

**We Don't Sparkle – by A J Archibald**

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And as for me...

I live in London with my partner and two rescue sighthounds. I work in the financial services industry, but I've been writing for twenty years or so as a sideline. This isn't my first novel, but it's the first one I thought would be worth taking all the way through to (self) publication.

WE  
DON'T  
SPARKLE

A J ARCHIBALD

Dedicated to Natasha. *Sine qua non.*

## Chapter 1

There's nothing sexy about being a vampire. Nothing. In the movies and books it's all glamour and seduction and money. And I dunno, maybe it is for some of us. For me, though, it's freezing my tits off in a graveyard, looking to score a meal by draining a tramp or a junkie.

The specimen I'm looking at just now has made a bed for himself up against one of the ancient vaults. I can smell him from up here on the belltower.

Why, you ask, does an apex predator, a proud and lethal lone hunter such as myself, feed on the smelly unfortunate? Are there not delicious young virgins with elegant necks and big eyes I can entice back to my lair? Where is the rapture, the sweet surrender?

Well, there isn't any. Because the first and most important thing about being a vampire, the thing the books and movies do get right, is you cannot get detected. We've got to maintain the Big Lie. The Obscura, they call it.

Hence, feeding on guys like this. I try not to kill them. It took some practice, but I can make the puncture mark super tiny – no bigger than a needle mark. So, if I do accidentally get carried away and send my dinner to the morgue, a coroner probably wouldn't spot the difference, unless they're really looking for it - which they won't be, of course, because of the Big Lie. This, then is the evolutionary niche of this apex predator: feeding off the forgotten humans that society pumps from its bilges.

Anywhere, here I am. It's a cold night in January, and all the teenagers who hang out at cemeteries cos it's cool have fucked off home to their parents. I'm perched on the steeple of a church, here in my home town of Edinburgh. If you've ever been, you know the one. It's just off the Royal Mile, a road that runs from the Palace of Holyrood up to the Castle. Take a short turn off the main cobbled road, leaving behind the naff little tartan shops and fudge stores and tourist-traps, and you'll find it. It's not a big place, but there's a big boneyard behind it that slopes down towards the train tracks. Father Niceguy gives out free sarnies at lunchtime and usually doesn't lock the gate at night – so it's a popular hangout for down and outs. Council-house kids like me and my pals used to come up here and pickpocket the Japanese tourists. There's no CCTV, and this time of night there's nobody around to hassle you. It's the perfect place to go, if you haven't got a damn thing. It's also the perfect place for me to hunt.

I make no sound as I drop the forty feet to the ground. I cut a little action pose, pressing a fist to the ground as I crouch and allowing myself a cheeky half-grin. If I'm stuck being a super-villain from the darkest nightmares of a superstitious continent, stealing blood from homeless people, I'm jolly well going to do superhero landings.

My victim is fast asleep. I approach him silently. I wish I could turn off my vampire super-senses right now, because I can smell *everything*: the dried piss in his skivvies, the booze seeping from his pores, his body's odour. And now I have to lick him.

Like I said: there's nothing fucking sexy about being a fucking vampire.

My dinner snores, snuffling and chuffing like a sow. I stoop down and concentrate everything on my fangs. Or, rather, one of my fangs. I feel it lengthen and narrow, an inch, then two inches, as I reach down and grab his arm, rolling up his sleeve. He doesn't stir. Trying not to think about how daft I look - what kind of stealthy and terrifying creature of the night goes about with one long fan sticking out her mouth like a walrus that's lost a fight? - I raise his arm and begin to feed.

A great warm wave crashes over me. Submerged in it, I feel somehow ecstatic and calm at once. In that moment, I can almost be glad I've been turned into what I am. It's like a high, but better – and you can trust me on that cos I've tried them all. Feeding is much *bigger* than a high. It's all at once like the warm embrace of a beloved mother (or so I'd imagine), the cuddly-bitey response some people get when they see a cute puppy, ASMR tickles, the relief of getting away from the cops, the anticipation of a hot date. There are sad feelings in it, too: your pal who ODeD, the feeling when they dropped the charges against your abuser due to lack of evidence. Life, or at least a tiny sip of it – that's what it feels like. And when you're dead – or even undead like me - even the lousy bits of life are wonderful.

Reluctantly, I stop drinking. The tramp sleeps through it. It's just as I'm straightening up that I feel something weird and new.

The feeling cuts through the tramp-stink, but there's more to it than just scent. It's not a sixth sense. It's more like an urgency, or an instinct. A buzzing energy-sense of wrongness. Whatever it is, I am just aware, somehow, that there's another vampire nearby. One I haven't met. I'm totally certain, even though I've got no evidence whatsoever. I just know. The other vampire's presence fills me with a vague sense of dread and off-ness, like being in a home where someone died. All those lovely feels from my dinner are gone in an instant. I jump back up to the roof of the church and begin sniffing the air. It is only a moment later that I realise I've done both these things automatically, without a thought. Every undead cell is telling me I need to go find this other vampire.

Unfortunately, this whole vampire homing-sense isn't exactly a GPS. All I have is vague pull in a direction. A nasty sensation that needs probing, like a missing tooth. Leaping from rooftop to rooftop, I chase this feeling beyond the north end of the boneyard. I'm down in this weird canyon that runs through the city. The railway lines run through it. West of me, beyond Waverley Station, this same little mini-valley becomes the Princes' Street Gardens. But the part I'm in right now is no bed of roses. Here, it will never gentrify. Not enough sun, maybe. Every building down here is at least fifty percent knackered.

Warehouses and asbestos-clogged office blocks. Not even the bright light of Edinburgh's economic boom can penetrate this gloomy valley. A forgotten property purgatory which may never be redeemed into heavenly flats.

If I was trying to lay low in another vampire's city, it's exactly the kind of place I'd go.

Something new strikes me, as I make a final jump from the back end of a 1970s tower block to an ugly brick monolith whose windows have been broken since I was a kid. The homing-sense changes. It's sort of like adrenaline. It's more like a feeling of having locked something down. I imagine it's what a dog feels like when he catches a toy in his teeth, right before he whips it around and then savages it.

Bitebitebite!

I launch myself through the air, twisting to slip through the empty panes of a broken window, like a pale undead reject from the Crystal Maze. Silently, I strike the bare floorboards and roll to my feet, sending dust and rat turds in all directions. I see him now, silhouetted in the piss-yellow glow from the ancient streetlamps outside. There's something at his feet; even without my vampire sight, I'd be able to tell it's a body. The vampire watches me walk closer.

"Who the fuck are you?" I say.

He just laughs. "If you play nicely, maybe I'll be your new daddy, once I take over this place. Instead of tearing your throat out right now."

Maybe I should explain why this all got so confrontational, so fast. And why we're both reading lines out of a bad action movie. See, for all our strength and cool powers, vampires are actually very vulnerable. 'Precarious' is how my sire describes it. There aren't many of us, and if people knew we existed and that we were eating them, we'd be screwed. We keep our profiles lower than the suspension on a boy racer's compensation-wagon. That much, you probably know. There're all sorts of unwritten social rules, too, to make sure we stay hidden. For example, it is 'highly unusual' - to mimic my sire again - for a vampire not to formally introduce himself with the local baron(ess), and even more 'unwelcome' for him to predate on our humanstock. 'Measures may require to be taken' in such circumstances.

