her, Suvi understood that Aila would scare off the guard. She nodded and sank down, concealing herself in the shadows of the fountain as the wolf slunk toward the drowsy soldier.

She watched, stifling a giggle, as Aila pawed at the guard. He came awake suddenly and yelped in fright to see a wolf so close to him. Aila pressed closer and the guard tried to escape. He succeeded in knocking down his spear. Then he tripped over it and landed in a heap on the ground.

Suvi heard the metallic rattle of keys against cobblestones. Aila backed away so that the guard could get to his feet, and then she fainted one way and then the other. For a moment the guard wavered between drawing his sword and running away, and then he turned tail and fled, too afraid to yell for assistance.

Aila gave Suvi a triumphant look before she playfully gave chase.

Swiftly, Suvi collected the basin of water and hurried across the empty marketplace. She had no idea how long Aila could keep up her pursuit of the guard before he ran for help to the garrison, but she hoped it would be long enough. Her heart racing with excitement, she

picked up the key from where it had fallen, inserted it into the lock, and clambered inside the cage.

“Kari? Kari, it’s me...”

As she closed the door, she heard a rustle from the straw and the clink and rattle of chains behind her. Suvi stood still, thinking fast. She had no idea if Kari was still in the *noai’de* trance or if he’d come out of it. She could be in danger; he might think she was an enemy and attack her.

She edged closer to the heap of straw. Mindful of the restriction of the chain, she knelt and set the basin on the floor, keeping her back to him in a position of defenceless trust. If he was still in the wolf-trance, it might reassure him that she meant no harm.

A long silence followed. She leaned forward over the bowl, dipping her fingers in the water and submerging the cloth, watching her actions break the silvered reflection of the moon in the basin.

Another noise, this time a soft susurrus of fur sliding over naked skin, a gentle rustle of straw and a short, rumbling growl as Kari lifted himself from his bed of straw.

Suvi sat very still, holding her breath as he ventured closer. He remained silent, but she could feel the feral heat of his body as he stopped behind her. She shivered with awareness as he lowered his head and inhaled her scent. Suvi froze, unable to move, breathing rapidly as her pulse quickened. A tiny cry escaped her as he put his lips to the nape of her neck, and then he licked her, a long slow sweep of his tongue from the top of her spine to her hairline.

She turned around to face him and Kari backed away, suddenly uncertain. He watched her as she nudged the basin closer to him. Still kneeling, she dipped the cloth into the water and held it out. He blinked, reaching out a hand to touch the droplets as they fell, and then he came near enough for her to touch him.

Suvi wet the cloth again and ran it over his chest and down his belly. With her free hand, she untied the loincloth at his waist until he crouched naked but for the chain about his neck.

Apparently acting on pure animal instinct, he leaned close and kissed her. Suvi dropped the wet cloth and lifted her arms around his neck, her hands gripping the chain for a moment before she brought him closer. From the fire of their kiss came desire. She gasped against his mouth, wanting him with a shocking, desperate urgency.

She sank down onto the wolf pelts and scattered straw as if in a dream, her lips parted and her eyes half-lidded as he followed her

down. His fingers made quick work of the cloak and the ties of her nightgown. Suvi put out her hand to touch him, curling her fingers around his cock and stroking it, feeling him shiver in response.

She wriggled against the pelts and closed her eyes as Kari slid down over her, the heat of his mouth travelling slowly, languorously, across her breasts. She whimpered, clutching at his shoulders as he suckled at her, his teeth teasing her nipples. Heat ran through her, making her wet with longing.

Kari licked her throat and kissed her again, passionate and possessive. "Suvi," he growled, and she knew he was aware of her identity, that this time the wolf-trance had gone from him completely.

He brushed back her hair so he could see her face and then he slid inside her deeply, watching her expression. They hung, motionless, Kari buried within Suvi as she arched up almost in offering, until she broke first, began to writhe beneath him, searching for yet more pleasure.

Kari smiled, his eyes gleaming as she moved greedily against him. He pinned her down and began to thrust, bending his head to nibble at her breasts. She gasped and moaned, her hands scrabbling across his back to slip over wet skin.

Suvi bucked and squirmed, matching his rhythm and falling into a state of dazed awareness of his power, the whisper of the fur and the rustle of the straw surrounding them. She floated adrift in a warm silvery darkness of pleasure, caught beneath his weight and the increasing staccato of his strokes. She felt hot, so hot... Her breath parched her throat and her lips were dry, her limbs heavy and leaden; her hair curled in wet tendrils across her face as she trembled, fought against the sensations that built, rose, and drowned her.

"Kari!" she sobbed, the scent of his sweat and the hot, sharp stink of wolf surrounding them. Pleasure screamed through her, wave after wave of blinding, desperate sensation that stole her breath away and left her weak and shaking, cradled in his arms.

Kari purred contentedly. He remained above her, keeping them locked together, and kissed her face until she blinked back to reality. She stirred against him with a moan of wonderment.

"I didn't mean for that to happen."

"You didn't?"

"I came here to rescue you!"

Kari chuckled. "Believe me, my love, that was just as satisfactory."

The endearment made her glow with warmth. She laughed. “I agree. But now we should get out of here before the guard comes back...”

“There’s no rush.” Kari pulled the furs around them and snuggled against her. “Aila will distract the guard for hours yet. She won’t let him raise the alarm. Beside, you have only the key for the cage, and not for this accursed collar. So I can’t go anywhere.”

Suvi cursed softly. “Then there’s only one thing for it. I’ll stay here with you until morning.”

He went still. “You would expose yourself to the sight of the whole town? You would let them know you’d spent the night with me?”

She swallowed. “Yes. Sometimes we have to face our fears and show our true selves for the greater good.”

Kari gathered her close and held her tight. “You’re right. I always feared leaving my homeland and coming south, but when the prophecies became stronger and more frequent, I knew I would have to make the journey. I didn’t want to go far from my homeland, even on the orders of my gods and the predictions of my drums. They foretold that my destiny lay here in the south, away from my people and amidst much danger. My totem would lead me to my fate...and Aila led me straight to you.”

“You didn’t expect your destiny to be a woman?”

He shook his head. “Not at all. I thought I’d been called to serve my people in battle, perhaps by helping the Eastlanders in their struggle against the Novogodrians. But every time we stopped to trade at military posts, Aila turned her nose up and made no move. It was she who led our ship to Häbo, and then she chose you. I cannot tell you how shocked I was when I realised you were part of my destiny.”

Kari gave her a crooked little smile. “The *noai’de* are not meant to love. We are shamans who work powerful magic, and that sets us apart from other men. We are respected but we live our lives alone. We do not look for love. It is a weakness for us, and we are the ones who must be strong.”

“Love can be a strength, too,” Suvi ventured in a small voice.

He raised himself up on his elbow and stroked her face. “Yes, it can. But why do you say it with such unhappiness?”

“Because I should have drawn strength and courage from my feelings for you earlier today,” Suvi admitted. “I should have stood my ground and defied Jakob and the soldiers. But I was afraid. I

worried what the townsfolk would say. I didn't want to be accused of betraying Häbo. I let my fear rule me when I should have told them all how I felt. I should have told them that we spent that first night together, so they'd know you were innocent."

Kari lay beside her again. "Jakob still would have found a way to accuse me."

"He knows about us."

"He is desperate to own this town—and you with it." Kari's voice hardened. "He believes he can control the trade and make his fortune. I've seen his kind before at every trading post in Eastland. What they can't get through marriage, they get through foul means. Jakob Lennqvist thinks he can have you and Häbo because your father isn't here to protect you."

"I would rather die than marry him," Suvi said with feeling.

"I think the townsfolk would rather kill him than allow such a wedding to happen." Kari smiled at her. "Your people love you but they hate Lennqvist. I heard many things as I lay here waiting. The townsfolk spoke warmly about you. There are even some who think I'm innocent—the silversmith, for example..."

"Teppo." She nodded. "He's helping me gather evidence against Jakob."

"A woman came and gave me food," Kari continued, "and several other people stopped to offer words of support. I expected to find nothing but hatred here because I am an outsider, but instead I find comfort, despite being locked in a cage. It's not the people's fault that they are easily led. They believed I was a threat and were manipulated by a cowardly, cunning man."

Suvi sighed. "Then you can forgive them? And me?"

"Of course." Kari looked solemn. "After all, the drums foretold danger." He smiled again. "You shouldn't worry what others think of you, Suvi. You should always do what makes you happy. Obey your instincts."

"Just as you must obey the drums?"

"Yes."

She slid her hands around his neck and ran her fingers through his hair. "So tell me, that day in the forest—what did the drums say about me?"

He lifted his head, quite serious, his hand resting possessively on the curve of her belly. "To be *noai'de* is not inherited, it is decided at birth." Kari stroked around her navel lovingly. "First we shall have a

son, and he will be a great hero. Then we shall have a daughter, and she will be the most powerful *noai'de* of the Sami people. That is what the drums promised...amongst other things.”

Suvi stared up at him. “A son and daughter? But we are not yet married!”

“Ah.” Kari looked embarrassed. “The drums also foretold your father’s swift return. I hoped to do the honourable thing and ask his permission first...”

“What about my permission?” she demanded, teasing.

He grinned. “Perhaps I am sure of your response and do not need to ask you.”

“The drums told you I’d be your wife?”

Kari kissed her. “Absolutely. They’re never wrong.”

“And...the child—our son—did we...? Just now?”

His hand felt warm over her belly, as if he could divine the conception of their child. “I do not know. Maybe. Maybe not.” His eyes gleamed with amusement and desire when he smiled down at her. “We should try again, just to make sure.”

He wrapped the wolf fur about his lover and rolled her on top of him.

* * * *

Suvi woke the next morning to the sound of church bells. At first she felt confused, but then she rolled over into the warmth of Kari’s embrace and looked up to find him smiling at her. Memory returned and she blushed, remembering what they’d done...and then she realised that she and Kari lay entwined not in bed, but in a cage in the centre of Håbo’s marketplace.

“Oh God!” She sat up suddenly, the fur sliding from her naked shoulders. She caught it just in time. Her startled gaze took in the scene before her—the gathering crowd, the curious stares, the whispered comments.

“Perhaps you should get dressed,” Kari murmured, handing over her nightgown. He held up the wolf pelts to form a protective screen and she lay flat, wriggling into the gown as quickly as possible.

“My cloak...”

“I don’t know where it is.” Kari’s eyes flashed with amusement. “Don’t worry, my love. You look like a princess.”

She snorted. “A princess who’s been rolling in the hay!”

A voice hailed her. She stood, drawing herself to her full height, and ran her fingers through her hair in an attempt to look a little more

respectable. As if that would save her from the scorn of the townsfolk! She clutched the edges of the fur trailing behind her and waited for the first comment.

“Lady Suvi!” The chief guildsman of the merchant’s collective stood at the head of the crowd outside the cage. He stared at her and then bowed. “My lady, you seem to be...in need of assistance.”

“We are both in need of assistance,” she said, summoning her dignity. “Perhaps you could call the blacksmith. Chains do not suit Kari.”

The chief guildsman nodded. He seemed distracted by her state of undress, although propriety forbade him to mention it. He called, “Someone send for Hannu Blacksmith.”

A lad ran to do his bidding. Suvi watched him go, and saw as well how the news of her self-imposed incarceration with Kari spread across the town. Doors opened and shutters were unlatched to allow matrons to look out into the marketplace. People, young and old, continued to arrive. A buzz of gossip seemed to hang over the whole of Häbo.

Despite the good-natured atmosphere, Suvi started to feel scared. As if sensing her need, Kari stood beside her and placed a hand on the small of her back. She felt her spine straighten as if he had added strength through his palm. Her lover’s touch calmed her, and when she heard the distant, sharply pitched commands from Jakob telling the crowd to let him through, she felt not fear but contempt for the confrontation sure to follow.

The sight of her standing in the cage beside Kari clearly came as a shock to Jakob. For a moment he looked horrified, but when he realised how much of her creamy skin was exposed by the loosely tied nightdress, his countenance turned possessive and evil.

“Suvi, what has this beast done to you? How could you let this happen?” Jakob’s voice rose and cracked hysterically.

“I am Lady Suvi to you. I am the daughter of the *jarl* and you, Jakob Lennqvist, would do well to remember that,” she told him, summoning every ounce of regal command she possessed.

“You are mine,” Jakob snarled, spittle flecking his cheeks as he came closer to the cage. “You are my reward for putting up with this mud-infected town. Your wealth, your beauty...they belong to me. You are mine and yet you dare give yourself to this animal! You will pay for this, you bitch—yes, you will pay for this, my lady!”

Jakob lunged toward the cage but at a sharp order from the chief guildsman, he was grabbed and held back by the strong hands of four hefty cloth-merchants.

“I am not your lady. Not now, nor have I ever been.” Suvi heard murmurs from the crowd that seemed to agree with her. They gave her the strength to go on.

“You deserted your rightful post by my father’s side and made grave assumptions about your place in this town, your place in my heart, and over the Sami shaman Kari, who is completely innocent of all the charges you have brought against him...”

“Innocence!” a new voice bellowed from the back of the crowd. Suvi faltered for a moment when she realised it was Father Nordmann, his black robes flapping as he hurried forward. The townsfolk may not fully trust Jakob, but the keeper of their faith represented a whole new challenge.

“There is nothing innocent about the defilement of Håbo’s most precious jewel!” Father Nordmann pushed through crowd, red-faced and pious, although Suvi noticed he stared wantonly at the shape of her body revealed beneath her nightgown before he turned his head in disgust.

Addressing the crowd, he shouted, “Not content to kill a soldier, steal a baby and terrify our residents, this beast has defiled a woman, and for that he must face the wrath of God. Let us put him to death so he may be cast down to the fires of Hell. His heathen soul will answer to the Almighty. He must pay!”

“But you know all about payments, Father.” Suvi’s voice rang out loud and clear, rising above the babble of the crowd. “You are in the pay of Jakob Lennqvist to support his outrageous claims. You were seen taking a bribe from him. How dare you talk about defilement when you have disgraced the trust of the church?”

Father Nordmann spluttered with outrage, but his hand went instinctively to the purse at his waist to push it farther under his cloak. Suvi could see that several of the townsfolk had noted this gesture. She felt pleased when they moved away from the priest as if he were infected.

Looking from Father Nordmann to Jakob, she continued, “Not only did Captain Lennqvist bribe a priest, he also gave money to Timo Riikonen the day before he died. Why? So Timo would act as a willing victim. It’s one thing for the wolf-man to attack drunks and helpless women, but quite another when the victim is an armed

soldier. Jakob hired Timo to be a coward—but something went wrong.”

“That poor young man!” Father Nordmann pulled at his long grey beard in agitation. “It wasn’t supposed to happen like that. Timo should still be alive. But the captain said it would be more realistic if he died. He said the town would rise up against the Sami and he’d take charge of the secular forces while I tended my flock through spiritual guidance. He said we’d rule the town jointly if I went to the manor and announced that Timo had died naming the Sami leader Kari as the wolf-man.”

“And what were Timo’s final words?” Suvi asked.

Father Nordmann put his hands over his face. “He said ‘You bastard, Lennqvist. You bastard.’”

Jakob let out a piercing shriek and flung himself up onto the wagon with such force that it rocked alarmingly. Kari still held his hand pressed to Suvi’s back, even though he had said not a word in his own defence. She could see the madness in Jakob’s eyes as he flung open the door. He crouched as if about to pounce on her, but before he had a chance, the four burly cloth-merchants reached up and dragged him down, catching his flailing arms and pinning them behind Jakob’s back.

Suvi realised that Teppo Silversmith, who had arrived near the front of the crowd with a large bundle under his arm, had urged them on.

“Friends,” he shouted above the noise. “I see we have captured the vermin who attacked our town!”

He paused for a moment as if savouring the flash of fear that crossed the faces of both Jakob and Father Nordmann. “I have final proof that Captain Lennqvist is the man who attacked us in our homes and killed Timo Riikonen. I found this in his barracks.”

With a flourish, Teppo unfurled the bundle to reveal a matted grey wolf pelt. Everyone could see the near-bald patches, and there was a murmur of condemnation when the brewer came forward and matched the handful of fur he’d snatched from his attacker to the pelt held in Teppo’s hand.

“You planted that,” Jakob hissed, loud enough for the crowd to hear. “You, too, have been seduced by that wizard.”

“Then perhaps some independent witnesses could help,” Teppo replied, and called on three women to step forward.

He made them all sniff at the pelt and asked them what they smelt.

After all had screwed up their faces, Seija Makkonan, a fishmonger of good repute in Häbo, announced, "There is nothing animal about this hide. It smells putrid-sweet, like flowers left to rot in a midden. It smells just like that horrid concoction that tells everyone Jakob Lennqvist is within a dozen yards." She pointed a finger at him as the other women nodded in agreement.

As one, the crowd turned on Jakob and began yelling at him, even as his four jailors started to drag him off to the barracks prison. Father Nordmann scurried away when one or two braver souls began to jostle him, and as he turned tail the remaining townsfolk let out a huge cheer for Suvi, followed by one for Kari.

Suvi didn't realise she was crying until she felt Kari's fingers on her cheek, gently wiping away the tears.

"Don't be sad. The nightmare is over," he whispered, his head bent low to hers, even as Hannu Blacksmith went to work on the collar around his neck.

"I'm not sad," Suvi whispered, turning her head until she could look deep into Kari's silvery-blue eyes. "I'm not sad at all. I'm proud. I'm proud of my town and my people for seeing the truth and saving you."

"This town should be proud of you for standing your ground and standing up for the man you love," Kari replied, his hand stroking down her neck as he leaned forward as much as the collar and chain would allow.

"We are proud," Hannu chuckled, as with a sharp click the lock gave way and Kari was freed. "We have always respected Suvi and her family, and if she means you to be her mate and join that family, then I reckon we'll all be respecting you, too."

Kari gave the blacksmith a nod of thanks and Suvi felt herself welling up with tears again. She'd never imagined a town elder would say that about any outsider, let alone a Sami.

With a pat on Kari's back, Hannu jumped down from the cage and they were left alone.

Suvi closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "My father told me once that wolves mate for life." She could feel Kari staring at her keenly and she felt compelled to raise her head and open her eyes.

"Wolves choose their mate after they have faced a great predator together," Kari told her in all seriousness, but then he smiled. "Jakob

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may not have been a great predator, but the risk was real. You faced that risk beside me and for me, Suvi, but you know we were destined to be together even before I laid eyes on you.”

“I believe that,” she whispered. “I believe in you.”

Kari smiled. “A shaman’s drum is never wrong, and a shaman’s heart is always true.”

Suvi smiled at him and then drew him close to claim his love with a kiss. She heard the delighted cheers of the townsfolk encouraging her and she felt her heart soar with happiness. The wolf-man had been tamed, and he would be hers forever.

The End

Dark Gift
by
Ravyn Reccio

Erotic dreams bring to life Dianna's deepest, and darkest, desires.
Will she give into the haunting man, and accept his immortal gift?

Born in New York, her love for Vampires and things that go bump in the night, started at a very young age. She curiosity about them grew and after going with her dream of writing now has four titles to her name. Married and a mother of two, she is also a Columnist/Reviewer for an online publication for adult movies.

Dedicated to the One Man in my life that has always believed in me, my Husband Eddie and my two kids Josh and Amanda who have been patient and understanding when I need my private time to draw out the vamps and other monsters inside my head.

Find Raven at

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Dark Gift
by
Ravyn Reccio

Part One
The Claiming

The full moon gave the newly fallen snow a soft blue cast; the chill air causing her breath to cloud so thickly it was difficult to see. She closed her mouth, breathing through her nose in small dragon-like puffs, fighting to keep in sight the figure just inside the tree line. He was tall, over six foot, wearing a long black duster, a wide-brimmed black hat, and high black leather boots. She never moved a muscle as he sauntered toward her now. Half-lidded, silted red eyes held hers through lightly-tinted sunglasses. His hair, shaggy, long, and black as a raven's wing, cascaded over his shoulders. A slight smile twisted his thin lips, suggesting just the hint of wickedly overlong canines.

Soft, seductive, his slightly accented voice sounded altogether alluring. "You've followed me a long way to just stand there now, Dianna. You think I hold the answers to your desires... Well, maybe I do, but you will never find them out standing out in the snow. Come with me."

Dianna shivered, not just with the cold. She noticed his breath did not cloud, and the chill seemed not to affect him. Where she hunched over and stumbled, he walked with slow, easy strides. The unfriendly smile altered little, but his alien eyes seemed to warm just a touch behind the tinted glasses. "You'll never learn anything if you freeze to death, girl. I'm not going to kill you, if that's what you're afraid of." He held out his gloved hand in invitation to her. "Come."

With one last, delicate shudder, she reached out and took his hand. She expected cold, hard, unyielding flesh, and was met with warmth as the long fingers curled around her hand and gently pulled her closer. She felt her resolve melting away in that warm contact, her

eyes recaptured by his, and any lingering willpower dissipated with her inexorable move into his arms.

The stranger wrapped his long duster around her shoulders, holding her close to him, and his warmth soothed her iciness like slipping into a hot bath. She sighed and nearly swooned for the relief of feeling like she was now where she was meant to be. His body against her felt hard muscled and smooth beneath the silk shirt he wore, his hands large and strong where he held her shoulder, trapping her.

Her breath hitched in her throat, and he smiled again, this time gentle, soothing, seductive. He hushed her quietly and gathered her up in his arms as though she were a child, and carried her through the snowy night. She was lulled by his soft tones and comforting warmth, and slept with her head against his chest...despite her entranced state she noticed that her paramour had no heartbeat...

* * * *

She awoke languidly, a soft voice calling her up from her deep lethargy. The voice called out her name. "Dianna."

She opened her eyes to see the stone-walled chamber, lit by a fire in a large fireplace and long black taper candles in brass sconces along the tapestry-covered walls.

A tall cheval mirror stood off to one side, dusty from lack of use, though beautiful, antiquesly ornate. The door looked heavy, oaken and the hinges were of thick cast-iron in a very old style she had not seen except in history books. A narrow window overlooked a moonlit courtyard far below; an English teagarden delicately traced in rosebushes. The bed beneath her was large and soft, covered in deep velvet down comforters and fluffy pillows. Above her rose the canopy, draped in dark burgundy velvet curtains. The immaculate beauty amazed her as her consciousness increased.

Pulling herself up to sitting, she noticed she no longer wore her street clothes. Now clad in a silken black gown exposing her neck, and much of her cleavage, Dianna wondered if a dream could be so real. She gazed around her in amazement and was met again by the stranger's red eyes, this time uncovered. With a start she attempted to cover herself. He sat casually on a high-backed chair, looking cool, giving her a possessive yet soft grin. He wore only his white silk shirt, opened to the waist and cinched in by his leather pants.

As her gaze raked down to his boots and back up to his free-falling hair, he raised a high arched eyebrow, bemused. "Sleep well, my dear?" he drawled.

Now, fear closed her mouth. The reality of what this man was hit her, out of her trance-like state the panic ruled. She could not speak for the constriction of her throat around her pounding pulse. She backed away across the bed, winding up against the elaborate mahogany headboard, shaking her head and trembling. He cocked his head, looking intrigued, and sat up straighter, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees, his chin on his long, steepled fingers.

Her lower lip quivered. The thought of running her fingers through his silken black hair crossed her terrified mind. She tried to fight the thoughts away as she wondered what kissing those pale lips would be like, and shook her head to clear her mind. This was insane! Her life was forfeit! What had she done? Was giving into her unnatural desires worth risking her life all for the sake of wanting to be different and finally loved and wanted by someone, anyone for that matter. Ever since she could remember, he haunted her in her dreams and even come to her during the early hours of the night. Night after night the same question remained unanswered. Why had he chosen to appear only to her?

He didn't move, but his eyes captured her attention again, easy as a cat captures a mouse in a corner, and she felt a lump rise in her throat. His stare softened, his brows knitting together with sweet concern, his lips pursed slightly. When he spoke his voice sounded tender, soothing. "What frightens you so much, girl? I already said I would not kill you, unless you asked me to..."

