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ON ANY GIVEN NIGHT, IN ANY CITY IN THE WORLD, SOMEBODY WILL DIE BEFORE SUNRISE and most of them will die alone. I speak, not of the peaceful, 'tucked up in bed' deaths, which mark the passing of the fortunate, but rather the deaths that go unseen and often unmourned. The lost soul who climbed a bridge one night and thought the water below might be hiding what remained of his dreams. Or perhaps the one who picked up the wrong one-nighter in some bar. One way to avoid the 'alone' part, I suppose.

Most humans put this sobering thought out of their little heads while they're out on the town. After all, it's not going to happen to *them*, is it? The nearest to death they'll get on their big night out is a splitting hangover, come morning.

I'm not human, but even so, this is a reality I can't ignore. If I'm not careful when I feed, when I take my fill of blood, I can quickly become the wrong one-nighter.

I'll thank you not to use the 'v' word.

Given my proximity to Oxford Street, the sleazy, pulsing artery of Sydney's nightclub district where I've lived for the better part of thirty years, I try not to visit any club twice in the same week. It's safer that way, particularly for a man whose lifestyle depends on discretion. Barely two nights ago, I'd graced Fantasy, a club full of pretty, if flighty young things – some gay, some straight, most happily open minded on the subject. So the following night's destination was Blaze, a club currently serving as de facto cathedral to the Church of Saint Muscle Mary, where the buff and beautiful took time out of their forty hour a week gym schedules to model, preen and occasionally dance the night away for the slack-jawed ogling pleasure of curious onlookers.

For hunting clothes, I chose a pair of tight leather trousers, an equally tight lycra vest and a silver-studded belt. A little

attractive, a little sexual, and a little ridiculous. The perfect human mix I'd developed over the years. Not the epitome of modern style, but on a healthy twenty-four-year-old man, which is what I appear to be, it did say 'come hither and bed me,' which was the whole point.

Then, there was the pill. I rarely use them, but if options are lacking and I get too impatient, a little chemistry in a capsule can seal the sumptuous fate of any prospective companion. You needn't judge me. You do a lot worse to your food. Besides, it's not as if I've had to use it - recently.

I finally mussed my hair into a high swept fringe that resembled the current trends. There. Reylan had arrived. And so, the hunt commenced.

* * *

If Fantasy was an over-priced showcase of Sydney's most precious 'see or be seen' crowd then Blaze was a stream of hedonistic delights, corrupted further by a tacky West Hollywood sheen, as imagined by a designer who'd had never been within a hundred miles of the place. The neon show was frightening - more Hong Kong than California - turning its lobby into a maw of the throbbing techno-driven beast that lay beyond its doors. Still, there were the delicious beasts within that beast. The elite bodies of Blaze. The blood bags of Blaze. Shallow though it may have been, this was a club not without its advantages.

Flashing the bouncer a smile, I was admitted with a polite flourish. I'm pretty, after all, and pretty's good for business. In front of me, two epicene boys, barely old enough to enter, strutted around with... glitter. Glitter, plastered over their faces and arms, their hair styled up and cemented in place like ghastly exotic birds. Escapees from Fantasy, perhaps? Show cockatiels belong in cages, children.

I quickly turned my attention to the chiselled beauties of mankind that crowded the room. Physically flawless - the pesky confines of mortality notwithstanding. It was rare to find half a brain between them, but for blood that sweet, I

was willing to forgo intelligent conversation. Then, there was the ever-present smattering of fine looking women, mingled throughout the posers and their admirers.

Decisions, decisions.

Seduction remains, without doubt, one of the safest forms of feeding available to our kind. I have taken to my bed women, men, white, black, Asian, young, old, fat, thin, muscular... any creed, colour, sexuality or physical type you care to nominate. It is only the taste of the blood that varies.

For example, men taste harder, bolder and fuller in flavour than women. This doesn't necessarily make their blood better, and I've nothing in the world against women. But over decades of hunting, I have found the blood of men much easier to attain. Men are confident to go home with a stranger for a night of rough passion while women tend to balk at the prospect - an unchanging observation for as long as I've depended on their blood. Women are perceptive. Men are dumb - many adorably so.