In other words: he is fucking with me and my sire in a very fundamental and aggressive way, and we both know it.

"Did you empty him?" I ask.

"This?" he nudges the body with his boot. "Why do you care?" He sounds posh and it makes me hate him even more, tapping into a different kind of vein: Scottish resentment.

My fingernails sharpen and harden into claws, and I shift my weight to strike. He's grinning at me. Smug bastard. He knows exactly what he's done, and what I have to do in return. With my claws out, I leap across the metres between us like a spear, my hair and jacket trailing behind me. I watch in satisfaction as his grin is erased.

Despite my blood-fuelled speed, my attack doesn't land. With inches to spare, he turns and leaps through the decaying plate-glass window, out into the night. I pause, glancing at the body he has left

behind.

"Shit," I say, because now I have a dilemma. I have to chase him. That may sound daft, but I have to. It's not just a pride thing – though I'll admit that features more than a little – it's also about safety. Killing a human like he just did could reveal the Big Lie. I don't know yet why he's done this, because it creates a risk for him as well as me and my sire. And no, there aren't any vampire cops I can call to stop him. It's on me.

But I also have to clean up the mess he made. No doubt, it's a problem that smug prick set for me deliberately. If I tend to the person he's just murdered, it'll be a huge pain in the tits to track him down. I know somehow that this vampire detection sense thingy doesn't have a very long range. Within minutes, I'll lose all idea of where he might be. Damnit. I make a decision and hope it is the correct one.

The sleeping city slips underneath me in a series of jolting bounds. My stranger-sense is still going, but only just. The sensation is fading. I curse under my breath. It took me too long to clean up. Wherever he's going, he's on his way in a hurry, too. I burn blood, faster than I probably should. But it'd be a disaster if I lost him.

My roof-top jumping ceases as I reach the Cowgate. I run under the railway arch, thinking about how long ago people used to live inside it. Like proper mole-people shit. Subterranean dwellings, forever dark, which you can visit now with a tour guide for a tenner. Up ahead is Grassmarket. Jogging past chippies and bars and youth hostels, I still can't see him, but it feels like I'm gaining on him. My roof-top leaping is over for now. There just aren't enough buildings around here to leap across; it's an open plaza full of pop-up stalls, boarded up for the night. This part of town is awake all night. There are folks smoking fags outside nightclubs or in the alleys behind all-night takeaways. Knuckleheads in rugby kit guffaw outside pubs, seemingly immune to the chill. The Castle looms over the open space, impressive and immortal. Even if there were buildings to leap, I'd still have to run this bit. Just in case someone looks up at the wrong time. It's one thing if people see a surprisingly fast runner in the middle of the night; it's quite another to see me make death-defying leaps across the rooftops. The good news is that my tracker sense is getting stronger.

Up ahead is the part of the city we used to call the Pubic Triangle, on account of the strip-clubs on three sides. It's tapas and craft beer now, though. That's where I finally spot him. He darts into a side-street, then down a dark lane. I torch another gulp of blood to close the distance. As I turn the corner, he's waiting there with his hands on his hips.

"Took you long enough."

Four men appear out of nowhere, and I do a little half-jump in surprise. "What the?" I say to no one in particular. Humans can't sneak up on me. It's just not something that they are capable of doing. Somehow, these four managed it though. They've surrounded me, and each has a weapon of some kind. Each of them is tall and pumped up, with the kind of heft and very specific thickness you get from moving



heavy things while looking in a mirror. Performance manliness. But they move strangely, all lurching and pausing. As I stare into one man's eyes, I realise these aren't humans. They're his ghouls.

"Oh yes, we've been planning this for a little while, hen."

"Who the fuck are you?" I say, not because I expect him to say anything, but because, well, it's what you say in situations like this.

"I'm the future. Me and my boys, first we're going to take over your money. Then we'll take the rest of the city."

I don't bother saying anything. I fed recently, and my bloodstock is high. This is a good time for some violence.

Taking a deep draught of blood, I enhance my speed and launch myself in a high backflip, flying over the heads of one of the goons behind me. As I'm about to land, I catch hold of one goon's head. Twisting my hands around, a satisfying, grinding crunch jolts through my palms and I hear a crack, as his neck snaps. One down. I jump back up into the air, trying to get away from any grabbing hands and arms.

Because that's another thing they never get right in movies. It's really, really hard to fight lots of people at once. They don't come at you one at a time so you can do fancy kicks and whatnot. Even with vampire strength, if you get surrounded by four men with bats and knives, they're going to get hold of you, and you're going to go down.

There's also the matter of the other vampire, who apparently know some tricks I don't, because he's hovering a few feet off the ground. Mid-air, he pivots and flies straight at me, faster than even I can see. Shit. I'm in the middle of a jump, committed, so all I can do is reach out, desperately searching for a bit of wall or a lamppost that I can press off, to change my angle of flight so I can avoid his spear of a kick. Just an instant before he hits me, I find it, the tiniest edge of the eaves of a tenement block. Pressing with my fingertip, I manage to shift my momentum ever so slightly, and he soars past, digging his claws into the tenement block to make a temporary hold.

I am beginning to see that I am in over my head. Although I've got some fighting experience, stuff my sire taught me or I've picked up through my own night-time work, I've never fought a vampire of similar power to me. And this guy looks like he might be stronger than me, too. Plus, he's got his ghouls, who I have only now noticed are all in immaculate, tailored suits. What the hell is going on here? Who is this guy?

It looks like I might not be around long enough to find out.

As I fall, I straighten up and bring my legs together and spear myself on top of the skull of one of the other ghouls. He collapses beneath me without a sound. I think he's out for the count. But as soon as I land, the others are at me. I block a baseball bat with my forearm, consciously burning blood to harden my bones and muscles, so the bat bounces off me harmlessly. The ghoul looks at me in surprise. I slash my left claw at his face, but he rears back just in time. Something hard thumps into my back, and I stumble forward.

There is no pain. Don't ask me to explain why, because I can't. We simply don't feel normal, human physical pain. We take damage like a mortal - cut off my leg and I won't be able to walk. But it won't hurt. My sire reckons that physical pain isn't part of the animus. Which he says is a bit like a soul, or whatever you call a thing that stays when you die and become an undead monster. Emotional pain we have for sure. But not physical.

When I spin around to see what's hit me, everything seems to be working, more or less. There are two left, now, plus the vampire. They're standing in front of me, and I wonder what they're waiting for. I hear the wail of approaching police sirens, but even if they're coming to rescue me, they're more bad news than good. I raise my fists, ready for round two.

The other vampire launches in a flying jump-kick, leg extended, like a vampire artillery shell. I dodge this easily enough, and I catch his leg, hoping to whip his face into the tarmac. It's no good, though. He tugs his leg inward, pulling me off my balance as he hits the deck with his hands. His free foot smacks me in the face, and I'm forced backwards, disoriented for a moment. Which is precisely when a slicing machete catches me high up on my shoulder, hacking into muscle and sinew. My left arm dangles uselessly, now. I hiss, and consume blood to heal the wound, even as I twist and slash my own claws at the face of the gym-bro who just cut me. He falls as my claws dig deep into his throat, leaving him a twitching, gurgling wreck.

