

Ritual of Blood

By

C J Wright

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Dedication

To the memory of my grandfather,

Ernest Francis Wright

Forward

I first started writing *Ritual of Blood* back in 2000. I'd always had a desire to write since I was a young child, but apart from a few school story projects, I hadn't really tried to write a novel length story. After starting a couple of ideas for novels, and never getting past the first few pages, the plot for a vampire novel began to grow.

It started off with two main character creations, the Vampire Hunter Victor Drake, and the vampire Lucinda. As I started to plot the story more characters came about, and the plot about a feast that would make vampires able to walk in sunlight, formed very quickly.

I pretty much knew where I wanted the characters to go, but I still let them dictate the pace, I adapted parts of the plot as were needed, and the main storyline remained intact.

It took me nearly two years to get the first draft done, and I was happy that I'd been able to finish what I started. I knew I could write a full-length novel, it may not have been much good on the first draft, but at least I hadn't given up on it, and I had completed my goal.

Wondering how far I could go with it, I thought it would be good experience to see what it took to get it published, no really thinking it would be.

The whole process was fun, but I wasn't completely happy with the end result. I think it's the perfectionist in me, at least when it comes to my writing, whenever I read the proofs I saw where I could write it better, and made some changes that the publisher didn't always implement. Anyway, in 2003 my book was published and in the shops. My second novel, *Killing Time*, was published a year later.

Sales weren't great, and after two years the publisher relinquished the publishing rights back to me. During that time I had written a few things, but nothing that I thought could be published, until 2007, when I started *The Ramton Gallow Mysteries: The Witch of Primrose Hill*.

Once that was done I toyed with the idea of trying to get an agent and see if could get back into the world of published authors again, but then the idea to self-publish my work hit me. After finding how

easy it was with *The Witch of Primrose Hill*, I knew that I could revise and re-publish *Ritual of Blood*. Since it has been out of print there has been some interest in reading it, and a few copies have been floating around on the internet, which have been snapped up by readers. So I thought, why not? Only this time I could make it the way I wanted it to be in the first place and what you have here is the end result.

I hope you enjoy it.

C J Wright
September 2009

Part One

Edgewich

Chapter One

The shadows on the cobbled streets where she was running were frightening her.

Not knowing whether they were her stalker or not, her heart raced as she ran. Afraid for her life, she dare not look back in case her fear was real.

The stories she had heard over the months she had just dismissed as foolhardy tales told by travellers at the local inn. As a barmaid, she was use to the drunken lies told by the customers just to get her into their beds. A few of the other girls had been drawn by these stories, or at least that was their excuse for going with these men. Jessica however was not so taken in. She knew the truth. Whether the girls she worked with believed these stories or not, she knew that tall tales ran wild in the quiet countryside towns, especially in the town of Edgewich.

Jessica ran so hard the muscles in her legs started to burn. The streets where also unforgiving on her feet as her shoes where very thin, she might as well be running barefoot for all the protection they gave her.

She was a very beautiful woman, with her long blonde hair and green eyes; the most attractive barmaid at the Old Cock Inn. Not that the others girls there were ugly, far from it, but Jessica was by far the best. This was probably why she got most of the attention from the men that came in, and why she did not believe the things they were saying. She knew what they wanted.

There were always stories about '*monsters in the fog*', as she liked to call them, and they were always after young, attractive girls. Jessica was sure that she was far too smart to believe anything anyone said, and would purposely find out for herself before she trusted anyone's word.

The latest group of tales however held more substance than the others. The theme of these stories was always the same, and they were not just told by travellers this time; it was solely the locals, men who she had known almost all her life, who were talking about them.

These recent ones had started with the disappearance of a little girl about four weeks ago. By all accounts she was playing by the woods at the back of her home, and as nightfall drew near, her father went out to bring her back in. She was not where she was supposed to be, which was just near the edge of the wood, but her father was sure he could just about hear her playing behind the first lot of trees.

He called out to her, and much to his relief, she responded by saying that she was coming through the sound of her footsteps on the dry leaves on the ground. As she got closer he could hear her talking to someone, but could not see her or her companion yet as they were still too far in the wood.

He felt that something was wrong, so he called out her name again. She called back to him, her voice echoed through the trees.

"I'm coming daddy," she called, repeating the words over and over.

Her voice got louder the closer she got to the edge of the wood, then, all of a sudden, there was complete silence. Not a twig snap. Not a branch sway. Not a bird singing. Nothing at all.

The girl's father waited a few seconds before calling her name again, but this time he got no response, just the echo of his own voice. Panicking, he tried again and again, but still no response came.

By this time his wife had come out to see what was going on, and upon hearing what had happened, she told him to find some help to go and look for her. He went knocking on the doors of the houses nearby, but to begin with only a few people agreed to help him search for his daughter.

It was said that they spent the best part of three days and nights looking for the little girl before her father became too exhausted to continue. The others had taken it in turns, spending a few hours out before being replaced by fresh eyes and ears. The thickness of the woods increased the further they went inside them, and with it the chances of finding the little girl diminished with every step they took, every second that past. Finally the girl's father was convinced to go back and wait with his wife, he needed to rest, and she needed his comfort.

Eventually they found the girl by a small stream deep in the wood, and with it all hope of a joyous resolution. Her blood soaked

clothing covered the floor around her cold, lifeless body, and as they approached her the method of death became apparent. On the left side of her neck and shoulder was a large, deep wound. It resembled a bite, though it looked kind of strange, as if it hadn't come from any known animal. The body was pale, as if all the blood had been drained from her, and even though there was blood on her clothes, it didn't account for the amount she had lost.

They started to carry her back to her father. It was late when they headed back and night had begun to draw in. About halfway back they heard what sounded like another little girl coming from up ahead. A group of the men decided to stay behind and look for the other little girl while the others carried the body back.

Both parents were distraught by the appearance of their daughter. Her father sent for a doctor and the undertaker as he waited for the other men to return from the woods. He hoped that this other girl might shine some light on what had happened in the woods with his daughter all those agonising hours.

The hours passed but there was no sign of them.

The doctor pronounced that the girl died from loss of blood from the bite on her neck and shoulder. He could not say what had done this, concluding, like the men who had found the girl, that the bite marks were from no animal that he had seen before, but they looked almost human.

The undertaker took the measurements of the little girl so he could make her coffin. He hated it when a young life ended, especially in such a tragic way; he always thought of his own children at times like this. Luckily the undertaker knew that he had a coffin in storage that was the right size for the little girl. He told the girl's father that he would take her and asked if he would accompany him to his funeral parlour. He did so.

Not long afterwards one of the search party that stayed in the woods returned, and his pale complexion showed that something had scared him nearly to death.

When questioned all he could say was, "She, monster."

There was no sign on the others; even searches for them came up with nothing.

News of what had happened spread through the town at an alarming rate, with everyone who stopped at the Old Cock Inn as

they passed through the town knowing about it before they had even finished their first drink, and with each telling the story became more and more bizarre. Jessica, however, still did not believe everything about them. That was until now.

*

Jessica had just finished working at the Old Cock Inn, and was on her way home. Local drunks usually slept in the alley next to the Inn, which she had to pass each night, and she usually ignored the noises coming from there as she did so. That night however, for some unknown reason, she did something that she was very rare for her, she looked down the alley.

She wished now that she never had, as what she seen, she knew, would be something that she would never ever forget. One of the drunks was passed out in the alley, which was nothing unusual, but above him stood a dark figure of a man. Jessica watched the figure bend down over the drunk, and even though she could not see what the figure was doing due to the darkness of the alley, she heard the bite.

Holding back her screams was to no avail, as the figure raised his head and saw her. Its red glowing eyes fixed on Jessica, and she knew she had to run or die.

All these things were going through her mind as she reached her home, she didn't think she could hear anyone following her, but she was not going to chance it. She got to her door and as she opened it she took a look behind her.

All Jessica saw were empty streets; relaxing with a deep breath she entered through her door, but as she turned to close it she jumped at the man who was standing in the doorway.

"Hello, could you help me, I am a bit lost?" he asked, pleasantly.

"Y...yes," she stuttered, "where do you want to go?"

Under his long black coat, his clothes made her realize that this man must be extremely wealthy. Even the richest merchant could not afford clothes of that standard.

Jessica thought that he must be a nobleman, either that or an excellent thief. He was tall, about 6'1", very handsome, with shoulder length black hair, and piercing blue eyes. He held a

smallish black bag in his right hand, and his mild voice reassured her that he was safe.

"I am sorry," he said with a smile. "Let me introduce myself, my name is Victor Drake, and I am looking for an Inn to stay the night, I need to get some rest, I have a lot to do in the morning. Could you help me at all?"

