

## **Chapter Sixteen, "The Rules"**

Manny backed up all the way until the cell wall was to his back. It was no good: there was nowhere to go. Barnes had him like a rat in a trap. He was a goner.

The sheriff approached the bars, gripped the metal with both hands. There was a scittering, scurrying sound. Manny didn't want to know where it was coming from but got the answer anyway.

Cockroaches began to stream out of the sheriff's shirt sleeves, onto his hands and the bars of the cell. They crawled down the bars and onto the floor, coming towards him. Manny stepped on several, avoided others. He knew they were dangerous, like the centipedes in the diner.

"Just let 'em take you," Barnes said. "It'll be easier for both of us. Well, easier for you, I gotta clean up the mess. Lot of paperwork, too."

"Fuck you!" Manny said, stepping on another roach and pointing at the sheriff for extra emphasis.

"Suit yourself," Barnes said. "Look at 'em squirm. Funny little things. You know, I can't remember a time when they weren't inside me? Strange, huh? Papa has been a friend for so long now. She started planting the special bugs in me so young." He laughed. "You should have seen us. Here's this kid, probably no more than twelve and this strange, beautiful woman in an alley downtown. She's jerking him off and stuffing cockroaches down his throat! Can you imagine if we ever got caught? That would have been embarrassing. Luckily, we weren't. And, of course, she helped me get this job. So, I'm nothing if not loyal to my friends. Now, she may be a little crazy, little cruel sometimes, but I understand her position. She's just trying to stop a greater evil. And, sorry, but you're in the way. Goodbye."

The roaches swarmed around Manny. He was on his tip toes trying to avoid them but there were too many. It was hopeless.

That's when the door to the station burst open and the Toothpick Man walked calmly inside. Barnes whirled around, pulling his pistol.

"What the fuck?" he said.

The Toothpick Man threw a fistful of small stones into his face. Barnes reacted instantly, screaming in pain as the stones hit his body. There was a sizzling sound and smoke poured out of his skin. He

dropped his gun and ran right past the Toothpick Man and out of the station, screaming all the way.

The Toothpick Man didn't hesitate, reached into his pocket and threw another fistful of stones into Manny's cell, onto the pile of cockroaches in front of him. Manny didn't know if he was hallucinating, but it seemed as though the stones hung in midair for a split second longer than they should. Then they hit the roaches. A moment later, the pile of bugs was just a heap of black sludge, the stones melting them down in an instant. Manny looked at the stones, interested. They had little carved markings on them.

"What are those?" he asked.

"Runes," the Toothpick Man said. "Now let me get you out of there."

He grabbed hold of the bars of the cell and yanked. The door came off with a sharp metal crack. The Toothpick Man threw the door aside.

"Come on," he said.

"All right," Manny said, perplexed. "Where are we going?"

"You need to meet Asa, my mistress. She knows what's going on here."

"That's good, I could use a little help in that department. But we have to stop by my house first. My wife must be worried sick."

The Toothpick Man shook his head. He looked like a puppet. Lifeless but moving. "There's no time for that."

Manny frowned. "No time? What the Hell does that mean? Is there a bomb ticking away somewhere?"

"In a sense, yes. Your friend Camille could be turned at any time. And if Papa has her on her side, there's no hope for this world."

"Well, when you put it like that..."

Camille and Kimberly lay together, both naked, both covered in sweat, basking in the afterglow. They were tangled together on the grimy floor of the warehouse, moonlight streaming in and over them. Kimberly's eyes were closed and Camille had transformed back into a girl again. She slowly caressed Kimberly's stomach as she playfully nibbled on the girl's left ear.

"You sound like a kitten," Kimberly said.

"What?" Camille said.

"You. You sound like a kitten when you're fucking. Never heard that before."

"Well, you've never had sex with a werewolf before, have you?"

Kimberly shook her head, smiling. "Not that I know of. Some of the girls in college might as well be

werewolves, though. Some of them don't shave their legs."

Camille playfully smacked Kimberly on the stomach just below her navel. She laughed. "You bitch, I don't shave my legs. If you haven't noticed, I tend to sprout hair pretty regularly. So it's hard."

"I noticed," Kimberly said.

"Okay, Miss Perfect Little Vampire. Wanna watch the sunrise with me?"

Kimberly kissed Camille's cheek. "I was kidding. And that's a low blow. You have your drawbacks, too."

Camille looked up at the ceiling of the grimy warehouse. "Yeah, God hates us. You, especially. I know that for sure. I don't remember seeing you wear crosses before but I suggest that you don't pick up on that particular fashion trend anytime soon."

They both laughed.

"What about silver?" Kimberly said. "Am I vulnerable to silver? I know you are."

"We both are," Camille said. "It will set you on fire and it will kill me. Well, if it's lodged in my heart. But, if it's removed..."

"And what about a wooden stake?"

Camille looked at her. "Kind of like the silver is for me. If it lodges in your heart, you're dead, but if someone takes it out, you'll be resurrected."

Kimberly had closed her eyes again. "Good to know."

"Try to avoid fire if you can," Camille said. "That could kill both of us permanently. Different vampires have different powers. I've met ones who have only simple mental powers, hypnotism, you know. And there are others who can transform into bat creatures or control armies of vermin. Papa is the most powerful vampire I've ever met. Probably because she's so old."

Kimberly sighed, not wanting this moment to ever end but knowing that it had to. She opened her eyes.

"So what do we do?" she asked.

"We stay here forever," Camille said. "Let the world burn around us."

Kimberly smiled. "Sounds great. But what do we really do?"

Camille sighed. "I guess we get out of here, go after Papa directly. Take her down."

Kimberly nodded. "I can lead you to her base. It's..."

She trailed off, eyes fixed at some ill-defined point on the ceiling. Camille looked at her, concerned.

"What is it?" she asked.

"The music," Kimberly said. "The music's getting softer. I can't hear it."

"The music's fine. I don't recognize the tune but the radio's definitely on."

"That's not what I mean. 'Queen Bitch.' In my head. It's quiet. I can't hear it. I feel Papa coming back! Stop her, please stop her!"

Camille took Kimberly's face in her hands. She whispered into her ear.

"Listen to me," she said. "She can't control you anymore. You are your own person. I..." She was about to say, "I love you" but she hesitated. She hadn't said those words in an awfully long time.

"What?" Kimberly said.

Tears streamed down her face. She wiped them furiously away.

"I lo--" Camille said and was cut off.

The door to the warehouse burst free: kicked open by a powerful foot. Standing in the doorway was Arthur Samms, impossibly alive. In one hand he held a .357 Magnum. In the other, he held the severed head of a wolf, one of Camille's pack.

"Remember me, bitch?" he said and tossed the severed head onto the floor in front of them.

To Be Continued...

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