I'm beginning to slow, as my bloodstock dwindles. Meanwhile, I've still got one last ghoul to deal with, plus the vampire. On top of that, there's the matter of the bodies in the middle of the street. Even though the ghouls are already fading to dust, if someone walked past us just now it would be a very bad thing indeed. And I dearly hope there's no CCTV here.

The other vampire approaches calmly, in close formation with his remaining ghoul, who regards me with a flat expression. I've never seen or even heard of a ghoul like this. Baby-faced, young, well-dressed, the ghoul looks like a lad you'd see on the pull in New Town bars. They couldn't be more different from what you might expect.

In unison and from different angles, they pounce at me. The vampire goes left, and his thug goes right, and I have to jump and twist in a desperate attempt to avoid them, hoping to put some air between us or make them get in each other's way. But the vampire is wise to me, the bastard. He turns and leaps at me in one smooth, terrifyingly fast movement. I raise a leg to block his strike, drawing on some of the last of my blood-fuel to toughen myself up. Even with the vamp-armour though, his blow lands heavy. Something crunches, and I fly backwards into a wheely bin. When I try to pick myself up, my left leg gives out, and I sprawl face-first into a street full of blood and spilled beer and rainwater.

Yep. It seems I made the wrong damned decision, when I chose to chase this arsehole. I'm scraping the bottom of the blood barrel, now: as I try to heal my shattered tibia, it stops halfway. Swaying, I clamber to my feet, half-dragging one knackered leg. The other vampire giving me a cheeky grin. He and his ghoul close the distance at a leisurely walk, as if they know it's all over. Which I guess it is.

But then, just when they're about to get close enough to finish me off, they stop. The vampire's

expression changes: his eyes widen, the smugness is gone. He sniffs the air. Then he bares his teeth, looks up, and jumps away. His ghoul takes one look at me, drop his crowbar, and runs away.

A moment later, my sire glides gently down from the sky, his cape – his literal cape – floating behind him like a comic book magician. "We haven't long, Mhairi. Let's do what we can to clean this up."

\*

We're at my sire's place. You know those elegant sandstone buildings that were broken up and turned into flatted apartments many years ago? Flats that highly paid lawyers and bankers save up for years to afford? Yeah - my sire owns one of those entire buildings. His name is on a brass plaque on the front. It's on a cobbled street in the New Town, just north of Princes Street where the tourists congregate. A tiny strip of grass and trees runs through the middle of the road, surrounded by a black iron fence. It's the kind of neighbourhood tourists gawp at and imagine living in.

We're sitting in his front room. If an estate agent walked in, he'd jizz himself. It's got the original chimney and a huge bay window, and hard wood floors and these big, thick rugs that shine with money and quality. Paintings hang on three walls - I think one is a Turner - and the wood panelling is flawless and polished. There is no television, and no unsightly black cables run across the floor or clump together in angry snarls in a corner. He doesn't even have Wi-Fi. It's a time-warp, coming in here.

"This is a disturbing development." His accent is a gentle purr. Posh Scots, but old fashioned. Like a radio broadcast from the 1940's.

The disappointment stabs me in the guts. I hang my head. "I'm sorry, sire, I didn't-"

"I do not blame you for his arrival. It would have been better if you had slain him."

I suck in my breath. It's only a mild criticism, but it *hurts*. It seems so unfair, but I also know I let my sire down and that hurts more than anything the baddy and his ghouls did to me, tonight. "I, I trie-"

"You were overmatched. Ah, well. Perhaps there is yet something that can be salvaged from this."

In the quiet moment that follows, I look at myself in the big mirror above the hearth. Yes, you can see a vampire in a mirror. C'mon - let's not be absurd about this. Violating biology is one thing, but you can't argue with physics.

Even in the relatively flattering soft light of my sire's aging bulbs, I'm not exactly an advertisement for being a sexy vampire. My hair is mousy brown and it looks greasy no matter what products I use. My black Nirvana t-shirt is more grey than black - though I guess at least it qualifies as vintage, now. It hangs off me; I bought it when I was still human, and a size or two bigger. My jeans are half-ripped, and the jacket I'm wearing over my hoodie is an army surplus camo is probably from the Falklands war. Everything on my body is hard-wearing, simple, chosen to hide stains. My nose is a bit too long, and my cheeks too shallow to be considered pretty. I'm not saying I'm ugly. But you can forget any notion of some tall, long-necked blonde ice-maiden with high cheekbones who could star in a film about elves. And this is what I'm stuck with for eternity.

"It's a good job you came when you did," I say, breaking the silence, "I thought I was done for."

How'd you even find me?"

He shakes his head slightly, not acknowledging the question. "Four dead. The chap in the parking lot and three ghouls. The other ghoul having absconded, of course. Were you able to find out who his victim was?"

"Yes. A council employee. He must have been on a night out and was just unlucky."

"And the ghouls?"

"Dust, now. They didn't have any ID."

He nods. "I am slightly less troubled by them. When a vampire takes a ghoul, it is usually the case that there is a police report, or a missing persons investigation. Their loved ones wonder about strange behaviour and hours. But that would all have taken place some time ago, when he first made his ghouls. I am less concerned about their final disappearance, now."

"That leaves us only with our interloper." I can't help myself: when I'm around him, the poncey language comes out.

"Assuming we can rely on your work to obscure the source of the council worker's wounds."

"We should be good. He was pretty torn up. The only thing I could think of was to put him on the train tracks."

My sire makes a face.

"What? I couldn't exactly try to make it look like it was a wild animal attack or something. I'm pretty sure there are no wolves or bears in Edinburgh."

"No, only the haggis."

I laugh.

"What about this other vampire, sire? You ever seen anything like that before? Somebody just rocking up in your city?"

"It is rare. Exceptionally rare. As you know, we are, by nature, aggressive and territorial. And those of us who survive for a long time usually begin to nurture grand ambitions. One would imagine we'd be at one another's throats constantly. Playing power games, raising armies, building empires."

"But no?"

"Not that I have observed. To use a gambling analogy, I suppose the pot is insufficient to warrant the bet. We all have our wills to power. But we also all know that, even if we achieve our aims, our empires must be obscured, our powers hidden. What pleasure is there in a paper empire? And on the other side of the scale, attempting to wrest power from another vampire entails tremendous risk. If you'll permit me a florid analogy, stealing territory from another vampire is like a knife-fight in a telephone booth."

"Right."

"From time to time, someone becomes convinced that my description just now is inaccurate. And

they launch a scheme. Usually it's someone quite powerful, but not tremendously powerful. Again, the gaming analogy is apt. A truly powerful vampire - one of the Lords of old Europe, say - might be able to make short work of me, but he equally has far more to lose, and my modest holdings are of comparatively little interest. So, where these challenges arise, they usually originate from a younger, ambitious vampire who is hungry for a domain of his own. Edinburgh is a modest prize but may be very attractive to a climber."

I don't say anything for a few moments. I think about what he's just said. "Are we under attack?"

"That is what I require for you to determine. You can make up for tonight's less than ideal outcome by investigating this further."

"But you saw what happened tonight. I couldn't beat him."

He shakes his head. "There is more to this than mere physical confrontation. This is an opportunity for your development and growth."

His disappointment stings. "Okay."

"Find out who this that vampire is. Find out his plans."

"Got it."

