

# His Essential Nature

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*Rumor and Hollywood have it that vampires are born from a bite, drink blood to survive, and live hundreds of years until someone puts a stake through their heart. Or exposes them to sunlight.*

*Truth is, your average vampire is born to a mommy and a daddy, requires one square, if small, meal a day to supplement the hemoglobin, and generally lives to about 110, assuming that we don't get hit by a truck or taken out in a drive-by shooting. As for the stake through the heart—hell yes that'll kill a vampire. Kill most anything, you do it right.*

*You see, when we're kids we can bear the daylight, make friends, play by the daylight rules. Be "normal." It's only when we hit puberty that things begin to change. And by then, most of us have made our peace with the way things are.*

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Westin looked at the words glowing on the screen and rubbed one eye wearily. He'd made his peace, but it hadn't been easy. And now he was going to put someone else through that. Maybe.

Looking across the home office to where Dani sat at the old-fashioned rolltop desk, test papers and grade book laid out with frightening precision, he felt a rush of adrenaline run through his veins that had nothing to do with the blood he had consumed not half an hour before. His wife. And, god help him, his child. Because they were really going to do this. They were going to have a kid. In about six months, give or take miscalculations.

Looking back at the words he had typed, his contribution to his child's education, Westin saved the file and stood abruptly, gliding out of the room without a word of excuse or explanation. He knew, without looking back, that Dani watched him go. He could see that smile on her face, the amused glint in her eyes. She knew him entirely too well, dammit. Couldn't a man keep some privacy?

Grabbing his camera from the hook where it always hung ready, Westin dragged his "working" jacket over his arms, let himself out the back door, and stood a moment on the yellow-lit porch, breathing in the cold night air. It was time to work. He'd been home for almost two weeks, trying to choose the negatives for the book project his agent wanted to put together, when Dani had dropped the baby bombshell on him. That, he admitted wryly, had stopped him cold for a few days. But worrying wasn't going to get the bills paid, and while it was satisfying to compose the things he was going to have to tell his unborn child, words weren't the same as images. They didn't have the same power, the same corporeal dimensionality.

He snorted, shaking his head in disgust. Fatherhood was making his brain soften already. Corporeal dimensionality. Jesus.

Stepping off the porch, he strode into the darkness, sensitive eyes adjusting automatically to the play of shadows and starlight. The adaptations of a night creature. Following the needle-sharp tracks of deer, he moved into the spaces between trees, letting his breath float like mist. There, over to his left. Stopping, he raised the camera slowly, forcing himself to take the time needed. A buck lifted his head, slowly chewing, a strip of tree bark hanging from his mouth. His sides were scarred, and his shoulders strong. A survivor. But the buck was thinner than he should be for what had so far been a mild winter. He might not last the season, leaving a space for a younger buck to get himself into the gene pool.

Two vampires made for a vampire. But a vampire and a human...

Westin tried to shut the thought out, snapping a quick succession of frames before the buck reacted to the clicking and bolted for deeper shelter. The last shot, of the old buck risking one glimpse over his shoulder, hooves kicking up dried leaves and white tail flicking, gave Westin a deep satisfaction. He was good at this. His photos of street life were in great demand, and critics referred to his “uncanny ability to ferret out the still beauty of despair, and the clarity of peace within misery.” But it was this, his nature photography, that gave him the most pleasure. Animals were what they were, and his lens revealed only that. He exposed no one’s secrets in these photos, laid no one’s soul bare for the world to gape at.

He had met Dani during one of his nocturnal rambles through the city, camera at the ready. It was early in his career, when he was taking heat for not doing the “commercial” thing. Just in his mid-twenties, he already knew what he didn’t want to spend the rest of his life doing. The fact that he couldn’t work under sunlight had, thankfully, limited his options, and his talent turned his reputation into eccentric rather than obstinate, temperamental rather than brat. A few carefully chosen projects bombed, allowing the world that had heralded his early work to promptly forget his very existence, leaving him to his darkened streets and crowded tenements. Over the years he had learned the secret tricks of nighttime photography and invented a few of his own. It helped that he could see the shadows, sense the light. His eyes were a better meter than any mechanical contraption, and his judgement hadn’t failed him in years.