"Y-y-you're a...a...vampire!" she gasped finally, tears streaming down her cheeks, her hands rushing up to cover her exposed throat.

He nodded,, "Indeed, I am just that. But, I am also a man of my word. I promised that I would not kill you, and I hold to that. You wanted answers, and I will give them to you. But nothing is free, there will be a price. Not your life, mind. Just now, for saving your life, the price is... a kiss."

Dianna's eyes widened, her tears startled clean away. "A kiss? That's it?"

A hungry look crossed his handsome face, and he cocked his eyebrow at her again. "For now," he replied softly, "the more you ask, the more I take. Understand?"

She nodded slowly and stayed very still as though in the presence of a predator as he slinked across the bed to kneel before her. She closed her eyes as his arms came up around her and his warm lips pressed against hers. If only her heart would stop it's pounding, as she was sure he could hear it, feel it, through her skin. Daring not to move her lips, not to enjoy his mouth on hers.

He pulled away slightly and looked into her eyes, whispering, "It's not much of a kiss if only one party is doing the kissing, Mi Querida. Am I so horrible? I think I deserve a kiss for what I have done for you."

She worried her lower lip with her teeth, stopped herself quickly for fear she should cause her lip to bleed, and tilted her head back slightly to accept his kiss again. He did not lean forward, only watching her expectantly. A chill coursed through her as she realized he wanted her to kiss him now.

Dianna swallowed, feeling very much like a sparrow within the claws of a great tiger, being asked to preen his whiskers, so near those teeth! She put those thought aside and focusing instead on his handsome features; his sensuous lips, high cheekbones, warm, red eyes. A handsome man, indeed.

She indulged herself and ran her fingers through his hair, leaning in for the kiss he desired, and was surprised as his lips parted and he ran his tongue sensuously along hers. She could feel the long fangs on either side, but he did not bring them into play at all. She sighed, melting into his arms, her head tilting back, her fingers gripping his shoulders, holding him close. She felt his long fingers in her own red curls, stroking her neck, her face, her shoulder. As he parted from the kiss, his hand lingered on her cheek and he smiled warmly for her. "There, now. Was that so bad?"

She blushed and smiled back, "No, it wasn't..." Now, she realized she did not even know his name. Would he require a price for this request? She wondered if he would even tell her, as names have a power of their own. However, perhaps, it might not be so bad a price... "What is your name?" she asked.

His grin suggested that he had thought of this himself, cocking his head. "The price for that answer might be a bit dearer, my Lady. How far are you willing to go for the answers in which you seek?"

"What will that one cost me?" she asked boldly.

He grinned, pleased. "Oh, well, perhaps more than a kiss, I think. My name is an important thing to you, is it not?" He nuzzled her ear

gently, breathing warmly into it as he said, "I should love to see you without that gown on, and touch your silken skin. For my name, that is my price."

She considered this for a moment, her heart now pounding with something that was not entirely fear, but just as primal. Her sense of decency was going to have to go to hell tonight, she mused. She wondered if he was the one to change her clothes? Or does he have servants? No longer was she that afraid to be with him, in her dreams she saw herself in the same situation and he never harmed her. It was like *déjà vu* all over again. But this time it was not a dream.

Sitting back, he let her go, and watched her as she slowly pulled the silky gown off over her head. Suddenly, mid-motion, he grabbed her arms, trapping her effectively blindfolded and bound with the black silk, and planted another hot kiss on her gasping lips. His free hand was soft as it caressed her naked body, down her shoulder, cupping her breast briefly, across her belly and along her thigh until it rested on the small of her back, the sharp fingernails grazing her flesh tantalizingly. She shuddered at his touch, writhing to free herself, but his voice in her ear stilled her.

"You only make yourself more inviting with your struggles, my dear, and if you free yourself then you will not get what you want. The price will be forfeit."

She stopped, panting, and forced herself to hold still. She could feel his eyes on her, every bit as compelling as his touch had been. At last his strong hands released her, and she was able to pull the gown the rest of the way off and look him in the eye. She almost challenged him; he had cheated! But she had won this one, and awaited her prize.

"My name is Pablo...I was a Spanish Duke before I was turned." He paused, and she felt he'd gotten the exact reaction he wanted.

She knew it even as she said it, "How long ago was that?"

His grin was hungry, now, and her bravado faded some in the face of it. "For that, my dear, I will require a taste..." At her horrified gasp he shook his head with a chuckle. "Mi Querida!" he cried in mock-indignation, "You wound me! There is more to the taste of a woman than her blood, my dear! I am, after all, first and foremost, a man. With a man's desires, I am not purely monster! Besides, I would think you had noticed..."

He took her hand in his and pressed it to his bare chest beneath his shirt. "My skin is quite warm. This means I have fed recently. You are in no danger of dying at my hands, unless you ask it of me. My

appetite tonight has little to do with hunger, and more to do with the pleasures of the flesh. You are in good hands tonight, if very capable ones. I can do things for you, and to you, no mortal lover can. You just have to trust me.”

His offer sounded fascinating, but before she could condemn herself further with the burning question, she bit her lip. Just what was he capable of? Would he grow tentacles like some freakish Anime-style demon lover? Could he invade her senses, hypnotize her like some B-movie Dracula? On the other hand, was it something more? Just how much control did he have over those fangs? What would it cost her to find these things out she thought to herself. She had yet to pay the price for her last question.

Quite the game, indeed! He was an alluring, sexy creature, no matter what he was, but could she really find pleasures with something that was not human? Less than human? Perhaps more than human? Was this bestiality at its worst? What, honestly, did she have to lose? Except maybe her own humanity...

“Like what?” she finally spoke out, feeling as though she cursed herself with her own curiosity. However, was that not what made her essentially human, after all?

The expected, triumphant, I-told-you-so look never made it to his eyes. Instead, he kissed her cheek, tenderly. “One thing at a time, Querida” he whispered. Pablo nuzzled gently into her neck, as if breathing in her scent. Dianna tensed, waiting for the wickedly overlong fangs to sink into her throat, confirming her damnation, but was instead met with the soft, warm slickness of his unnaturally long tongue along her collarbone in a long, sensuous lick.

Her tension changed flavor, from fear to pleasure, and she relaxed a little. His arms were around her again, and he cradled her as she sank into his embrace, accepting his kisses and gentle licks trustingly. He drew a deep, shuddering breath and pulled away, closing his eyes momentarily in pleasure. Then, he grinned down at her, and whispered in her ear, “I am over nine hundred years old. As for your other question, the answer for it would have its own price. How curious are you, pet? How far are you willing to go for answers? For temptation sake?”

She turned her head slightly, catching a glimpse of his pale luminous skin in the firelight. The way his eyes caught the candlelight like soft, deep red jewels was hypnotic; she could gaze into his eyes for hours. How far *was* she willing to go? At that moment, she would

have given her immortal soul for the feel of his lips against hers once more!

She dared not say as much, instead craning her neck to kiss him, aching for the touch, but he moved away slightly, his wicked grin widening.

“Oh no, little one! Are we so willing now? Be careful, now, my dear. Kisses in the dark are all very well and good if you are a blushing teenager who is not yet aware of their own desires. I, on the other hand, am a man and you are most definitely a woman. I would not have brought a giggling child down here for silly games. You wanted answers, and pursued me to give them.” He paused for a brief moment hoping to unhinge Dianna’s resolve for just a bit. “I have my own reasons for wanting you. Is it a seduction you want? Or are the questions of immortality what have driven you to me? You know I am real, but what of the legends, now? Is what you have read in those stories correct? The movies, do they paint the same picture of the man you see standing before you? Can you even begin to guess what I can do? What I can offer you? Moreover, what are you willing to give up for it? I gave you my name and your life for such a paltry price, the rest will not be so easy. What do you want?” he waited patiently for her reply though he could hardly control his own carnal needs and desires pushing deep inside his own darkness.

The concept of giving up her body to this beautiful being for the answers she sought had been a playful idea, she realized, the truth of the matter would be so much deeper. Would she be forever bound to him? She began to wonder how much she cared. She had little to lose in the human world anymore. No family to care for her and certainly no friends that understood her. Her pursuit of him had become little more than a suicide attempt gone awry, and those that wanted the answers from her about him might never get what they wanted. They had chosen her because she had nothing to lose, they never imagined that the cost might not just be in the messenger, but what she faced might be more than they could handle.

Her heart pounded; with fear, with lust, with the thrill of the moment. What did he have to offer? Now that the price would be the answers, how far was she willing to go? She just wanted him to touch her again, to kiss her, caress her, and make her feel desired. As though hearing her desires, he leaned in to her neck, holding her body against him, and planted hot kisses along the collarbone, up the side of her neck, across the sensitive hollow beneath her ear.

Her body trembled and shivered as the feeling of desire and lust over came her. Dianna clutched his hard muscled body even as his fangs grazed her throat. "Gods..." she whispered, swept by the emotion and sensations of his attentions.

"Dark gods, indeed," he breathed into her ear, sending a shiver down her spine.

Suddenly, a thought occurred to her; his flesh was warm? He had already confessed to having fed that night. That meant a human had died for this exquisite pleasure. She felt the growing erection through his leather pants, knowing his current humanity was stolen from a once-breathing person.

She bucked in his embrace, then suddenly his warm arms were strong, stronger than any human's grip, and she reminded herself that he was not human. She was so entranced with him despite his assurances otherwise, he was a monster.

He wrestled her down easily to the bed, holding her fast on her back and lying on top of her, his breath hot on her neck. Terrified, she writhed beneath his hold and sobbed; begging him to let her go, let her live. He did not relinquish his hold on her; instead, he trapped her wrists above her head with one large hand, stroking her hair with the other, and murmuring into her ear soft soothing words as though she were a nervous colt.

"Mi Querida, You knew well when you came to me what I was. Don't act so surprised, now. You entered into this willingly. Just what would you has enter your body now? Will it be this?" and he ground his lean hips into hers, letting her feel his desire growing there. "Or these...?" and he grazed her skin with his fangs, sending delicious shivers skittering across her flesh. "What will it be? Immortality? Eternal desire?"

Her senses were filled with him. Her every nerve acutely tuned to the feel of his warm flesh against her, the grip of his hands, the smooth fingertips devoid of calluses, his breath in her ear, the silken veil of his hair on her bare skin. His voice was soft, smoky, and deep in her ears. He raised his head, and all she could see were his deep red eyes staring into her very soul, and she felt trapped in their fathomless depths, spiraling toward an abyss she could not begin to define. Even his scent was wood smoke and leather, roses and old blood, coppery beneath his alluring musk as she breathed him in.

There was a long pause. He was her entire world in that moment, and her heart was utterly his, no matter how much her head might try

to convince otherwise. All she had to do was give in, and he would give her pleasures beyond her wildest dreams, his eyes promised her. All she could think was God, he is beautiful...

"Love me..." she breathed. She did not recall voicing the words, though she heard them ringing in her ears. Pablo paused, and he released her wrists, slowly caressing her arms as he brought his hand down to stroke her cheek, an odd expression on his face.

"Love you?" he whispered. He began to kiss her face, almost reverently, tasting the salty tracks of her tears with delicate flicks of his tongue. "With no living heart to beat for you?"

His words trailed off as he kissed her lips, as though seeking to avoid the subject. She closed her eyes, feeling him move over her, his hands competent and tender in drawing the pleasure from her like a musician with a harp. She wondered what she had said that made him so oddly pensive. Gone were the persuasive words, replaced now by touch, taste and feel, a soft growl rising deep in his throat. She almost opened her eyes when the growl began to sound too real. He raised his hand to cover her eyes almost the instant she thought of it.

"Not yet," he hissed, and it sounded as though he was forcing the words through more than the fangs.

She could feel him diffusing around her, the weight lessening on her chest, and his touch impossibly all over her body. At first, it was disconcerting, then she felt him like soft fingers everywhere, she held still to feel it fully. It was almost as though she could breathe him in, like water vapor.

His presence was all around her, and she reached out to return his caress, but her hand passed through his insubstantial body. Instead of horror, she laughed lightly, delighted. A tendril of mist found the opening between her legs, and teased its way inside of her, sliding over the sensitive flesh there and making her gasp. She moaned and a chuckle, quieter than the crackling of the fire, could be heard as he entered her, filling her, and stroking her swollen clit at the same time.

Soft, misty fingers caressed her breasts, covered her eyes, teased every inch of her body to tingling rapture until she thought she would scream for the ecstasy of it. He felt like warm water surrounding her, and she could hear through her cries of agonized pleasure his own soft groan. Her orgasm rippled through his form as it tore through hers; she felt it as an answering wave over her flesh even as it was within her.

Opening her eyes, she could only perceive a midnight black mist surrounding her like a shroud, burning red eyes glowing softly above her. She gazed around her in awe as again, he congealed from his vaporous form into the handsome creature that had seduced her there. Crouching before her like a cat, and now quite naked, his grin was feral, his eyes wild. "How's that for power, eh, Mi Querida?"

"That was incredible!" she sighed contently.

He slid his body sensuously over hers, and she ran her hands over his smooth hairless chest, meeting his lips with a kiss. Dianna was pinned beneath him once again. He pushed his swollen manhood into her without hesitation. She had not thought that she could take him again so soon, but found herself clutching him to her, crying out, raising her hips to meet his thrust. Solid, now, she could feel the play of his muscles beneath his flesh, the drive of his lean hips, and it was far more primal, less ethereal. His growls in her ear brought her down to earth, to the here, and now, and she ran her own nails across his back seductively. He hissed in reaction, arching his back, and looked down at her through his slitted eyes with a devilish gleam.

With preternatural speed he grabbed her wrists and gently placed them over her head, holding her down as he leaned on them, his arms straight, lending her a delicious view of the way the muscles flexed across his chest and shoulders as he thrust into her. The sensations became almost too much, but she wanted it all, and she howled her release.

Unfinished with her, without a word, he grabbed her up as easily and gently as one would a rag doll, flipping her over onto her stomach, pulled her up to her knees, and entered her again amid cries of "Oh Yes! Please, don't stop!"

He growled, deeper in his throat, one hand gripping her hip, the other tangled in her hair, holding her head up and back as he pounded into her from behind.

Her hands clawed at the air as he pulled her head so far back she was meeting his glowing red gaze over her own back. She gasped and froze as she saw his thick mane of black hair extend down his chest and shoulders. Her heart beat so hard and fast she thought it would surely burst in her heaving chest.

"Oh, Gods, no," she panted.

His shaggy black head lowered down to her ear and he growled low and deep, his tongue snaking out to lick the sensitive hollow behind her ear. She shuddered. He spoke, and his smoky voice lisped

past rows of wickedly sharp teeth. “I am the shadow’s best kept secret. Not man, nor beast, yet all of the power and mystery of both. Did you think you would ever love such a being, in all your wildest dreams?”

“No,” she gasped between words, “please!”

Her body trembled as a frisson of horror, followed by another shattering orgasm, ripped through her, and she screamed her throat raw. Betrayal and pain battled on her features as she fought to maintain control of herself, though her thighs shook violently with the effort of staying up for fear he should claw her to ribbons should she fail to please him. The vampire’s claws dug into her back as he howled his release into her, his back arching, his head thrown back in ecstasy, and she collapsed beneath him.

The fur and claws receded, and the vampire curled behind her, skin to skin, in softly intimate contact the length of her body, as though his rough claiming of her had never happened. He cradled her as she sobbed into the blankets, stroking her hair and nuzzling the back of her neck comfortingly. When she tried to shy away from his contact, he held her against him until the shakes passed.

“You knew I was not human when you came to me, Mi Belleza,” he spoke softly stroking her cheek. “Don’t look so surprised. You wanted to know what I was capable of, and I showed it to you, the good and the bad. I was nothing but honest with you. And there is more, so much more I can do.”

She nodded wearily in agreement, but something didn’t feel quite right. Dianna shivered, realizing suddenly that his body was cold where it pressed against her.

“You’re growing cold,” she whispered.

He moved over her, pinning her down again, his expression not so gentle, his skin so pale it was nearly translucent. His eyes had retained their feral edge, and cold fear coiled in her belly again. “There is a reason for that,” he growled, his lips twisting back to expose his fangs.

She fought to steady her breathing, keeping eye contact with him, praying that some shred of humanity remained in him that would stay his bite from killing her.

Part Two

The Gift

The bite was inevitable. She had given him her body, utterly. Now he could take her life! He bent down over her neck, his silken hair veiling them, his breath coming in anticipatory hitches, his long tongue flicking over her exposed, pulsing vein. She held as still as she could despite the trembling, and whispered softly. "Pablo? Please..."

He paused, his breath catching, then he repositioned himself over her, brushing her hair away from his target and lowered his head.

"Pablo?" She lifted her hand and stroked his cheek. "You promised you would not kill me...said you were a man of your word..."

He lifted his head again, meeting her steady gaze with burning eyes, his lips curled in a sadistic snarl exposing his fangs. "I will not kill you, Mi Amor," he lisped, his voice husky, "I need you. The price for your answers are great, the price for the power itself is greater. It is my price to pay, as well. I will not lie to you. I do need your blood to sustain me. But I will not kill you unless you bid me to let you die instead of giving you immortality."

With a delicate shudder, she turned her head to offer her neck to him, closing her eyes, trusting in him. She expected the bite to be a violent act; another claiming, but it was gentle, sensuous. He held her in an embrace, softly licking the spot where he would bite, and his fangs slipped into her skin like needles. The pain was brief, and then she felt delicious warmth wash over her body as he began to suckle the blood from the wound, gently, at first.

He repositioned himself so he knelt, clutching her body close as he drank deeply from her, one hand buried in her hair, the other cradling her back. She sighed, returning the embrace, her fingers digging into his warming flesh as the wave of sensation washed over them both.

His breath metered in small, sharp gasps against her neck. He almost didn't stop himself from taking her life; her heartbeat was so alluring, so strong, so full of life that he craved the very essence of it. With a huge amount of will he pulled his teeth from her neck and fell back onto the bed beside her, panting with effort.

Pablo opened his eyes and looked over her still form. She had fallen unconscious from the effort and shock. She laid exhausted and barely breathing beside him. Dianna's neck and shoulder now covered in blood, she was close to death and had only one chance for survival. He nipped her ear to wake her and curled up close to her again, whispering. "Dianna."

A slight fluttering of her pale eyelids and an almost inaudible sigh were the only indications he had that she had heard him. "Listen to me" He nudged her again. "You are going to die, Dianna, if you don't listen to me. I have drained you to the point of death. You have two options left. You can either succumb to the darkness of the grave...or...drink from me, and have the power over life and death itself. I have given you a taste of my world. I have kept my promise to you. I have whole other worlds to show you if you wish immortality. What will it be?"

Dianna felt lost in a comfortable white haze. Pain free, no fear, no darkness, no other life but her own, and his strength faded fast. She felt if she could just relax into the soft white cloud and everything would be okay. Comfortable though she was, she felt alone. Completely alone, and it made her inexplicably sad. She felt the nip to her ear again as it jerked her perceptions. A laser red dot in the misty white, and the vampire's voice was like smoke in the haze. She could barely hear him through the rushing in her ears, but his voice carried as though over water.

What will it be? He now offered his gift, and it was hers to take and experience the world like no other human could know, or succumb to the sleep that called to her. Return to his world? Where even sweetness had the taste of blood? Back to his kisses, to be his for all eternity? His eyes; his beautiful deep blood-red jewels, the mirrors to a soul untouchable. An endless playground of the spirit.

Her pale lips parted, her breath so shallow a human could never have heard what she said. "Please make me yours?" she said faintly.

His first drop of blood hit her tongue like liquid fire and ran down her throat, spreading heat like a shot of well-aged whisky through her belly.

Her eyes flew open, and she extended her tongue for another drop, curling it animal to catch the next droplets coming from a cut on his wrist. Her hands reached up and took his arm; bringing it to her lips to clamp onto the life-giving liquid heat, letting it revive her. Her heart hammered in her ears she almost did not hear his throaty chuckle...until the rabbit-fast beat slowed and finally, stalled out altogether.

Her chest clenched around the dead organs within it, and she panicked, sucking harder at the vampire's wrist until he snatched it away with a snarl. Her breath came in harsh gasps, and she crawled up to crouch, predator like before him, her cool green eyes heating to ember red as she fought for control over the screaming hunger that overcame her. She focused on his face only to see a satisfied, toothy grin on his handsome face.

"You want more, don't you, little one?" he chuckled.

"Yesss-s-s-s," she hissed through her growing canines, narrowing in on his long, graceful neck.

She had not noticed how sexy his throat was before. His backhanded slap took her by surprise, and she tumbled to the stone floor with a yelp of dismay.

"You mind who Your Master and Sire is little one", he cooed from the bed, and gracefully slipped to the floor beside her.

"That is the hunger you feel, and I will teach you how to sate it. However, tonight is ours. Come to me, and I can help you..."

Entranced by the sensations around her, even the pain of his slap, she crawled obediently to him on her hands and knees, begging him with her eyes for relief. He reached out and guided her face gently to his throat, showing her where the best blood vessel could be found with subtle manipulations of his long fingers on her jaw.

When she had settled her needlelike fangs into his neck with a sigh, he bent his head around and sank his own teeth into hers, forming a bond of preternatural depth. The Blood Bond. They remained in this deep embrace for hours, each taking from the other, soaking one another's pale skin with blood that stained their lips like wine. He looked at her, his red eyes piercing into her, and her fears melted. She felt a sweet languor flow through her body, and she looked at him calmly. He smiled, and moved nearer, until there was no space between them. He took her face in his warm, strong hands, leaned closer and closer, until their lips gently touched.

She breathed in his breath, and leaned into his body, feeling the heat radiating from him. His tongue flicked out, lightly circling her lips, enticing her to open her mouth, touch him with her tongue. He slid his tongue in between her parted lips, tasting her lightly at first, then deeper, more possessively. She moaned in her throat, and held onto his neck, feeling weak in her knees, and hot between her legs. He slid one hand down her neck and back, holding her tight against him.

His need, hard against her hips, and it made her feel even hotter. She began to kiss him back, one hand against his neck, the other slipping between them, feeling his smooth skin.

He was hot, like an iron, heat radiating from every inch of him. The robe he'd put on her now slid down her shoulders, her full breasts pressing against him. He kissed his way down her cheek, grazing her ear with his soft lips, licking and nibbling his way down her throat.

Again she moaned, and he answered with one of his own, deep and growling in his throat, a sound that was vaguely menacing and exciting all at once. He reached the soft skin where the shoulder and neck meet, and grazed his teeth gently over the sensitive skin. She shuddered, and would have fallen had he not gathered her completely in his arms.

Dianna leaned her head to one side, he bit harder, licking and sucking gently, then started to swirl his tongue lower, tasting her skin at her throat. She leaned back in his arms, baring her chest to him. Pablo licked his way down the swell of her right breast, slowly circling, until his lips found the hard nipple at the center. She gasped as he flicked it with his tongue, and then nibbled it with his teeth.

The combination of hard and soft made her whimper, and he mercilessly flayed the hard little nipple, alternating between lips, tongue, and teeth, licking his way over to the untouched breast, and commenced the same treatment to it. Dianna melted, her inner thighs dampened with her desire.

Pablo lifted her in his arms, his lips leaving her breasts, covering her mouth in a blistering kiss. The robe slid to the floor, her placed her down on the bed, naked, her pale skin gleamed against the slippery black silk. She looked at him with desire-heavy eyes, wondering what he would next do, and wishing it would never end. He smiled a seductive smile, showing glittering white teeth, and said in a silky voice, "It need never end, my love. I will come for you every night, and make you mine forever." Dianna felt a slight fear at

that, but then he stretched out next to her, covering her mouth with his, stroking her throat, then chest, with his hands.

Pablo's fingers closed on one nipple, pinching lightly, twisting slightly, making her back arch off the bed. A squeal escaped her throat, and his kiss became harder, almost fierce at her response to his ministrations. He continued this to the other breast, molding and kneading the tender round flesh. She felt helpless, her hands not knowing what to do. His hands had no such indecision, roaming down her body now, stroking the quivering flesh of her belly, the flare of her hips.