"The nearest Inn will be closed by now, but if you want to you could stay here if you like."

Jessica was hoping that he would say yes. She felt something for him, his good looks and friendly demeanour made her feel safe, making her nearly forget everything that she had been through that night.

"Are you sure? I don't want to put you out at all."

Her heart fluttered at his smile, she knew that his company would not put her out, she had longed for company ever since her husband died two years before.

She had married young; he was the son of the town Mayor. He and Jessica had grown up together and had been pretty much inseparable since the age of ten. Parents from both sides hoped that they would be together in later life, and that hope was answered when the two told them that they were going to get married. Even though they were only both eighteen they knew their love was strong.

Their marriage would only last six months, however, before tragedy struck when Jessica's husband died in a fire.

As he was walking home one night he saw that a neighbour's house was blazing away. Everyone was out except a baby in a room on the top floor, and because of the man he was, he ran in to save the child. Even though he made a successful rescue, he was not so lucky. He had breathed in too much smoke, and as he left the burning building he collapsed and never recovered. Hailed as a hero in the town, Jessica wished he had never saved the child, but was proud that he did.

"It will be no trouble at all," she whispered as she looked into Victor eyes.

"Thank you," said Victor.

He picked up a large suitcase, which was next to him that Jessica had not noticed until then, and walked inside.

“Does anyone else live here with you?” he asked.

“Yes, just my father,” she replied.

“Are you sure he would not mind me being here?”

“No, he will be fine,” she replied, hoping that it would be the case.

A creak from the stairs signalled that Jessica’s father was coming.

“Hello, who do we have here?” he enquired.

“Father, this is Victor Drake. He needs a place to stay so I said he could stay tonight. Is that all right?”

“I should think so.”

Victor turned to face Jessica’s father. He stuck out his hand.

“Thank you, mister?”

“Hanson,” said Jessica’s father, shaking Victor’s hand, “Edward Hanson, Mr. Drake.”

“Please call me Victor. You have a lovely home.”

“Thank you, what do you do Victor?”

He stalled in answering; he did not want them to know exactly what he did and why he was there. It was not a random choice that had brought him to them. He knew what Jessica had seen and that he needed to make sure that the situation was all right.

“I am a traveller,” he said.

That was the first thing that came into his head. He knew he looked nothing like a traveller. His clothes, his demeanour, everything about him said anything but a traveller, though it was closer to the truth than first impressions would have suggested. He did travel a lot in his work, but the reason he travelled he needed to keep to himself, at least for now.

“A traveller is it? Well I hope you will be comfortable. Jess I will see you in the morning.”

Edward Hanson went back up stairs. He knew that Victor was lying about just being a traveller; he knew full well what Victor was.

Jessica sat down and asked Victor to join her. He did so and placed his bag next to him. Silence passed between them, and after what seemed like hours, but actually only a few seconds, it was Jessica who spoke.

“Would you like a drink of tea?” she asked, not knowing what else to say.

“Yes please, if it would not be any trouble,” replied Victor.

He liked Jessica, and he hoped she liked him. If he told her the truth he knew that it may hurt that fact at this point. If Jessica did not understand what he was, things may not go the way he wanted them to.

Jessica got up and went into the kitchen. With her gone Victor opened up his smaller bag and pulled it onto his lap.

Inside he rummaged through and checked its contents. The four wooden stakes were on top of a flask of holy water and a crossbow. Under those was a large black book; the tough leather binding the pages had a gold bat symbol inside a silver circle on the cover.

The writing underneath the symbol was in Latin. Translated it read: - *Vampire Hunters Journal*. He took out the book and placed it beside him. Under where the book had been was a silver crucifix. He placed the crucifix at the top of the bag on top of the wooden stakes. Victor then opened the book and started to read.

Listening out for Jessica's return, he read up on accounts of vampire disturbances that had been reported in the area. These accounts were always hidden from the general public to keep hysteria out of the town, out of every town. All accounts had been recorded by the Vampire Hunter sent to sort out the problem. These cases were kept in a library of the Union, the organisation that controlled the Vampire Hunters, which sat, overlooked by the masses, on the bank of the Thames. Only Vampire Hunters could ever read these books. Victor was one of those hunters.

Before he could really start getting into any study, he heard Jessica returning. He quickly replaced the book, but did not have time to close his bag properly before Jessica entered the room.

“Here you are,” said Jessica, handing over the cup of tea.

“Thank you, Miss Hanson.”

Jessica laughed.

“My name is not Miss Hanson,” she said. “It is Mrs. Smithson, well at least it was, but you can call me Jessica.”

“Oh, so you are married then?”

His heart fell at the thought that this girl was a married woman.

“No, I'm a widow. My husband died about two years ago. He rescued a child from a fire but he was too over come with smoke and he never recovered.”

“I am so sorry. I did not mean to bring up such a sad time.”

Victor had wish that he had not said anything at all, but was glad that she was single.

Jessica just stared into nothingness, thinking of her late husband. Then she snapped out of it.

“It is all right, I just miss him sometimes. I have not been near another man since. I just have not found any one to compare to him. Anyway, let’s not dwell on the past. Tell me about yourself?”

Sitting back, Victor took a sip of his tea.

“Well, there is not really much to tell. My father was an undertaker; he died when I was young. My brother ran the business, looked after my mother and got married to a wonderful girl a few years back. As I said, there is not much really to tell about me. I have no special person in my life. I have a private income from an inheritance and well I just travel around a lot. My life is very boring really.”

Victor took another sip of his tea; this one was a lot longer than the previous one.

He looked into Jessica’s eyes he saw a girl that he knew he could love. Victor had not been with another woman for a long time either; he never let anyone get close to him, considering what he did for a living. The last girl he was with ended up at the wrong end of his stake after she had been turned into a vampire.

He blamed himself for what happened to her, a lack of judgement had caused him to make the mistake that got her captured by a powerful vampire called Turic. Though Turic was killed by Victor, the vampire left a surprise in his lair for him to find. Victor had suffered nightmares for a long time about what happened, but that was a long time ago, he had accepted the experience since then. He knew not to let Jessica get too close to him, even though he wanted her to so much.

“Oh,” said Jessica, “so nothing much happens to you then?”

Jessica knew he was holding out on her but she did not want to push him too hard. She glanced at his bag and saw the book sticking out of the top. Noticing the symbol on the cover, she did not want to say anything as she did not want to spoil things between them, but she could not stop herself.

“What is that book?” she asked.

“Do not worry about it. It is just something I am reading.” Victor hoped that she would not ask any more questions of that nature. He decided to change the subject. “Tell me about you.”

She realized that the book was a sore point so she decided to leave the subject alone, and instead go on with his request, and tell Victor about herself.

“Well, as you know, I’m a widow. I’m twenty-one years old, and I live with my father here in this house. I work at the Old Cock Inn, just the other side of the town square and, well that is about it really,” she said, stifling a yawn. “I hope you don’t mind if I get to bed now, I am really tired.”

“Of course, I need to rest myself. Like I said, I have a lot to do tomorrow.”

With that, Jessica went upstairs to get Victor some blankets.

Before heading back downstairs, she stopped outside her father’s bedroom, knocked on the door and waited for an answer.

“Come in, Jess,” he called through the door.

Jessica entered, holding the blankets for Victor under one arm, walked across the candle lit room and sat on the edge of her father’s bed. Laying the blankets on the floor, she turned to look at him.

“Well, do you like him?” her father asked.

For a second she was a bit taken aback by her father’s question, wondering if he was testing her; and if she gave an answer that he didn’t approve of then he would throw Victor out into the cold, dark streets. She decided to tell him the truth and hope for the best.

“Yes, I do like him,” she said, eventually. “I like him a lot.”

“Do you think anything will happen between you two?”

“I don’t know. There is something about him that I am not sure of. He is keeping something from me.”

“We all have our secrets, dear girl. Ever since your mother disappeared you have been there for me. You need to get over Andrew, he has been dead for two years now, and you are old enough to make your own choices. You should take chances in life, if you find this Victor attractive then see what happens, you do not need my permission anymore.”

Jessica was wondering why her father was so happy for her to be with a man she had only just met. Maybe it was because he looked very wealthy, but her father was not usually so superficial. There

must be something else. Maybe her father knew about the book that he had.

"I saw something in Victor's bag, a black book; there was a symbol on it I wondered if you knew what it meant?"

"What was it of?"

"It was a gold bat inside a silver circle. Does that make any sense to you?"

"Yes, it does. I thought he was one, it has been a long time since a man like him has been here, but with what has been going on I am not at all surprised."

"Well what does it mean?"

Though she was hoping that her father's answer was not a bad one, she was preparing herself for the worst.