Like the one who caught my eye, leaning on the bar just a few metres away, swilling expensive beer from a thin bottle. His short blonde hair shone immaculately in the pulsing lights. His legs snugly filled out dark blue jeans and his black shirt was tucked into a leather belt, laying bare his muscular chest and strong back. I could tell by the bored, lazy expression in his eyes. An easy, tasty meal. A meal named Rory, as a smile and quick introduction soon revealed.

I take great pride in my ability to summarise people at a glance, and Rory was more or less as he appeared. He was twenty-seven, infatuated with the gym, loved to party and knew none of the authors, musicians, or artists that I longed to speak of.

On the bright side, our lack of common interests allowed me to hand out half answers while I focused on what was important - the veins, rising deliciously from his forearm to his shoulder. As I looked deeper, I could almost feel the warmth of his blood, unpolluted with drugs, save the little beer he was drinking. That body, lean, athletic and well-kept, was a brilliant store of health. Enough to last me two nights, if I was careful.

Now, do you understand why I love Blaze?

After a half hour's 'conversation', I was actually starting to enjoy Rory. He had a hearty laugh that matched his physical appeal and occasionally caught my attention with flashes of keen intelligence. A law graduate, completing his thesis at Macquarie, he was trying hard not to bore me with details - despite the best pleas of my glazed over expression. Anything but the blow-by-blow description of some fitness class he taught. Please, I beg you. Make it stop!

Before the boxercise-induced aneurism could take hold completely, the blood flowing beneath his smooth flesh glowed hotter, and he put his beer down on the table. Before I could move - not that I tried - he leaned down and kissed me.

It is one thing to be kissed as a human, by someone gifted in the act. But for one of my kind, being kissed is a far more revealing experience. In that brief moment of intimacy, we can sample a mortal's blood without drawing a single drop. We can know their health, their quality and breeding, their nature and mood - anything that may affect the blood's flavour, but remains invisible.

As long as his lips were against mine, Rory was happy to be explored. The aroma of his blood was so sweet I had to fight the temptation to bite his tongue right there and drain him. His hard, smooth body, damp with the sweat of dancing, slid over my lycra vest as he pushed deeper. He put a hand on my back and worked his way down, somehow forcing his fingers inside my unyielding pants, gently kneading the smooth cleft of my behind. Not wishing to seem frigid, I began a little exploration of my own, slipping a hand inside his belt.

"Ahem." The bartender winked at us. It was one of the modern club scene's most elegant phrases summed up in a very simple act.

Time to get a room. Mine.

* * *

Rory made a striking figure, striding along Oxford Street towards my home, now wearing the black singlet that had hung from his belt inside the club.

I cut a nice figure myself, letting a little of my gifts pervade the air around us. In the pursuit of companions, one's appearance prior to the 'change' matters very little – a sly benefit brought on by centuries of rapid evolution. Once our predatory nature takes hold, it radiates with sexual magnetism. A lure, if you will. What's the use of eternal youth if you can't convince the world you're irresistible, after all?

As we weaved through the crowd at Taylor Square and met the privacy of Darlinghurst's darkened streets, I felt Rory throw a heavy arm over my shoulder. I hoped the man wasn't going to play clingy. I don't play well with clingy, no matter how beautiful – or drunk – it is.

My companion had no way to detect the sudden stillness of the night air, his already limited human senses dulled by liquor. But I knew. I knew it was too still.

"Rory..."

"Mmm?" The man's pace never slowed.

I softened my steps, acute ears reaching out for anything nearby. Something accustomed to hiding, something that didn't want to be seen.

Perhaps, something like me?

"This way." I eased Rory towards a side street that took us off the main road and out of public view. I could partly cloak both of us, even from the prying eyes of another of my kind, but not for long. This enviable specimen of humanity was mine, damn it. I had seduced him, I would drink from him, and I was not inclined to share.

"Hey," my lunch called.