"This is important." He looks straight at me, locking on to my eyes. "Mhairi, one day, you will have a domain of your own. Perhaps it will be this city, perhaps some other. Doing so will require you to ask the right questions. To plan ahead. Haste is a human failing, one which has no place in the life of an immortal. This is a lesson I want you to learn."

"Okay. Leave it with me. I'll start tomorrow night."

He looks back down at his book. I am dismissed. I walk silently from the quiet sophistication of his sitting room, out into the pissing rain, to retreat to my tiny flat. Edinburgh is a modest prize, he said. A knife fight in a telephone box. But I still have to go find this bastard and figure out what he's been doing, because if he ruins the Obscura in this city, we're all stuffed. I told you, there's nothing sexy about being a vampire.

## Chapter 2

I start my search at Dougie's. Dougie hears stuff.

Even after all these years, I'm still not sure how to feel about Dougie's place. On the one hand, it's a titty bar – and that's kinda gross. On the other hand, I'm not a prude. I know the girls, and they're here by choice. Most of them make pretty good money. Some of them putting themselves through Uni doing this, making way more money and having a lot more fun than they would by waiting tables or pulling pints. Others are here because they don't have many other skills, though, and that seems kinda forced. Plus, y'know, the patriarchy and shit.

And so the argument goes, back and forth in my head. I don't know how I feel.

One thing I know for sure, though, is that Dougie treats everyone well. He takes a fair cut and keeps everybody safe. Nobody is pressured to do anything they don't want. If Dougie tried any shit like that, I'd rip out his throat. Not every woman in this game is so lucky, but these ones are. I guess I'm saying I don't like blanket statements. Dougie's is all right. Other places probably aren't. That's true of most anything.

Anyway, yeah, so this is my life. I'm a gross, violent, literally blood-sucking monster, and sometimes I have to go to a titty bar for information. Sometimes, my vamp-daddy has to bail me out of a fight I couldn't handle, and I have to drain a stinky homeless guy.

It isn't all bad, though. Tonight, I'm walking from the New Town to Dougie's with my veins full of some of the top-shelf blood my sire keeps in reserve, feeling in charge of the night. It's Thursday at midnight and the bars and clubs are getting spicy and I'm in amongst it. This is my town, and even an undead monster can feel alive out here.

And as much as I like to whinge about some of the shittier parts of my life, things weren't exactly perfect for me when I was a human. No - that's an understatement. As I walk past a park bench in one of the little New Town greens, I recall a night I slept under it. In fact, I've slept in or been kicked out of most of the municipal spaces in the city. Why else do you think I know where all the jakeys and tramps hang out? Where else do you think I got the idea of disguising a fang wound as a needle hole?

No, it certainly was *not* my sire who had that particular brainwave. Debonaire, fastidious, main-door-flat-owning vampire like my sire – draining a victim and making it look like drugs would be as hard for him to imagine as, I dunno, Wi-Fi.

Anyway, yeah. Things aren't perfect as a vampire, but they're better than what I left behind. Or at least from what I remember of my previous life. My sire says there's a kind of amnesia that comes with

being turned. I have all these fragments. Sleeping rough. The boyfriend I ran out on. No, not boyfriend. The guy I had been fucking for drugs and a place to sleep. There's these images. Me running up Fleshmarket Close, away from some alley near Waverley where he - I shake my head. Something grim. That's what I remember, mostly. Overarching, persistent grimness, with occasional flashes of nasty shit.

Dougie was the one good thing from that time. We grew up in the same council estate, and sometimes he let me crash on his couch. You never really outgrow the estate. That's why he has a titty bar named after him.

Dougie's place is half full when I get there. The bar guy lifts the entrance to the behind-the-bar area without a word. Dougie is down in his basement office, pinched into an office chair whose arms are too narrow for his bulk. Flesh collects under his chin. He is one of those guys who always looks like he has a five-o'clock shadow, even if he has just shaved. There's a pile of paper on the desk in front of him, a filing cabinet behind him in one corner, and a big safe in the opposite corner. Down here, you can't hear the customers, but the bass-line of the music thumps through the stone. It feels like a heartbeat.

"What's up, Mhairi?"

"I'm trying to find someone. New in town."

He quirks an eyebrow at me. "A, er, *friend* of yours?" This is kinda how we talk about vampire stuff. It's Dougie; of course I told him everything. He's my oldest friend. Shit – he's my only friend. But that doesn't mean we *really* talk about it – what it feels like and stuff. Christ, no. We're Scottish - not mamby-pamby hippie wimps from California.

"Yeah."

"What's he look like?"

I describe the other vampire. Narrow face, dark hair, bulgy eyes. He's thin, too. We all are, as far as I know. It would take an awful lot of burned blood to force my dead intestines to digest food, and to put on fat. Any fat we have just sort of slowly disappears. I guess it's an energy store, so maybe our bodies use a little of it. Fuckin I dunno. None of this makes much sense to me, either.

"Not much to go on. He got anything unusual? Clothes? Tattoo?"

I try to remember. "He had a kinda poncy haircut. Tight to the sides, and then long up top, curly like slinky coils. And of course he'll be pale. Obviously."

"What makes you think I'd know him?"

"He's a creature of the night. There aren't that many titty bars in Edinburgh. I'm playing the odds."

"Right. I'll let you know if I find anything."

"Thanks, Dougie. How's things, anyway?"

"The usual. Oh, Darlene said to tell you you're invited to her going away do."

"She's finally leaving?"

"So she says. Got a job in York or Peterborough or something. Consultancy, she says. Whatever

that means."

I make an 'oooh' sound.

"Aye. I think it's about firing people mostly. Being an arsehole."

"Well, she'll have learned from the best, here, hey?" I say.

Dougie snorts. Then he quirks his head to one side.

There's a slight change in the sound coming from upstairs. A human, or at least a human who had a superstitious bent, might say the vibe suddenly changed. For me, it's more precise. I pick up more than a mortal. All those thousand tiny sense-clues that make up a subconscious feeling of menace or danger - I read them more explicitly. Even with my senses, though, it takes me a moment to figure out what it is. The chattering hubbub has changed. It isn't necessarily quieter, it's just different. "You want me to go have a look?"

"If you wouldn't mind. It's probably nothing. There's a conference on or something. Been a lot more suits been around the last few nights. Some of those lads like to play the tough, sometimes."

I narrow my eyes at this. I remember the expensive suits the ghouls were wearing last night. Our invading vampire shitbird - there's no way he'd be as crazy as to send his ghouls to a strip-club around a bunch of humans, is there? He's not that daft, is he? It'd be suicide: even if he managed to take the city from my sire and I, he'd get rumbled by the humans straight away. And that would be the end of him. Maybe all of us.

Sure enough, I reach the stop of the stairs and see a party of ten or so lads in suits milling around the bar, honking out laughs like demented geese. I look at them for a second and I realise, in a way, I know these knuckleheads. The bluster, the noise, the whole drama of acting out their manliness - it would all be perfectly at home in the high flats around Dumbiedykes. The only difference between these lads and the neds I grew up with is the starting hand they got dealt - and the suits I guess.

They look harmless enough, though. Based on the way their eyes are bugging out and pointing in every direction, I figure this the first time most of them have been in a place like this. Strutting around like they're alpha males. Bless 'em. These boys are soft. Upper-class. You can see it in their cheeks. A couple of them have the fluffy dough-boy mass that comes from lifting in a gym and drinking a lot of protein shakes. Maybe they do some MMA after work or a bit of white-collar boxing. Maybe they've been on a resilience training course at work. It's kinda cute, in a way.