"It means that he is a... how can I say this? He is a kind of protector."

"What does he protect?"

He did not want to go into his reason for allowing Victor to stay at his home, there was a lot more to explain than he wanted to tell Jessica at that moment.

"It does not matter just now, when he wants you to know, he will tell you. Go and get a good night's sleep, I will see you in the morning," he said, before kissing his daughter lightly on the forehead before she got up and left.

When Jessica got back down stairs, Victor was asleep in the chair, holding his bag close to his chest. Covering him up with a blanket, she smiled as she looked down at him, before going back upstairs to her bed.

Victor opened one eye as she went up the stairs. He knew that if she thought he was awake then she would start asking him a lot of awkward questions, and pretending to be asleep would be a good way to prevent her from doing so.

He sat up, took out the book and carried on reading from where he had left off.

There had been several vampire related reports over the past hundred years in the town, but none at all for about the last twenty. If there had of been they were not reported as such to the Vampire Hunters Union. This was not uncommon; people had a habit of only seeing what they want to see.

The last account on record about the town was that there had been a large vampire nest just south of the town limits. Three Vampire Hunters were sent to destroy this nest. Only one returned, but to complete success, so it seemed. The Vampire Hunter that survived was Alexander Price, the now head of the Union.

Alexander's report stated that they had stormed the nest with some people from the town who had heard of some girls going missing and suspected the vampires. Sixteen vampires managed to get away from this frontward assault, and in the pursuit the other two hunters were killed. The report went on to say that Alexander chased the last three vampires through to the back of the nest, which had no covering to it, and even though he did not see them die, they were trapped against a wall by the sun. He left as the sun was rising towards the three, knowing that they would have been dead within minutes.

Victor closed the book and placed it back inside his bag. Taking out his crucifix, he placed it around his neck. After what Jessica had seen that night, he knew that the vampire would probably come after her. While he waited, Victor took out his own personal journal, opened it to the last page he had written on while on the train. He put in the date and time, October 14th 1873, 11.43pm. Then pondered over what he wanted to write next.

*

Upstairs, Jessica was trying to sleep, but she was finding it very difficult to drift off.

Her mind was on what she had seen; the glowing red eyes seem to pierce her heart. She hoped that she would be safe from the creature that did that to that poor man.

She sat up and lit the candle on the nightstand next to her bed. The flame lit up the room; all the shadows disappeared. She stood up and went over to the window.

Peering outside, she could see the whole of the street. The street lamps made her view a lot easier, the cobbles looked worn as far as she could see. As she looked for strange shadows she felt a cold chill come across her body.

Turning around, she grabbed a blanket from off the foot of her bed and wrapped it around her body. When she turned back to the window, the image she dreaded to see was staring straight back at her. The figure of the man was stood outside her house, and as he looked up at her his red eyes shone.

The figure floated up toward the window, and the shock of what was happening froze Jessica to the spot. Once he was at the window his pale face emphasized the eyes, which were no longer glowing red, but were now a transfixing white.

As Jessica tried to walk back, away from the window, the figure's arm came through the glass and it grabbed Jessica by the throat. The strength of it was immense; its vice like grip was choking the life out of her. Just as she thought she would draw her last breath, the door burst open, and Victor was standing there.

He raised the crossbow and fired the silver tipped bolt straight through the vampire's heart. As the bolt entered the vampire let go of Jessica, who fell back onto her bed. The vampire screamed as he turned to dust.

"W...w...what, what was that?"

"That was a vampire, I should have told you but I didn't know how you would react. I am a Vampire Hunter." Victor hoped that she did not recoil from him.

"What did you do to him?"

"I shot him with a silver tipped crossbow bolt straight into his heart. Are you all right?"

"Yes, I think so," she said rubbing her neck. "That was the figure I saw while I was on my way home tonight."

"I know; I saw you earlier. That was why I came here. I knew he would come after you."

"Why did you not warn me?" asked Jessica angrily.

"I needed to make sure that he was coming. I didn't want to scare you if he was not going to come. I am sorry, I...I just didn't think."

Victor turned away to leave; he thought that he had blown his chance with her.

"Well, there's no way I can sleep in here now, I will have to come with you downstairs," said Jessica as she grabbed the blanket off her bed and then followed Victor down the stairs.

The fire in the living room was burning quite well, and Jessica laid down on the rug in front of it. Victor wanted to lie next to her, but he thought better of it after his actions that evening. What he didn't know, however, was that Jessica was wishing that he would lie down next to her as well.

Victor knew how lucky she had been, had he not been there things would have been dire for Jessica and her father. Victor wondered how come the vampire was able to burst into the house, as vampires had to be invited in before they could enter.

"Jessica, did you invite the vampire into your house?"

"No, he just burst in. Why?"

"Don't worry, it doesn't matter, just rest yourself."

Victor placed his bag next to the chair he was in, keeping it open just in case he needed to grab a weapon in a hurry if the vampire he had disposed of was not alone. He held the crucifix he was wearing tight in his hand. The crucifix was merely a detection device when it came to vampires. Even though they could sometimes prevent themselves from recoiling from the sight of it, the touch of one would burn their skin.

Victor waited for Jessica to go to sleep before he drifted off. Her safety was more important to him than his sleep.

He had to go and see the town Mayor in the morning. The Mayor had asked for help from the Vampire Hunters Union over the problems they had been having for the past month. What with the death of the young girl and the missing searchers, along with other unexplained happenings, they needed some help, and Victor was it.

Victor had had a reputation of being one of the best Vampire Hunters that the Union had to offer. Researching recent high profile problems had made him well respected by the Union and his fellow Hunters.

Victor felt however that this problem was a small part of a very large one. The increase in activity had come at a time of great importance to the vampire community – *The Feast of Dran Val Karlic*.

The '*Feast*' would allow the vampires involved in it the ability of becoming '*day walkers*', vampires that are un-affected by daylight. Their powers would be increased ten fold, and their blood lust along with it.

The powers that vampires have are quite unique in an undead creature, for not only did they possess a lust for blood but also a lust for things of a carnal nature. Many of the female vampires hung around the questionable areas of a town or city, praying on any man, and sometimes any woman, who wanted them. A double fix for vampires was never a temptation that they could resist.

Male vampires often used their hypnotic powers to trap their carnal partners. Women, especially young girls between the ages of sixteen to twenty four, had very little resistance to them.

To look on a vampire you would normally see just a very attractive person, no sign of evilness at all, but before a feed they would change. Their eyes would change colour from a normal colour to either red, usually for males, or yellow, usually for females. Their teeth would protrude more from their mouth, and their forehead would wrinkle like they had raised their eyebrows, but they had not done so.

These changes they kept to themselves until they knew that their victims would not be able to escape their clutches.

Sometimes a vampire would change its victim into a vampire. Nearly all are willingly done so, either by love for the vampire or the fear of death.

Most vampires would use this as a way of keeping servants. Their vampire masters call these servants '*Rifes*', a vampire word meaning slaves. A mark was sometimes branded on the Rife's arm to show who they belong to. If a Rife proved themselves worthy enough the vampire would change him or her into a vampire. If a Rife ever failed its master, however, they would usually come to a grizzly end.

Dran Val Karlic was the stuff of legend. One of the first ever vampires that had been recorded, he was said to have lived for over three thousand years, and he did not die of what you would call natural causes, not even natural for a vampire.

He was encased as a large black statue that stood at about ten feet high, though how this happened was not explained. The prophecy claimed that in two thousand years the blood of Dran Val Karlic would seep from the statue, and any vampires that drank this blood would be able to feed on its power. According to sources, this event was scheduled to occur was within a month's time.

One of the known signs of the event would be an increase in vampire activity, as the giving of blood from victims was an offering unto Dran Val Karlic for the gift of his blood. Also the moon would grow in size and slowly turn red, or as the record said – *the sign of the time for the Feast would be when the moon was the size of a fist and as red as fresh blood.*

The moon had not changed yet, but time was getting closer.

The Union knew of this event, but their research material was sketchy at best on the subject. Victor did not know for sure which things would happen and which ones were just added for flavour to the legend. The location of the Feast was somewhere in what was now the heart of London. Apart from what the Feast would do the only other information was the phrase “*the three skulls*”.

Victor started the drift off to sleep. He was quite used to sleeping during the day, as there was not much vampire activity during the daytime hours. He thought that if he caught a couple of hours that he would be fine for his meeting, which was at nine, and attempt to get some more later on in the day.

“Victor?” said Jessica from where she was lying.

“Yes” he replied, sleepily.

“Will everything be all right now?”

“Yes everything will be all right now. No more vampires will come tonight. He was probably a lone vampire out for a meal.” Victor yawned, stifling the fact that he knew he could not be sure if what he just said was true or not. “I think you just distracted him so he went after you to make sure you did not alert the authorities. Just rest yourself now.”