I swear my fangs flashed as I rounded on Rory with a furious glare. He was too drunk to notice. Idiot. You don't 'Hey' our kind when we're nervous. The consequences are typically... unpleasant.

"You want to have some fun with me?" he teased.

"Yes, but we've got to keep moving." I sniffed the air. No scent – no sound anymore either. Had we lost whatever I

thought I'd heard in the dark? I took Rory's hand again and tried to lead him away. But the man just smiled.

"Why not here?"

I stared at him. "What? No!" This was the last thing I needed - a drunken exhibitionist.

"Come on, man. There's nobody watching. It'll be hot."

I could barely contain my annoyance behind clenched teeth as Rory pawed at my shirt, his warm fingers dancing over the cool flesh of my waist. I tried to push him away, careful not to use my full preternatural strength. If I was already facing some rival predator, lurking in the dark, I didn't need the complication of accidentally breaking my companion's ribs.

I gasped as Rory slid a hand inside my 'impenetrably' tight trousers and kissed me. I let him nuzzle me a moment, then forced him to break. "Not here. Not now."

Mumbling what sounded like an obscene description of precisely what he hoped to do to me 'here and now,' Rory grabbed my vest and yanked it up, his tongue cutting a slow, sensual dance down my chest. I shivered as cold air hit the pale, moistened skin. My companion lapped at my abs with warm, open kisses as he pulled open my belt and pants. He wasn't taking no for an answer.

I listened for the intruder once more, trying to shut out the mortal's lustful sighs as he explored me. Still nothing. Perhaps I'd imagined it, or 'it' had lost us. In any case, I'd soon lose my prey if I didn't get back into character. I closed my eyes and tried to relax.

"That's better," Rory grinned, as he took me in his mouth.

I wasn't convinced we were out of danger yet. With a sniff of the air, I was certain. Yes, something was out here now, and it was close. At least Rory was distracted. I shuddered as he yanked down my trousers, grabbing my backside with strong hands, pulling me deeper as his fingers teased me. I ran an appreciative caress over his biceps, shoulders and neck.

Then, in the dark, I saw the intruder's outline. He was roughly my height, but slouched, his manner almost tenta-

tive as he watched us. I tapped Rory's arm to get his attention, nodding at the intruder. "Excuse me, do you mind?"

No answer.

Rory quickly turned and shouted as I redressed, "Hey, are you deaf, mate? Piss off, will you?"

Still nothing.

Rory glanced back at me with a grin. "I think somebody wants to party with us."

This, I sincerely doubted.

My companion turned back to the figure with a cocky swagger. "Show us what you got, then."

A young man stepped tentatively from the darkness. The stench of cheap cigarettes hung from his clothes. His jeans were ripped, and he wore a stained and faded jacket that at one time had been blue. His hair was a mess of dark brown locks. The kid's face had been unshaven for just over a day, and his tongue bled from an accidental bite. I could smell it.

Rory shook his head, putting an arm around me again. "Jesus. You into rough trade, Rey?"

"Shut up!" the kid barked.

We startled as he waved a flick-knife at us.

Still, I was relieved. I'd had every nerve and fibre primed, ready to fight for my prey, yet my nemesis had turned out to be some unkempt delinquent too gutless to hold up a convenience store. He couldn't have been much more than twenty, probably still living with his parents in some suburban backwater in the outer west.

I almost pitied him.

"Your wallets, fags. Now!" He flashed the knife at Rory and tried to look intimidating. This was no easy feat, for while the mugger was almost six foot tall, Rory was several inches clear of that benchmark and almost as broad around the chest.

"Okay." Rory eased off of me and took out his wallet. Any trace of the drunk, muscle-bound horn dog, who moments before had been so focused on the worship of my flesh, was now gone as the situation sank in. "Just relax. It's okay, you can have it. Just be cool, all right?"

I had to admit, the man's calm confidence impressed me. Ego and alcohol were, just occasionally, a useful mix.

"I said now! You too." This time, the bastard pointed the knife at me.