Pablo's touch was so hot it burned, and she welcomed the sensation. She felt his hand smooth up her inner thigh, until she felt his touch on her innermost self. Dianna gasped at the heat just from the touch, breaking the kiss. She gazed up into hot red eyes, burning with naked desire. He smiled making her shiver with anticipation.

His fingers moved, flicking at her clit, making Dianna arch herself into the touch. He then slipped two fingers inside her, feeling the wetness and heat. He kept his thumb on her clit, sliding his fingers in and out, making her moan and shake. He kissed and licked his way down her throat, once again nibbling on her nipples. She grasped his head in her hands, pressing him into her breast, moving her hips with his fingers. He worked his way down her belly, swirling his tongue around her navel. His mouth continued to moved lower until he reached her clit.

Pablo's tongue glided gently against it, Dianna's hips bucked slightly, making her crying out softly. He continued to move his fingers inside her, reaching deeper, while his tongue continued its sensual attack. Dianna felt her orgasm building, the tension within her body rose, reaching incredible heights. She gave herself over to the incredible pleasure his tongue gave her as she screamed her release, collapsing back down on the bed. Pablo stretched out next to her, and kissed her deeply. She could taste herself on his tongue and lips; her desire grew once again.

She ran her hands over his chest, feeling the broad planes of his muscles underneath taut skin. Pablo laid back on the bed with a very invitingly wicked smile on his face, almost daring her to continue with her explorations.

Dianna leaned over towards him, kissing him deeply. She explored his mouth with her tongue, as she took possession of him. She kissed her way over to his cheek, until she reached his ear, taking

the tender lobe between her lips and teeth. She sucked gently on his ear, causing him to moan lightly, and then down his neck, alternating between kisses and light bites. She moved over him, rubbing her breasts on his chest, kissing her way down, licking his hot skin. Her tongue dipped lightly into his navel, leaving wet trails from her kisses down his belly. She stroked his flesh with nervous fingers, delicately, making him shiver and moan. Her fingers ran over the hot silky skin of his erection, feeling the hard pulse of his arousal.

Now harder, moving her hand up, then down, his shaft. He moved his hips in response, and twined his hands in her hair, gently urging her head down. She complied, touching him first with her tongue, licking up and down, long even strokes. Then, she opened her mouth, and slid her lips down around him, until he was almost entirely in her mouth.

She sucked gently, then released, moving her lips to its length, sliding her tongue over. He moaned again, low, deep, making her moan as she continued sucking and licking his hot erection. He moved her head, making her whimper in disappointment, and pulled her on top of him, thrusting his tongue deep into her mouth.

She rubbed herself against him, wanting him, craving to feel that rock hard piece of himself deep inside. He positioned her until she straddled his face, and he attacked her again with his tongue. He sucked and licked her clitoris, alternately thrusting his tongue inside her, small sounds of need escaping her open mouth. She came again, flooding his mouth with her release, screaming in her ecstasy.

Dianna fell forward, onto her hands and knees, panting. He slid out from underneath her, and she could feel him behind her, stroking her bottom, rubbing his fingers inside her. In a husky voice, he said, "do you want me?" She looked over her shoulder at him, desire glazing her eyes, and whispered, "yes."

She closed her eyes, as he slid smoothly inside her. It burned, burned and she cried out in happy agony. He moved, slowly, in and out, his hips touching her backside, his hands on her hips, holding her tight to him. Grasping the pillow with both hands as he moved faster. She whimpered as he thrust deeper inside her, his hands stroking her skin.

She gasped, "I'm going to cum," and did, shaking.

He groaned, then moved out of her, laying her down on her back. "I'm going to watch you cum this time," he growled, an animal glint in his eyes. He swiftly entered her again, kissing her hard, fiercely.

Night Moves Digest

Moving under him, guiding him in deeper, sighing when he hit that tender inner spot. He grasped her under her bottom, holding her tight to him, trying to get deeper. They moved in unison, slowly, and then faster, naked need moving them. She grasped his arms, hard, digging in her nails. She cried out, as he brought her up into the atmosphere, the release shaking her very soul, as he came with her, his eyes never leaving her face.

His lips rested on her throat, her skin still feverish. Teeth grazed her tender flesh, and she felt a faint whisper of fear. Then, without warning, he pierced her with his sharp teeth, causing her to give a short gasp. She felt as if she were melting into him, becoming one with him, as he began to suck, gently, his tongue and lips drawing on her flesh.

She drifted down, and heard, whispered in her mind, "You will always be a part of me, we will never part, and you are mine forever." Pablo and Dianna shared climax after climax, shuddering in each other's arms, their fingers alternately intertwining with each other, and stroking the other's body in tender caresses.

Finally, they parted, and stared into each other's eyes; red on red. The learning had only just begun...

To be continued...

In The Dark
by
Lil Gibson

What happens when the man conjured up from her imagination—the star of every one of her fantasies—crashes her almost fiancés’ party?
Sparks fly...

Lil loves to hear from her readers and can be reached at
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Lil spends her time at the mercy of her fertile imagination, which has garnered her a nomination for Best Erotic Paranormal Romance along with many other, very much appreciated, superlative reviews. Before conjuring tales of other worlds, Lil spent a considerable amount of time headhunting in the world of Information Technologies. She recruited her IT husband out of North Carolina, relocated him to her home in Nashville, and married him a year later. They now live in Weeki Wachee, FL enjoying the big birds, the mermaids and the manatees—and their demand cats: Katu, China Cat Sunflower, and Mad Max.

Dedication: To my brother, Kip Shaffer, who’s always in the dark...<LOL>

Available soon at www.midnightshowcase.com
Desiree Does Deliver, Midnight Raunch

In The Dark **by** **Lil Gibson**

In the dark.

Always in the dark, he came to her. Lately it seemed she *remained* in the dark; hardly recognizing herself, or how events could have brought her to this juncture. Even her dream job as V.P. of Sales and Marketing at Haniford's Handles had lost its appeal.

When she spoke to her friends of *him*, her dream lover, they laughed and blamed it on pre-wedding jitters. The fact that she'd turned down Tom's proposal for the fourth time didn't seem to faze anyone but Tanya. Even her parents pressed for the match. They wanted her to marry into a family that could support them in the way they wanted to become accustomed. And Tom's parents, Bill and Gloria Haniford, saw Tanya's hardworking diligence and scrupulous reliability as a steadying influence. Their charming, irresponsible son needed help to mature, and take his job of CEO more seriously. Instead he used it as an excuse to co-ordinate and launch a never ending string of four martini lunches, partying with clients past, present and future. Bill and Gloria had even gone so far as offering her a partnership in their company when she wed their son.

Everyone would come out a winner. Only she didn't want to. And what was wrong with this picture when she preferred her imaginary lover over the reality of Tom? Handsome and charismatic, he was considered a marvelous catch and the two of them shared an easy camaraderie and a relaxed business relationship. Only she didn't feel right in his arms. He was simply wrong. Wrong for her. She had to tell him, make him understand.

Not like the one who visited her in deep night, playing her body like a finely tuned instrument—doing things to her that made her scream her completion. Teaching her intimacy that she hadn't imagined could occur between a man and a woman. Each morning she awakened completely naked and bonelessly replete; divest of her

panties and tee-shirt, her sheet tangled around her thighs. And the dreams were becoming worse...or better...and occurring with greater frequency, more vivid in detail. She could almost see his face, taste his skin, become lost in the dark chocolate promise of his eyes.

And then she'd have to wake up and face another day without him.

Sighing, Tanya climbed out of bed making a mental note to dress for that night's company function. Bill and Gloria were celebrating the tenth year of Haniford's Handles at the country club and since Tanya held a position of prominence, her attendance was mandatory. While she dressed and made herself up, she kept looking longingly at her bed; wanting the day to be over so she could fall into *his* arms, once again.

* * * *

The festive party, now in full swing was loud and boisterous. Tom remained by her side doing his best to charm and cajole, hoping to change her mind about the two of them. "Tom, you can have any unattached woman in the room and probably a few who aren't, why are you being so utterly single-minded about us? I mean we have a good time and get along but there is no spark, and don't say you haven't noticed."

Shoving his hands in his pockets with a wry grin, Tom looked boyishly chagrined. "I'm afraid you caught me out, darlin'. You see, our wedding present was to be a sixty foot yacht I've had my eye on..."

"You bounder," Tanya laughed, smacking him playfully of the arm. "Now it makes sense. Hmm, maybe if you marry someone else they'll still come through. Or even better, convince them you are utterly brokenhearted by my refusal and need a diversion in order to heal."

"Excellent strategy," Tom agreed, smiling. "Who's the guy over there? He's been staring daggers at you for the last five minutes."

Tanya caught a shadow out of the corner of her eye and started after it in awe. He moved just like her imaginary lover. She followed him through a door leading to the veranda.

"It's you," she blurted, avidly taking in the stark planes of his face, his broad shoulders, chiseled chest and powerful, almost overpowering, countenance. Too late, she realized her blunder. With his continued, stony silence, Tanya decided she'd fallen down another wrong rabbit hole—countless many, in her experience, thanks to a

vivid imagination. Embarrassed beyond redemption, she looked around at their deserted surroundings.

“You came out here to be alone and I have disturbed you. I – It’s a case of mistaken identity. Please excuse me.”

Still silent, he raised an amused eyebrow. Tanya turned to flee only to be stopped short by an arm across the exit. She took a couple of calming breaths before facing him.

“What makes you think I’m the wrong male?” The cadence of his question caressed her from the inside, out.

Tanya gaped at the familiar, accented sound of his voice. It matched the one in her dreams. Deep, smoldering, exotic. She gave herself a mental shake; time for a reality check...and escape. But before she could duck under his arm, he locked her in his embrace and took her flying into the night, high enough to catch the stars.

The same as her dreams; except the damp night air now ruffled her hair, sweeping over her heated skin. His hot, hard chest, and arms like steel, banded around her. Her arms naturally found their way around his corded neck while her head fit perfectly within the crook of his neck and shoulder. Um, the smell of him intoxicated her. Who said a rabbit hole couldn’t go up?

They landed at an iridescent cave, complete with a huge claw-footed bed on one wall and waterfall on another, became their destination. Lair! Screamed her first thought followed by, major, big trouble.

“Uh, mister,” Tanya began and then froze when her gaze met amused sable eyes glinting so much like his...

With a single bent finger under her chin, he gently closed her jaw. “Don’t think or try to rationalize, I have come to take you home. But first, it is time we make fantasy reality.”

“Wait! I don’t even know your name. And about the rest—we can’t do what we normally do. We’ve never even kissed.”

“I am called Tobias, and we will be doing much more than kissing, my beautiful Tanya.”

He took her to the bed and had her unwrapped, so to speak, in an instant. “You are perfect. Even better than in our shared consciousness.” Before Tanya could unravel his declaration and the fact that he knew her name, she found herself naked in front of this semi-stranger.

His mouth closed over hers, exploring, marauding her moist cavity until his taste, a combination of heated nights, earthy musk and

man, imprinted itself on her senses. Then he moved on to her neck, making her raise her arms above her head and demanding that they stay there until he told her different. Being an executive, and a bossy one at that, she could only gape, open-mouthed, at his Neanderthal tactics—which he made use of by devouring all thought of protest. Her dreams turned out to be no match for the real man. The familiar ways in which he touched her became new again. Tanya could not remember an experience so riveting it held every one of her senses in thrall.

They leapt from one glorious, addictive fix to another watching her hands as they traced over the vast landscape of shoulders, biceps and chest, absorbing the feel of hot hard muscle moving along her thighs, belly and breasts, and taking in his own unique scent. The sight of his liquid molten whiskey eyes, when he paused to stare into hers, penetrated to the very core of her soul, staking a claim.

His callused fingertips glided over every sensitized inch of her making her skin catch fire and her body arc under his knowing touch. “I will have you, Tanya mine, all of you. It is time to know your master in the flesh.” The gravelly timber of his declaration resonated in her womb and female passage causing a flood of musky honey to escape her labia. Tobias froze and sniffed the air before giving her a look of such knowing arrogance she fought to wrestle up some indignation and a molecule of control. He was, after all, just a man. Yeah, and Michael Angelo’s rendering of David was just a figurine.

Tanya fought to regain lost equilibrium, uttering, “Um, I have a problem with your statement on several levels.” He derailed her wimpy protest, however, by circling his thumb around her clitoris and driving two fingers deep inside her weeping channel. Rebuttal suddenly seemed over-rated. His mouth closed on one nipple while his hand kneaded, pinched and squeezed the other making her groan in surrender.

“Tell me you want this—want me, Tanya. Say it.” He pulled his fingers from her pussy.

“Don’t stop,” she gasped. Good heavens, couldn’t he tell by the level of her arousal? Had he ever heard her say no? Okay, he’d never asked her before, not in all the months he’d invaded her dreams but wasn’t it a little late now? He had to know he’d become more real, more valued than anyone or thing in her waking world. And not just for their steamy body chemistry, they’d also spent countless hours

exploring each others experiences and feelings creating a heart to heart bond.

“Tell me you belong to me.”

Sheesh, pesky details at a time like this? “Tobias.” She loved finally having a name for him. Tanya shook her head in confusion sifting through the murky layers between fantasy and reality, trying to determine which was which. After all who could make up a name like Tobias?

He began to chuckle into her shoulder. “Female, you will be the life of me. Answer.”

“You are the best marathon wet dream I ever experienced and if it were in my power, I would be yours. But for future edification, I’m not a female but a woman. Females are, well, cats, dogs, rabbits, horses and...”

“Enough! You are here, you are mine, and will not leave my side from this moment forward.”

“Please touch me again, Tobias,” was her only reply.

Suddenly his hands and mouth were everywhere on her body, rabid with want and she wept, her juices running down the crack of her ass which he fervently lapped, plunging his tongue into her channel again and again, then circling and teething her clitoris until she rocketed to the heavens, splintering apart. Finally he rose up and pinned her with his fathomless, now coal dark eyes. Venus, he was beautiful—long black hair, enigmatic, worldly eyes that slanted up above high cheekbones. Corded arms connected to powerful shoulders and chest. Washboard abs that led to a long, thick, hard, to almost shiny, erection that almost made her drool. He was too beautiful to be real and she wanted to lick him all over—causing her voice of reason to cant the likelihood of her imagination somehow bleeding into reality.

He gifted her with an almost whimsical smile before impaling her, forcing a scream to echo through the cavern. He lunged into her fast and sure—then changed the angle and pistoned into her harder and harder until another orgasm rocked through her. Still he continued. The earthy smell of their sweat commingling with her juices ignited Tanya’s desire yet again and she entrusted all of her passion to him and every other part of her, as well. He completed her. They completed each other. That was the message he strove to impart and Tanya became an active participant in that promise.

She read the triumphant gleam that shot through his glowing obsidian eyes. “Look at me, mate, know who is inside you, fucking you. Know your master.” Punctuating his order with action.

On the other hand, it took no effort at all to read his heavy-handed caveman tactics. “Again, with the master comment, I am no man’s slave. We are equal partners and belong to each other.”

“You are correct, I am no man—but you have been mine since the night you invaded my consciousness.” He declared, totally ignoring the second part of her statement. Before she could point this out, however, he shrugged with a combination of chagrin and boyish charm causing a lethal fusion in her brain. “And now I claim you.” His fangs gleamed white in the cave while his hard length moved at a faster, more rhythmic pace.

Tanya knew what he intended and knew what it meant from their months of intimacy but instead of trepidation clouding her ardor, she longed to finally experience the sharp sting followed by the powerful thrill of his emotions. She literally screamed her wanton victory when he punctured the base of her neck, the potent fury of his love for her slamming her into another realm.

* * * *

He nudged her awake, his melodious voice tender and endearing. The experience felt so natural it took a few moments before Tanya realized he was speaking telepathically. Additionally, she understood that she’d become linked to him in more than body but in mind, as well.

Stirring like she’d just awoken from a long, long sleep, she peeked up at Tobias; an indulgent grin touching the corners of his mouth. “Uh, just to recap, this is all real and you are really here, correct?” she brilliantly surmised.

He grinned. “Can you doubt it?”

“There’s no telling what I can doubt, but there’s also no telling what I can believe. Take you for example,” Tanya muttered the last words to herself, sitting up. She needed a few minutes of privacy where she could regroup and pee but before heading to the room he indicated, she glanced back. “Tobias, there are things we need to discuss. Things like, oh, flying through the air, fangs, and telepathic sex. I hope you know that I am worthy of keeping your confidence. You’ve taken my body, glimpsed my soul, and now I give you my trust, as well.”

Her mind in a complete muddle and her body loose and relaxed, Tanya didn't realize she'd left the room without a stitch of clothing on until she discovered a full length mirror in the bathroom. Did that mean he could see his reflection and wasn't a vampire?

When Tanya reentered the main room she observed Tobias in what appeared to be a mental war within himself, pacing the length of his hideaway.

"I could hear your conflicting thoughts even through the rock walls. What is this place...and more to the point, what are you, er, exactly? You took my blood, does that mean you're a vampire, uh, member of the undead? I'm not sure of the politically correct phrase." Tanya leaned against a large rock.

Tobias actually laughed at her question but she knew he'd taken her blood. She had the puncture wounds to prove it on the base of her neck. Along with a really large hickey.

"Truth and perception—such a slippery slope, don't you agree, my love? I am nothing of your Earth. I come from a star system far from your Milky Way. And the taking of your blood does not nourish my kind but is used to instigate a life-bond between mates. To complete the ritual you must also feed from me." Tobias ran his hands through his hair and turned away from her. "Of course, I hadn't planned to initiate the binding process the first time we made love." A soft, wry laugh escaped his lips. "I just seem to get carried away where you are concerned." He turned around and froze, studying every detail of her naked form as she approached him.

Tanya wondered why she could stand in front of him not in the least self-conscious of his direct gaze. Instead, she felt empowered by his hot, appreciative gaze. And then there were his words, flung down like a gauntlet. She supposed she should be frightened or at least wary—concerned with his sanity and even more distressed if he spoke the truth. "Why?" she asked instead. "Why me?"

He barked out a tiered laugh. "I'm afraid only the Gods can answer that but your unique spirit haunted me for one of your Earth years leaving me with no choice." He grabbed her shoulders keeping at arms length. "I had to come and claim you. Earth being or not, logical objections and all rationales be damned. You will return to my home."

Tanya was grateful for the support of his arms, for without them she'd have toppled to the plush rug in an uncoordinated heap. "You look nothing like E.T.," blurting the first thing that came to mind.

Surely any rational woman would be aghast at his declaration; perhaps swoon dramatically, or run like hell. But feeling his wary uncertainty and dogged determination, only made her want to get him out of his pants and fuck his brains out...again.

Relief flashed across his features and he toppled her onto the mattress. "I need you, Tanya," Tobias murmured. "Will you let me love you again?" He moved behind her, spooning her on the bed. An arm snaked underneath her waist, moving until his hand connected with her breast. Fondling, kneading and flicking her distended nipple, his touch glided down across her belly and lower, making her shudder.

She hooked her top leg over his leaving her nether lips fully exposed. Tanya jumped and groaned when a finger ringed and then gently flicked her sensitive nub. His talented fingers paused on her wet pussy and she moaned her disappointment while he leaned slightly away from her. Using his other hand he playfully slapped her exposed ass before carefully pushing a finger just past the entrance to her anus. No one had ever breached her there and it felt forbidden, erotic, and tightly snug. "Uh, Tobias?" she uttered.

"I know, my love, you are a virgin there. I will go slowly and if you do not like it, we will stop. But I can't tell you how pleased it makes me that I will be the first to enter your rosebud. And hot, it makes me very, very hot." With the finger of one hand rocking deeper and deeper, his other resumed its ministrations on her pussy until Tanya writhed, close to climax.

Tanya wanted to shriek in frustration when he stopped. "More please, Toby..." He silenced her begging with a searing kiss. Her body had become so sensitized she shook. Even her goose bumps had chills.

"You're a greedy little witch, and believe me you will be rewarded. But first I want you to suck my cock with that sweet, hot mouth."

He didn't have to ask twice. Tanya fell on him, kissing, licking, and suctioning his thick, hot, steel-like length, taking him all the way to the back of her throat.

A deep growl emanated from Tobias growing louder until he hoarsely commanded, "Enough"

"I want to taste your cum," she pleaded, leaning over him to taste a dollop of milky icing that appeared on his tip.

"Later, first I'm going to take you in your ass. Roll over."

“You’re too big. You’ll tear me to shreds.”

“I will never do anything to harm you. Ever,” he emphasized forcefully, grabbing her chin to make her look deep into his solemn eyes.

Tanya licked her lips. “You’ll have to explain what to do,” she offered.

His mouth twitched and his eyes flashed victorious, possessive heat...and feral intent.

He grabbed the oil off the ledge beside the bed and poured a generous amount onto his hand, pausing to warm the fragrant Jojoba concoction. “Get on your hands and knees. I promise to take you in that virgin channel, and make you come until you faint.” He punctuated the promise with a wicked grin. Tanya’s heart raced in anticipation and her breathing grew ragged.

Tanya felt both wildly aroused and warily uncertain which only served to increase her level of excitement. She jumped at the touch of his large, callused hands as they generously coated her cheeks and the crease in between, massaging and kneading her.

A groan hissed through her parched lips when he worked first one finger, then another into her rose-budded entrance, rotating his wrist, twisting in and out of her deeper and deeper, swamping her senses, careening her toward an orgasm...and then he stopped. Again. Was he doing it on purpose? Because she felt raw, edgy, and more than a little desperate.

“Relax for me, baby, and I’ll give you exactly what you need.”

Tanya sure hoped so because she’d gone way past caring if it hurt or not, she needed release and Tobias was the only one who could give it to her. A menacing snarl poured from his mouth when he barely pushed past her opening. “Curse the Gods, you’re tight. Damn it, relax or this will be over before it begins.” He leaned forward and gently nipped her shoulder to take the sting from his words and reached around to fondle her wet folds and clit. “That’s it,” he murmured a moment later, “open for me, open all of you to me—soul, mind and body. I would have every part of you.”

He eased the rest of the way in until she could feel his tight balls and thighs flush against her bottom. He pitched against her in a circular motion while kneading her cheeks. She answered him with series of bucks against him after each rotation. The act of his cock burrowing deeply into her seemed more erotic than she’d ever dreamed. Then his motion changed and he started banging her with a

pulsating rhythm that grew faster and harder with every second. His hands on either side of her hips dug into her with bruising intensity that only added more fuel onto her already primed libido.

The combination of ecstasy and pain came screaming out of her in waves of intense rapture bursting through her until she could take no more. Tanya heard a masculine rumble from far away while she flew into oblivion.

* * * *

She awoke to the sounds of pacing at the foot of the bed and knew she'd open her eyes to the sight of Tobias in yet another conundrum...and smiled. Tanya sat up and stretched, and found herself greeted by an odd goblet in Tobias's out-stretched hand. She took it and asked, "How long have I been asleep?"

Amusement turned his eyes from Mocha to deep Maple Syrup and his mouth twitched. "It was not sleep that claimed you, dearest love, but the little death. And I intend to gift you with many more as soon as we are underway. But first you must drink this. It will refresh and energize you."

"Um, what is it?"

"It is good for you and if you do not drink every drop this instant, I will assist you. Drink, we've not much time before our flight window closes and I am sure you'll want to contact your friends and family and collect any desired items. The longer I stay the more risk I run of discovery and capture."

Tanya looked into the goblet and sniffed. It smelled of cinnamon, ginger and other fragrances indefinable to her palate. "Will it taste good or should I hold my nose?" His gaze hardened and his face lost all signs of animation. She sipped it, then, deciding she could keep it down, gulped the rest. It had a tangy, pleasant aftertaste. "How much time do you have until you have to go?"

"We, Tanya, we. I did not come all this way to leave empty handed."

"What if we're making a mistake, Tobias? After all, we've known each other for only a group of hours out of time..."

"I beg to differ; in these last months we have shared our bodies, our minds, and bound our souls. The two are now intertwined. One would perish without the other. Do you doubt this, Tanya mine?"