Jessica turned and went to sleep. Victor relaxed and slowly followed her.

Chapter Two

Lucinda waited in the park. Sitting on the damp ground she wished that Jason would hurry and get to her. All she could hear was the hustle and bustle of nocturnal animal life, a sound she had become accustom to. Night had always been a time she enjoyed, even as a child.

She remembered waiting for her parents to go to bed when she was younger, so that she would sneak out into the flower garden at the back of her house. Lucinda belonged to a wealthy family, and the grounds at her home were vast. The flower garden was always a busy place at night. She would watch the owls flying above her as they searched for some small creature to feed themselves, and sometimes their babies. Along with foxes and badgers, a family of hedgehogs lived at the bottom of the flower garden. Hedgehogs were her favourite. Lucinda loved the way that they would huddle together in a group, and ball up when any predators came near.

Lucinda was getting impatient. Jason was late. She should have been used to that fact by now; he was always late.

She got up and brushed herself down. Her crimson dress had been covered in dry leaves but her brushing got them off. Lucinda's beautiful blonde hair caught the moonlight, and her red lips emphasised her pale complexion.

As she walked through the park, she heard the crack of a twig breaking behind her. Stopping for a second to listen out for anything else, she considered quickening her pace. As she did so she could hear the heavy footsteps behind her. Lucinda felt threatened but not scared when she turned to confront the person following her.

Behind her was a tall man in brown raggedy clothes, and the moon shone on his dirty thin face. In his right hand he held a small dagger, and held out his left hand to grab whatever Lucinda had on her.

"Give me all your stuff," he said, in a gruff deep voice.

"I don't have anything on me. Just leave me alone."

She really was not in the mood for games from a piece of scum like him.

“I said give me all your stuff, now!”

Not wanting to bother with him she just turned away. Suddenly she heard the air swish as he lunged at her with the dagger. Lucinda turned at lightning speed and caught hold of his wrist. His arm stopped as he felt her grip tighten around it. It became stronger until he heard a sickening snap. Looking down he saw the dagger on the floor, with his hand still holding it.

The shock of what he saw stopped him from crying out, that was until Lucinda, her true vampire form showing, bit into the end of his arm.

His scream could be heard for miles around, masked in the distance by the howl of a wolf.

To stop his screaming Lucinda put her hand down his throat, deep inside she grabbed the man's tongue and pulled it completely out of his mouth. He fell to his knees and then face down in the grass. His lifeless body spread on the ground.

Lucinda wiped the blood from her mouth and her face changed back to normal.

She hated it when people bothered her. The good thing was that they never lived long enough to regret it.

Lucinda looked around the park for Jason, but there was still no sign of him. She had known Jason for many years and was used to his total disregard for time and anyone else's feelings, but even though this was his usual behaviour she was starting to get worried, he was never as late as this.

Their master had told them to be back in the lair two hours ago. It was never wise to upset their master; he was one of the oldest and most powerful vampires of the new age.

After deciding that she needed to do something, Lucinda left the park and went looking for Jason. The well lit streets made the view a lot easier than it had been in the park, as there were hardly any lights inside the confines of the high metal bar fence.

She exited the park at the gate; a large black double gate, which when closed made a perfect arch.

While crossing the street towards the main town square, two dogs were fighting their way towards her, but as they got closer they stopped their duel and looked at Lucinda.

She stopped and just stared at them, seeing the fear in their eyes. Only vampire familiar dogs would have been unaffected by her presence.

Vampire familiars, unlike witch's familiars, were large dogs, about the size of small horse, with thick, black coats, and were very fierce towards non-vampires and non-Rifes.

These dogs however where no were near familiar type dogs, they were just common mongrels, and after a few seconds of staring at Lucinda, the dogs ran in the opposite direction.

She carried on crossing the road, hoping that Jason would not come to the park now that she had left it.

The town square was completely devoid of any noise; even the few birds that flew overhead did not sing. The wind blew past Lucinda with more respect than it would have with a normal person. The presence of a vampire seemed to demand respect from the forces of nature, and they got it.

Lucinda looked of any sign of life that might have been able to tell her where Jason had gone. Upon going down an alleyway her hopes were answered.

Sitting on the ground was a beggar gently rocking, holding his to chest, and whispering to no one but himself. Lucinda leant closer and managed to make out what it was he was saying.

"He ate him, he ate him," the beggar was repeating. In his trance-like state that was all he could say.

"Who?" asked Lucinda, hoping for any kind of answer but knowing that she would not get one.

"He... ate him." The beggar looked up at her. "He...ate...him."

Lucinda bent down, took hold of the beggar around his throat with one hand, and lifted him, as if he was nothing more than a feather pillow, about ten inches off the ground.

"Who?" she demanded.

"A...a demon."

Lucinda's grip has snapped him out of his trance and replaced it with fear.

"What kind of demon?" Lucinda was getting impatient, it took all of her control not to wring his neck there and then.

"It was evil, ungodly. I saw him bite a man just outside the Old Cock Inn."

“Where did he go?”

Her grip closed in around the beggar’s neck.

“Where did he go?” she repeated.

“I... do not know,” the beggar managed to say as Lucinda’s grip got even tighter, “a girl.”

Lucinda released her grip and he fell back down to the ground.

“What girl?”

“A girl,” the beggar coughed to clear his throat. “A girl saw him, she ran away but I don’t know where to.”

“Thank you.”

Lucinda turned away and headed towards the Old Cock Inn, but before she took any more than three steps the beggar spoke.

“What would a beautiful girl like you want to find an ungodly monster like that?”

Within seconds he wished he had kept his mouth shut.

Lucinda turned around, her face changed. Her eyes became yellow and her teeth showing the full horror of what she was. As she loomed over him, the beggar knew that he was about to die.

“Because I am one of those ungodly monsters,” she snarled.

The look of horror on the beggar’s face was soon covered by Lucinda’s hand. Her razor-sharp fingernails, common in most vampires, pierced themselves into his flesh.

As the blood poured from the wounds onto the ground the pain was immense, yet the beggar could not scream. His body convulsed until Lucinda rammed his head into the wall behind him. Her powerful strength made the back of his skull cave in with the impact, and his body fell limp. She pulled him away by the face and threw him on the ground.

The back of his head had fallen away from the rest of his head and fell beside the body. In the moon light Lucinda could see the crushed brain of the beggar sitting inside his lifeless skull. She turned around and carried on to the Old Cock Inn.

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When Lucinda got there she found the body in the alley at the side of the Inn. Crouching next to it, she moved the blood soaked clothing and examined the chest of the victim for Jason’s tell tale

mark. She found it engraved over the victim's heart – an upside down triangle with a figure of eight inside it.

She looked back into the street to see if she could find any clue as to where her fellow vampire had gone. Quickly scanning the ground, Lucinda found the bloody footprints on the cobbles from Jason's shoes. They did not go too far, but she could tell in what direction they went, so leaving the body where it lay, she followed them.

Lucinda walked for a few minutes, following the scent of blood that still lingered in the air, until she came across a house, which she noticed had broken upstairs window.

For a second she thought about knocking on the door, but before she did so she noticed a ring on the ground directly below the window.

Bending over she recognised it as Jason's ring. It was a gold thumb ring with a ruby in the centre. Engraved on the inside was an ancient vampire text, which translated said '*Let the blood run forever*'.

Lucinda's heart sank as she knew what it meant. The only way a vampire lost their ring would be if they had been killed.

The ring, which was very rare, signified the life force of a vampire. The ruby would glow at certain times during the year when a vampire's powers increase, usually in the autumn and winter times. This glow was only visible to other vampires; the human eye was unable to get that far down the spectrum. Lucinda had given it to Jason as a present, a sign of the love they had for each other before their change.

Next to the ring, Lucinda saw the method of Jason's demise.

The crossbow bolt was lying on the ground; the silver tip reflected the light from the moon.

She picked up the bolt and looked carefully at it. All Vampire Hunter weapons had marks on them, the symbol that was also on the book. Lucinda knew of this and she did not need to look hard to find it. The symbol was engraved just below the tip. She held the bolt in her hand for a moment, contemplating what she was going to do next.

Wondering whether she should go inside the house to find the Vampire Hunter or go back and tell her master what had happened, she went up to the window and peered inside.

She could see a young woman sleeping on the floor and a man sleeping in a large chair just away from her, and by the sight of the crucifix around his neck confirmed to her that he was the Vampire Hunter that had killed Jason.

Lucinda turned away from the window clenched her fist. Feeling the loss of Jason, and anger for what the Vampire Hunter had done. She felt that her choice of this undead life would be for nothing now without Jason.