Dani had been walking up Eighth Avenue, the light from a streetlamp catching her face as she stopped to look at her map. An obvious newcomer to the city that Westin called his own. The clarity of her face in that instant was too much to resist. He’d taken her photo. Had fallen into step beside her, offered his help getting her to where she was going. Made advances. Felt her pulse stir a hunger not expected.

Later, over coffee, he had scolded her for accepting a stranger’s invitation. She had merely smiled at him and said that she knew he would never hurt her. Fool, he had thought then, not unkindly.

Two weeks later he had fed from the delicate veins in her wrist, bringing this undaunted woman into the small circle of human Mends who willingly supplied him with the sustenance he needed to survive. Three months after that, he tasted the heart-blood running in her neck, and that summer they had been married. His father had been the only member of his family to attend the dusk ceremony, sadly outnumbered by Dani’s innumerable, exuberant family.

Leaning against the cold fencepost that marked the end of his land and the beginning of their neighbor’s, Westin scanned the field in front of him, hunting for owl sign. He’d gotten a decent shot of one of those horned hunters taking a mouse, but the angle hadn’t pleased him. Hunching slightly to allow his jacket to bunch around him for warmth, Westin allowed himself to blend into the surroundings, his grey down jacket and heavy cords becoming just so many more shadows.

Born to the ever-neon, ever-bustling city of Las Vegas, Westin still savored moments like this, knowing that except for Dani back at the house, and the Fillinghams in the old farmhouse across the field, he was alone for miles. There was no blood-sense to distract him, nothing beyond the faint pulsing of animal blood too gamey to appeal. He loved Manhattan, but the coolness of Nature, her insistence upon ignoring him, was too much a challenge to resist.

Hearing the smallest rustling behind and above him, he forced his body not to tense. A few minutes later he was rewarded by the heavy flap and swoop of soft-feathered wings and the inaudible scream of a field mouse.

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The CD player clicked and whirled, and the soft voice of Mary Chapin Carpenter filled the oversize

darkroom. Echoing off recycled plastic walls, the upbeat music made the eerie black-lit darkness seem even more surreal. Reaching up, Westin adjusted the magnification and hit the light timer. While the seconds slowly ticked off, he checked his watch. Julianne was supposed to stop by tonight, and his sister wouldn't hesitate to storm into the darkroom if he weren't there to greet her.

Opening the black metal cabinet against the far wall, Westin carefully aligned the sheets of photosensitive paper and closed the lid of the box so that no light could reach it. He reached up to recount the large plastic jugs of fixative on the top shelf, his fingers sliding over the base of the jugs with the familiarity of a blind man reading Braille. Everything was as it should be, and he was simply filling time. Worried about telling his sister his news. Their news. Jules' children were her delight, even if the man she'd married had turned out to be one of the lowest bloodsuckers, in every sense of the word, he'd even encountered. There was no way that she would understand the apprehension ripping through him. Or worse yet, if she did, it would be with a painful I-told-you-so kind of sympathy. While fond of her human donors, and cheerfully willing to agree that Dani was five times the spouse her ex could ever claim to be, Jules had never understood his desire to marry outside. His need to make a life with this quiet, loving human woman.

The timer *pinged* and he swung around, slow strides taking him back to the machine. Unclipping the paper, he moved with that same careful grace to the row of plastic tubs. Dropping the sheet carefully into the first bath, he reached over to the small shelf by the door and lifted a neon-green squeeze bottle to his mouth.

His old instructor would have screamed to see him eating or drinking in the darkroom—there were so many chemicals, all toxic, that could get into the mouth without adding any risks. Westin's lips pursed in a sour smile. He was going to have to put a lock on his studio once the child began walking. Inquisitive little fingers were dangerous. And, if his nephews were any indication, a child that didn't mind darkness would home in on this room, with its kid-friendly revolving door and black lights.

Of course, the child could be afraid of the dark . . . .

A chime rang out, startling him from his ruminations. For an instant he was confused, looking to see what piece of machinery had made the noise. The chime rang out again, two quick bursts, and he recognized the sound this time as the bell outside the darkroom.

"Damn," he muttered, looking at the proof sheet still developing. It was unusual for Jules to be early—she was the original night owl.

"Mind the door!" he shouted.

The lightweight door began to revolve slowly, his visitor heeding his warning that there was work in process. But the body that appeared wasn't that of his reed-shin baby sister.

"Keeter?"