Tempting as it might be to give them a bit of schooling on what true toughness is, they haven't actually done anything wrong as far as I can tell. The tone of the room has changed, and they're drawing some nasty looks from a few of the broken-down regulars, not to mention the bouncers. But they seem to just be some lads on an entitled boys' night out. If I beat up every prat I came across in Dougie's titty bar, I'd never get anything done.

It seems doubtful they have anything to do with the shithead vampire I fought the previous night. But I might as well try to find out. I turn on my glamour - just a moment's concentration and a sip of blood



- and walk over to them.

"Hiya boys. Why don't we have a seat together?" I gesture at one of the larger booths, not far from the bar. Their eyes don't follow my gesture; they're locked on my eyes and chest. That's the glamour, or else it's a force of habit for guys like this - probably a bit of both - because the jeans and hoodie I'm wearing don't exactly draw the eye. And compared to the girls who work here, I am really not much to stare at.

It's a weird feeling, glamouring someone. I'll admit, it's kinda sexy in a way - okay, so maybe there's *one* sexy thing about being a vampire. It's also kinda ick, though, watching their eyes go all round and glossy. I wonder what's going on in their heads. There's no coked-up dilated pupils, staring into space like when you're tripping balls, no speeded-out nervous glances. They just stare at me vacantly. There's a thrill in having glamour power over someone. But what kind of a sicko wants to be desired like that? Who wants to be able to make someone do anything they tell them? Now I think of it, the first vampire to figure out how to glam somebody must have been pretty sick himself. I'm assuming it was a bloke because obviously.

I try not to think about the fact my sire has told me on a number of occasions that glamour seems to be a particular talent of mine.

"This is better, isn't it. We can talk *privately*," I say. I sit down in the middle of a large semi-circular booth with faux-velvet upholstery. They join me, filling the space wordlessly, shifting over in unison, never once looking away from me. Yeah, ick.

"Who, who are you?" One of them says. Dribble drips from a corner of his mouth.

"Never mind that, hon. I'm much more interested in who you boys are. Who do you work for?"

As one, they tell me the name of a big investment company.

"Wow, that's fancy. You must be *very* smart guys, huh."

I let the glamour-powered flattery take hold for a moment, while I think about what next to ask. "Say, I don't suppose you know this friend of mine," I say, before describing the other vampire just as I did for Dougie. Even to me, it sounds weird to describe a person rather than using his name like a normal person. But under my sway, these guys don't pick up on it.

They all shake their heads. Damn. Well, it wasn't ever going to be *that* easy.

I try a different approach. "Well, I wonder if you can tell me. Do you know any colleagues who didn't come into work today?" I'm thinking, of course, of the well-dressed ghouls my sire and I finished, last night.

"No. We're all here," says one.

"The Shaftster is off sick, but I was messaging him earlier today. He's got the man-flu."

Damn. I don't know or care who the Shaftster is, but I'm now certain it has nothing to do with the bastard I'm after. A colleague of theirs with a vaguely sexist nickname - common as muck in the work they're in. Sometimes a suit is just a suit. Fine. I'm done here. "'scuse me, boys, just need to freshen up."

They let me up and I make my way out of Dougie's place, letting the glamour drop as I go. There's someone else I can visit, if I want to know about posh twats. It's just that I was really hoping not to.

\*

Graeme's still up. Blue and white light flashes through the shutters on his office window. Watching the stock market, maybe, or more likely playing video games. I press the little smart-doorbell thing he's got going on. It's quiet out here on the new-build estate, and the cheeping sound seems to travel for miles. Don't imagine you get many folks dropping by near one am on a school night. While I wait for him to answer the door, I fidget with my hair, tell myself to stop, then start again. Damn it.

It takes a few more rings and knocks before the door opens an inch. "It's one am, who the hell are you?"

"It's Mhairi, Graeme."

"Mhairi?" He says my name as if he's never heard it.

"Fuck's sake, Graeme, it's *me*. Mhairi. You know."

A light comes on, above me, and the door opens up. Graeme stares at me, squinting. He's in a dressing robe over his pyjamas, stood there in his plastic shoes with the holes that let your dignity drain out - but he's look at me as if *I'm* the weirdo. "Jesus. Mhairi. I mean. What the fuck? Uh. What?"

"Can I come in?"

He shakes his head, pauses, looks away. "Look, hold on. It's the middle of the fucking night. I don't want to wake Sandra up. Or the dog."

I lower my voice. "Sure, okay."

The door closes. Time passes. The door opens again. Graeme leads me around the corner into a small, but comfy sitting room. Linoleum flooring, bright purple sofas - there's a big mirror above the faux chimney that makes the room look bigger, and a whacking big telly in one corner. A small glass dining table and two chairs are nestled in the far corner. Out back it looks like there's a small conservatory and, beyond that, a small garden.

"Do you, uh, want a cup of tea or something?" he asks.

"No. Thank you." I sit on one of the firm purple settees, and he's on the other, at a sideways angle.

"Mhairi Drummond. Bloody hell. I mean. Wow. What are you *doing* here?"

"I need your help with something."

He laughs. "You need. What? I mean. Jesus. I haven't seen you in, what, ten years? Fifteen? And all of a sudden you show up at my house and you need my help?"

"I know how this sounds and I'm sorry." I find myself playing with my hair again.

"Do you? Are you? I'm not sure being sorry was ever really your strong suit."

Ouch. I don't have a good reply to that. Or at least nothing comes to mind. I'm definitely not thinking quite as quickly as I'd like to be, right now. Silence stretches on for a time.

"I mean, you look well," he says. "I turned thirty-six this year, so you must be, what-"

"Thirty-five."

"Well, you don't look it. Sandra will want to know your secret," he says. His eyes soften when he says her name.

I chuckle weakly. If he only knew.

And of *course* there's a Sandra. Or, like, a Fiona. Maybe even a Pippa. And a nice detached new-build property in easy commuting distance of town. "This is nice. Nice place."

"Thanks. A long way from Dumbiedykes, I guess."

"Aye. A long way."

"Are you - is this about-"

"No. I'm clean, Graeme. Been clean for, well, since not long after you last saw me."

He doesn't say anything. After a moment, he breaks eye contact with me and begins to study the patterns in his lino. There's pictures of him and Sandra on the walls. They're smiling. Good teeth.

"So what *is* this about? I mean, you show up without warning in the middle of the night having not spoken to me in decades."

"I need your help finding someone. I think he's in the same game as you are."

He frowns at me, and I realise I've made a huge mistake. "Mhairi - how do you know what I do for a living?"

Shit. "Social media," I say, lying. I decide to season the lie with a bit of the truth. "I mean, I never stopped thinking about you, from time to time. About us."

He keeps staring at me. I can't say I blame him. "So who is this person you're after? And why?"

I describe the vampire I encountered last night - minus the whole 'being a vampire' bit. "I think maybe he's set up like a new bank-type company in the city. Not sure what kind."

"So, let me get this straight. You're trying to find somebody, and you've come to me because...He was wearing a suit? And because I sometimes have to wear a suit, this means you think I know him? Help me out here, Mhairi."