She looked up at the face more dear and familiar to her than any other and acknowledged the truth of his words. "No, you're right, of course. I don't believe I could live without you in my life but...but

why can't you just stay here? We could make a beautiful life together and avoid having to make such a long journey. If you didn't like it, then we could talk about leaving." Suddenly her romantic tryst had permanent, overwhelming consequences, more permanent, even, than an unexpected pregnancy. Tanya froze. They hadn't used protection, what could she have been thinking? Okay, she knew exactly what she'd been thinking, or not been thinking.

Tobias sat on the side of the bed and took her hands. "It will be alright, my treasure. I'm sorry to have to pull you from all that is familiar, but I have responsibilities long postponed in coming for you...and my features are not consistent with those of your world and would be questioned."

His speech confused her. "You look fine to me. There are many nationalities with olive complexions and large, slanted eyes. I don..." Tanya froze as Tobias put his shoulder length hair behind his ears. "Are you a Vulcan?" she gasped.

He bit down on his lips and shook his head, his gaze leaking humor.

"No, no, of course you're not. Er, Romulan, perhaps?"

His eyes now danced a 'ha ha, are you silly' jig as he shook his head again adding, "So you see why, even if I could do this for you, it is impossible. And though I did not mention it before your atmosphere, too, would kill me before long. My metabolism has fundamental differences incompatible with Earth."

"Wait a minute, if that's the case, then I can't go with you either for surely the same would hold true if I tried to survive in your world."

"Normally, yes, but the blood exchange is complete and the changes to realign your metabolism are now commencing."

"Changes? Exchange?" Tanya wondered why she couldn't formulate an intelligent thought. Was it part of the so called change? "Wait a second, there's been no blood exchange. If there were, believe me I would have remembered." Whew, boy, would she have remembered.

"My blood was in the mixture you ingested along with the other essentials."

"Your blood? In the...and now I must leave my planet if I want to survive? Of all the heavy-handed, obnoxious, autocratic stunts. What if I decided to change my mind at the last moment? It's a girl's prerogative...normally!"

Tobias cocked his head in mock consternation but his eyes were telegraphing an unrepentant, smug, self-congratulatory gloat-o-gram.

Tanya wanted to rail at his under-handed antics, but she found herself feeling relieved as well. He knew her heart and she knew his—just as she knew he'd leave nothing to chance. She was his. He was hers. Together they would explore every wonder of the vast universe and every wonder inside each other. Tanya pounced on him, toppling them both onto the bed. Tobias laughed, turning her onto her back in an instant, and in the next, crushed his mouth onto hers. His kiss was dominant, possessive...and wholly captivating.

He tore at his own clothing and rammed his sizzling length into her in seconds—filling her while his mouth kissed and sucked a path down her neck to a plump breast and turgid nipple, biting it gently then sucking it hard into his mouth. He laved his way back up to her earlobe and bit gently making her moan.

“We don’t have time for this,” he grunted.

“Uh, huh,” she agreed.

He maneuvered her legs over his shoulders while his gaze bore into hers. He roared up, never losing eye-contact and impaled her; he on his knees and she, helpless, on her shoulders. And then he started moving inside her penetrating deeper than the other positions allowed.

Her climax took her in seconds but before she could savor the tightening spirals, he rose over her and joined with her in missionary position; belly to belly, chest to chest, her legs locked around his hips. Elbows on either side of her shoulders and hands woven into her hair, he rocked her gently, tenderly, watching her watch him.

His eyes glowed with tenderness and desire, inviting her to see everything inside him. Then he kissed her forehead, eyelids, cheeks, and mouth, all the while undulating his hips with slow, deep strokes. Another climax built slowly. Tanya wanted more, faster, but Tobias merely smiled a secret smile and continued the slow, thorough rhythm. His pupils had taken over his iris's turning them black. Caught off guard, her release crashed over her—and when Tobias followed her seconds later, it sparked another even stronger than the last.

When Tobias finally lifted his head from the crook between her neck and collarbone, he had tears in his eyes. To her surprise, so did she.

Tanya, always before skeptical about love, marriage and a bond that could last for eternity, recognized in Tobias the other half of her

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soul, the answer to every yearning of her heart and the perfect fit within the comfort of his arms. She was home. Even if it meant residing in a galaxy away.

So what is this feeling—insanity?

“Love,” Tobias murmured. “It is love.”

The End

At The Edge Of Darkness
by
J H Wear

Can Rodney, a claustrophobic suffering vampire find romance?
Rodney wants Irene. Her friend Shelly feels uneasy about him. And
meet Sheldon, a whole other mystery.

JH Wear lives in Edmonton, Alberta with his wife Laurie where they raised three sons, now supposedly adults. He started writing a few years ago as a way to learn to use a keyboard faster and found that he enjoyed writing fictional tales.

JH Wear recently started his own a wine agency after spending many years as a technician repairing printers. When he's not selling or sampling his wine he tries to find time for his other interests of reading, astronomy and listening to music. Those other interests often take a backseat to the dreaded home renovations.

Dedication: I want to dedicate this story to my wife Laurie, who puts up with my need to lug my laptop almost to wherever I go.

At The Edge Of Darkness
by
J H Wear

Prelude

Boston, New England

March 2, 1841

Rose-Marie brushed back the limp, damp hair clinging to his forehead, then gently stroked his cheek as he lay on the small bed.

“Don’t worry, it won’t be long now. Just try to relax, I’ll be here to take good care of you.”

He turned his head towards her, his eyes barely open. His vision seemed unfocused and incomplete. It didn't really matter. His memory of her was good enough. Dark red hair that framed her lovely face, golden eyes that seemed to radiate with their own light, and the pale skin that followed the delightful curves of her body. He remembered all of her and hated every part.

“Leave me! I would rather die than to be cursed with you or your life!” His voice came out in a whisper, rather than the shout he intended.

She blinked for a moment, and then smiled knowingly. “You say that now. But you’re not in the right frame of mind. Soon you’ll understand, when we’re together. You once told me that you loved me. I believed you then and I still think you love me even if you deny it. You’re fortunate that I’m willing to take the time to teach you, and to care for you.” With her fingertips she traced a path from his face down his bare chest, resting them a moment on his stomach before repeating the action. She reached down and circled her fingers around his cock, smiling at her dominance over him.

His arms felt too heavy to slap her hands away, and again he cursed his weakness. He tried to speak, but found his mouth too dry, and now the heavy blanket of sleep started to cover him. His eyes shut one last time, and his life ended as he struggled against the darkness.

* * * *

“Water.”

This time she heard him and moved quickly to obtain a cup. She supported his back as he gulped it down.

“More.”

The second cup seemed to quench his thirst, and he fell back on his bed. He felt her hands pulling up the blanket to his shoulders, then quickly dropped back to something resembling sleep.

The next time he stayed awake longer and was able to eat a bit of stew. He still raged at her, calling her names and throwing out threats when she was there to listen. But she tolerated his behavior as something expected, and calmly went about her business of making him stronger.

“Would you like more bread?”

He grabbed the slice from her hand. “Don’t you know I will kill you when I get strong enough?”

She sighed. “It will be a very long time before that happens. And it’s not just the body, but also the mind that has strength.” And then for a moment she bore at him with golden eyes that suspended him in a timeless trap and just as quickly released him. “I know how you feel, because once I felt that way towards my mentor.”

She sat next to him on the small bed and ran her fingertips from his neck down his chest, coming to rest on his knee, pushing the thin cover down as she did so. Though she had released him from her direct mental control, he could still feel the remnants of its power, and couldn’t do anything to stop her from touching him. He was more aware than ever of being naked on the small bed, unable to muster the strength to walk out of the room.

The woman seemed to understand his plight, and moved her hand to his upper leg, massaging his inner thigh gently. She slid her fingers up to his leg and dragged them over his groin before stopping to play with his pubic hair. She sported the look of a modest victory, such as one would use to gloat after winning a chess game. Despite his feelings towards her and his fear of what he was becoming, his own body started to betray him as his loins reacted to her touch. She pulled her hand away and stood up just as he was beginning to exert control

on his arms again. Rose-Marie looked down at him, surveying his body, before pulling the blanket over him again.

"I could make you love me again, but I would rather it happens again on its own accord. And it will, you won't be able to stop yourself."

He said nothing more, fearing she was right. Who else but she could he have? Who else would care for him? He finished eating the bread. His stomach was full, but the hunger had not subsided. Rose-Marie had asked him if he wanted to feed, and he refused to admit he had the urge to do so. She merely smiled and went out that night to satisfy her own needs.

* * * *

"You must feed soon, or you'll get very sick, and then finally die."

"I would rather die than become the devil's instrument!"

She laughed, covering her mouth as she did so. "The devil's instrument? Where did you come up with that one? You are a predator, nothing more or less. Unless you think that lions are devil's instruments too? How about bears, or wolves, or hawks? You're still human, only of a superior form. You have the right to live, and the power to do it. So stop feeling sorry for yourself."

He glared at her, not knowing how to respond. She walked over to him, kissed him on his forehead and left the room. He was alone again with thoughts that swirled in his mind. He was a prisoner to his contemplation as well as to the room. Rose-Marie had done something to his mind that wouldn't allow him to leave the room, proof about her earlier conviction that her mind's strength ranged far above his. But that didn't stop him from planning.

* * * *

The sound of footsteps down the hall stirred him from his half slumber. He turned away from the door as it opened, not wanting to give her any reason to think he needed her company.

"Look dear, what I have brought you."

He slowly turned to see what she had, and was startled by her gift.

"Isn't she lovely? Come here and hold her." The petite and pretty young woman had a glazed look in her eyes.

"No, let her go!" But even as he said the words he found himself standing up, and he could feel his upper gums starting to throb from pain.

“But she wants you. She needs you.” Rose- Marie led the unresisting girl to him. “You shouldn’t resist. It is the right thing to do. She wants you to do it.”

Now he felt and tasted the trickle of his own blood as his gums split open to accommodate the new teeth. His hunger increased as the girl came closer, and he could only manage a slow shake of his head when she stood in front of him. He could feel the warmth of her body, and the scent of her causing his new teeth to tingle, like an electric current ran through them.

Rose-Marie seemed to enjoy his torment, and laughed at his weakened resolve. “You must give in now. Look at her.” With a hard pull she ripped open the girl’s blouse, revealing two small breasts. She grabbed his hand and placed it on the exposed flesh, the nipples hard to his touch.

He was surprised to hear the girl softly moan with pleasure at his touch. He moved closer, his hands running over her bare chest as her cries grew louder. He felt dizzy, and as the room disappeared he could only focus on the helpless woman. He felt almost out of control as he started to kiss her lips, and then he suddenly plunged down to her neck. His blood boiled as he opened his jaw and...

It was the most glorious feeling. A bolt of electricity started at his mouth and perpetrated every part of his being. The rest of the room disappeared in his excitement as the explosion of physical and mental pleasure flooded him. His mind became linked to hers as he rode a constant wave of ecstasy. He could not get enough as he clung to his victim until she cried out, then went limp, and gradually fell to the floor.

“I think you’ve had enough. That was a rather long feeding for someone who would rather die.”

“I don’t know why I did that. I didn’t mean to lose control.” He slumped on the bed. “Is she going to be all right? Did I...?” He stopped speaking, knowing the answer.

“Just lie down and take it easy. The first feedings are like this.” She lifted the body up and carried her to the door. “You will learn to temper your thirst. I’ll take care of her.”

* * * *

During the next few feedings he learned to use control. He still resented her but had held back his comments as he looked for a way to strike his revenge. She released her hold on him, knowing that he

had no other place to turn. And she continued to teach him on how to survive.

“Only feed on the same victim twice. Three if you absolutely must, but after that there is a great risk of turning them into a vampire.”

“Why do you care if they become vampires as well?”

“Because, dear Rodney, we do not need more competition for our feedings. More vampires will mean a greater chance of us being exposed, and the superstitious peasants will start hanging garlic bulbs at their doors.” She shook her head in disgust. “But there’s another good reason why you should not return to the same woman too many times.”

“What is that?”

She leaned forward, her hand resting on his thigh. “I’m the jealous type. And I would kill her without a second thought to keep what is mine.”

Her eyes showed no betrayal in what she said. And he sat horrified at the full implications of her words; he remained her prisoner for as long as he lived. Or as long as she did.

That night he came back late to the old house. She waited up for him, wearing a nightgown by the fireplace. He only nodded in reply to her greeting and slumped in a chair by the fire, feeling chilled to the bone.

“Any luck?”

“No. Not this time.” In reality he didn’t look for a victim at all, but spent the time walking up and down the streets thinking.

“You must be careful about staying out so late. Don’t get caught in the morning sun, it would be unfortunate to lose you.”

“I miss the sun, the daytime.”

“I used to. But after a while you will forget about it, and learn to live after dusk.”

“There must be something better to living at night, than only to feed and hide.”

“There is.” She opened her nightgown and dropped it to the floor. “Come to me, let us share the rest of the night together.”

She was still beautiful to his eyes, but not his mind. Still, he felt his teeth sliding out of their concealment, ready to do his feeding.

“No, Rodney. You must never bite another vampire. A vampire’s blood is poison to another. Like venom, it’s very deadly even in small

doses.” She wrapped her arms around him. “So we will make love the old-fashioned way, and with no biting.”

He took off his own clothes and they tumbled together by the fireplace. His thoughts only on her. Or, more accurately, on what she had told him. The sex was still good, though it paled in comparison to feeding. Part of the problem, he thought, was that it was hard to make love to someone you hated. Still he didn’t have a problem obtaining an erection as he kissed her lips, neck and breasts. He sucked on her nipples as his fingers touched her clit and then slid inside. As soon as she was wet he inserted his cock inside her, wanting to finish as soon as he could, not caring that she also reached her climax.

* * * *

Rodney followed her when he had the chance and quickly figured out the type of men she preferred. Much like himself, which wasn’t really a surprise. He also noticed how she would set up a future feeding by stalking the victim a few nights early, leaving them with a hypnotic suggestion that would make the rest of the seduction easier when the time came.

And now she had set up the next offering, the young man seemed quite taken by her beauty.

After she left, Rodney approached him. “Nice-looking woman.”

The young man seemed nervous about talking to a stranger this late at night. Most strangers wanted some spare coin. And were prepared to roll you for it. Still, the young man couldn’t ignore the comment, made in the relative security of the tavern.

“Yes, she is at that.” “Tell me, are you going to meet her again?”

“Yes, I am.”

“When and where?” Rodney stared at him, willing the information from him.

“Two nights from now, at Garland Bridge on the west side. At midnight.”

“Now, listen very carefully. You will not meet her at the bridge. There has been a change of plans. Is that clear?”

“Yes.”

But Rodney could tell it wasn’t clear to his mind. Two contradicting orders. To meet or not to. “Good. Now, give me your hat and coat and go home. And do not go to the Garland Bridge two nights from now.”

* * * *

Two nights later saw a troubled man trying to decide whether he should be at the bridge or not. He kept walking away and then returning. Then on his final return visit he saw the stranger, wearing his coat and hat, standing by the wooden posts that supported the bridge. The woman, the one with red hair, approached him from behind. The man kept his collar up and his head down as she spoke to him, only slowly turning sideways as she pulled at his arm. He could only hear her voice as she tried to maneuver him out of sight, the man declining to speak. Suddenly her mouth pounced at his neck; the man did not resist the attack, merely lifting his head. Then a moment later she began to shriek at him.

“You bastard! You have poisoned me! Why? Why? I loved you. Why did you do this?!” She fell to her knees, her hands pulling at his coat.

The stranger didn't reply at first, merely stepping backward in an attempt to distance himself from her.

“You damn bastard! I curse you!” She fell to the ground on her side, curling up from pain, her voice getting weaker.

“Sorry, but you left me no other choice.”

Whether she heard him or not was difficult to say, for she became silent and lay still.

“I hope God forgives both of us. And I promise I will never do what you have done to me.”

And that promise he kept. At least for another one hundred and fifty years.

Chapter One

“A vampire! Sheldon, are you serious?”

“Of course, Harry. Have I ever made up a story before?” The big guy finished off his beer in a quick gulp. “You don’t think that I make them up do you?” He suddenly looked alarmed at the possibility that someone didn’t believe everything he said.

Careful, we don’t want to get him upset. As far as believing his stories, well, that was hard to say. Some of his stories were pretty fantastic, but he did tell them so well that...let us just say they sounded like the truth. “Of course not. They’re a little different from my own experiences, but they are quite plausible.” I hoped that would mollify him.

My name is Harry Webster. Most people know of me as a columnist for the local paper, writing about events in the city and special interest stories, like the sixty-eight year old grandmother taking up skiing for the first time. But I also write stories secretly under the name Edwin Drood, named after a character in the unfinished murder mystery of Charles Dickens. I use the cover of Harry Webster to hunt down those stories that can make it feel like a piece of ice has just touch your spine.

I met Sheldon at one of those forgettable grand openings and something about him made me wonder about him. According to his acquaintances he likes to tell tall tales; tales he insists are true. Second, it seems he dabbles in the arts, and I’m not talking about paintings. One young man confided in me he believes he’s a warlock, prosperous perhaps, but I’ve seen stranger things, like vampires. Laugh at it as urban myth, but I’ve seen bits of evidence of their existence and apparently Sheldon knows one personally. Now if I can get him to talk about it without arousing his suspicions I might find out where this vampire is hiding.

“Good, because I only repeat what I know is the truth. But I must be going, I’m an old man and I need my sleep.” He looked towards the bar and got Nancy’s attention with a wave.

This was ridiculous. Sheldon may be old, how old is hard to say, but I doubt he goes to bed early. He keeps himself in shape, maybe by lifting weights or by swimming, and in truth has the body of a thirty year old. Only his white hair gives a hint of being a senior citizen. And man, can he attract the ladies. But the trouble now was to convince Sheldon to stay and tell his tale of the vampire. His stories are always interesting, and though one may doubt their authenticity, they always make you wonder.

“How much do I owe you this time, my dear?”

“Only a couple of dollars. Do you really have to leave so soon?” Nancy placed the bill on the table, and rested a hand on his shoulder. “Gee, you smell nice. Is that a new aftershave?”

“I’m afraid so. An old man like myself needs his sleep. And, yes, that is a new aftershave. A lady acquaintance gave it to me as a gift.” He picked up the bill. “Say, you bought me a drink. That was very kind of you.”

Nancy beamed at him for noticing the drink. Like all women, she seemed to find him fascinating. Damn him. As for Nancy, she had dark features, a lovely smile and eyes that always had a sparkle to them. And tonight she wore her mini-skirt, a nice change from her usual jeans.

“Here’s a ten spot. Keep the change and put it towards your college fund.”

Incredible, he gives her a big tip, but to his buddies he’s known as being a tight wad with his money. I have lost count of the number of lunches and drinks he has coerced out of us.

“Why, thank you Sheldon. You have a nice evening.”

“Wait.” I couldn’t let Sheldon off the hook from his vampire story. “Nancy, why don’t you bring us two more beers, and put it on my tab?”

Nancy looked at Sheldon for his reaction and he hesitated, and then very reluctantly nodded. “Well, I suppose one more won’t hurt, if you insist, Harry.” Nancy turned back towards the bar. “Oh, and Nancy, could you also bring me a steak sandwich? Medium rare.”

Now she looked at me for the OK. A beer is one thing; food is another. I pondered my answer for a moment, and glanced at her legs. Rather nice legs. That was a good enough sign. “Sure, put the sandwich on my tab, too. Sheldon, I thought you ate supper.”

“Oh, that was hours ago. And I shouldn’t drink on an empty stomach. Us old men have to be careful, you know.”

What does he mean 'us old men'?

* * * *

“Aha! So Rodney is also a vampire.”

Sheldon looked mildly annoyed. “Of course he is. Did I give any indication that he wasn’t?”

“No, but...”

“Well then stop making such obvious statements. Now where was I?”

“Drinking beer.” On my tab I might add.

“Here’s your steak sandwich, Sheldon.” Nancy placed the plate before him, smiling away. “Do you want sour cream on your potato?”

“Yes, please. Make it two scoops and add some of those bacon bits as well.”

I couldn't believe that he lived as long as he did eating food like that. Perhaps there is hope for me after all.

“Sheldon, this vampire you are talking about, doesn't seem much like, well, Dracula.” Nancy placed one knee on an empty chair and leaned on our table towards Sheldon. “Like he’s small, rather unimposing, wears glasses, and sleeps under an electric blanket. And he eats macaroni and cheese.”

“That may be so, but since vampires were people of all walks of life before they became victims, shouldn't they represent all types of people as well? As for his diet he needs to feed off others, that is true. But that would not be his only source of nourishment.”

The trouble with Sheldon is that he could make preposterous situations seem quite reasonable. But there was something missing in his story. “What about a coffin. Don’t vampires sleep in coffins?”

“Well, at one time they did. And there were several reasons for that. One, it provided protection against sunlight. Two, it offered refuge from intruders. When a vampire sleeps, which is not sleep so much as hibernation, they are rather defenseless. People are rather superstitious about opening coffins so they became good hiding places. And lastly the coffin provided some warmth for the vampire. They have trouble maintaining body heat and during periods of inactivity such as sleep they lose body heat easily. Incidentally, the reason vampires are pictured with a cape and high collar is also for warmth. The collar protects the neck from the chill air and the cape acts like a second coat.”

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“What about the glasses? And why were the eyes golden?” I notice the beer mugs were empty. “Nancy, why don’t you bring a jug? This may take awhile.”

“He was near-sighted, that’s why he wore glasses. Though they didn’t fit too well. But their eyes shone golden simply because of pigmentation. They’re very good in seeing in the dark and like most creatures that can see well at night, their eyes would reflect what available light there was and that gave the appearance that they glowed.”

Nancy stood up. “So he had good night vision. That would be handy in some of the bars around here. But it’s hard to picture a vampire needing an electric blanket.”

“Well, as matter of fact there was another reason he didn’t sleep in a coffin.”

“What was that?”

“The poor guy suffers from claustrophobia.”

Chapter Two

The streetlights reflected back by the wet streets of Saint John. Though it had stopped raining hours ago the saturated air refused to accept any more moisture and the puddles of water remained behind. A lonely figure walked quickly through one of them towards home. With a turned up jacket collar, he had thrust his hands inside the pockets and had hunched up his shoulders. Still, perhaps in part of his small frame, he could not keep warm, and the occasional shiver ran through him. As he walked he would sometimes dart out a hand to push up his black-framed glasses as they slid down his nose.

The evening proved uneventful and he was anxious to make himself something to eat when he returned to his apartment. The chill air, with the weak smell of the ocean, had caused his hunger to mount. He was reviewing what was in his cupboards when he heard the laughter. At least two men by the sound of it. He rounded the final corner of his journey and the voices became much louder. He looked up and saw two young men approaching him. As they angled down the sidewalk, obviously suffering the effects of alcohol, they boomed out hearty laughs after each comment they made.

Unfortunately for him the type of people who lived in his neighborhood were not always the best of character. He started to hug the brick wall as they approached to allow them to pass. Now they noticed him, sized him up for a moment, and relinquished part of the sidewalk as they passed, lowering their voices marginally as well.

Relieved that they were not troublemakers, he hurried on his way to his third-floor walkup. When you stand only about five foot six it was not easy to avoid confrontations. He was certain he could have handled the men without too many difficulties but the fewer incidents, the better.

In his apartment he first secured the door and then turned on the stove. A few minutes later he had prepared macaroni and cheese along with a hot dog wiener. He sat down at the kitchen table, the only table in the apartment in fact, and wolfed down his supper. A

few minutes later the plate sat in the sink as he undressed for bed. He secured the bedroom door, climbed into bed, and set the electric blanket on low. Sleep came easily to him, as usual.

Day break came to the good people of Saint John, and many of them were waking up or were already on their way to work. But in a small apartment bedroom a figure would sleep throughout the day. Actually you would have to look very carefully indeed to detect any breathing at all. Only the slow and shallow rise and fall of his chest indicated that Rodney was still alive.

* * * *

An hour after sunset, there was a stirring in the apartment's bedroom. The window effectively blocked sunlight from entering the room by a combination of aluminum foil and plywood, therefore Rodney depended on his biological clock as well as a clock radio, to inform him it was time to rise. He yawned, stretched, and gradually found his way to the door, and unlocked it.