I slowly took out my wallet, the focus of my curiosity shifting from companion to thug. Surely, Rory wasn't intimidated? One swipe of those big hands and this discussion would be over. Hell, I wasn't bound by human limits. One punch from *me* would achieve the same outcome. But that was out of the question in front of the human. Plus, there was every chance the thief would remember it when he woke up. If he woke up.

But something was different now. Too different. The mugger was flinching, like a dog taking fright.

"Rory, get behind me and get ready to run," I said, backing away. It's not always gratifying to have one's first instincts confirmed.

"Shut up!" The thief lunged at Rory with the knife, striking a deep cut to the man's wrist.

The aroma of sweet blood swirled around me as it spilled out over his flesh and dripped to the street. God, I didn't need that distraction. More blood spilled as the muscles in Rory's arm tensed. He grabbed the kid's jacket, lifted him high off the ground and shoved him against the wall. The thug swore in defiance, but Rory was firm.

"What's your problem?" he yelled, his hands scrunching the young tough's shirt in a hold so tight, the knife clattered to the ground.

"Get off me, faggot!" The boy spat in Rory's face, but the crude gesture only angered my companion more. The thief convulsed under the impact as Rory threw him against the wall again.

"Rory, drop him and follow me, quickly."

The air had changed. A musky odour now wafted through it, and it was coming from our would-be mugger. The boy's shirt had ridden up as Rory gripped it, exposing his belly. I could swear it was a lot hairier than it had been when the man had first picked him up. That was bad. *Very* bad.

“Rory!”

With one final push, my companion threw the kid back, letting his head hit the wall and his body slide to the ground with a pained groan.

“Nasty little punk.” Rory lifted his singlet to wipe the sweat from his brow. Blood still seeped from his wrist.

I backed away, beckoning my companion to hurry up.

Rory shrugged, grinning at me. “I don’t think he’ll be doing much—”

A long, hollow howl cut him off mid-sentence. I’d only heard that sound two, perhaps three times before. But I’d never forgotten it.

There comes a point where a prudent predator severs ties to his prey, and that point was now. Rory ran toward me, but it was too late. The werewolf brought down its claws and grabbed his midsection. My companion’s screams echoed around the street as his stomach was ripped open. But they were soon silenced as he lost consciousness, and the beast bit into his leg, tearing it off.

I could have intervened. Rory was still alive, though barely, and I could have distracted the creature. Used my own powers and forced it to leave the mortal alone. I appreciate that some may have been horrified at my inaction.

But, hello? *Werewolf?*

Popular fiction would have us believe them inherently spiritual creatures. At one with the call of nature, their social rituals governed by centuries of pack tradition and worship of the moon, Gaia, and all that’s good in the realm of night.

All this, I call bullshit.

What I know is that they grow to over nine foot tall after full transformation, with teeth and claws capable of tearing prey apart within seconds. And if their ‘society’ is one governed by spiritual discipline, this one seemed lapsed, at best. My kind hunts for food by necessity. Werewolves kill for sport. We’re predators, they’re monsters. That’s the difference.

Rory was lost to this beast. There was little I could do now but slink back to the shadows and return to one of the

clubs for another companion, getting hungrier by the minute. And no, I did not consider feeding from the werewolf. Would you?

My better sense compromised by panic, I clean forgot that my kind were not the only supernaturals with enhanced senses. The monster looked up and sniffed the air. I ducked as Rory's body was tossed to the ground, his blood soiling my clothes and bare arms. I licked away the few specks that had spattered across my mouth. A fine vintage of man, and I couldn't abide waste.

I tried to run, but there was nowhere to go. Was I mad? If Rory's screams hadn't attracted enough attention, luring a fully changed werewolf into the open street was just begging for more trouble. One human death was already too many.

If I couldn't run out of the maze of colonial laneways, behind the empty terraces and warehouses of Darlington, my only option was to lead the beast into it. My shaking limbs strained against hunger as I tried to bolt past the creature. I'd barely gotten more than a few steps when a weighty paw scraped down my back, knocking me to the pavement. As I struggled to my feet, it came down again, picking me up, claws now digging deep into my leg. The monster's terrible breath swirled around me as it prepared itself for meat far sweeter than any mortal.