I laugh. He's got a point though. "No, no. He mentioned something about being in finance. Making a big move. It sounded like. I dunno. What's the word the tech bros use?"

"Disruptor."

"Yeah, he didn't use that exact word, but that's definitely his game." I don't think Graeme needs to know that the disruption my visitor had in mind was more to do with me and my sire than the financial services industry.

"And why are you looking for him?"

I didn't plan for this question, either. And I don't know why I didn't, given it's such an obvious thing to ask. "Do you really want to know?" I say. Perhaps I should glamour him. But that just feels wrong. I can't glamour *Graeme*. So instead I just say nothing, and let the silence go on for a bit, hoping he'll fill it with something suitably dark and mysterious.

Eventually, Graeme sighs. "Okay. I'll take a look."

"Thank you so-"

"But look, Mhairi - this can't be how we interact. I'm happy to do you a favour as a one-off. But, I mean, what the fuck? You can't just rock up here after so long and the first words out of your mouth be 'gimme something.'"

I hang my head.

"I'll do this, because of what we were. But if you want to talk to me again after this, it's got to be more fucking normal. We're not fifteen anymore. I've got a wife, a life - *boundaries*. You understand what I'm saying?"

"We were never normal."

Graeme laughs. And for a second I see the kid he once was, before money and stability and time and obligation kicked that kid's ass. "I'd like to stay in touch, Mhairi. But I won't be used." He gets up, and gestures for me to leave his nicely appointed little sitting room. So I do. As he closes the door behind me, he says, "You still got the same number?"

"Yeah."

"I'll be in touch as soon as I find something." The door closes softly with a click, and I'm out on my own again. Yeah, nobody ever talks enough in vampire stories about the whole *lone* vampire thing. It's balls.

## Chapter 3

Another shitty thing about vampirism is filling the god-damn hours. I mean, it's 3am. Everything is shut. Maybe there's some nightclubs still letting folks in, but no thanks.

But as it happens, I'm in luck. I rock up at my sire's and find him reading some big tome. When I suggest we go out on patrol, his eyes brighten. Which is good. Some nights, I don't mind hanging out in his sitting room, looking at my phone until I get bored. A bit of time on Vampstagram – yes, of *course* there's a Vampstagram – is always good for a laugh. All the mortals dressing up for a laugh probably don't realise just how many actual vampires they're following.

Tonight, though, I need to go on patrol. To take steps towards something. Or even just get out of my head for a while.

Meeting with Graeme has me rattled. Like: where did I even get the idea to reach out to him? This is a guy I lost touch with after I quit school. A few bad years, then almost twenty as a vampire. Not once did I think to look him up. To be honest, he didn't even cross my mind. Maybe it was the semi-amnesia my sire told me about. Maybe I blanked him from my mind, when I was out there on my own, and in my un-life, I just kept on going the same way. But then, the second I get even this minor connection to a banker-type, my head suddenly goes straight to my ex-boyfriend. Something must have jogged loose. Weird, though. Vampire detective powers? Seems unlikely.

Seeing him older, all settled and mature – that was even weirder. He was just so – I dunno, *sorted*. A man. Not the boy I knew. Comfortable in his skin and his nice little house with his little purple sofas and his Sandra or whoever. And I'm out here made of fucking elbows.

Yeah. Let's get on patrol.

My sire keeps me waiting outside while he gets ready. It's a whole thing. It must be ten minutes I'm stood outside, admiring the sandstone façade. William Kellas, reads the brass plaque on the front door, Laird of Ardmarr. I try not to be too jealous standing there, when all I've got is a single room in a tenement.

Eventually, he comes out. I'm not going to lie, he looks resplendent. A full head of thick, dark-brown hair, silvering at the temples. Lean, tall, with a narrow jaw and the nose of an emperor. He's wearing tweed trousers, like a gentleman might sport on a shoot, but that is his only 'casual' article. Waistcoat,

necktie, an immaculately pressed shirt with double cuffs. Though neither of us can feel the cold, he wears a camel-coloured, three-quarter coat. He looks like he has just stepped out of an advert for a high-end Highland outfitter, or a department store. This is a person I have never seen in jeans.

"It is important to maintain one's connection to one's domain. Particularly when there is a disturbance," he says, as we head off. Dim yellow streetlights shine down on the rain-slick streets. There was talk of replacing the lamps with LEDs to save money and prevent crime, but the locals said it would ruin the aesthetic. "It is part of our service. We-"

"I know, sire. We have a contract with this place. We feed to meet our needs, and in exchange for our predation, we offer our protection."

He gives me a tiny nod.

It took me a little while to get here from Graeme's. But even though it's gone three AM on a Thursday night – Friday morning -the New Town is surprisingly busy. Thursday is the New Friday, I guess. Some of the pubs still have people inside. Landlords will often risk a fine if it means keeping folks drinking - especially nowadays, when it's so hard to keep a pub open. There are queues outside the nightclubs: girls in tiny skirts and midriff-revealing tops mostly, along with leering lads in skinny jeans and white shirts from Primark. All so flushed and delicious. From a food point of view, I mean.

Human mating rituals never made much sense to me, even when I was a human. I never saw the point of spending a couple hundred quid on the chance you might bring someone home to have semi-conscious, half-drunk, semi-consensual, unsatisfying sex with. The *hassle* of it all. Maybe that's partly why the youngsters don't go out as much as when I was a kid. Why go to all that effort? It isn't as if it's difficult to talk some bloke into shagging, when the need arises.

And vampire sex is easily the *least* sexy thing, among the many not-so-sexy things about being a vampire. Just – trust me on this for now, okay?

But I do have to admit that seeing Graeme has me feeling pretty nostalgic. Romantic, maybe. Even vampires get to feeling like that, sometimes. Though I don't remember all the details of my human life, I know it wasn't *all* titty bars or copping off in a toilet stall to get high. With Graeme, sometimes it was even sweet. I remember moments from before things went wrong with him and with everything else in my life. A day out at the Ocean Terminal shopping mall. Laser Tag on a school night. I'm not sure I ever really got a chance to figure it all out before - blammo, bloodsucking monster forever.

Anyway, the night is busy, and it is good to be out doing something after my setbacks with the invading vampire. I walk beside my sire, pushing my senses out. I can hear a young woman crying. My sire hears it too, of course, and he gives me a slight nod. I jog down an alley, out of sight, and leap up to the roofs. The roof tiles clack under my feet as I run along the top of the tenement towards the sound, a block or two away. There she is.

It's nothing, though. Just a lassie having a drunk-cry, swaying back and forth on the stair in front of her house. I walk back the way I came and spot my sire coming around another corner. I catch his eye,

and motion to meet him up the ways a bit. Glancing over the edge of the tenement block, I see an empty close where I can drop down from the rooftop without being spotted.

It's awkward work. The hunter in me wants to leap and soar and strut: look at me, pathetic human blood-cows, and fuckin *behold*. Instead I have to hide behind skips and carefully plan every route so as not to show people what I am or what I can do.

"So what's the on the menu, tonight?"

"We shall do something about those *individuals* running the nail salons." There's acid in my sire's voice.

"Is that wise, sire? The last time, we were caught on CCTV-"

He raises a hand, and I stop mid-sentence. Shame fills my veins. "Forgive me, I-"

He sighs. "I sometime forget how young you are. I forget you are a product of your time, just as I am. All around, there is this epidemic of speaking without thinking."