Tea and toast. He had his usual breakfast as he listened to radio. Nothing much, except an appeal by the Red Cross for blood donations. He would pass on that.

"What is your blood type, sir?"

"Whatever type is available."

He took a quick shower, dressed, and headed out the door.

The sky shone clear, making it a nice change from the last three days of light rain. Still, the air felt cool, and he felt the need to hurry to work to avoid being outside longer than necessary. His path took him towards downtown and as he entered within the areas of restricted parking and heavier traffic he encountered a few others traveling down the sidewalks. He shied away from a group of young men standing outside a pizza joint. Probably too young to gain admittance to a bar, they would hang out in places they could get in if they had enough money. Individually they were not much of a bother. But in a group they had a tendency to exert their influence, usually on someone small such as himself. So he found himself skirting the outside of the sidewalk. He heard a comment made about him, superior hearing allowing him to overhear conversations, and he quickened his steps. Fortunately there was not a follow-up action to the remark, the wisecrack not made seriously. Still Rodney was always on guard, trying to avoid confrontations whenever possible. When it wasn't feasible, he was more than capable of defending himself. Vampires had a few advantages over others. They had higher

degrees of smell and hearing, better night vision, faster reflexes and strength out of proportion to their size. Which was great in most circumstances, but might not suffice against a group. Especially if one of them had a weapon. And the last thing a vampire needs is situations where police might be involved. A daytime visit might be required to a police station or a courthouse.

So he mentally breathed a sigh of relief and headed down the block, turned a corner and almost tripped over a dog that was leaving a territorial mark. The canine looked at him, sensed something strange about him and hurried away. Many dogs acted that way to him. Some attacked while others thought of him as one of their own and would tag along with him throughout the night. Cats were better. They usually just ran away.

Halfway down the block two women were approaching him. He straightened up and slowed his pace a bit, not from the vampire aspect but from the nature of a man drawing close to attractive women. They were talking in low voices, sharing a joke as they giggled at a comment. Both were good-looking in different ways and were dressed for an evening of socializing. Their coats hid most of their clothes but the brunet was wearing tight jeans, while the lady with lighter hair wore a short skirt. The taller brunet was slim but was well endowed at top; her companion had a more hourglass figure and it was her that triggered a sudden change in his breathing.

Rodney looked at the legs, enjoying the sight and then looked up at her face. She was looking at him and he felt a moment of awkwardness, but only a moment. She had a lovely face that froze his eyes to her. As they passed she smiled, he smiled back, and he found his heart racing. He turned to watch her as they walked away and a feeling almost alien to him washed over him, a feeling a predator normally doesn't feel towards prey. His teeth started their outward journey but when he focused his thoughts on going to work they slid back to their hiding place.

Twenty minutes later he entered the side door of a three-story building with a key marked 'Do Not Copy' and went to a small door by the elevators. Inside the room was an assortment of mops, pails and cleaning supplies. Hauling them out, he proceeded to his circuit of wiping, cleaning, emptying and otherwise restoring the offices to their former state. A few hours later he finished, and now he replaced the items back in the closet. He opened his bag lunch, ate his sandwiches and then left the building. It was time for a vampire to do

what he had to do to live and this time he didn't worry if his fangs started to expose themselves a bit.

* * * *

Sheldon refilled the beer glasses, picked his up, drank most of it in one long swallow and then refilled his glass. It was amazing what he could consume; he not only had a second supper with the steak sandwich but also out-drunk me two to one. All the while telling his story. His jaws must be working overtime.

"This vampire had a job as a caretaker? Not quite the image I had of them."

"There's nothing wrong with being a caretaker!" One thing with Sheldon was that he was a bit unpredictable in reaction to offhand comments. Sheldon's raised voice caused a couple at a nearby table to glance in our direction. "I'll have you know that I know a number of people who are caretakers, and they are fine, educated people. Furthermore..."

"That's not what I meant." I waved my hands at him as he slowly increased the volume. "I was just surprised he worked at all. I thought that he might be independently wealthy."

"And that he lived in a castle?" Sheldon's outburst disappeared as rapidly as it appeared. His face was already losing its red color, and his body relaxed back into his chair. In a quieter, mater-of-fact voice Sheldon continued. "Really, you must realize that just about everyone needs some income. There aren't too many rich people who don't have to work and few of them are vampires."

Which implied that there were some vampires who were rich but I decided to let that go. "So why did he choose to be a caretaker?"

"Well, Rodney, he had to have an income somehow and very few jobs require only night work. Dayshifts are obviously not a consideration. The second problem is that he does not have proper identification. Simple things like a driver's license, credit cards, bank accounts all require social insurance numbers. And the government does not easily hand out such numbers to people 187 years old."

"And being a caretaker gets around this problem?"

"Yes, first it is a night job. Second, he works under a contract, eliminating much of the normal identification information required by employers. He set up a bank account using false ID. He is a bit nervous about the income tax people asking questions but so far they haven't been too demanding. Just a few letters requesting more information."

Nancy came by in time to hear the last bit of the conversation. After refilling Sheldon's glass she joined into the question period. "What about other things like credit cards?"

"None of that. He really doesn't exist to any consumer credit companies. The government wouldn't know anything about him except for paying some taxes. When and if they start getting too close he will simply disappear, like he has a dozen times before by moving to another city."

"Doesn't he get kinda lonely?"

"Of course. No friends, though he does make a few acquaintances. The dilemma vampires face is that a solitary existence is the safest one for them. But how long can people live without company?"

"Can't he live with other vampires?" I drained the rest of my beer, and picked up the pitcher to refill it.

Sheldon held out his glass for a refill. Where does he put it? "No, vampires are too territorial to tolerate other vampires. Sometimes a couple will live together for a while but the relationship would be tedious. The nature of the vampire to feed on members of the opposite sex would cause jealousy. Vampires are predators and like most predators, they do not like competition."

"You said vampires prefer members of the opposite sex. Why would that be? Blood is blood, isn't it?"

"Well, not to Rodney. Let me explain by an example."

Chapter Three

Rodney moved quietly down the streets. The hunt was on, and his metabolism started to switch to a higher mode. His breathing became deeper, the senses keener. Soon he found himself in familiar territory, just outside the downtown area. He waited a short distance from a convenience store, and observed the people entering and leaving. He ignored the young men that entered left as a group. A couple came and left quickly, probably to pick up cigarettes. He waited for a lone person this time, not wanting to expend too much effort for this feeding by having to overpower two people. A single woman drove up and jumped out of her car. He moved across the street and waited by the outside of the building. The young blonde paid at the counter and headed out the door.

She saw him. He looked into her eyes. She hesitated a moment, the golden eyes holding her...then Rodney disappeared, watched her looked confused, and get into her car. . Rodney watched the car turn the corner and then continued to watch the store. She would have been fine, but as she came closer he could smell alcohol on her breath. He didn't like to feed on blood that wasn't healthy. Now a new car drove up. A woman in her thirties stepped out of her Honda and hurried into the store. The clerk looked at her as she came in and offered her a greeting as she approached him.

"Hi, could you tell me where you keep something for upset stomachs?"

"Just over there." He pointed with his arm. "At the far end aisle." Like most of the customers in the store she could locate milk, pop, magazines and cigarettes, but little else.

"Thanks. My daughter ate too much candy or cake at her friend's birthday party." She walked quickly to the area indicated to her, made a selection of pink fluid, and after a moment of hesitation, also picked a bottle of ginger ale. Two minutes later she paid for the items and left the store.

He was standing by her car, and she slowed her walk as she came closer. He was small in stature and did not pose a serious threat. Still, she felt a bit apprehensive as he approached. Until she looked at his eyes, golden eyes that held her gaze. Suddenly she understood, and opened the passenger door for him. She stepped into the driver's seat and drove out of the parking lot.

He guided her down unfamiliar streets, leaving the heavier traveled roads to a quiet one that wound its way past some residential areas before coming to open fields. The rural area had the look of unsuccessful farming; the pasture did not seem to be able to support either animals or crop. A bit farther down the road he directed her to park by a small grove of trees.

“It’s getting really warm in here.”

“Take off your jacket. It will be cooler.”

She slipped off her jacket, still feeling the warmth that came from within her. Her breathing increased as he started to move his hands up and down her thighs and then began to kiss her neck. She closed her eyes, enjoying his touches. In the back of her mind she wanted him to stop, knew that it was wrong, but the thought was suppressed. Her skin started to tingle as hands started to move under her shirt and her mind could only focus on how good it felt. She shifted her position and after he helped pull off her shirt leaned forward so that he could remove her bra.

His lips moved down from her neck, kissing as he went downward. She moaned as he moved both his hands and lips over her body, feeling a flush of new heat; she felt more sensuous than she had ever felt before, not wanting him to stop. She started to cry out, urging him on as she undid her jeans and pushed them down. She thought she was having the most erotic dream she ever had and wasn’t responsible for what happened. Rodney kissed her breasts and gently pinched her nipples with his fingers as he lowered his head. He licked at her pussy, encountering a problem with the steering wheel that banged on the back of his head when she reacted to his tongue. He swore, wishing he had moved her to the backseat first as she struggled to spread her legs, her jeans and panties bunched around her ankles.

Rodney touched her mind and determined that the moment was near. As her body started to tense up he moved back to her neck, then opened his mouth to expose his teeth to her soft skin. He pushed at her mind a bit more, giving her the final release the instant he bit

down. She cried out loudly as he continued to feed, both of them wrapped up in their own passion. He was careful not to overfeed, and a minute later brought her back to a near normal state.

She was still in a bit of a daze as he helped her get dressed, and he carefully wiped away the blood from her neck. As they drove back to the convenience store he talked to her, reinforcing the story of what had happened.

As she headed home she hoped the medicine would help her daughter's stomach. And she was glad she could help the young couple who was lost, showing them the way to the highway. She didn't remember the woman very well, but the man was unusual. Something about his eyes.

* * * *

"So why did this vampire pick her?" Nancy was becoming more interested in the story as time progressed. Also she was becoming more interesting to look at, perhaps something to do with the beer.

"As I pointed out earlier, vampires prefer people with healthy blood. Rodney claims he can taste a definite difference between healthy blood and that of those who are under the weather."

"So that was why he refused the woman who had been drinking. Why did he take his victim out to the country to feed and what was the purpose of necking with her first?"

"Again it has to do with the taste of blood. Rodney claims, and I have no way of validating this, that blood fed from an aroused victim is much better. He said that trace chemicals make the feeding last longer, that he doesn't have to feed as often if he chooses a healthy female that is excited. I suppose males would provide the same benefit but he prefers to feed only on women. The reason for driving out to the deserted area was for privacy, it wouldn't be good to get caught feeding from someone's neck. The time to drive also allows for him to condition her mind both before and after. The victim believed only that she helped out a couple in trouble." Sheldon finished off his glass of beer and picked up the food menu again. "What are your chicken wings like?"

Chapter Four

Rodney opened the apartment door, did his usual quick glance to see if any intruders had entered during his absence, and then secured the door behind him. He went to the bathroom to brush his teeth, his breath after feeding could be most unpleasant, and then took a quick shower. He turned on his radio and then picked up the book he was currently reading. The book had his attention for a while but after an hour his thoughts drifted back to the events of the day. His feeding had gone rather well, he had received enough nourishment to last him for some time, perhaps a good week or week and a half. His victim had not suffered much, other than a loss of time, and there was little chance of his identity being disclosed.

All that was well and good. But his mind drifted to the lady walking on the sidewalk who had given him a smile. That made him feel good and it brought forth the realization that he was very lonely. His life was devoid of friends, and relationships of any kind did not seem possible. He remembered his own experience of being turned into a vampire. Perhaps he didn't have to force someone to be a vampire; they could still have an intimate relationship. The idea lingered for only a moment before he shoved it away and shook his head at the crazy thought. It wasn't feasible. His world opened the doors to a long life and a body that was physically better than other humans. However that meant other doors closed. He had to learn to accept what he could have and what he could not have.

He went to bed wishing for things a vampire shouldn't wish for.

* * * *

"So are we supposed to feel sorry for this vampire? Of course he's friendless. Who could be friends with someone who wanted to feed on their neck?" I didn't believe that Rodney should expect any better fate than he had.

"Your point has been made by others before. But the problem still remains that people enjoy relationships with others and when that is taken away we have a difficult situation."

Nancy placed the chicken wings on the table and took part in the conversation. "So what did he do? Give in to his loneliness and go after some girl?"

"Well, you will have to listen to my story to find out. But you have to remember the time when he first became a vampire, he vowed he would never do the same to another."

"I gather from the story that these vampires can turn another person only by repeated feedings, right? Otherwise the town would be swarming with vampires." Nancy was asking questions that I would have asked if I had not drunk so much beer. Well I still would have asked them but perhaps at a slower interval.

"Right. Some people can resist the virus better than others. But usually it would take at least three or four feedings within a year for the change to take place."

"Virus?"

"Yes, a virus actually causes the transformation of a person into a vampire. I'll explain that later."

"So why does he have to bite? Couldn't he just not bite people he liked?"

"Possibly, but the urge to bite would be very strong. And when a vampire is aroused, either by hunger pains or by sexual excitement, his teeth move outward. He can't really control or stop his teeth from moving past his lips. And the sight of those fangs is likely to disturb his friends."

"But what if they knew he was a vampire and learned not to be worried by their sight?"

"Rodney wouldn't trust his secret to anyone. A slip of a tongue could be the end for him. A vampire doesn't live long if he isn't a bit paranoid. Besides, wouldn't you be nervous around him if his teeth started to show? Even if you were friends?"

"I suppose so. But it would be kinda neat to know a vampire. And the thought of a vampire biting a neck is a rather alluring."

"That's one of the strange things about the relationship between vampires and people. The victim finds the predator erotically appealing. Many women find the image of being bitten in the neck by a vampire rather seductive." Sheldon shook his head slowly, unable to comprehend that thought.

Nancy laughed as she headed to the next table. "It just shows how strange us women can be." I noticed she was touching her neck with her fingertips as she walked away.

* * * *

“So he would also go to bars to pick women? That would seem easier than waiting for the right victim by the Seven-Eleven store.” I watched horrified as Sheldon finished the last of the beer and signaled Nancy to bring another pitcher. If I drank much more I was going to have trouble walking out of here. Three glasses ago I had decided that I was going home by cab. Sheldon didn’t even slow down.

“Well it would be at first glance. But most people in a bar have too much alcohol in their systems for Rodney’s liking. They also have to be unattached and be able to follow him out of the bar without too much fuss. The second problem is that he cannot frequent the bar too much. Some of the patrons may start to get suspicious when young ladies leave with him on consecutive nights, without remembering what happened afterwards. The young lady who went with him this last time would ask questions on where they went. She would not be able to remember hardly any detail. Perhaps not even what he looked like. And if too many incidents like that occurred you can bet he would be in a difficult situation. People would talk and soon he would be noticed. So his method was to try a place, then not return for a few weeks. This meant he was always looking out for a new place, and new victims.”

“You mentioned something about a virus that caused people to turn into vampires.”

“That’s right. The virus lives in the hollow of the vampire’s teeth. It may also survive in other parts of the mouth, but is transmitted from the teeth during feeding. Usually the body has the ability to kill the virus the first time it is exposed. Most victims after a vampire feeding feel like they had a touch of the flu, as well as fatigue from the loss of blood. However the virus is normally killed easily after the first attack. If a second attack and then a third, or even a fourth attack was to occur too soon, the body would be unable to resist the virus. If enough of the virus survives it attacks the host’s genes, altering them in subtle ways. That is the reason a person turning into a vampire succumbs to deep sleep, the body requires a lot of energy to transform itself. This deep sleep, of course, resembles that of a dead person. The loss of blood causes a pale complexion and combined with a lower body temperature gives an impression of death. Then they awaken, giving rise to stories of the walking dead.”

“So a vampire is the result of a virus? Is there not a cure for it?”

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“Well obviously not much research is placed into this virus. There are other side effects as well. The vampire becomes sterile. Procreation, which is strong in all species, is possible only through the creation of another vampire. I mentioned superior strength and reflexes and also an increased sense of smell. The eyes change so they can see extremely well in the dark; unfortunately they become too sensitive to light and a vampire becomes blind in normal daylight.”

“What about their inability to stand sunlight at all?”

“Oh, there is that problem as well. Also, unfortunately for the vampire, the blood loses some of its effectiveness and the vampire requires a supplemental blood supply to keep it alive. I’ll give you more details on that a bit later.”

Chapter Five

The bar scene was always a nervous place for Rodney. There was a chance of being involved in a fight. He could handle himself quite well but if he got hurt, well, most hospitals did not understand a vampire's special needs. A small-framed man like himself sometimes stood as an easy target for those out to prove how tough they were. So he now felt a bit more relaxed as he checked out the shopping mall. Most people shopped or walked about in pairs. Some in an entire group. He kept looking, munching on a bag of chips as he did so. He looked in a couple of stores but did not see any potential. Then in a women's clothing store he saw her.

The woman who had given him a smile that night. Her hair was shoulder length and she tossed it as she held up a dress to her girlfriend and laughed. She wasn't tall but wore high heels with her short skirt. His heart started to race. He dropped his bag of chips and felt his teeth sliding out of his gums. Frantically he walked away, completely unnerved by what he felt. A minute later his teeth were again hidden and he stopped to rest on a mall bench.

This was not good; he couldn't afford to have feelings like that. Besides his teeth his loins indicated his interest in her, and that hadn't happened for a long, long time. He told himself to stay focused on the problem. He came here to find a victim. He needed to feed, so he better find someone else. He got up and went down the other side of the mall.

Inside the shoe store he watched another young woman make her purchase. She walked out of the store alone. He approached her, gazing at her eyes as he came closer.

"Yes?" She stopped to stare back at him.

Damn! He held her eyes but forgot to send a strong message on what he wanted. He tried to center his thoughts on the task at hand. Good. She started to move her mind to where he could bend her will.

She nodded to his quietly spoken suggestion and headed to the exit doors.

They stepped out into the night air. He would lead her a few blocks to a secluded spot behind an old garage he had used before.

“Patricia! Where are you going?” A man burst through the exit doors. “What are you doing with my daughter? Who are you?” He stepped at a rapid pace. His hands clenched into fists. There wasn't time to give Patricia a message she could use as an excuse. Rodney panicked, and ran. His speed would have attracted attention if there were any people who could have seen him. In a flash he had covered the parking lot. He looked back at the man shaking his fist at him, still standing at the mall doors.

Rodney went back to his apartment. That woman had distracted him. None had ever done that to him before; at least to the extent it broke his concentration. And it had very nearly caused him a major problem. He should have verified that his target was alone. He mustn't let thoughts of that woman distract him again.

He wondered what was her name was.

* * * *

After a restless sleep, for a vampire, Rodney strolled down the streets inhaling deeply the night air. He wasn't trying to pick up a scent though he had done so on occasion in the past. This time he just enjoyed the flavors that the night brought forth and a vampire's keen sense of smell could pick out many subtle nuances. He really needed to feed tonight but didn't feel the urgency yet. If he did fail there was always some food at the apartment that could hold him for a couple more days. When that couldn't sustain his needs any longer, he could always resort to the old standby of raw liver.

That had kept him going for up to a week in the past. But it couldn't give him the proper nourishment that human blood could. Especially the blood of young ladies. The thought sent his teeth out past his gums and he had to suppress his thoughts to cause them to retreat once more. No, his hunger felt more mental than physical this time. He sometimes only fed when he began to feel physically ill. But not tonight. He was going to enjoy this feeding. Rodney didn't consider why he felt this way. A vampire's needs are as complex as any person's. But in the back of his mind lingered the image of the woman. The one with the smile.

He walked down one street after another. Usually he had a plan, a destination. But not tonight. He let his legs carry him where they

wanted. Pedestrian traffic was light since he was moving outside the downtown area. Near a small park he came across a single woman. She appeared to be alone, and moved quickly through the park so that he came up from behind her. He was ready to make his move when he heard the movement to his right. Twenty feet away walked a dog. He looked back at the woman and could now see a folded leash in her hand. Damn! That was close. He didn't want to tangle with a dog. He turned away and headed back up the street.

Old wives' tales tell of using garlic or a cross to ward off vampires. Some claimed a vampire didn't have a reflection. All of this was nonsense. But vampires did not go near dogs. The animals usually didn't like vampires, and were known to attack with little warning. And they were downright nasty when you were trying to feed on their master. Rodney could have handled the dog and then taken the woman. But it would have been more trouble than it was worth.

A block later he came upon a young lady carrying some groceries from her car.

"Hello."

"Uh, hi. Do I know you?"

Rodney quickly spoke a standard line that he used when a mind was ready to accept suggestions. He used the old friend proposal to bring down the subconscious guard a bit more. "Do you live by yourself?"

"Yes. I live alone." She stopped at her apartment door. "Would you like to come in?"

The apartment, a small one-bedroom crowded with furniture and pictures, gave Rodney a feeling of claustrophobia. He lost his composure for a moment but regained it in time to lead her to the bedroom. She stood at the doorway waiting for him to give directions, her face without a hint of expression. The bedroom was not filled with furniture like the rest of the apartment and the large window gave it a more open appearance. Rodney was able to relax a bit more, and watching her standing at the entrance made his needs come forward once more.

"It's time for you to get ready for bed." He waited for her to move towards the bed, and slowly begun to push new thoughts into her head. She responded as he expected, her breathing changing slightly, becoming deeper and more relaxed. She pulled off her shirt and jeans, discarding them on the floor. Rodney was pleased things

were going smoothly for a change. He was working the thoughts into her mind with little effort, the young woman not resisting his suggestions at all. Now she removed her bra, allowing it to drop to the floor. She hooked her thumbs at the waistband of her panties, pushed them down, when he had an unexpected reaction.

He sneezed. And sneezed again. And again. With considerable effort he tried to keep focus on the job at hand. He found her thought patterns scramble, she was losing the dreamlike state where he could control her actions. He started to reshape the thoughts into the coherent pattern he needed. Good. She was back under his direction again.

But what caused this sudden attack of sneezes? A cat? Not likely, he would have felt its presence and the damn thing would have probably attacked him. Cats didn't like him much better than dogs did. He looked around where he was standing when he sneezed the first time. By the head of the bed. He picked up the pillow. And sneezed twice. It was the stupid pillow, or more precisely, the feathers inside it. Allergies to dust and feathers were something he could really do without. He should have taken his antihistamines with him. Rodney tossed the pillow into the closet, wondering how many other vampires suffered from allergies like he did. It would certainly make hanging around old castles difficult. But back to the main concern, namely the young lady who was now lying down on her bed, albeit without the pillow.

Rodney started kissing her neck but she resisted his advances slightly. He could feel her reluctance as he navigated around her mind, pushing here and pulling down resistance as he moved along. Her hands pushed against his chest, a feeble effort to stop the inevitable. He didn't hide in his mental probes what he was, some women found the thought of a vampire seducing them sensual and it did not matter what she knew now.

He continued kissing at her neck and then began a downward journey. He traced his tongue on her chest, and then moved his lips over her breast. She continued to push at his shoulders with her hands but her efforts weakened. Then like a key turning a tumbler in a lock he broke through her mindset. He was free to move her thoughts where he wanted them, the code was cracked and he could do what he wanted without her resistance. As he placed his lips on a nipple she moaned, and her hands lifted from his shoulders and fell above her head, signifying the end to her objection.

Because he was not seducing her in a car or an abandoned building, he took his time. It was relaxing not having to listen or watch for possible intruders. Under his guidance he sent her to ecstasy, holding her at the edge as she cried out. Her body had sheen from the film of perspiration and her hips shifted up as he traced his tongue along the length of her body. Her arms moved about continuously, sometimes her hands grabbed at him; sometimes they touched her own body, and at other times flailed above her head.

It was long enough, his teeth had been tingling for her blood for several minutes. He debated in his mind the best place to strike. The neck was his favorite place; the blood seemed to leap out into his teeth. But he had also fed from the thighs where puncher marks did not show as much, and occasionally from the inside of the elbow. He lifted himself from her legs, trying to decide, when she put her arms around him and pulled his head towards her. She lifted her head to expose her neck. The decision was made for him.