She thought about how it had been. They had been together long before either of them had become vampires, dreaming of a life where they didn't need anything else but each other and their love. That was until Jason stumbled into something he didn't fully understand.

He witnessed what he thought was a street fight in a dark part of the town. Jason watched for a moment, feeling that he should just leave but was too mesmerised to do so. It was then something happened that changed his life forever. He saw one of the men raise a crossbow from out of his coat and aim it towards the other. Instinctively, he decided to step in.

As he flung himself onto the man with the crossbow, it went off, the bolt piercing through Jason's chest. The man, with fear in his eyes over what he had done, said something to the other and then ran off.

Jason was bleeding pretty badly, he knew he didn't have much time left and his thoughts were with Lucinda. How would she cope without him, their love was very strong and they wanted to be with each other for the rest of their lives. Jason's life, however, looked like it would end very soon.

"Sir, are you all right?" asked the man whose life Jason had just saved.

"I...I think I am going to die, I feel so cold."

"Yes, you have not got much time. I have a choice for you."

"What...choice?" asked Jason, coughing up blood as he did so.

"I can make sure that you will live, but there is a price to pay."

Jason thought again about Lucinda. If there was a chance that he could live he wanted to take it, no matter what the price would be, anything would be better than losing her.

"I will do... anything. Please, help me."

The man took a small silver cup out of a side bag on his belt, opened up his shirt and cut his chest with the long, sharp nail of his index finger. Pouring the blood into the cup, he then placed it by Jason's lips.

"Drink this," the man said, pouring the blood into Jason's mouth. "You will live after you do."

After a few seconds of draining the cup, Jason's body began to convulse, and then was still. The man took back the cup, placed it back in the side bag and waited for Jason to wake up.

"What did you do?" asked Jason as he opened his eyes and looked up at the man who had evidently brought him back from death.

"You drank my blood, it saved your life but now you must pay the price."

"What price, I do not have a lot of money?"

Jason wondered what he could give this man that had saved his life.

"You now will never grow old, you will never be sick. You will be stronger than you can ever imagine. This is the consequence of becoming a vampire, like I am. You can never venture into daylight and never have children. You must kill to survive. Feed on the blood of others, feed for all eternity."

"What about my love?" asked Jason, hoping that this man could say that he and Lucinda could still be together.

"As you are and as she is now? I am sorry, no; that is not possible. You would come to see her as food, the desire to feed on her will be too powerful to resist. She must agree to join you in this life or you will never be together. Return here tomorrow at this time. If she is willing bring her, if not leave her or feed on her. Through the daytime tomorrow you must stay inside, black out your windows. The sun is lethal to our kind."

Jason turned away and carried on to meet with Lucinda as he was when all this happened. He turned back to say something but the vampire had disappeared.

When he met with Lucinda she saw that something was not right with him. Before she could question him he told her everything that had happened. She listening, and though it sounded fantastical, she believed him, and even though she did not want to become a vampire, she loved Jason enough to agree to do so.

The next night Lucinda went with Jason to meet the vampire, and the vampire was glad that she had decided to come, and he changed her in the same way he changed Jason. The effect of her change, however, was far different.

Lucinda was descended from a witch, and her heritage made the vampirism change her physically and well as mentally. Her height increased by four inches, and her body had become more muscular and toned, even her beauty increased. The powers she now possessed surpassed even vampires who where hundreds of years old.

“You are very impressive my dear, very impressive indeed. Please, allow me to introduce myself. My name is Sebastian Van Rake, and I am now your master.”

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Lucinda decided to head back towards the lair. It was in a cavern near the outskirts of the town. She knew that her master would know how to approach this Vampire Hunter.

After holding the ring tightly for a few moments as she walked, Lucinda decided to place the ring on the gold chain that hung around her neck; they were now the only things she had left of her late love.

Then, like a bolt out of the blue, a strange thing happened to her. After the initial strike of grief had passed she felt nothing, no longing, no hatred, just nothing. Had her time with Jason been in vain? Was her choice to become a vampire to stay with him just something completely unnecessary?

She stopped and looked at her life as a vampire. There were many things that she could never have had before, power, strength, and eternal youth. Her focus was to be with Jason, but with him gone she realised that she could be much more than just a normal vampire. She had never used her powers to their full potential,

keeping them hidden from Jason so not to over shadow him and make him resent her. Now with him gone she could be all that she was, all that she wanted to be.

Lucinda smiled to herself. With Jason gone there was no one stopping her, holding her down. Then she remembered the master, Sebastian. Would he be jealous by her abilities?

‘Yes,’ she thought, ‘he would be jealous’.

It occurred to her that she may be even more powerful him, but her lack of experience meant that he could still pose a threat to her if she decided to challenge him for dominance.

The Feast of Dran Val Karlic was soon, she would wait until then. With the powers from the Feast no other vampires could stand in her way, not if she didn’t want them to.

She reached the edge of the town and headed into the wood. After going only thirty yards she arrived at the tree that hid the entrance into the cavern. It was the biggest tree in the wood, and its black roots spread about around all the trees for as far as the eye could see.

A small dent in the tree was the key to open the cavern door. She pushed the dent with her finger, and a mild click signified that it had unlocked and was about to open. The front of the tree lowered inwards, and Lucinda could see the steps to travel down to reach the nest.

This had been home for Lucinda and Jason for the past twenty years, and even though Sebastian travelled around from one nest to another, checking on the other vampires that hid themselves in the surrounding countryside, she and Jason rarely left here.

Both of them were content just feed off beggars and drunks that were from the town. It being a merchant town, with a lot of new people stopping off, the taking of their victims never really alarmed anyone to their presence. They would sometimes have Rifés to do their dirty work, but Jason hated that, preferring the thrill of the chase.

The Rifés which they had were usually female, but on occasion some male ones would be brought from another nest to work there for a time.

There had been only a handful of Rifés there over the twenty years, and all wanted Lucinda more than Jason. Lucinda liked the

attention that the few male Rifes gave her, but she enjoyed the attention of the females more. The women were always beautiful young girls who were attracted by Lucinda's beauty, and she used that to her advantage every chance she got.

Many a time Lucinda felt that a woman's touch was more needed by her than a man's. Jason, on occasion, felt a touch of jealousy, but Lucinda and the female Rife soon made it up to him. Lucinda hardly ever went with any of the male Rifes, as Jason filled that department most of the time.

A female Rife was also handy if Sebastian was staying and he wanted some attention. He made it clear that he wanted Lucinda, so she sent him a Rife instead. This seemed to appease Sebastian, and so Lucinda's conscience was clear. Now though, with Jason gone, could she keep herself out of Sebastian's arms?

As Lucinda walked in, the dankness of the cavern was evident. With its damp walls and a distant drip, that echoed around the large underground hideout. Burning torches lit the way down the vast stone stairway deep beneath the ground. These steps were evidently well worn; they had been used for at least three hundred years. The footsteps of numerous vampires and Rifes had eroded the stone surface by a couple of inches.

Down the steps lay a well-lit lair, the top of the lair must have been at least a hundred feet up. On the stone walls of the cavern were hundreds of ledges where vampires would usually lie when they were not feeding, but no one had used them for a long time.

She heard the lustful moans of love making coming from deeper inside the cavern. Had her master taken female Rifes already? She hoped so; she really didn't feel like satisfying his desires tonight.

Lucinda walked over to the area of the lair where she kept all her belongings. It resembled her bedroom at her family home. She had gone back to there since her change; her parents had not been there when she went. She had made sure of that.

Lucinda loved her parents very much. What she had become made her dangerous to them. Her mother would have understood; she was, after all, a witch. Her father on the other hand was a different matter. He didn't even know his wife was a witch, and if ever found out that his daughter was a vampire she didn't know how he would react.

Lucinda's mother, Patricia, stopped most of her witchcraft activities when she got married, repressing her powers so not to disgrace her husband. Patricia however taught Lucinda about her powers when her husband was away from the house. She saw great things for her daughter if she could break away from her father's eyes and harness her powers. Unable to do this, she taught the girl what she could. Lucinda could heal minor wounds, read the minds of people and animals. She could cast small curses on people such as boils and scabs. Her favourite power, however, was the ability to move things with her mind.

Those days she had put behind her, they were fond memories, but now her powers as a vampire, thus far, were all that she needed.

Lucinda went back to her parents' house after she had become a vampire a number of times to watch them through the window. One night when they were out she broke in and took as many things as she could and stored them in the cavern. The little reminders of her home kept her happy from the longing to see her parents again. Something she could never do, as that same night her parents died in a fire at their home. Lucinda visited their graves as much as she could, and placed a rose there on every anniversary of their death.