This causes my ears to sting; unfairness replaces shame. "I am sorry. I chose stupid words. But I promise I did think it through what I was about to say."

"You are concerned about the Obscura."

"Yes."

He nods.

"Noted. I judge, however, that we may carry out activities this night without risk of detection."

Well. That's that settled, I guess.

"From my observations, I know they periodically bring money to a central location. And I have determined that location. Whether this will take place tonight, I cannot say."

"Cool. Sounds like fun."

We walk for a while. Edinburgh is two cities, see. There's the tourism and finance and software engineering industries, and all the middle-class folks who work for them. Swish new-build flats, trendy bars, craft beer, university students. The English/American/International City.

And then there's the rest of the city. The streets full of betting shops, charity shops, vacant lots, crumbling old-man pubs with patrons who show up at 9am. Single mothers with yellowed skin and drawn-in cheeks. The addicts and drunks I feed on. The armies of cleaners and food-service workers, the criminally underpaid care workers - all the squillions of invisible people who make the city liveable for the higher castes. And often these two cities are separated by one another by just one road, or a tiny park, or just one old posh building. It's the second city that we're strolling through at the moment.

And this thinking about power and position has got me thinking. "Sire?" I ask.

"Mhairi."

"How many vampires have you, um – I mean, like, what's my number?"

"Number?"

"Yeah. Like. How many spawn-"

"God, how I loathe that word. You're not a frog, Mhairi. You are my ward."

"Okay. Yeah. I like that word." And I do. The whole 'sire' thing is kinda cringe. "So, how many wards have you had before me?"

He shakes his head, but there's a tiny smirk on his face, and it fills me with joy to see it. William Kellas is a hard man to make smile. I'm glad to see it, and I'm glad he's not pissed off at me from what I said a moment ago.

"I'm not sure you really want to know the answer to that."

"Where'd they go? Who were they? Are they still around? Do I have vampire brothers and sisters?" I step in front of him half-pleading, jumping around like an excited kid.

He laughs, and it fills my heart to bursting. "Ask me later. Come – this is no evening for merriment and frivolity. We have some mucking out to do."

I sigh theatrically. But he's got a point. Lift up the finely knitted wool rug of the city and all sorts of nasty things will crawl out. There are slaves in my city. Undocumented folks cleaning toilets, washing cars, cutting hair, doing building work, and worse. To take tonight's example, my sire has been looking into some folks working in a few nail salons. They're not exactly a chain, these salons, but they're owned by the same people. There's no other word for it. These employees are enslaved.

The police do what they can. But the problem is fear. The traffickers know everything about the people they bring over. They threaten their victims' families, back home. They show them what happens to people who step out of line. Many of the victims are here illegally. Nobody is going to the police.

That's where my sire and I come in. The Chain of Escalation, my sire calls it. We terrify the gangs into not terrifying their victims.

So yeah I'm basically Batman. Minus the latex.

And, yeah, I know it's bad to be a vigilante and all. But, look, at least my sire and I give a shit, okay? We don't just walk past these operations, these criminals, these *bastards*, and cluck our tongues and do nothing.

We're walking down North Bridge, now. There's an area, past the bridge itself and the big five-star hotel, where you can see the high-water mark of the tide of gentrification. A bit further, and you're university land again, and it's pretty. But right here, in the weird middle space between Prince's Street and the elegant Uni buildings, it's third-world. My sire nods at a weedy man in a stained white shell-suit with short, black hair that looks like it's been greased in place. A ned from central casting. He glances around constantly as he makes his way down the road, ahead of us. There's a backpack slung high on his back, and he's holding the strap, too.

"It appears we may be in luck," my sire says, pointing up ahead.

"That your man?"

"One of them."



"I didn't realise you've been watching these arseholes for so long."

"This is my city, Mhairi." He gestures, and we begin following the chavvy wee man.

Backpack-Ned turns left and begins heading down a gentle slope towards the Craggs and Arthur's seat. For anyone who's never been to this fair city, Arthur's Seat is a dormant volcano, perhaps a mile from the town centre. There's a big open space all around it, wild and unkempt, forming the south-west perimeter of the city. As you travel towards it, from Holyrood Palace, a jagged ridge – the Craggs – looms up to dominate the skyline. It's pretty. So, naturally, they bit a whole bunch of council flats and tower blocks with a view of it. It'd be priceless real estate if a developer could buy the flat-blocks and rebuild everything, but most of those flats are in private ownership now, or the Council is holding strong. Damn right. Why can't poor people have a nice view, too?

Anyway, we follow our guy. At a couple of points, he turns, and he spots us. From this distance, I can't do an awful lot with my glamour, but I can hide us a bit. I can make us look harmless, just a couple returning from a night out. Never mind that my sire will forever look twenty years older than me.

Our prey leads us further from the town, down to the council flats on a certain little road. With a sinking feeling, I recognise the low-rise where I used to live. I catch my sire's eye, then roll my own. "Figures."

"It could have been anywhere, Mhairi."

"Even still." I am embarrassed to know this has been going on where I grew up. I don't spend much time here for a lot of reasons maybe I'll get into, later. It's not like I'm this place's guardian angel. Still. I make a mental note to watch the area more carefully.

Our man opens the door to the stairs to the low-rise. There's no one else here, so we increase our speed to close the gap with our target, moving silently. I lose sight of him as he goes up the stairs.

We catch up at the top floor, though. He doesn't see or hear us. The wind howls up the stairwell like a dying banshee. I glance at my sire. There are lots of ways we could handle it from here, and I'm looking to see how he wants to play it. But he's not signalling anything, yet.

Our man knocks on the door. It opens. We follow him in.

Immediately, I'm filled with a jumble of emotions. Jesus, this flat. Part of me feels like I'm back in my childhood home. There's a tiny kitchen with a two-ring hob and a half-size fridge with no freezer. Clothes hang off the radiators. The interior has a fake-chalet look and the floor is wood-effect linoleum. And another part of me realises just how insultingly tiny this flat is. And this is what you get, if you're going through a rough patch, if you're lucky. No wonder people do bad shit.

There's a man on the settee. He gets up. He's wearing a jersey for one of the two local Sectarian football teams. "Who the fuck are you two?"

The man we followed turns, sees us, and jumps back. His rucksack slips from suddenly limp fingers. "What the?"

"You fucking idiot, you've been followed." He glares at me. "Get the fuck out of here."

I cross my arms.

"Young man," my sire says, "I have an opportunity to offer you."

Another two men emerge from behind us. They've come from another flat, startled by the raised voices. There's nothing behind their eyes - no comprehension, no compassion. But they're not ghouls. No, I've seen men like this before. Collectors, enforcers. These are men who do what they are told and are accustomed to violence.

"I'm urging you to listen, gentlemen."

"And I'm giving you one last opportunity to fuck off out of here before we put you in the fuckin hospital, grand-da."

My sire shakes his head. "Return to me the passports of every one of the individuals in your bondage. Plus the money in your friend's rucksack. Free the people you have cruelly held against their wills, and never trouble them again. Do this, and I will spare you."

The two toughs look at their boss, the man in the football jersey. So does the smaller guy with the rucksack. Then they look at my sire as if he's just arrived from Mars. "Fucken crazy old bastart," says the leader, and he lunges forward.