Afterwards, he told her to forget he was here, that she had met a blonde-haired man from Germany. He dressed, and threw a blanket over her. She still smiled in the afterglow as he left the bedroom. He looked at the groceries sitting on the kitchen table, walked over to them and checked their contents. He put the ice-cream in the freezer, meat and vegetables in the fridge. Nothing else was in danger of spoiling so he quietly slipped out of the apartment.

He entered the night air feeling good. He pulled his glasses from his shirt pocket and slipped them into place. The blurs suddenly sharpened into sharp edges of buildings and lights. It was a great night to be alive, even for a lonely vampire. Humming a tune seventy-five years old Rodney crossed the street to make his way home.

Chapter Six

“So is that it about the vampire? I had a feeling you might have killed him during the story.” The story was a bit disappointing, the ending lacked a conclusion.

“Who said I was finished?”

Nancy reappeared with beer for Sheldon and coffee for me. “The girl he keeps thinking about, has a major part in the story, doesn't she?”

“Well I don't wish to give away anything. But you are right that she does make Rodney's situation more interesting.”

Well it was a good thing she had brought me a coffee. It was obvious the beer was affecting my concentration; I had completely forgotten about the girl. I decided to keep quiet for awhile, lest Sheldon starts lecturing on knowing one's limit.

“Sheldon, how do vampires control the victim's minds, does he read them? Or does he just hypnotize them?”

“Well Nancy, initially there is a hypnotic suggestion involved, but what Rodney does after that is to trigger certain emotions. He said that it is like trying to pick up a broken egg off the floor with your fingers. You have to be agile but also gentle. Once he understands the type of thought patterns his victim has, he can guide them into place. He can't actually read minds, he just controls part of the thought patterns and gets some feedback on their emotional state.”

* * * *

Rodney preferred to be unnoticed, privacy was important to avoid detection and possible questions about his lifestyle. Therefore he would change the places he searched for new victims and also alter his route to work. But since the evening he had received a smile from the passing woman, he had heavily favored one particular street as a walkway to work. He didn't think it would hurt to overuse this street but also could not think of a logical reason he would continue to use

it. So what if he saw her again; what possible good could come out of that? Ask her out? *Would you like to go out with me? I promise I'll have you home by dawn.*

Or did he plan to feed on her, on the one woman in all of Saint John who smiled at him?

Rodney stopped a half block from the street as he considered the question. Puzzled by his own inquires into his motives, for the moment he was oblivious to his surroundings. His thoughts jolted back to reality by the air brakes of a transit bus. His heart jumped a beat by the noise and he quickly started to move his feet again. The bus doors opened as he passed by, depositing three passengers. The first two, a young couple, grabbed each other's hands and disappeared. The last one caused his heart to skip another beat; it was the same woman he had been daydreaming about.

He stared open-mouthed at her. She immediately noticed the small man almost coming to a complete stop while his golden eyes peered at her. At first she felt nervous, and then he looked vaguely familiar—had she seen him at a nightclub perhaps?— And as she looked back at him he caught himself and turned away embarrassed. Now she remembered him; he was walking in this area a few weeks back. She had commented to Shelly about his eyes being golden, their apparent size increased by his glasses. He not only looked shy and nervous, but his small stature did not cause one to be apprehensive in any event. She looked back at him as he quickly looked away but after a moment turned back at her and their eyes locked.

He appeared uncertain what to do. She knew how he felt, to look away again would appear rude. And to continue to stare would require him to say something or else he would look foolish. She felt some sympathy for his plight and felt some awkwardness herself at staring back at him.

Normally she did not make the first overture to a man but one of them should say something, and it looked like he was going to have trouble doing so. Already she could see him starting to blush and decided to initiate the dialogue; it appeared he lacked some social skills when meeting people.

"Hello. I think I've seen you in this area before."

"Uh, hi." He could feel blood rising to his face. Damn time to start blushing. The thought caused him to blush more. "Yeah, I walk this way to work. Sometimes." *Why did I add sometimes? Great conversationalist.*

"Oh, where do you work?" They fell in step with each other as the bus pulled away.

"I do work at the Crafton Building. Uh, do you work in this area?" *Stop saying uh, she'll think you're an idiot.*

"No, my girlfriend lives close by, we're going out for a bit to the bar. Isn't it kind of late to be going to work?" She noticed that though he had a small frame, he had an athlete's body. He moved fluidly and if he were to get rid of those glasses, or at least buy a better pair, he wouldn't be bad-looking at all. She still couldn't get over his eyes though.

"I do night work." *Obviously, stupid!* "I'm the caretaker for the building, so I do all the cleaning after hours." He looked at her eyes, and his heart raced a little. He was surprised that she showed interest in what he was saying. "Which bar are you going to?"

"Nighthawks, probably. Shelly, that's my girlfriend, and I will check it out. If it's too quiet, we'll try another spot."

"Well, if I finish up on time maybe I could head over there to see if you're still there. That is, if you don't mind."

"That would be great. What time would you be finishing up?" She stopped walking as they drew up to a walkup apartment.

"Around eleven."

"Okay, I'll be at Nighthawks some time between eleven and twelve. By the way, my name is Irene."

"Pleased to meet you Irene." *You don't know how pleased.* "My name is Rodney."

They parted and with his heart pounding he glanced back as she went up the apartment walkway. Though she wasn't tall her body had the right curves to it. Her skirt was on the short side and he hoped her legs wouldn't attract someone else before he got to the bar. He thought about what had just happened; he had never once considered putting her under his spell and using mind control. That was really unusual. His teeth had started to slip out past his gums but then had stopped there. That did cause him to be careful how he pronounced words but he was grateful they did not show themselves. This woman was causing a strange reaction in him. A part of his mind warned of the danger up ahead. He didn't care. He was going to see this through and to hell with the consequences.

* * * *

"So Rodney, for the first time since becoming a vampire, has thrown caution to the wind. Vampires can live a very long time,

several hundred years, but very few last even a normal person's lifespan."

The bar was now on the quiet side and as midnight approached a few more customers might wander in. But Nancy had everything under control. Tim, the bartender, was cleaning up at his own slow pace, which gave her time to sit down with us. The coffee hadn't had its desired effect yet as I was still under the influence of too much beer. Which was why I had a quick look at her legs as she crossed them, the hem of her skirt rising higher. She should wear skirts more often. Oh well, better be mindful to what Sheldon is saying before I get in trouble for not paying attention to his story. And a rather expensive story at that.

"So what will shorten a vampire's life, Sheldon?" I listened to myself speak, which is a sure sign that I have had too much to drink. "Besides a wooden stake through the heart."

"Really, that old story." He shook his head in amazement. "A wooden stake, an iron bar, a bullet, or even a knife. What does it matter? Anything that can stop your heart and kill you will also kill a vampire. They aren't supernatural beings after all. What kills them, more often than not, is disease. If you feed on the blood of other people you will catch whatever they have. True, a vampire has a more resilient immune system than most people, but there is only so much any body can take. AIDS killed many for instance. The problem many vampires had was that many of their victims were those not high on society's list. For example it is easier to go after victims in the less privileged neighborhoods than in the suburbs."

"What about sunlight? Doesn't that kill them as well?"

"Good point. Yes, sunlight is a risk to them, and will kill them if they are caught in daylight. The morning sun isn't too bad, they can survive that for almost an hour. The rest of the day would claim them much faster. Incidentally, even at night there is a danger from the so-called full spectrum lamps, which while not as powerful as natural sunlight, can cause extreme pain to a vampire."

"So why does sunlight affect them so much?" Nancy took a drink from her coffee laced with GM. She shifted position in her chair so that she faced Sheldon. Her interest in the story, or the storyteller was strong. That was okay because it gave me a better look at her legs.

"The virus, when it changed the genetic structure of the human cell, also causes porphyrias. In this case, erythropoietic porphyria. The cells can no longer make heme, which is an essential part of

hemoglobin, and this is one of the reasons a vampire must obtain the blood of others. Second, the vampire cannot break down toxic precursors of heme. These are called porphyrins, and when the skin is exposed to sunlight, the proteins react. The skin blisters rapidly, and soon the vampire's skin looks like it is on fire. It isn't long before the vampire dies painfully from the ruptured skin."

Good grief. If I knew Latin or had a medical dictionary I might have followed his explanations or at least challenged his reasoning. As I mentioned before he always has an explanation behind his outrageous stories. "How come we never hear of anyone dying that way?"

"Simple. If a vampire is caught in the sunlight, rather than die painfully, they will jump off a building or throw themselves into a lake. Some even carry a gun or poison in the event they are caught out in the sun. And, of course, once they are dead no further skin reactions are possible. And that is the reason we do not hear of sunlight killing vampires." With that he took a large drink of his beer and placed the mug heavily on the table to reinforce that the matter was dealt with. A good storyteller, Sheldon does not allow questions to sidetrack him too long.

"Sheldon, does he meet up with that girl later on?" Nancy leaned forward, she sensed that the story was about to get interesting.

I sensed something as well and excused myself to go the washroom.

* * * *

Rodney hurried down the streets, walking as fast as he could. He would have run but that would have attracted too much attention. It was a long time since any woman took any sort of interest in him. Mind you, a lot of that was his own doing, making sure no one noticed him as much as possible. Women tend to ignore men hiding in shadows. But he felt he was ready now to meet someone. He craved a chance to talk to someone not hypnotized, someone who would like him as he was. He was under no illusions about how far such a relationship could go. She could not find out he was a vampire. And he promised himself that he would never use her for feeding. It was time for a human-to-human relationship.

The bar was not crowded, and he was able to spot her right away, sitting at a large table with her friend and three other men. Rodney felt nervous approaching the group and they were laughing at a joke when Shelly turned and saw him. She touched her friend on the arm

and spoke into her ear. Irene turned towards him, smiled, and then waved at him to come over.

“Rodney, this is my friend Shelly and this is Dean, Mark, Shairos.” She pointed to each one in turn. Shelly said hello and waved her hand at him. She looked directly into his eyes, probably out of curiosity. Another part of him knew that his predator part always seemed to hold the eyes of possible victims.

Dean, on the short side himself but heavily built with muscle, stood and extended his hand. He was still taller than Rodney and the two locked eyes for a moment. Rodney could feel the strength in his handshake; Dean was putting a bit of extra effort in his hand grip. A warning that the lady was his? Showing off his strength? Or just didn't know how silly that was? Regardless, Rodney answered back with a grip of his own and he could see the surprise in the Dean's eyes.

Mark was casual in handshake, barely standing up as he did so. Tall and good looking, Mark looked at ease sitting between the two ladies. Shairos stood up completely, bowed his head slightly, and extended a weak handshake.

“Pull up a chair Rodney.” Mark pointed out the empty chairs at the next table. Dean leaned back and pulled one across the floor from the next table. Rodney reluctantly walked over to sit between Shairos and Dean.

“Wait, Rodney, sit next to me. I want to ask you something.” Irene motioned him to sit between Dean and herself. Dean gave him a dirty look but stood up from his chair, picked up his glass and moved to the new chair. Relieved, Rodney sat down.

Irene chatted with him immediately, the conversation centered on small talk, certainly nothing that required him to sit next to her. He felt grateful for the opportunity to sit next to her, whether it was because she liked him, or to push Dean farther away. This changed the chemistry of the table as well. Mark no longer was trying to woo both women, he sat up a bit straighter and began to talk more earnestly to Shelly. For her part Shelly seemed a bit miffed that Mark was making the moves on Irene earlier and only now turned attentions on her.

An hour later the two women went to the washroom, leaving the four men to eye each other. Rodney could perceive that Dean was hot under the collar. Mark was too drunk to care, and Shairos was unreadable, though he appeared pleased that he could join in the conversation for a bit.

“So, how long have you known Irene?” Dean leaned forward on the table and glared at Rodney.

Damn, this could be difficult. If I tell him I just met her he might not like that at all. He’s looking for an excuse to fight me. “I met her a long time ago and was fortunate enough to run into her again.” Rodney looked away from Dean and spoke to Shairos. “How did you meet Shelly and Irene?”

“We just met them this evening. We invited them to our table, which they accepted. We are hoping they will be able join us for a party afterwards.”

“Shut up, Shairos, can’t you see he’s just trying to change the subject? We spent a few bucks on their drinks, and now he wants to take off with them.” Dean face reddened and his voice amplified.

“Take it easy, Dean, we had a good time trying. You win some, you lose some. Rodney seems to have the inside track this time. Well, cheers to you Rodney. Hope you get some tonight. She sure looks hot.” Mark was sitting relaxed in his chair, the body language belied the seriousness in his eyes.

“Well, to fuck with that nonsense. If he wants her, he better be ready to fight for her.” Dean stood up, his fists clenched. The chair scraped loudly as he stood up, threatening to topple as it slid backwards. The noise caught the attention of the bartender and he put down the glass he held and began to slowly walk around the bar.

Mark stood up as well. “For Christ’s sake Dean, you’re twice his weight. If you win the fight you’ll just be a bigger asshole than you already are. Sit down and drink your beer.” Mark pointed his finger at him as he spoke.

Rodney was surprised by Mark’s defense. Mark was unsteady on his feet but stood a foot taller than Dean, with a heavy build as well. The bartender now stood only a few feet away, ready to intervene. Rodney didn’t know if he should stand up or not. Standing up could be seen as a provocation, sitting there made him feel foolish. He could feel perspiration at his back; he felt nervous and agitated. Is this what he deserved for trying to start a social life? He might be able to control Dean by hypnotizing him but that would require looking into his eyes. That might not work and Dean would see that as an invitation to a duel.

“Why are you sticking up for this creep?”

"I'm not. I'm just trying to stop you from making a fool of yourself and maybe getting arrested for manslaughter. But don't kid yourself, the way to him is through me."

The two men eyeballed each other for another few long seconds, then Dean sat down, looking straight ahead at no one. Mark sat down as well, and looked over to Rodney. Shairos had sat quietly through out the whole affair, turning his empty glass around and around. Rodney found himself slowly exhaling, sweat now trickling down from his armpits.

"Uh, thanks Mark."

"No problem kid. Dean is a helluva nice guy most of the time. Give you the shirt off his back. Except when he drinks. Goes nuts." Rodney was under the distinct impression that Dean and Mark had experienced this problem before. Mark may have been the stronger of the two but it was more his role as a big brother that kept Dean from acting out his threat.

The silenced endured for several seconds, and then the two ladies made it back, much to the relief of everyone. If they had heard the commotion they made no sign of it. A few minutes later they finished their drinks and indicated they had to leave.

"I have an early day tomorrow. It was nice meeting you guys. Thanks for the drinks." Shelly gave a sincere smile as she stood up.

Rodney felt nervous. *How can I get Irene's phone number without reawakening Dean's outrage?* "Irene, would you like some company back to the apartment?"

"That would be nice. Are you ready to go?"

"Yeah." He stood up. "Well, it was good meeting everyone." Mark gave him a thumbs up and a wink. Shairos merely nodded. But Dean stood up, causing Rodney to inhale sharply.

"Sorry about what I said. No hard feelings?" Dean stood up, his hands held limply at his sides. He didn't look directly at Rodney, but down towards the table.

"None at all." Rodney wasn't sure why the threat of violence always caused him to feel uptight. There was no doubt in his mind he could handle Dean easily, yet he remained frightened of him. *It must be built in the programming I was born with, or something I learned when I was still a normal human being. But after a hundred and fifty years you would think...*

"What are thinking about?" Irene looked at him as they exited the bar.

“Nothing. Except that I am happy to have met you.”

“Well I am happy to have met you too.”

Encouraged, Rodney reached for her hand and was pleased she entwined her fingers into his. That made him feel good. Unfortunately he also felt his teeth slide outward. He tried to focus his thoughts elsewhere but his teeth would not return to their hiding place. He hoped he didn't have to try to talk until he could get control of his fangs. Irene drew her body closer to his as they walked. The teeth started to tingle. Out of desperation he used his free hand to pinch himself in the ribs, increasing the pressure until the pain was high enough that his teeth slid back.

The rest of the walk back was better; his teeth did not venture out again and he was able to have a conversation with Irene and Shelly as he walked between them.

After they reached Shelly's apartment they stood outside making more small talk. He was about to ask Irene for her phone number when Shelly invited him up to the apartment for a nightcap.

Rodney sat on the couch with Irene, while Shelly went into the kitchen for the drinks. Irene kicked off her shoes, which lowered her height a bit, and sat on the couch with Rodney. Irene started to talk to him and then swung one of her legs under her. He wasn't sure if she did that to increase her sitting height, or to face him better, but it did result in considerable more leg being exposed beneath the already short skirt. He tried not to stare, as that action might cause more teeth problems.

Shelly returned with three beers and Rodney was grateful for the interruption. His thoughts were going to get him into trouble. The beer tasted good though and Rodney couldn't remember the last time he drank so much.

“I want to see what you look like without glasses.” Irene reached up and gently removed his glasses. She leaned back. “Hmm. Not bad at all. You should wear contacts. What do you think Shelly?”

“I think so. Either that or lighter framed glasses. Those...” She pointed at the glasses in Irene's hand “... are too heavy a frame.” Shelly looked into his eyes and felt it again. That sudden loss of where she was, the fall into infinity. The urge to obey commands lingered at the edge. And then it came, just before he turned away, the rush of warmth that started within her and moved outward. Almost sensual in nature. When he looked away the feeling disappeared. She wondered if she imagined it, perhaps from too much drink.

Rodney caught himself in time. When he first looked over to Shelly his vision became blurred without his glasses. He tried to focus his eyes on her but that effort had the effect of turning on his hypnotic powers and the normal suggestions associated with them. When he felt himself touching Shelly's mind he released her and looked away.

"Well, that's settled Rodney, you're going to have to get new glasses." Irene put on his glasses. "How do they look on me?"

"Terrible. But if you help me pick out a new pair, they're yours."

"I like these. It makes everyone look smaller than me."

"That's why I wear them too. When you're short, you have to give yourself a confidence boost." The drinks they had made almost every comment sound funny.

After a lull in the merriment, he asked them where they worked.

"We both work at Cox Industries. Shelly is the good-looking receptionist you see when you enter the door, and I," Irene cleared her throat. "am the training manager. I'm also the only person in the training department, but nevertheless, the training manager."

"So in what subject do you train?"

Irene ran her hands down Rodney's chest. "Sex education." This resulted in more laughter, a sure sign the alcohol was still working.

Rodney couldn't remember when he had had such a good time, in fact he couldn't ever remember having a good time in many years. But as all good times must come to an end this one did too,

"Excuse me, I have to go to the bathroom." Shelly got up and disappeared down the hall.

Irene still sat on her leg but now she leaned in towards Rodney. He didn't know too much about romance but even he knew she was being amorous. He placed a hand on her knee and slowly moved it upwards in massaging strokes. He looked at her and couldn't believe how lovely she looked. He felt his heart racing and could feel himself growing hard. Fortunately his teeth were not extending themselves past his lips. This was either due to his mental prowess, which ordered his teeth to stay home, or the effects of too much drink. She rose herself to her knees on the couch and looked down at him with soft eyes.

His heart nearly stopped as he stared at her, he felt frozen in time. *Please don't let this end.* His hand was still on her thigh and he moved it upward.

"I won't bite, you know." She moved her lips towards him, her eyes closing.

"I'll try not to." He whispered. His hand slid under skirt, resting on her buttocks.

The kiss lasted not long enough, and too long. He was scared his teeth would jump out at that moment. He darted his tongue into her mouth, fearful of the consequences of doing so but powerless to resist.

A moment later Shelly returned to the living room wearing a nightshirt with a Disney character on it. "Hey you two, don't set my couch on fire."

Rodney looked at her, while Irene was content to lean into him for a moment longer and then sat back, this time with both legs under her. She gently pushed his hand off her backside as she did so. Shelly's nightshirt did little to hide her figure, the cotton clung to her enough to show her off and was short enough to display rather long legs.

"Sorry, I got carried away." He glanced back at Irene whose skirt was still up near her hips. The sight was hard for him to ignore but he turned his eyes back to Shelly. She was just sitting down and had to cross her legs for modesty. The sight of two women barely dressed caused him a serious problem, the bulge in his pants was evidence to that. As a man he was unsure of how to ease this type of frustration; a vampire would simply bite the neck of the closest woman. But he couldn't do that here. Or could he? *Absolutely not. For once I have a chance to make friends, and I will act properly.* He looked at his watch. *Four o'clock in the morning!* "I guess I better get going. I didn't realize the time."

"That's okay, we invited you in. And we don't have to get up until noon anyway." Shelly stifled a yawn. Rodney remembered that they had told the other men at the bar that they had to get up early, but understood that statement as a polite way of dumping them. Now he wanted to make sure that these ladies, in particular Irene, would see him again. "Do you suppose that I could have your phone number? I would like to see you again." He voiced his question to Irene who had readjusted her position so she now sat forward.

"Sure. Here, write down yours too."

The exchange of phone numbers done, he stood up to leave. Rodney had trouble remembering his number, not many requests were made for it. Shelly stood up as well and headed into the kitchen, giving Irene and Rodney their last bit of privacy but called out as she left, "Nice meeting you Rodney. Careful you don't bump into anything on your way out."

Rodney looked down and felt embarrassed by the protrusion in his pants. But he was grateful that his teeth had not ventured out again. Why he didn't know but he was thankful all the same.

Irene put her arms around his neck, kissing and pressing her body against his. If she cared about his erection she didn't let on. But he felt like he was ready to explode. "Sorry about kicking you out. Gotta save some for next time."

"That's okay. When can I call you next? Tomorrow?"

"No, Shelly and I are going out of town. Call me next week." Her arms fell to her side, indicating the good-byes were over.

"I will. Have a nice trip." With that he turned away, trying to look composed about it.

"Bye. Did you want me to call you a cab?"

"No, it's not far to walk. And I need the air." With that he turned and walked away, trying to look cool.

"Bye. Make sure you call."

* * * *

Irene closed the door and called to the kitchen. "Shelly, what do think?"

Shelly came out of the kitchen munching on an apple. "I think it was a good thing you were not alone with him tonight. Good grief girl, you were going hot and heavy on the couch with a man you just met."

"I know, I know. But it's been so long since...well its been a long time. But what do you think of him?"

"He's on the small side, so he's not what I'd call macho. But when he takes off his glasses, he's good enough looking. He's got to dress better, though. Those clothes do not make a fashion statement."

"He's pretty muscular, you know."

Shelly raised her eyebrows.

"Not big muscles because he is kind of skinny, but when I ran my hands over his shirt I could feel lots of muscle. He's really strong. But do you think he's nice enough, not like the creeps I usually end up with?"

Shelly thought for a moment. There was something about him she couldn't put her finger on. "Yeah, he's pretty nice. Seems a bit naive about things." She decided to hold back what happened when she looked into his eyes. "I'm not sure about something, though, so hold off going full board with him right away, okay?"

Irene thought for a moment. "I'll try. I'm getting tired of being burnt."

Shelly climbed into bed, sighed, and closed her eyes. She was a bit concerned about Irene. They had been friends a long time and had gone through different crisis together, mostly involving men. The last jerk messed her up good for a while and she was not keen to see her jump to another unknown so fast. And this one was a bit strange, but why exactly she could not pinpoint. She drifted off to sleep, her last thoughts were of golden eyes that hung by themselves in open space.

Irene hadn't expected to be spending the night at Shelly's. It wasn't a big deal, she had done that before. She took off her own clothes, and put on the T-shirt Shelly had lent her. She slipped under the covers on the couch. She laid awake thinking about him and found that she felt hot, aroused; the shirt was digging into her boobs. "What the hell, it's not as if Shelly would care." She murmured to herself, and took off the T-shirt. Sleeping in just her thong panties seemed the best option tonight.

* * * *

Nancy looked interested; the chance of romance in the story intrigued her. "Sheldon, was he really falling in love? And why was he so nervous with this woman? Hasn't he had lots of women before, even if only to feed on their blood?"