Lucinda sat down and brushed her hair with her mother's favourite brush. It had a gold handle and a red marble pattern on the back of the head. She had even taken her dressing table with a mirror at the back, which she kept all her things on it. The mirror had a gold trim around the edge, and even though the mirror was useless to her now without a reflection, she still looked into as if she had one.

She undid the small lace bow at the back of her dress, loosened it, and slipped it off. Lucinda cupped the falling dress in her hands as it fell from her shoulders and guided it to the floor, and stood completely naked, the coldness of the cavern never touched her skin.

Vampires never felt the cold, or warmth for that matter. Their bodies were always the same. As promised, she had never aged. In fact she looked better than she did before, the side effect of her witching powers.

Lucinda took out a black silk dressing gown from her top draw and put it on. She tied the matching belt around her waist and went to see her master.

Sebastian was lying on a large red and gold patterned mattress, and around him were four beautiful, young girls.

Lucinda made her way over to him. She pushed passed the lace curtains that surrounded Sebastian personal area.

“Master, may I speak with you?”

“Yes, Lucinda, of course you can,” said Sebastian, with a pleasant smile, admiring her. “Where is Jason, I have a girl for him? That is unless you two want to be together tonight?”

“Something has happened, master.”

Sebastian signalled the girls to leave him.

“What is it Lucinda?”

“Jason... Jason is dead.”

Sebastian seemed to know what had happened before the words left her.

“How did he die?”

He knew the answer, but he wanted to hear it from Lucinda.

“A Vampire Hunter, master. I found this by Jason’s ring.”

She placed the crossbow blot by Sebastian’s hand on the mattress. She looked at his almost naked body. Even though she had been there for twenty years, this was the first time that she actually looked at it. He had a very muscular body, and looked in his mid-forties, with a trim black goatee beard. His black hair was shoulder length and straight.

Lucinda felt an attraction to him; and with Jason gone there was nothing really stopping her, but she felt that she should play hard to get if he tried anything.

He picked up the bolt and looked at it. Upon seeing the Vampire Hunters Union symbol on it his suspicions were indeed correct. With the coming of The Feast of Dran Val Karlic and the disappearances he knew that the Union would send someone eventually, but he did not think that they would kill one of *his* people.

He looked up at Lucinda; before he could speak he fixed his eyes on her body.

“Do not worry about this Vampire Hunter,” said Sebastian. “I have been expecting him.”

He crumbled the bolt into dust, and looked back at Lucinda. He noticed that she was eyeing up one of the young girls that were huddling together. He looked back and forth between the pair, knowing what they both wanted.

“Do you like her, my dear?”

“Yes master,” answered Lucinda. “She is... beautiful.”

He signalled the girl over. She was about nineteen, curly red hair down to the middle of her back. Her body was completely perfect, without blemish. The girl slowly walked over, her eyes never leaving Lucinda’s.

“Girl, you will be with Lucinda for the rest of the night.”

“Will you change me mistress?” asked the girl meekly, but hopefully.

“Do you wish it?” asked Lucinda.

“Yes, mistress,” replied the girl.

“Am I permitted to do so master? If she proves worthy, of course.”

He looked at them both; never did their eyes stray from each other.

“Yes, you may also keep her if you wish.”

Lucinda led the girl by the hand over to her resting place. She then took out a large blanket from a sleeping ledge where she kept many of them for the Rifes. The girl laid the blanket out on the floor. Lucinda undid her dressing gown and let it fall. She then lay on top of the blanket and gently pulled the girl down next to her.

“What is your name?” Lucinda asked.

“My name is Sarah, mistress.”

“After this Sarah, you will not need to call me mistress.”

They kissed passionately for what seemed like an eternity before making love.

Sarah had longed to become a vampire; she had nothing in her life to give up. Her parents were both dead, and she longed for an air of family. A nest of vampires would provide everything she longed for. Sarah had watched the other girls take it in turns satisfying Sebastian, and she would have been next. She had never been with a man before, and she had no desire to be with one in the

future. So when she saw Lucinda she hoped to be in the position that she was in now.

As the hours past the two women became more intense with each other. The sun outside was beginning to rise as they stopped and held each other close.

“Am I worthy enough to join you forever?”

“Sarah, I want nothing more. If that is what you want you can have it.”

Lucinda kissed Sarah passionately once more. When she released her embrace, Lucinda went over to her things and took what looked like a thimble out of a jewellery box.

Placing it on her finger she walked back over to where Sarah was lying. Taking her finger out of the thimble her blood dripped from a pinprick she got from it. The thimble had small needle in the top; Lucinda used this method to change people because it was the easiest way she could find. She held out her finger towards Sarah, the blood slowly dripping into the ground.

“Drink my dear, and join us.”

Sarah sat up and took the finger in her mouth and as the blood coursed through her body she fell back and screamed in agony. After a few seconds she stopped screaming and was still, her body growing cold. Minutes passed until Sarah once again opened her eyes and looked up at Lucinda.

“Thank you, mistress.”

“You do not need to call me mistress anymore, I told you. You are now one of us, an equal. My name is Lucinda.”

“Lucinda, thank you.”

Lucinda lay back down with Sarah and kissed her. They held each other and went to sleep as day fully broke outside.

Chapter Three

As the sun rose a distant cockerel could be heard crowing from a farm on the outskirts of the town. Jessica woke up with a start, not sure where she was at first, but when the warmth of the fire hit her face as she strained to rub her eyes she managed to focus on her surroundings.

Jessica turned over and saw Victor sitting up in the chair reading his book. The activities of the night before came flooding back to her; the chase, Victor's arrival and the vampire attack. She had hoped that it was all a dream, well all except for Victor.

"Have you been reading all night?" she asked.

"No, I just got up about half an hour ago." Victor replied, never taking his eyes off the book.

"What do you have to do today?"

"I have a meeting with the town's Mayor at nine."

"If you are going to see the Mayor, I will come along to introduce you, he is my father in-law, or at least he was," she said, hoped that he would agree.

"That would be a big help, thanks."

He closed the book and placed it back in his bag. The crucifix he was wearing during the night he had already placed back inside the bag when he had woken up.

Jessica gathered her and Victor's blankets and went upstairs, deciding to get dressed as quickly as possible. Placed the blankets in a cupboard, she took out a broom and went into her bedroom.

She shivered as the door opened and the morning air hit her. Glass covered the floor and her bed, the sunlight reflecting off every minute shard, so she started to sweep a path for herself from the door to her wardrobe.

When she got to it, she opened the door and took out a pair of shoes. They were ankle height and black, with about a four inch heel. Placing them on her feet she carried on sweeping up the glass. She swept it all into the corner, leant the broom up against the wall and went and got dressed.

Victor waited in the living room for Jessica to come down. Sorting out his bag, he knew deep down that the meeting with the

Mayor was going to lead to something big after what had happened. He started to pen a letter to the Union in order give them a picture of the situation.

Jessica came down the stairs in a flowing white dress, her blonde hair down around her shoulders. She looked like an angel as she came into Victor's view. Taken aback by her beauty, he found it hard to breathe for a few seconds. When he did he felt his heart long for her.

He placed the letter back into his smaller bag and got up.

"Are you ready to go, Victor?" she asked.

As she smiled at him, Victor's heart melted. He knew he had kept his feelings to himself for such a long time that the effect Jessica was having on him was more amplified.

Victor got up out of the chair, picked up his bag, and he and Jessica made their way towards the town hall.

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In his office at the town hall, the Mayor was sat at his desk. The large room was decorated on two sides from ceiling to floor with bookcases. All the books in them were about laws, town plans, and other local historical works. The carpet covering the floor was claret colour, with a large gold mayoral crest in the centre. The Mayor's desk was in front of a large window at one end of the room and was covered in papers.

Standing on the other side of the desk were his two aides, commenting on the prospective visit from the Vampire Hunter.

"Sir, why do we need this man to come?" asked Hugo Brackett, the deputy Mayor. "If people get wind of a problem in the town then the merchants might stop coming here. Our revenue depends on their custom."

He was a tall, thin man, though had a quite domineering presence. His job in Edgewich was to monitor all the monetary revenue for the town, and his concerns about how the situation would affect it were very personal.

"Hugo, my friend, you will not need to worry," said the Mayor. "These men are anonymous, the Union is only known by a few

people. There will be no need to panic about the populous. They will be kept in the dark as usual.”

He hoped that this would reassure Hugo.

“All right Peter, as long as you know what you are doing,” said Hugo.

“Mr. Mayor... why is this man coming?” asked the young man who stood next to Hugo.

“You will find that out, Mr Wallace, once he arrives, and I must remind you, everything you hear never leaves this room.”