It's over in less than two seconds. My sire takes a stride forward and reaches out with both hands. Tiger's paw, he calls it: fingers bent in to form a knuckle-edge. I watch as each hand catches one of the toughs in the throat. Their nervous systems haven't even caught up with reality before I make my move towards the leader and the bag man.

It takes me about half a second to close the distance. Taking a cue from my sire, I choose not to make a bloody mess. I drive my elbow into the leader's chest, crushing his sternum. Then I turn, firing a kick at the head of the stooge with the backpack. It's a flashy move, one I wouldn't dare try against another vampire, let alone one with the gifts of speed that my sire has. But it's more than enough for a human. The back of his skull thumps into the mantle and he goes down.

I hear two heavy thumps as the toughs who were incapacitated by my sire then collapse to the floor. Then the only sound is three men dying. I grimace at my sire. It's a pathetic little scene. Some people are born wrong; this has been my experience. But in most cases, you only make people like these arseholes with a whole life of nudging in the wrong direction. A lot of years of no prospects, child abuse, bad role models, being shouted at, absent parents, indifferent social services. Mars bars for dinner. Nobody there to course-correct. A million tiny adjustments that end up forcing you off the motorway of normal life, and now you're stuck in the gyratory around Coventry. It could have been me in this room. "Was that not a bit much?" I say.

He looks at me like I just shat on his pillow.

"I'm sorry, sire."

"No, pray tell – how might the police report read?"

I hang my head. He's right, of course. And I feel stupid again. His disapproval makes me want to

throw myself out the nearest window.

"You're right. I wasn't thinking."

"Despite my words earlier about precisely this failing. Honestly, Mhairi."

I have nothing to say to that. He's right. I just say what's on my mind and I don't always think it all the way through, and I just keep doing this over and over. I can't remember what my school reports said, but I bet it was much the same.

"Mhairi, your sentimentality is misplaced in any case. These were bad men. Whatever brought them to this moment, however limited their choices, the final decision was theirs. As were the consequences."

"Yeah," I say, not sure whether I agree or not. Or if maybe I agree but I'm not sure how it sounds coming from a guy who's probably never lived in a place like this. "The reason I was asking was maybe if we'd kept one alive, he could have told us about the rest of the operation?"

"Perhaps. I'm content with this outcome, though. If there is some wider criminal enterprise in play, we shall root it out in due course, I'm confident. Come, let us see what we can find here, before finding a suitable way to obscure what we've accomplished this night."

\*

We spend an hour searching through the two bedrooms of the flat. I'm determined to be thorough, after the bollocking I just got.

The place is a pigsty. Fag ends, unwashed clothes in heaps, curtains stained and torn and hanging from one pathetic ring, plaster bulging from damp, and everywhere the smell of body odour, gym socks, and mould. All the furniture is falling to bits. It's so gross I struggle to understand how any anyone actually lives here. Even I'm not brave enough to go into the bathroom.

In the bottom of a half-collapsed wardrobe I find a shoebox filled with passports. Ukrainian, Romanian, Chinese, Nigerian. There must be a hundred of them.

"One hundred and six," I tell my sire.

"One hundred and six lives, lived in fear and oppression."

"Yeah." I pick one up, then open it to the photo page. A blank face stares back at me. A young, black man. "Sire?"

"Yes, Mhairi?"

"How come you wanted to take those guys down? I mean, why them and not someone else? There's plenty of shithheads in this city."

He looks at me, searching for something maybe. "Do you remember the night I turned you? Do you remember the life you once lived?"

I laugh, but it's not funny. It's a bitter cackle. "Bits of it." I can't honestly say whether it's the vampire

amnesia or just the junk I was doing. The years after school, after Graeme, come in flashes. Arguments with my parents. Leaving home and school, lurching and stumbling from high to high. There's a dead woman who walks beside me. "But what's that got to do with the arseholes we just killed?"

"I cannot abide the concept of being bound. Whether one is bound to a chemical dependency, or enslaved by criminals to violate trust and ruin lives. Or by-" he stops mid-sentence, and goes back to sifting through passports, arranging them by country.

I'm curious about what he didn't say, but I know better than to push my luck. And anyway there's something else on my mind, it's been there since we busted in here.

"Do you think. Um. Do you think we're any better than these guys? I mean. Don't we bind the people we feed on?"

"We choose to do that, rather than die. And we do so with care. Now, come, help me extract what information we can, from this portable computing device. You did suggest earlier that we find out what we can."

I nod, but even as I move to grab the laptop we took from the flat, I wonder if there's something more to my sire's reasons. This isn't the first group of traffickers we've broken together. Over the decades since I was turned, we must have rolled dozens of outfits like this. We've also done our share of other vigilante activities, but he definitely has a soft spot for this particular crime. I dunno why. He's old - I dunno exactly how old - but definitely at least a hundred. He's seen stuff I can barely imagine. Maybe this is a trigger thing for him. Maybe that's why he went for the kill instead of intimidating them into confessing to the police.

We work in silence for a while. There's some potentially useful stuff on the laptop. These guys left it on, and logged in. You don't need to be a hacker to find some juicy spreadsheets. "Sire, I think there might be enough here to just drop the laptop and the passports off at the police."

"Oh?"

"Here, look-" my phone rings. I glance down. It's an unknown number. Graeme? If my heart was able to beat, it would be going nuts. "Uh. Can I take this? It might be a lead on our invader."

He gestures for me to continue with my phone call.

"Hello?"

"Alistair Saint-John. I think that's your man." Graeme's voice is tight, clipped, quiet, like he's trying to be quiet in the middle of the night - a good husband or whatever. Though I do have to wonder why a good husband is up so late on a school night helping his random ex-junkie ex-girlfriend. "I'll send you a picture."

I take the phone away from my ear. A moment later, a picture pops up on my messenger app.

"Yep. That's the guy. Who is he?"

"No idea. You're right about the finance connection. He's been all over socials, adding everybody in the industry, up here. Weird. Totally un-subtle."

"Right. And investment bankers value subtlety and discretion."

Graeme chuckles. "He's not a banker, either. He's not even a *broker*." There's disdain in his voice. I guess there's people even investment wankers think are sleazy. "Whanging on about some company called Edinbytes. His thing, I guess. Might be crypto. Might be outright fraud. Anyway."

"That's amazing. Thanks Graeme. I owe you one."

"You don't owe me anything, Mhairi." I hear him sigh. It makes me want to sigh as well. Cos that's what we do, in Scotland, when there's Big Stuff to say and we don't know how to say it. This isn't some 90's TV show full of disturbingly articulate teenagers.

"Just. Look after yourself," he says, after a time. "This guy looks like trouble."

"Thanks, Graeme. I will. And. Uh. Stay in touch, okay? I'll stay in touch, I mean."

A pause. "Okay."

I put my phone away. My sire pretends as though he didn't hear the whole conversation - which of course he did - because vampire senses. "Go. I can complete what is necessary to obscure our activities."

"You sure, sire? We got a bit, um, vigorous."

He grimaces. "I shall find a solution."

"Okay." I glance back once at the shoebox full of stolen lives, then head out into the night. I don't know that I've ever felt so determined to deliver the goods for myself, and for my sire. Alistair Saint-John, I'm coming for you. And I'm going to prove to my sire that I'm not the thoughtless moron he thinks.