"Slow down on your questions, Nancy." He patted her arm. "Was he really falling in love? Well to answer that question, did you fall in love with your first boyfriend? Or maybe you just thought you did. But how can you tell the difference between love and infatuation? What you have to know is that feeding on young women that you have complete mental control over and trying to socialize with them when they are free to think as they please are two totally different things. He had avoided social interaction for so long he had to to relearn social skills. And the social skills he knows are one hundred and fifty years old. As for knowing women, well let us say he knows how to please them in bed. That is a talent a vampire has to have if he wants a good feed. But before he gets to that point with Irene he has to learn how to treat her as a girlfriend. And he has just now started on that learning curve."

I had a question as well. "Sheldon, why did his teeth retract or at least not expose themselves?"

"Well, the alcohol had some effect on that. It does have a tendency to cause the muscles in that area to relax. But teeth come out

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when he's getting ready to feed, that is when he has a hunger for blood. When vampires are sexually aroused it is usually time for nourishment, the two normally go hand in hand. But the reason they come out is because the vampire is a predator, and the teeth appear much like a cat's claws come out when it is ready to attack. But Rodney in that instance gave a strong signal to his body, despite being very strongly aroused, that he was not in a predator mode. In other words he wanted something entirely different from these ladies. He had never distinguished the difference between feeding and sex so it took a while for his body to retract the teeth."

Chapter Seven

Rodney completed the first floor cleaning, and then dialed her number. He had it memorized the first time he had phoned, but kept the paper with her number on it in his wallet all the same. It rang once, twice and he was getting nervous. He had tried yesterday without any luck, and now for the second time today there didn't appear to be any response. Notions that she had given him the wrong number, that she was avoiding him plunged into his thoughts.

"Hello?"

"Hello, Irene? This is Rodney."

"Hi Rodney, this is me."

He wasn't very good at small talk but managed to ask the appropriate questions on how work was, how her trip went, and generally tried to get her to do most of the talking. That part of the conversation went pretty well but when he tried arrange a time for them to get together, he was stymied. By the time he finished his shift it would be too late to go out.

"I guess we'll have to wait until the weekend to see each other Rodney."

"Yeah, I guess so."

"Well, you don't have much chance of finishing work early, do you?"

"No, well, sometimes I do. But it's more like finishing at ten thirty instead of eleven. That doesn't help much."

"No, it doesn't. But could you finish faster if I came down to help?"

"Sure, the work I do is easy enough to learn. Which evening could you come down?" His voice brightened.

"How about Thursday?"

The arrangements were made and after the call Rodney went happily back to work.

* * * *

Shelly got a call from Irene shortly after she had talked to Rodney and filled her in on the details of the dialogue. Irene seemed quite happy about the call and looked forward to Thursday evening's rendezvous.

But Shelly had some misgivings, partly because of Irene's tendency of falling too quickly for the wrong guys, and partly because of the spooky dream she had that night with the golden eyes. No, there was something more than a little different about this guy, she could sense it. "Look Irene, I know he seems like a nice guy but try to slow down a little. What are you doing Wednesday night?"

"Nothing much as far as I know. What did you have in mind?"

"Humor me a little. I know this tea reader. She's really good. I'll treat you, okay?"

"You want me to have my tea leaves read?"

"Please, I know it sounds silly, but I ..." How do you explain a bad dream? "Well, will you go?"

"Sure. I think they're kinda fun."

* * * *

The woman wasn't that old, perhaps around forty. But she dressed and acted like someone much older. Irene wasn't sure if her dress was part of the act but it didn't really matter. The reader studied the leaves of both women, and read Shelly's first.

"You are a kind person. You're trying to save someone, help someone? No matter, you always think of others. But you are troubled -by dreams." She looked up at Shelly who nodded. "Heed them, but be careful on how you interpret them. A mystery lurks within them. Other than that your life cycle is stable. You will meet a gentleman soon, a couple of months, who may be very satisfying to you." A few other comments were made, mostly of the nondescript nature that made them hard to discern.

She then looked into Irene's cup. "Very strange. I see that you have met someone. Be very careful, very careful." The reader looked up at her for emphasis.

"Why, what does it say about him?"

"Not too much. These are your leaves, not his. But..." She looked at the cup once more. "...He will have a great influence on you if you decide to be with him. Be cautious. He may hurt you without intention, but you will suffer just the same."

"Can you tell me anything more about him?" Irene looked anxious.

"Perhaps. But you would have to bring me something of his. Something personal. Then I could try."

"Is there anything else?"

The tea cup reader gave more indeterminate details, but both women were impressed by her ability to bring out some known facts. They walked off afterwards, talking over the experience.

"I'm glad for you that he called but don't go head over heels yet." Shelly could tell by the excitement in Irene's voice that she was getting her hopes up again. "Remember what the tea cup reader said."

"I know, I know. But we're just dating. And the tea cup reader didn't really say anything bad about him."

"That's because she was reading your leaves, not his. Tell you what, if you can get something personal from him and we take it back to the tea cup reader and she says good things about him, then I will lay off. Okay?"

"Oh, all right. I guess that can't hurt."

"Good, so you will get something personal from him?"

"I will. But it sounds like I don't trust him this way."

"What is there to trust? You just met him. You have been hurt too many times before. This time play it safe until you know."

"Okay. I'll see what I can do."

* * * *

Thursday evening arrived, and the Toyota navigated through the downtown streets. Irene finally parked and then let out a big sigh. She wasn't sure if she felt nervous or excited, or both. But her heart raced as she grabbed the gym bag from the front seat and walked to the building's rear door. She wore old clothes like he had suggested and took a change of clothes along to wear later.

Of course, just because they were old clothes didn't mean she couldn't look good wearing them. The jeans were tight-fitting and worn; there were holes at both knees as well as one on the seat. The white T-shirt had a faded print, some design that symbolized a forgotten rock group. The shirt had shrunk and thinned from repeated washings and when she tied the bottom in a knot, it helped to emphasize her figure. Not that it needed much help to be noticed anyway.

Rodney opened the door to admit her, he was wearing his usual baggy pants of a non-descript brown. His flannel shirt was open and untucked over a plain T-shirt.

The usual greetings were offered, plus a kiss that indicated more was to follow. But for now work was to be done. He showed her how to go through the office areas, while he went to washrooms to clean up. They went to work and around eight thirty stopped for a break. They sat in the empty coffee room, where she drank a Diet Coke from the vending machine and he poured coffee from his thermos. As they continued with small talk Irene got up to look at the bulletin board and then various vending machine offerings.

“Are you hungry? Some of the stuff isn’t too bad.”

“No, just curious.”

“Those are interesting jeans you have on. They look good on you.”

“Thanks. I’ve had them a long time, they’re really comfortable, but I can’t wear them in public much.” She slipped her fingers in the tear in the seat as an explanation.

The demonstration revealed a bit more of her cheek and he wondered if she wore any panties at all. That contemplation and the visual image of her backside consumed his thoughts when he became aware that she had asked him a question.

She had turned her head and was smiling at him, her fingers no longer pulling open the tear. “I asked how much longer until we are finished?”

“Sorry. About an hour should do it.”

* * * *

They worked in the last office together at the end. Out of the corner of her eye she caught him looking at her several times, which was okay. That was what this outfit was supposed to do, attract his attention. But he seemed to react to it more than she expected.

“Rodney, can I ask a personal question?”

“Sure.” He hoped it had nothing to do with him being a vampire.

“How old are you? I can’t guess your age.” Which was true, she and Shelly were stymied when trying to guess. His skin, being pale and smooth, gave no hint to his age. And his mannerisms reflected maturity while his inexperience showed in social skills.

He thought fast. It never occurred to him to think of an appropriate age to tell her. How old was she? He guessed about thirty and then added a few years for himself. “Thirty six.”

“Oh. Well, you don’t look it.”

“Thanks. How old are you, or is that a secret?”

"No, I'm thirty-three. I guess we're about finished here. Are we still going out?"

"Sure, if you want to."

"I'll change then. My bag is downstairs. I'll meet you there."

He stood by the door waiting. He had finished cleaning up, put the cleaning equipment away, washed up and changed into street clothes, and still she wasn't ready.

Then he heard the washroom door close, then the sound of high heels on a hard floor. She walked slowly and appeared around the corner.

"Sorry if I kept you waiting. It takes us ladies longer to get ready sometimes."

"That's okay, the wait is worth it." Which was true. She had reapplied makeup, altered her hair slightly and put on a semi-transparent top. The tight skirt almost reached her knees and had a slit at the front.

They went to her car. "Where to?"

"Go up to the light, turn left and go straight for a mile or so." As she swung out on the street, he noticed her perfume. It reminded him of someone from long ago. It wasn't the same fragrance, just the fact she wore it. "You smell nice. What's the name of your perfume?"

"Tresor. A friend gave it to me." She stopped at a set of lights. "Excuse me, it's a little hard to operate these pedals." She lifted up herself up, and pulled up on her skirt.

Rodney did his best not to gawk, keeping his eyes up as much as possible. But he did notice her bare legs, the slit in her skirt exposing them almost up to her crotch.

* * * *

Irene wasn't certain if she just happened to dress right, or if Rodney had picked a location that was appropriate to how she dressed. But the nightclub was perfect and had the right food menu for her appetite. They shared a bottle of wine together and talked. Talked about many things and found they enjoyed each other's company immensely. She suspected he was coming off a bad relationship, judging how eager he seemed for her company. She found she could learn little about his past, questions brought forth vague replies and a change of subject. Sometime before the dessert, and during the second bottle of wine, he kissed her deeply. After that time meant nothing to them. She looked into his golden eyes, normal

size now that he had removed his glasses, and found that she trusted him.

As the waiter was bringing back the change, she leaned into him, relaxed. Irene felt his hand move up her thigh again, to rest as high as the slit would allow. His light fingers aroused her and she reminded herself that it would still be too soon to go to bed with him. She hoped he wouldn't persist too strongly; her resistance was getting weaker.

But when she let him off at his own apartment he didn't ask twice about spending the night with her. Once he indicated that desire but after hearing some reluctance in her answer, he didn't repeat the invitation. She guessed that he was a bit nervous about the implications of that step and perhaps thought that it might be best that they waited a bit .

"Probably his last affair has made him reluctant for a bit with women." She mused.

She phoned him when she got home, as promised. It made her feel good that he worried about her safety.

* * * *

"He didn't try to sleep with you?"

"Well, yes, but he didn't push it. Which I was grateful for. After all that wine, well, I was on the weak side."

"Yes, we know all about you and wine, don't we?"

She laughed. "I can't help that. Anyway, I'm going to see him on Saturday."

"You didn't get an item from him, did you?"

"No, I didn't even think of that. And there really were no personal items I could get anyway. If I have a chance to, and if I remember, I will."

"Well, I am impressed he didn't try harder to bed you. But be careful, please."

"Don't worry. I think he really is special, unlike any other guy I've met before."

* * * *

Saturday evening found a nervous vampire phoning his girlfriend. He kept expecting the phone to ring without answer but on the second ring it was picked up. He wondered to himself what made her go out with him, he always thought of himself peculiar looking with his pale skin. But he decided that wasn't for him to figure out, and to be thankful she dated him.

They decided to meet at a small bar that served good food then plot the evening from there. He wore his usual baggy jeans and long-sleeved shirt. She came in a few minutes late, which didn't surprise him, wearing black stretch pants and a short yellow top. As it turned out, the steak sandwiches were excellent though she did wonder how someone could eat a very rare steak.

"It's an acquired taste. More beer?" The dark beer went down quickly during the meal, and after that he bought shooters, to toast their relationship. By that time it was getting too late to start looking for another place to go.

"We could go back to my place, if you like. There's a James Bond picture I haven't seen on TV tonight."

Lacking a better alternative they headed to her house, a small home that she had rented at a good price. On the way they stopped for more beer and chips. The movie had been on for half an hour by the time they turned the set on but it didn't take long to get up to speed on the plot.

More beer and chips were consumed by the time the show ended, and both were in a good mood as they channel surfed, coming to stop at an old western.

"Isn't it cruel what they do to those poor calves?" Irene watched the calf being lassoed and then branded.

"Naw. They don't mind too much."

"Oh sure, how would you like that happening to you?" She elbowed him in the ribs for good measure.

"Well that's different. But I could demonstrate on you that it isn't all bad."

She turned to face him. "What do you mean by that?"

"I'll give a five second head start, then I'm going to catch you, tie you up, and then brand you. Or its equivalent."

"You wouldn't..."

"One."

"...Dare."

"Two. Three." He took off his belt.

"That's not..."

"Four. Better run while you can."

She took off running down the hallway. "...Fair."

"Five. Here I come." He walked down the hall.

Irene considered locking herself in the bathroom, but that meant if he could find a way to unlock the door, she would be trapped. And

if he couldn't open the door, the game would end, ending any fun. She wasn't really concerned what he would do when he caught her. So she ran to the bedroom, thinking she could make a dash for the door again by running across the bed.

He entered the room with her on the far side of the bed. He moved towards where she was standing and then, as expected, she made a dash over the bed and to the door. She reached the hallway when she felt his hand pull at her waist. She carried on, breaking the grip. But in the living room he caught her again, one hand on her waist and the other on her leg. She made a low level scream as he gently allowed her to tumble to the floor.

She ended up on her side and when she tried to push him off with her free hand, felt the belt loop around her wrist. She tried to tumble away but her efforts were hampered by the coffee table. He turned her on her back, grabbed her other hand and put that through the belt loop as well and then wrapped the rest of the belt around them. The knot felt rather loose and she felt she could have slipped out of them without too much problem. She decided to give just a modest struggle anyway, just so he knew she wasn't giving in too easily.

"Now what are you going to do?"

He held her arms above her head with one of his and sat on her, looking at her. He looked like he was trying to read her mind, on what to do next, and in truth he was trying to read her emotional level to find if he could continue.

"I think I will relieve you of some of your garments."

"Excuse me? Remove my clothes?" She wiggled a bit more under him, and then relaxed again.

The yellow top had already slipped up to her bra during their struggles and now he eased it up with his free hand. He slid the top up to her hands.

She took in a deep breath and looked down at her bra, noting the sheer lace wasn't hiding much of her breasts and her erect nipples.

He began to circle his hand underneath her, feeling along the bra strap.

"That may take you awhile. The hook is at the front." She didn't want to make it too easy for him but his hand felt uncomfortable underneath. She also knew that by telling him where the hook was she gave him tacit approval to continue.

With a bit of effort using only one hand he managed to open the front, and then he pulled the bra up her arms as well. Still holding her

wrists he kissed her quickly on the lips and then lightly kissed each of her nipples as well.

She knew he was strong but it still surprised her when he easily slid her to a new position on the carpet.

“What was that for?”

“I’m getting tired of holding your wrists, so...” He picked up the edge of the coffee table and lowered one of the legs between her wrists. “... I’m going to let the coffee table leg do it for me. “Now I can concentrate on other matters.”

“Which would be?”

“Removing more of your clothes.”

“Oh, sure take advantage of a helpless lady.”

He undid the zipper of her pants and then slowly pulled them off, taking his time looking at her legs as they were revealed.

“Now what are you thinking about? You have me tied up and undressed.” She looked up at him staring at her, his mind obviously working at something. “Is there anything else?”

“Well, you still have your panties on.”

“Believe me, there’s not much to them.”

“I believe you. Don’t go away.”

“Hardly.” She watched him go to where the phone was. He looked through a small basket holding pens, scissors and other small hardware. He found what he was looking for and returned.

“Turn on your side.”

“Why?”

“Time for your branding.”

“My what!?”

He held up a red felt marker. “Your branding.”

“What are you going to put there? What if it shows?”

“I’ll put it where it won’t. Turn on your side, or better still, your stomach.”

“And if I don’t agree to this branding?”

“I’ll leave you tied up all night long.”

She rolled on to her stomach and he noticed her panties were the thong type, which took away his attention for a moment. He set to work at drawing a large heart, shading the inside with the pen. She twitched from the movement of the felt pen, disturbing a line. “Hold still.”

“And if I don’t?” She wiggled her hips a bit.

"Then this." He smacked her on her cheek lightly twice. "Now hold still."

"Yes, Mr. Cowboy."

He finished the heart, then on the outside of the figure he wrote their names.

"Done."

"Good. Are you going to let me go now?"

Without answering he turned her over and pulled off her panties. He started kissing her neck, and then moved down until he reached her knees. He lingered at her breasts, stomach, hips and thighs. Then he returned to the space between her legs, his tongue licking at her pussy. Her moans and crying out became more frequent. He reached into her mind, helping to release the correct pattern, but was careful that she did not feel his presence. "Do you want me to stop and untie you?"

"Whatever. Do whatever you want, but don't stop." She panted out her response. Her hips and chest lifted up and down as she spoke.

He lifted up the coffee table to release her wrists, but didn't remove the belt holding them together. He then removed his own clothes and prepared to have sex without his fangs for the first time in a long, long time. His fangs had surfaced a few times during the evening but had quickly withdrawn each time. And though he had tried normal intercourse a few times since becoming a vampire, out of curiosity to see if the plumbing still worked, this was the first time he had done this to anyone he cared about since Rose-Marie. He felt like a born-again virgin.

Rodney was a vampire, and one thing a vampire becomes very good at is the art of making love. It is both a learned technique and a skill that comes from being able to read other people's emotions. Irene never believed that sex could be like that and later that night she knew she was falling in love, if not for the sex alone.

"You're going to stay the night?"

"I want to. But I can't. The sun in the morning is too strong and I will get very sick if I stay." He went to explain that he had a skin condition that couldn't take sunlight very well. She accepted his explanation rather well he thought, probably something to do with the amount of drinks they had.

"Then how about if I stay tonight at your place?"

"Well, I suppose so. If you will do what I ask."

"Which is?"

He grinned. "You'll find out."

* * * *

Irene left his apartment in the morning, amazed that she didn't wake him when she left. She put a note on his door and then quietly exited. She also took something extra, his shirt to wear back home. When they had left her place he would only let her wear her bathrobe, which was meant to be more revealing than concealing. Last night with the liquor in her it had seemed to be a fun thing to do, even when he pulled the top down and exposed her breasts. It was a good thing there wasn't any traffic at four in the morning. She giggled at the memory of herself going up to his apartment.

He had checked first that there was no one around. Then he opened her car door and made her stand while he tied her hands behind her back with the belt from the bathrobe. She had to walk to his apartment with her robe fluttering open. And then the sex after that, well she couldn't believe all the pent up frustration she must have had to explode like that. That felt fun at the time, but now she rejoiced that the shirt was on the long side as she walked barefoot to her car.

* * * *

"That was a rather interesting way to have sex for the first time." Nancy addressed the question to Sheldon as a statement. But she clearly expected an answer as if it was a question.

"I believe you may be referring to when Rodney tied up his girlfriend."

Nancy considered her words before answering. "Well, we all like different things. And it's nothing I haven't heard of before." She blushed. "I didn't say I get tied up for sex."

"Well that certainly is none of our business anyway. But for Rodney, to be a vampire is to command the other person. He is the one who must be in control, complete domination is essential. This is easy most of the time as we have seen in the past. So we have a situation where Rodney now associates sex with this act of dominance. And when he had sex with Irene, whom he did not want to exert mental control over, he tried to dominate her in other ways."

"Does that mean that every time Rodney is going to have sex with her, he has to tie her up?"

"No, he will learn that sex isn't just about dominance, but about love. But give him time, he's new at this game."

I took a quick swallow of my coffee, found it cold, and tried to remember when Nancy had poured it last. Still too much beer in the

system. I did have a question, though. “Tell me, Sheldon, why did she allowed herself to tied up?”

“Well, for one it was just a game to her. On the conscious level it didn't mean being dominated. But in her previous relationship she had to do all the work, both household duties and financial ones, as well as be the emotionally strong one. She felt she had to care for both herself and her boyfriend. As a matter of fact that wasn't the first relationship where she had to carry the emotional load of a freeloader.” Sheldon shook his head in annoyance. “On the subconscious level she was glad someone else was taking charge. With her hands tied it meant she didn't have to initiate anything, in fact she could tell herself that she was helpless and that he would take care of everything and make all the decisions.”

Chapter Eight

Rodney read the note. Basically it said she would call later, that she would be doing some shopping. He was still feeling on cloud nine as the evening went on and tried to phone her, but got no answer. But he wasn't concerned and listened to the radio.

Irene did phone later and the two met for coffee, both still suffering a bit from the previous night's alcohol.

They didn't talk much but did a lot of hand holding and slow kisses.

"I'll return your shirt next time. I hope you didn't mind I took it."

"Of course not. But I warn you, I like the thought of you naked, and may try to do something like that again."

She blushed. "Well, it was fun for me too."

He didn't hear a negative in her voice, perhaps a tentative yes. "Tell you what. I'll call you during the week to check up on you, but maybe we can get together also where I work. I won't ask you to do any work, but I do have the whole building to myself. And maybe we could have some fun together."

"Sure. What did you have in mind exactly?"

"I just thought of it. I'll tell you more later."

"Something about me losing my clothes, I betcha."

"Maybe. But I hope you won't object in any event."

"No, I trust you. But let's make it for Wednesday and give my body a chance to recuperate."

"It's a date then. I'll phone Wednesday to give you some instructions."

* * * *

"How are things with you, Shelly?"

"Good. How was your coffee date? I hope it was tamer than your Saturday night one. Some day you'll have to give me the details."

"Well, maybe someday. But it was wild."

"Did you manage to get something of his?"

"Yes, I did. But I don't feel comfortable doing this."

"Come on, how can it hurt him? Look, if it turns out there is nothing, I personally will return it with an apology."

"Okay, I'll give it a try."

"Good. I phoned the cup reader and she is out of town or busy, but can see us on Thursday. I made an appointment for seven p.m."

* * * *

"Hello Irene? Are you still on for our date?"

"Sure. What did you have in mind?"

"Well, do you mind coming to the office building where I work?"

"No, not at all. What time did you want me to show up?"

"About nine p.m."

"Okay." A pause, then, "What should I wear? Anything special?"

"Well, if I get to pick out what you are going to wear, how about a short skirt and a light blouse. And high heels."

"That can be arranged. What about underwear? Do you prefer stockings, pantyhose or bare legs with the skirt?"

A moment of silence passed as Rodney thought. He hadn't really planned to be the one picking out her outfit. And choosing what she wore added suspense even though it didn't factor in to what he had planned. It made him feel good though that she was giving him the choice. "Uh, well, how about bare legs?"

"Okay, bare legs then."

"Good. And could you make your blouse of very light material?"

"Okay, you're the boss." She laughed a bit. "I'll wear a camisole underneath. The one I have in mind would be quite transparent."

"Good, I'm looking forward to seeing you."

"Me too."

* * * *

Irene arrived at the darkened building just after nine. The rear door was left ajar. She opened the door fully and stepped inside, then firmly closed it behind her.

"Hello?" She looked around then spotted the chair with the note on it. "Rodney? Are you there?" She walked over and picked up the note.

Irene:

Sorry that I am not downstairs to greet you, but I am busy working on the plans for this evening. Please go to third floor, room 312. A bottle of wine waiting for you.

Rodney

Irene was surprised by the note but the mystery aspect appealed to her. She went to the elevator, wondering what other plans were in store for the evening.

Room 312 was an unoccupied office. She noticed one overhead fluorescent tubing set shone in the corner of the room. As she approached she could see the bottle of wine on an empty cardboard box. Underneath the bottle lay another note.

Irene:

I hope you don't mind this method of putting some fun into the evening. If you don't care for this, call out, and we can do something else. If you wish to continue, read on.

Have a few sips of the wine, a rather nice red I think. When I talked to you on the phone you mentioned that you were going to wear a camisole underneath your blouse. If so, could you please remove it as well as your bra? Enjoy some more wine and then go to room 223.

Rodney

Irene drank a bit more wine, reread the note, and then considered his request. Actually she did find this note business interesting though not the type of evening she expected. She managed to drink about a third of the bottle before deciding she would slow down on her drinking. Having made her decision she stood behind a support pillar to remove her blouse, camisole and bra, before finally slipping her blouse back on.