Mark Wallace was the most junior member of the town council. He was shorter than Hugo, and a lot bigger built. His short black hair was just visible under his hat.

“What time is he to arrive?” asked Hugo.

“In about fifteen minute,” answered the Mayor, looking at his gold pocket watch.

“Is it because of the little girl and the men that went missing?” asked Mark, would was too inquisitive to not ask questions all the time, though he knew that the Mayor might get angry with him for doing so. His naivety always got him into trouble.

“Yes, Mark. Look, I’m not going over this now and then again in fifteen minutes.”

The Mayor didn’t even look at Mark when he said those words. He knew Mark wanted to know everything. His son used to be the same before he died.

“Mark, can you wait outside until the Mayor’s guest comes please?” Hugo’s forceful voice scared Mark enough to do anything that he said. Mark could of easily beat Hugo in a fight, but Mark was too intimidated too argue.

Mark nodded and left the room, sitting in a chair on the left side of the door.

“Peter, I am your oldest friend,” said Hugo, leaning forward on the Mayor’s desk. “Is there something that you are not telling me? Is this situation worse than you are making out?”

“Hugo, you know everything. This Vampire Hunter is here to find out where those men went, and to make sure it does not happen again. The deaths with the drunks and tramps I can say are just unfortunate occurrences with men of their sort, and can be swept under the carpet, so to speak. When it comes to a little girl that is

something I can't be seen to over look. It has taken this long to get someone from the Union here. I just need him to go into the woods and find out what happened. He will probably want to talk to Patrick before he goes into the woods, has he recovered?"

"It seems he has. He has not talked much about what he saw. Just that they followed the other little girl to a house, and then he just freezes and stares at nothing. I do not think the Vampire Hunter will get much out of him."

"You will be surprised Hugo. These men are trained to handle things like this. I believe that they have sent their best man. A, Mr Victor Drake, I hear he has quite a reputation, hopefully he'll live up to it."

"I hope so, Peter. The sooner we get this thing under control, the easier I will sleep at night," said Hugo, whose last word was punctuated by a knock at the door.

"Come," called the Mayor.

The door was opened by Mark, who let Victor and Jessica enter the room first. As they walked in the Mayor got up from his desk when he saw Jessica and strolled towards her with a wide smile and welcoming outstretched arms.

"Jessica, my beautiful daughter-in-law," said the Mayor as the pair embraced in the centre of the room. "What brings you here?"

"Mayor..."

"Come on now, Jessica, you can call me Peter."

"All right, Peter, this is Victor Drake." She pointed to Victor. "Victor Drake, this is my father-in-law, Peter Smithson."

"Hello, sir," said Victor as he stretched out his hand.

"I have been expecting you Mr. Drake," replied the Mayor as they shook hands. "This is Hugo Brackett, and you've already met Mark Wallace."

"Yes, pleasure to meet you all. Well shall we get down to business." Victor was ready to get started.

"Of course, please sit down."

The Mayor pointed to the three chairs around the front of his desk.

"I will go home now I have introduced you. My father will be wondering where I am." Jessica knew she was not welcome to stay by the look Hugo had given her when she had entered. She kissed

the Mayor lightly on the cheek, and bid her farewells. "Goodbye everyone."

"Goodbye Jessica, I will see you soon," said the Mayor.

As she left she gave Victor a smile, and then closed the door behind her.

"Well gentlemen," the Mayor said as he sat down in his chair behind his desk. "Let us begin shall we, I am sure you understand, Mr Drake that we would like to resolve this matter as quickly and discretely as possible."

Victor opened his bag, took out the Journal and placed it on his lap.

"Well, firstly, could you tell me all the events which have led me to be called here?" asked Victor.

"Yes, I thought you already knew, sorry," the Mayor hesitated. "It started about four weeks ago, when a young girl was killed in the woods by the town. A search party found her body and was bringing her back to her parents. They saw another little girl in the woods, so the party spilt into two, with most of them going after the other girl to bring her home. Only one of those men returned, and the little girl that had gone missing was found with puncture wounds on her neck and shoulders."

Hugo turned to face Victor. "And we need you to find out what happened to the girl and to the search party."

"Has anything else occurred since or before then that might shed some light on what has happened?" asked Victor, instinctively knowing there was more, but he was not going to venture any information, he wanted them to tell him.

"No, nothing at all," lied the Mayor, just wanting to get things over with as quickly as possible.

"But what about the increase of –" started Mark, though when he saw the look on the Mayor's face, he stopped mid-sentence.

"Increase in what?" pressed Victor, he needed all the information he could get. "If you do not tell me the truth, I will walk out right now and the problem will still be here. I have no worries about doing so." This was a lie, but he wanted the Mayor to think otherwise.

"Well...", said the Mayor. "There have been increased reports of drunks dying outside of the Old Cock Inn; that is all. When you

get a place like this, with a lot of people passing through, things happen. Yes, there has been a small increase, but that is more likely a separate issue, obviously.”

The Mayor was trying to keep control of this meeting but he knew that this Vampire Hunter would keep pressing for any information that he was hiding.

“Yes, it probably is a separate issue,” agreed Victor, trying to reassure the Mayor that both problems weren’t interconnected, even though he knew that they were. What he didn’t know was how yet. “What can you tell me about the only survivor of the search party?” he addressed this question to Hugo.

“His name is Patrick Slone. He has lived here most of his life, alone since his wife died a few years ago, in a small house near the centre of town. He was severely traumatised by what happen. We couldn’t get him to say much that was understandable when he came out of the woods. All we can get out of him now is something about a house in the woods where they tracked the other girl to. What happened in that house is still a mystery to us.”

“Well that is not really much to go on,” said Victor. “I think that I will talk to Mr. Slone myself in a while.”

Victor was hoping Patrick Slone could tell him what he saw. He needed as much information as possible so he knew what he was up against.

“That would be fine, I shall arrange it,” said the Mayor, trying hard to hold back a smile.

“Thank you. Now by our records your last trouble of this kind occurred twenty years ago. A nest was purged and all but a couple of vampires were accounted for. Do you know what happened to the remains of the nest?” asked Victor.

Hugo got up and went to one of the bookcases and pulled out a book that referred to that period of time. He returned to the desk, opened it up and read the information about that time.

“According to our records, the area where the nest was has been filled up and covered. They planted trees over it; this increased the size of the woods. That is the only reference to the area; there is no record of what caused the hole or the reason that it was filled.”

The Mayor took the book and closed it.

“Is that all?” enquired Victor.

“Yes!” the Mayor snapped. He was becoming increasingly agitated.

“Things have been kept as secret as possible from the population Mr. Drake,” said Hugo. “You can see why this is the case, I am sure. A mass panic would ruin our economy. You use anonymity in your line of work; we need it in this situation. Peter, I mean, the Mayor is only worried for the people.” He wanted to make sure Victor did not think they were intentionally hiding something.

“Yes, I can understand your worries, but you need to trust me. I can handle the situation for you,” said Victor, getting to his feet and picking up his bag. “I will go and see Mr. Slone now. Mr Wallace, will you come with me, do you know where he lives?”

“Yes, I do but...” said Mark, trying to get out of it. He knew that the Mayor did not want him to go anywhere near the situation. Mark’s naivety might cause problems for the Mayor.

“I think it would be better if Mr Brackett goes with you,” said the Mayor.

Victor was having none of it.

“If Mr Wallace knows the way I want him to come with me.”

“Please, call me Mark,” said Mark, meekly.

“Yes, but I...” The Mayor was stopped in mid-speech by Victor getting to his feet and looming over him.

“No, I want Mr Wallace, I’m sorry, Mark,” Victor corrected himself, “to come with me. You either do this my way or not at all.”

At the Mayor’s silence Victor turned to Mark, who was still seated.

“Mark, come on.”

Mark got up and he and Victor walked out of the room, the young man closing the door behind them. As he did so he caught a glimpse of the Mayor’s face, and it wasn’t very happy.

Inside the room, the Mayor and Hugo turned to each other.

“Why were you so forceful for me to go with him, Peter?” Hugo knew things were being kept from him.

“I trust you to keep an eye on that Vampire Hunter. Mark is to wet behind the ears to know what I expect and need. I just want to make sure that everything goes how it should. I want no mistakes, we cannot afford there to be any.”

“As long as that is the only reason.”

“Why would it not be Hugo?” snapped the Mayor, his face was beginning to turn red.

“Do not get angry Peter. I just thought...it does not matter.”

As Hugo turned away to leave, the Mayor grabbed his arm.

“Hugo, everything will be all right as long as things do not get out of hand.”

Hugo nodded and carried on out of the room.