Damn it! I'd lived three human lifetimes and it couldn't end there. Not consumed by some young beast that tore men's limbs off before tossing them aside like broken toys. I wouldn't accept it!

I did the only thing possible, and can now say with certainty that werewolf blood tastes foul. My teeth, quite capable of puncturing plate glass if necessary, neatly pierced his thick, leathery flesh. I could scarcely begin to describe the awful sensation that flooded me.

Was it even blood? It tasted more like a liquefied pulp of rotting meat, streaking the brown, matted fur as it erupted from the vein. The beast howled as it tried to shake me loose. I felt the crushing blow of a brick wall against my back and dropped to the street.

My vision swayed. I couldn't focus. What was wrong with me? I hadn't had a concussion since... I'd never had a concussion. I wasn't human, for Christ's sake!

I staggered to my feet, steadying myself against the wall. As I watched, the werewolf began to yell, not in pain, but frustration. Its incomprehensible yelps gradually began to form words as the fur retracted and his body shrank.

"No! Not now!" He fixed on me with murderous eyes, unable to move as he caught his breath.

I took my chance, lurching towards the now weakened and naked young man as the last traces of fur shrank from his body. I snatched hold of his throat.

"I'm going to enjoy this, you—" Before I could finish, the nausea returned. I lost my grip on the thug's throat, and a great stream of vomited blood spewed from my mouth. Werewolf blood. Not just vile to the taste, but completely poisonous.

The punk shrieked as the blood, his own blood, spewed over his feet. "You're sick!"

The irony of the statement wasn't lost on me. Nor was how ridiculous he looked, standing there, trying to shake vomited blood from his bare feet and shaking his fist at me. I couldn't kill him now. Not like this. I was a better man than that, or so I liked to think. I picked up a piece of the jacket he'd worn, which now lay ruined on the ground from his transformation. I gingerly wiped my face and arms and threw it back at him.

"Hey!"

As the nausea left me, I took a moment to look at the wolf's scruffy human shell. He wasn't a pretty, or even handsome boy in the traditional sense. He was well built across the chest, a little too much so for his height, with a lack of body hair that surprised me. Just a light trail on his stomach, belying his true nature. Captivating my attention though, were the tattoos. Intricate and complex, they adorned both his arms, yet by far the most striking was a sizeable tiger, which wrapped itself over his left shoulder, arcing down to its fearsome face, expertly etched into his chest. A beast to

guard the beast within. It seemed both poetic and pretentious. It almost seemed to stalk the faux silver ring mounted on his left nipple. At least, I assumed it was a fake, in deference to werewolf myth.

“Hope you’re happy, vampire.”

The air instantly chilled around me. I could feel it. A reflection of my own heart. “What did you say?”

“You heard me, vampire!” He drew closer, his demeanour still not entirely free of the wolf that had possessed him.

That did it.

I took him by the throat again, throwing his human body against the wall and pinning him there, my fingers closing around his neck like iron bolts.

“Hey!” He tried with futility to pry me loose. “Jesus, man!”

“Do you enjoy having a tongue, wolf man?” I asked, keeping my voice level, a counterpoint to the violence of my hands.

“Fuck you, bloodsucker!” he choked out, each syllable audibly more pained than the last. “Let me... argh! I can’t—”

“Because if you wish to keep it, you will never, *ever* use that word again.” I gave him an emphatic shake, cracking his head against the wall. The impact cut him and I felt warm blood trickle down over my fingers. I was beyond hungry by this point, but not for this bastard. I wasn’t putting my body through that again. “Now tell me you’re sorry,”

The boy hissed and I squeezed again, wringing another pained yelp from him.

“What’s your name, wolf man?”

“Piss off!”

“Your name?”

Whoever he was, he was now going the most alarming shade of orange about the ears, among other places.

“Jorgas,” he got out. “It’s Jorgas, now put me—”

I silenced him with another jolt against the wall. “Hello, Jorgas. I’m Reylan. And when meeting a stranger for the first time, it is customary in polite societies to introduce oneself before becoming a hideous cretin of the night and threaten-