Room 223 was a mail and photocopier room. The lights were on in the room but not anywhere else, which made it easy to find in the darkened hallway. On the table lay another note and sitting next to that was a plastic cup.

Irene:

The plastic cup contains three liquors; treat it like a shooter. After you consume it, please go to room 202 (it is on the far side of the building). And please remove your panties.

Irene sniffed the shooter. It smelled good, if a bit potent. She noticed the note didn't contain the line that if she wanted to stop, all she had to do was to call out. Apparently Rodney had thought that once she had reached this stage she was willing to follow through. She looked at the drink once more and then downed it, feeling the

warmth spread from her stomach. "Wow, not bad." She went to the next step, lifting up her skirt and reaching up to pull off her panties. She wasn't sure what to do with them but like her camisole, she left them behind as she left the room.

Room 202 was a storage room for old files. Irene found the room rather small for even that purpose, but it could not be used very much. It did contain a glass she presumed of the red wine. Another note awaited her. She drank the wine as she read.

Irene:

Thanks for being such a good sport. The next room is 355, the coffee room. Before you go there, please remove your skirt. I have turned up the heat a bit so you won't feel chilled.

Rodney

She closed the door, just in case someone could see her. She removed her skirt, then checked to see how much the blouse covered. The blouse was just barely long enough to cover her cheeks. Irene found herself growing more excited as each note gave her a new request.

The lunchroom still had its assortment of table and chairs. A white cloth covered one table with two chairs. Rodney was sitting in one chair, drinking a glass of wine. She stood at the doorway. "Well, here I am." She saw him look her up and down, wearing only her shoes and the transparent top. She did a quick spin around, noting he seemed transfixed by her.

"Do come in. Would you like another glass of wine?" Without waiting for an answer he poured her a glass. "I hope you didn't mind the run around, I thought you might enjoy a bit of mystery."

She took the wine and sat down, watching him. "No, I didn't mind that. But what was this bit about me having to get undressed? That doesn't seem to ever happen to you."

"Well, I guess I just thought of it first. I'm starving. How about you?"

"Sure, what do we have for dinner?"

He got up and removed two plates from the microwave. The plates contained take out portions from her favorite Italian restaurant. Along with the wine it made an excellent dinner. Though she felt exposed by what she was wearing, it felt sensual to be eating dinner in the office lunchroom almost naked with Rodney.

After the meal he was quiet, and then almost shyly he reached into a cupboard and produced a small present.

"I have something for you." He seemed reluctant to produce the small box and nervously extended it to her. "I bought this for you. I hope you like it"

"You didn't have to." She unwrapped it slowly, revealing a gold wristband with an intricate pattern. "It's beautiful."

He was beaming. "I wanted to get you something, because you mean so much to me."

She left her chair and hugged him. The hugs turned to kisses. The kisses led to other things. She ended up on the table where they had dinner, the plastic plates and containers tumbling to the floor. He mounted her as she wrapped her legs and arms around him.

"Hurry, the table is killing my back!"

* * * *

Irene's excitement didn't abate when she got home. She sat in her car looking around, wishing the night didn't have to end. She felt the jewelry around her wrist and smiled, glad she had found someone she could trust.

* * * *

"So you can see Rodney is making progress towards romance." Sheldon paused to take another drink. "He's starting to do romantic things such as buying a small gift and preparing dinner."

I saw Sheldon's point, but it didn't seem quite right. "But is it right what he's doing to her? After all she is falling for what she assumes to be a relatively normal guy. He has given no indication to her that he might not be what he seems."

Before Sheldon could answer, Nancy had a comment of her own. "And why did he use those notes to get her to undress? Couldn't he seduce her the way most men would?"

"Good questions. Yes, he should be more honest with her, or at least not seduce her into falling for him so fast. But he is blind as to what he is doing. He is intoxicated with the thought of a relationship and doesn't see the danger in what he is doing yet. As far as the notes are concerned, well Irene didn't mind so perhaps no harm done. But more to your point Nancy, he still is trying to exert control as a vampire. Where before he would use mental powers to get the women to undress he now substitutes written words to send out his commands. As I mentioned before he is learning and it is hard for him to drop his old habits."

"Hmm, the power of the written word. At least she wasn't opposed to it."

Chapter Nine

The cafe was not crowded, but evenings usually found it on the quiet side. The tea cup reader helped bring in some additional business, though tonight she had just one reading to do and that did not involve tea leaves.

Irene passed over the shirt reluctantly, still feeling guilty about the lack of trust it implied. Shelly sat next to her, sipping her tea. This time they drank a normal variety.

The reader shuffled the shirt in her hands, as if searching for a hidden object within it. She sighed, closed her eyes and then opened them again, staring past the two women sitting across from her.

“This shirt...it belongs to a very old man. He...”

“No, that can’t be. Rodney is 36.” Irene realized that she had interrupted. “Sorry.”

“That is okay. But my dear, this shirt is worn by an old, old man. This much I am positive. But let me continue.” She closed her eyes again. “He lives in a world of darkness. Shadows are around him. Ahh. I sense also the color red. Yes, that is very strong too.” She opened her eyes again at her last statement. She then placed the shirt closer to her face but quickly removed it, holding it near her chest. “This is peculiar. This shirt gives me a bad feeling if I hold it too close to my face. I don’t know why. But I can tell you more anyway. This man is very powerful, yes, very powerful.”

“Do you mean strong? He is not that big.”

“Actually, Shelly, he has really strong muscles though you can’t tell from those bulky clothes he wears.”

“No, I refer to mental prowess. Not just his intelligence, but his mental control.”

“Anything else? Is he good for Irene to have a relationship with?”

“Hmm. His heart. Well he is not a bad person, but he is hiding a terrible secret from you, a terrible secret, and he’s trying to run away from a problem. Yes, I see it now. For most of his life he has followed

a path. But he was unhappy with it, so now he tries a new path. This makes him happy, but this cannot be. He is trying to be something he cannot be.”

“Are you saying he can’t change his character?”

“No, it is more than that. He is trying to be, how can I say it? It is like trying to be taller by standing on your toes. You can only do that for a little while. Soon he will have to go back to his original path.”

“What if he doesn’t go back?”

“Not possible, I think. But if he tries to stay on this new path, it would bring disaster to him. Death, perhaps.”

“And the old path?”

“It would be dangerous to be near him when he goes back to his old way of living. Very dangerous.”

“Is there anything else?”

“Yes, well, to him sex is very important. Sex, I sense this strongly, gives him life. That is very strange, but this I am sure is right.”

“One other thing, if you don’t mind. Can you tell me where and when he was born?” This was from Shelly, who kept looking at Irene as each revelation was made.

“Difficult to say. New England, about... well, I feel ... well over one hundred years ago. I must tell you something else. He has lost something a long time ago and now he wants to have it back, even if it costs him his life. Beware if you continue a relationship with him. It almost certainly will result in a tragedy.”

A few more questions were asked, but the resulting answers sounded vague. Irene was beginning to doubt most of what she said.

“I know it is hard to believe what I told you. But I tell you something else, too, to help you believe. He lives alone, and works alone. He has recently bought you a gift ...of gold. His name is Robert, Rodney? It starts with the letter R, in any case. Ask him about Rose-Marie, it is she who made him.”

“Made him?”

“This is what he feels.”

Shelly and Irene left the cafe, Irene nervously rubbing her bracelet.

“She didn’t say he was bad or anything like that. And she didn’t know his age. I don’t know what to think.”

“Irene, she told you to stop seeing him or something awful was going to happen. Look, I know you fell for this guy, but he’s bad

news. I'm not saying he would intentionally hurt you, but you would be hurt just the same. Tell him it's going too fast and say it would be best if you didn't see him as much."

"I suppose it would be best if we did slow it down. I'll talk to him tomorrow night."

"Where are you meeting him?"

"The 8th Street Pub."

"How about if I join you two? I'll give you some support."

"That would be nice. I'm meeting him around eleven."

* * * *

After dropping Irene off at her house, Shelly paced in her apartment. The answer lay in front of her, but still out of reach. She tried to concentrate, but kept seeing those golden eyes and experiencing the memory of falling to nowhere for that brief moment. She went to the bathroom and turned on the shower, stripped off her clothes and stood under the hot water. She relaxed slowly, her mind forgetting about problems.

The sound of the telephone jarred her. She clutched at a towel and ran to the phone.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Shelly. We didn't interrupt you did we?"

"No, not at all Kim."

Kim rambled on as Shelly tried to dry herself with one hand, eventually giving up and letting the towel drop to the floor. Goosebumps starting forming on her skin.

"So if you're free Sunday, come over about two."

"Sure, I think I can make it. Does the baby need anything?"

"Not much, she has lots of relatives. Maybe a blanket or clothes. Well, if you like to get clothes, get them for a child about six months old. I think she has a lot right now."

"Say, Kim, are you good at puzzles?"

"No, but Frank is. What type of puzzle?"

"One from a book I'm reading. I have to determine an identity from some clues."

"What are the clues?"

"Darkness, the color red, very old but looks young, and, let's see...strong mental powers, and has a terrible secret."

"Gee, I don't know. Just a minute." Shelly heard the phone being covered. "Frank! Shelly needs help on a puzzle." The same clues were listed off.

“Shelly? Frank said that if you assume red is the color for blood then the only thing he can think of is a vampire.”

“A vampire!”

“Well, that’s Frank’s guess. He’s usually pretty good at that sort of thing.”

“Okay, thanks Kim. I’ll see you Sunday.”

Standing naked and wet by the phone was chilly enough, but now she felt a new wave of cold sweeping through her, her muscles tightening up to the point where they hurt. Remembering his golden eyes once more she knew Frank was right.

* * * *

Friday at the office went by slowly. She talked to Irene, who still seemed confused about what she should do. Shelly, without trying to sound desperate, pointed out the arguments used before.

“That lady hit on some of the facts pretty good, like his name, and the bracelet. Don’t you believe she’s right about this other stuff as well?”

Reluctantly she agreed. But Shelly had seen this type of reaction before, including in herself. The heart often won the tug of war over logic.

That evening Shelly stood in front of her closet. What to wear to meet a vampire? Perhaps something in a high collar? Well even if she wasn’t sure she considered a different plan. She knew men, and Rodney certainly acted like a horny guy. And she knew what to wear that gave her the upper hand over men at least most of the time. Out came the ‘Phantom of the Opera’ dress for lack of a better name. Before she left the apartment, she went to her jewelry box and picked out a special necklace.

* * * *

Rodney finished up putting the supplies away and then changed into less worn clothes. He decided he should do some shopping and get clothes closer to this decade’s fashion. Closing and locking the outside door behind him, he headed towards the street corner.

Hurrying down the sidewalk, he didn’t pay attention to her until she called out his name.

He turned and looked. Standing next to a car was a woman wearing a tight red skirt with a matching wrap which opened to reveal a translucent, white camisole. The image took his breath away for a moment and he could feel his teeth sliding out.

“Rodney, it’s me, Shelly. We have to talk.” She hoped her voice did not show the nervousness she felt and sounded properly authoritarian.

“Oh, hi Shelly. Sure, if you want.” He spoke carefully so that he wouldn’t lisp the words too badly, the teeth sometimes caused pronunciation problems. The teeth started their retreat slowly when he caught a whiff of her perfume and the teeth started their outward journey again.

“Get in the car, I’ll drive us to the bar.”

He got in slowly, wondering what this visit concerned. Her emotional level was high and he could perceive that her outward appearance belied her apprehension.

She sat down carefully but the skirt still rose up. He quickly glanced at her legs, the top of the stockings now showed and then looked back at her face, lest he was caught taking unfair advantage of her predicament of trying to remain dignified in a bucket seat. Of course he also saw a fair bit of her bust but that seemed to be more of the intention of the garment rather than the result of an awkward position in a car. So he didn’t feel abashed if he was seen looking for a moment. Still the effect of the way she dressed caused him to feel apprehensive and keep his mind from thinking much beyond what she was revealing, which was what she planned.

“Rodney, are you from New England originally?”

He didn’t expect such a question and wondered why she had asked it. Still he could be honest about that. “Yes, I grew up there. How did you know?”

“Irene said that you were thirty-six years old.”

“Un, yeah, that’s right.” Again he wondered what she leading up to but was still occupied with how she was dressed. He stole another look at her legs.

“Are you sure that wouldn’t be one hundred and thirty-six years old?” Her voice blazed at him, demanding an answer. She kept her eyes away from him, refusing eye contact.

“What? What are you talking....”

“What are your plans for Irene? Do you love her?”

“Plans? What do you mean by plans?”

“Do you love her?” The questions came loud and fast as Shelly drove down the road.

“Yes, I love her. But why...”

“Then why are planning to turn her into a vampire?”

"I'm not going to do that. Why would you think...?" Rodney stopped. Did he just admit to being a vampire? Alarms went up as he tried to replay the conversation in his head.

"You're a vampire!" It was spoken as a statement and not a question. "So why wouldn't you turn Irene into one? I thought you loved her."

She finally turned to look at him.

He had almost folded into himself, his hands wrapped around his head, the back bent so that his face touched his legs. She heard his muffled sobs grow louder, almost into a wail. She pulled to a stop at the curb.

"I love her. I would never do to her what was done to me. Never!" With relief Rodney confessed, the secret he carried for so long came tumbling out. "I only wanted some love. I was so alone. Alone for a hundred and fifty seven fucking years. Alone for a hundred and fifty seven God Damn years!! Do you know what that was like? Can you even guess?" He burst into sobs again. He felt her arms around him, pulling him towards her. He cried for a long time, felt her hands stroke his hair as he buried his head into her bosom. She could feel the dampness on her camisole spreading, wondering how long he was going to cry, the torrent didn't seem like it would end soon. She also wondered if she should be holding a vampire like this.

After awhile the sobbing stopped, she felt him take a deep breath and then sit up. He looked straight ahead and then took the Kleenex tissue she offered.

"Sorry about that. I just..."

"I know. You don't have to explain. Here." She handed him his glasses that had fallen off when he was crying against her chest. Now she looked at his eyes, gold mixed with red and remembered the feeling of falling the first time they had met. "Rodney, we have to tell Irene the truth."

"I know. I didn't want to deceive her but I didn't know how to say it."

* * * *

Shelly and Rodney walked into the bar, with Shelly's red outfit getting lots of second looks. They joined Irene already sitting at a table that used high bar chairs, causing Shelly to wish her skirt didn't expose her legs quite so much.

Rodney heard two men, after watching him escort Shelly to sit with Irene, comment, "Some guys get all the luck."

Irene could tell something had happened. Rodney looked like an emotional wreck. She looked at Shelly who only nodded yes at her. They sat in silence for a few minutes, the waiter taking their order.

Finally Shelly spoke. "Rodney, why don't you tell Irene about Rose-Marie?"

A tight smile creased his lips. "Rose-Marie. Yes, Irene, I should tell you about her."

Irene was grateful that he started talking. Judging by the expressions of Shelly and Rodney, even small talk was doomed to failure.

"I fell in love with her a long time ago. She was beautiful. I can still picture her easily. She fell in love with me as well, in a fashion. She was quite eye-catching with her red hair, but one thing that really caught my attention was her golden eyes." He looked at Irene with his own golden eyes for emphasis.

Irene realized she now knew an important clue in his tale, two people with golden eyes.

"Before I met her my eyes were brown."

"How did they change?"

"Well, it turns out Rose-Marie, despite her good looks was very lonely. She wanted a companion. Me. And so she transformed me."

"Transformed you?"

"Rose-Marie was a vampire."

Irene almost jumped off of her stool. She might have run out of the bar but Shelly held up a restraining hand.

"It's okay. He is only going to tell us the truth. He won't attack you."

"She made me a vampire too. But I swore I would never do to another what she did to me." Rodney continued, as if he hadn't noticed Irene's reaction. He spoke without emotion but they could hear his passion at being able to talk about a secret hidden so long. Irene sat down again and started to relax as continued.

The three drank, conversed, and eventually the whole story, from Rose-Marie to when he met Irene and Shelly was told. He informed them about his ability to control others, about his allergies, and just about everything they wanted to know. He even held the crucifix Shelly wore on her necklace between his fingers, telling her that the

cross had no ill effects on him. In fact, sometimes he went to midnight mass.

“So tell me Rodney, why didn't you just make me forget when I found out that you were a vampire?” Shelly took a drink, swinging back and forth on chair, looking better and better to Rodney.

“Because that was what Rose-Marie would have done. And in the emotional state I was in I wasn't sure I could pull that off. I vowed I was going to try to act human with you two, no special powers this time. On the subconscious level I guess I wanted to tell someone, wanted to be found out. And I had decided that if I got caught, well, then I would try to deal with the consequences. If you were yelling to everyone that I was a vampire that would be a different matter. I would do something to save my life, but not just because you found out my secret.”

Irene was wearing jeans and a blouse. She felt underdressed compared to Shelly. When Rodney went to the washroom, Shelly explained to her that she wore her ‘Phantom of the Opera’ to throw Rodney off guard, so named because she bought it specifically to go to that opera. “This suit has that effect on men. They stop thinking for the first few minutes, it must scramble their brains. But I feel very conspicuous when I’m wearing it.”

“I can see why. I feel like an old sea cow next to you.”

“Don’t be silly. You should undo some of the buttons on your blouse. It’s pulling at the shoulders with the top button done up.”

“Oh, sure. And what if Rodney gets all excited again? He’s still dangerous.” But she undid the top two buttons anyway, making her feel a bit better while sitting next to Shelly.

When Rodney returned they toasted to friendship and then left the bar, all under the influence. The bartender locked the door behind them.

“You know Irene, we shouldn't drive. Why don’t we walk to my place and we can pick up the cars in the morning? Rodney, you can sleep on the couch if you like.”

“Thanks, but I can’t, the morning sun and all that. My apartment isn’t far either and you two can stay there if you want.”

“But would it be safe?”

“Honest, I won’t bite.” And the three burst into laughter at the almost joke.

* * * *

Irene woke up in the darkened room. She couldn't tell if her eyes were open at first, the blackness didn't change when she blinked. Then her eyes saw a dim glow from the nightlight in a wall plug. She got up carefully and stepped on a hand.

"Oops, sorry," she whispered. But there was no response. She went to the door, opened it slowly, and found something on the doorknob—her panties. She stepped out, closing the door carefully behind her.

She went to the bathroom, finished in there, and then went to the kitchen looking for coffee. After a few minutes she found the needed items, plugged in the coffeemaker and sat down. The only thing she wore was her panties; somewhere in the bedroom were the rest of her clothes. But how to find them in the dark was going to require coffee. Besides she knew from experience he wasn't going to wake up to discover her sitting without her clothes on. And that wouldn't be a big deal anyway.

The coffeemaker finished its task when the bedroom door opened again. Shelly stumbled out, went to the bathroom and stumbled out again. She was completely naked and didn't seem to care at that point.

"Is there any aspirin?" Shelly startled Irene. "What a hangover."

"Sure, I found some when I was looking for the coffee."

After coffee and pills both ladies were ready for the next problem. "I honestly don't remember taking off my clothes. Are they in the bedroom?" Shelley asked.

"Yes. And the reason you don't remember taking off your clothes is because you didn't. Rodney and I did. Actually you asked him to help you undress, something about not wanting to ruin your suit. Which reminds me, I want to borrow it sometime. He was more eager than me to undress you, so I let him do the work. He even carried you to the bed.

"So he took everything off?"

"Well, I guess so. We were all pretty drunk. It was nice of him to let us have the bed, though it was a bit small for two. He insisted sleeping on the floor. By the way he's naked too. So if you want to take a look at him, he'll never know."

"So you're the only one with anything left on from last night?"

"Uh, no. I found these clothes as I was getting up."

"Did he undress you too?"

"No. I went to lie down with my clothes on, but he stood at the foot of the bed, and ordered me to take off my clothes. Something about all of us should be naked or none of us."

"So you took off your clothes because he told you to?"

"Yes, well, he has a voice that sounds commanding, must be tied in with being a vampire. Anyway, I didn't mind, it's sometimes rather uncomfortable to have clothes on while you sleep."

"So we were sleeping nude last night, together in his bed and he was naked on the floor. Oh, my Lord. Was there any sex? Please say no."

"No sex. But you were sure kissing him last night. Good thing he has will power. And we weren't exactly sleeping together, more like passed out together."

"Oh my God. I was coming on to a vampire. You weren't mad, were you?"

"No, I was too drunk to care. Without saying much Rodney and I both understand that it's over as far as romance is concerned. But let's find our clothes, we can turn on the light and he won't wake up."

"And we can see what prince charming looks like too."

They returned to the bedroom and picked up their clothes. Shelly slipped on her skirt and jacket, and then stuffed the rest of her things in her purse. It was not a good morning to play around with garters and stockings.

"Do you think we should leave him on the floor like that?"

"Maybe not. Grab his feet and I'll grab his arms. We should be able to lift him onto the bed."

After they shuffled him on the bed Irene went into the kitchen and returned with a pen and paper. "Help me turn him on his stomach."

"Why?"

"I'll tell you about it later after a few drinks. But it is payback time right now." She drew a large heart on his cheek and inside it wrote 'Rodney, Irene and Shelly.' "There, help me turn him back. Vampires always sleep on their backs in the movies."

They covered him with the electric blanket, left him a note signed 'your friends' and exited the apartment to go home.

* * * *

"So that, my friends, is the story of a vampire. As you can see they are much like the rest of us looking for happiness."

“These women became his friends? Weren’t they nervous with him?”

“No, Harry, they trusted him, as you trust Nancy not to overcharge you on our bill.”

“This Rodney vampire person, he still searches for women for feeding? Does he ever feed on Irene or Shelly?” Nancy was reclining in her chair, her feet up on the opposite chair. As we were the only ones left in the bar she didn’t have to look out for any other customers.

“No, he doesn’t use those ladies for that. He would be scared that problems could arise. He would rather have them as friends. You see he finally realized he had to be what he was, a vampire. And being a vampire meant he had to give up on having a wife. But that didn’t mean he couldn’t have friends, it hadn’t occurred to him before that he could. They have introduced him to others as well so his social life is quite good. Irene and Shelly are the only ones who know he’s a vampire and keep that a secret. Now, to answer your first question, he still searches for new victims.”

“Well, good thing for me he lives in Saint John. I would be worried if a vampire lurked around here. There are enough strange men without adding vampire to the equation.”

“Oh, well to protect the identity of Rodney, and the ladies, I made up the fact he lives in New Brunswick. It wouldn’t do to have someone search him out for some sensational news story, would it?”

Nancy’s face fell. “You mean he might live here? He might attack me?” She felt her neck.

“Oh, don’t worry. Chances are you’ll never meet a vampire. Of course, if he did feed on you he would erase your memory of him anyway. So there’s no point in concerning yourself about it.”

“You mean to say he may have already fed on my blood? And I wouldn’t know about it?”

“No, you wouldn’t. Well, unless, you experience a loss of time. Have you ever wondered where the time went? That it went by inexplicably fast?”

“No. Wait, there was a time...Sheldon! Tell me the truth, does the vampire live here? Do you know if I have been attacked?”

“Oh, Nancy, really now. I assure you have not been attacked. Well, that is to my knowledge, I don’t know everything.”

I wish I had a pen and paper. I would have him sign a note stating that he did not know everything. First time I heard him admit that.

Night Moves Digest

And so it ended, the three of us leaving the bar, with Nancy badgering Sheldon for more information. She locked the bar doors, imploring us to walk her to her car. She drove off in a hurry and I accepted Sheldon's offer for a ride home. He wasn't actually driving himself; he had a taxi waiting for him.

Fifteen minutes later he let me off. "Thanks Sheldon, for the ride. I hope Nancy isn't too scared to go to sleep." I leaned down and spoke to him through the open window.

"She shouldn't worry. I don't know of any men who are vampires in this area."

"That's good."

"Now, female vampires, that's a different story. Well, good night, Edwin. Sleep well."

"How do you know I use that name?"

"I may not know everything, but I do know a great many secrets..."

The taxi sped off before I could answer. Vampires, secrets...A tiny shudder ran over me, I thought about Sheldon's words, *female vampires, that's a different story*. Feeling nervous, I looked around. Did that shadow move?

The End