*

Mark was well known in the town, everyone he and Victor passed greeted him with a smile and a hello. Patrick Slone’s house was not too far away, but Victor wanted to take things slow. Without the influence of the Mayor, he hoped that Mark would be more open to him.

“Are there any strange happenings going on that you have not told me yet, Mark?” Victor enquired.

“Well...” Mark paused knowing that if anything got back to the Mayor he would be in serious trouble. There were quite a few secrets that no one else knew he had.

“Go on, no one will find out what you tell me,” Victor reassured him.

Before he said anything, Mark looked around to make sure no one was listening to them.

“The Mayor has been acting very strange recently, even more so over the past two months. He has been going on business trips a lot over that time, more than usual. The whereabouts and details of these trips have been kept very quiet by the Mayor, I have a feeling that not even Mr Brackett knows about them.”

Mark pondered over the next piece of information that he wanted to give Victor. What the Mayor did in private was up to him, but he felt it might have some substance to the Mayor’s behaviour.

“He has also been staying at the town hall until very late at night,” Mark continued. “I passed it once and I saw a shadow of the Mayor and another person in his main office. I know it was not anyone that works for the Mayor. The other silhouette was of a woman, I am sure of it. He was probably having a bit on the side.

The Mayor's wife has been ill for a long time. This might also contribute to his behaviour. If people found out that he had been unfaithful they might call for his resignation."

Victor thought about what Mark had said. He really didn't trust the Mayor as it was; he seemed to want to just get things over with as quickly and quietly as possible.

As far as the affair theory, he didn't think it really mattered all that much, but he stored it away in his mind just in case. What he really wanted to do was find out what Patrick Slone had to say; his experience would hold the key to stopping the vampire, or vampires, something Victor hadn't ruled out as of yet, that had attacked the little girl.

It wasn't long before they reached the home of Patrick Slone. It was similar to all the other houses in the town. Mark knocked on the door with the brass ring knocker that was in the centre of it.

A few seconds had passed and there was no sign that they would be answered, but as Mark was about to knock again, the door opened just wide enough to see a man's face in the shadow.

"Yes?" said Patrick, in a half whisper

He was a middle-aged man, greying black hair and brown eyes. He had not had a shave since the event had happened; his bread, black with whiter flecks in it, was very dishevelled. He shielded his eyes from the light of the sun, as he had not seen it for weeks, instead keeping his curtains closed and only lighting his house with a few scattered candles.

"Hello, Mr Slone," said Mark.

"Oh Mark, how are you lad, it has been a while. How is your mother doing?" Patrick seemed oblivious to Victor's presence.

"She is doing fine, sir. Let me introduce you to a mister Victor Drake. He is investigating what happened to your search party a month ago, when you went looking for the little girl."

Patrick and Victor shook hands, Victor registering how weak the man's grip was.

"Come in, come in." Patrick said as he led them into his home. The living room was in near total darkness. Patrick opened the curtains and the sunlight filled the room. He pointed Victor and Mark to the wooden chairs in the centre of the room, they sat on

them and Victor pulled out a notebook and pencil from his coat as Patrick slowly walked over and joined them.

"Well, Mr. Slone," started Victor.

"Patrick, please, the both of you," Patrick corrected.

"Thank you, Patrick, can you tell me exactly what happened. Don't worry if you have forgotten anything, just as much as you can remember."

"Well, it happened about four weeks ago. I saw Andrew Williams that is the girl's father, frantically knocking on doors along the street. I went up and asked him what was wrong. He told me that his little girl was missing in the woods. I agreed to help him search for her." Patrick paused. "Would you like a drink, either of you?" He got up before even waiting for their answer. "Is tea all right?"

They both said yes and Patrick went into the kitchen.

"I remember that night as well," said Mark. "I joined in the search for a couple of hours for the first night. We did not find anything though because it was too dark. Most of the others carried on the next day but I had to work at the town hall so I never carried on with it. I feel a bit guilty about that."

"Do not worry yourself," Victor reassured him. "You just did as much as you could; there is no disgrace in that."

"Yes, I suppose so."

Mark felt a little better with Victor's words and they waited for Patrick to come back.

Victor knew he needed to visit the home of the little girl and interview the parents. He was still very tired after last night, and this looked like it was going to be another long day.

Patrick came out of the kitchen with a fully loaded tea tray for them. He placed it on a small table, poured out three drinks, let the other two choose theirs, and then sat down with his. Taking a sip, he continued with his statement.

"Now where was I?" he asked.

"You had just said that you would agree to search for the little girl," said Victor.

"That's right. We searched for a couple of hours the first night but couldn't see a thing because of the dark. So we called it off until the next morning." He took another sip of his tea. "In the

morning we got together and basically started the search from scratch. There were only a few of us that were there the previous night, as most people had to work. There were enough of us to make a good job of it though. The search lasted all day and into the night, but we saw no sign of her. The weird thing was that we searched by the stream where she was found that day and did not find her. After the night came in we stopped and arranged to carry on the next day.”

“So when you searched the area the first time you did not find her?” asked Victor.

“That’s correct she wasn’t there the first time.”

“Are you sure you did not just over look the area where she was found?”

“No, we found her out in the open, on the bank on the stream. She either was put there or found her way there during our search and we missed her.”

“Please,” said Victor, “carry on with what happened.”

“The next day we carried on where we left off. We called off the search earlier than the previous day; it was still just about light. We went back and came across the stream again. Her body was lying out in the open; she looked like she had been bitten by some sort of animal.” Patrick picked up his cup of tea, his hand was shaking.

“Are you ok, Patrick?” asked Mark.

“Yes, I am just a bit shaky, that is all.”

“Can you continue?” asked Victor.

Patrick sipped some more tea, placed the cup back down and nodded.

“When we started to head back with that frail, lifeless body, we saw some movement in the trees up ahead. They were very thick around the stream and no sunlight could get through. It was I that noticed another little girl hiding behind one of the trees. Before I could get to her she had ran deeper into them, so a couple of the party decided to take Claire, that’s the name of the little girl we found by the stream, back so the rest of us could find the other girl. We walked in the direction she had gone, and after a couple of minutes we could see her running through the trees.”

“What did she look like?” Victor asked.

“She looked as if she was the same age as Claire, she was wearing a blue dress, and it looked really dishevelled, dirty and mucky. I could not make much more out than that.”

Victor wrote it down in his notebook. He was not sure what to make of everything at that point. If the little girl was a vampire she sounded like she was a Gypsy Vampire.

Gypsy Vampires usually had no care for their appearance, lived in small nests in abandoned areas and fed primarily of stray animals. For a nest to be so close to a populated area was very rare, but not unknown. When they did though it was usually to obtain Rifes in the form of local children, they would take them on their travels, and they would grow up with them. If this was the case the little girl must have rebelled and they killed her.

“What happened next?” asked Victor.

“We followed the girl to an abandoned house; well we thought it was abandoned. She went in and we followed. I wish we had turned back now. What was in there was the scariest experience of my life. We entered the house and she stood at the bottom of a flight of stairs. As one of the group went up to her she...changed.”

“How, what did she look like?” enquired Victor.

“It’s hard to describe it, like a wild animal. She jumped on him and ripped his throat out. As he fell to the floor we ran over to get her off him and the door behind us closed. Out of the shadows about eight more people came around us. They looked the same as the girl. We tried to fight them off but they were stronger than we were. I even saw the little girl pick up one of the others, a big man, more than twice the size of me, and she threw him as if he was a rag doll. Blood was flying everywhere; they were eating them as well. It was horrible. I managed to escape and ran for my life. I just ran until I reached the edge of the woods where we came in. That is all I know.”

Victor finished writing in his notebook and placed it back in his bag.

“Thank you, Patrick, you have been very helpful,” said Victor, shaking Patrick’s hand.

“You take care now,” said Mark, smiling at him.

“Do not worry Mark, I will. Give my love to your mother.”

“I will.”

Patrick saw them to the door.

“Mark, we are going to the William’s house now” said Victor as they walked away. “Are you all right with that?”

Mark nodded, and they both head towards the William’s house the other side of the town.

After Patrick closed the door and returned to his chair. Reliving what had happened was too much for him. He broke down and began to cry into his hands, the images that he saw were engraved in his mind, and he knew that they always would be.

Composing himself as much as he could, he took the cups back into the kitchen. He placed them on the wooden counter and went to the cutlery draw and pulled out the biggest knife he had. It had a black handle and a six-inch blade, sharp and clean. Looking into the blade, all he could see were the faces of the men he had left behind as they died in terror. He opened a draw and placed the handle in it and closed it shut so that the blade was at the right angle. Aiming his heart over the blade, the tears running down his face, he fell onto it, crying out. Blood poured onto the floor from the wound, and as he breathed his last breath all he thought was ‘Sorry’.