Six-four of Nordic god filled his doorway, making the darkroom suddenly shrink in on itself.

Westin put the bottle down slowly, not moving. His eyes measured the distance between them, taking in the other man's posture, noting the muscled arms held loosely to the side, shoulders relaxed, knees straight, not flexed for action.

Augie "Mosquito" Bick. Old childhood buddy. Sculptor. Art gallery owner. Part-time vampire hunter.

Not that Westin hadn't hunted a vampire or two on his own. Not every member of his rather extended

family felt as he did about humans, and there had been a few times when Westin had been forced to explain his philosophy of coexistence at fangpoint. But Keeter did it for pleasure. And revenge.

Now his friend loomed like a minor god, one hand slapping a flat manila envelope against his left thigh. “We’ve got problems.”

Keeter’s voice still flowed like warm honey, seducing everything in sight. But the eyes were cold. And angry.

Westin turned his back, stirring the chemicals thoughtfully. Keeter always brought problems. Usually fanged ones. Almost always messy ones. And despite the fact that it had been three years since their last joint venture, the memories of the blood spilled hadn’t left him yet. Picking up a set of plastic-tipped tongs, he removed the proof sheet from the first bath, shook it gently, and dropped it into the second shallow tub. Images were forming there, rows of small boxes, holding a world of secrets to be unearthed, picked over, chosen. Shown to the world in a triumphant declaration: Here is how I see your world. Deal with it.

The CD clicked off, and nothing replaced the silence except Keeter’s patient breathing. The human could sit for hours, waiting. Westin knew that, had taught him that. Had taught him how to make the first stroke count, and finish the job without hesitating. Vampires died badly. But so did humans. This is our world, too. Deal with it. What had Keeter brought him to deal with?

He could tell the human to leave, to take his trouble and walk out the door. Keeter would do it, he knew. Walk, without question. Never bring it up again.

The silence in the darkroom was unthreatening. They each knew what the other was about, the demons each danced with. Keeter found a space on the worktable that was clear to sit on and let his long legs dangle above the concrete floor while he waited for the photographer to finish his work. In the black light of the darkroom, his hair and skin seemed to glow with health, vitality—blood. Westin had often wondered what Keeter’s blood tasted like. But the human had never offered, and he had never asked.

The tongs raised, lowered, and the proof sheet moved into the next bath, and on through to the waterfall of cold water that finished it. Westin found a feeling of satisfaction in the accomplishment. The taking of photographs was his love, his passion. But this was his religion, complete with ritual, offering, and resulting miracles. Dipping his hands directly into the water to remove the sheet, he lay it on a towel draped over the far end of the worktable, blotting it gently until damp.

Taking it and three other finished sheets carefully in hand, he moved into the revolving doorway, pushing out with a forearm. He didn’t look behind to ensure that Keeter followed.

Hanging the results of a week’s work on the drying line strung across the far length of the basement that housed his darkroom, Westin could feel the cotton of his shirt rubbing against his skin, the weight of his cords against his thigh. The flesh was tight, dry—active. Anticipating a Hunt. Damn Keeter anyway.

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Someone—Westin couldn’t remember the name, only that he had been a short, overweight little man with a wicked gleam of humor that made you trust him at the same time you watched his hands—had once approached him to work for the local police department. Night shift, where all the action occurred. He had declined, not graciously. He hadn’t found any art in that work—too much anger in that profession, and damn little joy. But, looking at the black-and-white positioned on his light board, Westin was ready to reconsider. These shots were Art. Unfortunately, they were also of dead people. Dead humans. Their throats sucked dry with a considerable lack of finesse and a very definite message.

Vampire. To Keeter, it might as well have been a neon sign. Come and find me. Catch me. Stop me.

And Westin knew that Keeter could no more refuse that invitation than he could stop breathing.

Catching a glimpse of himself in the small mirror by the door, Westin catalogued his features: Eyes, tired. Skin, papery. Mouth, tense. Well, hell.

“You couldn’t call Nick Knight?”

Keeter actually laughed, rare for him. “He’s been canceled. You’re all I’ve got.”

“Dammit, I’m going to be a father.”

“Congratulations.” He must have encountered Dani on the way downstairs; he showed no surprise. The blond indicated the photograph he had brought. “You want whatever did *that* to be her role model?” Frontal attack.

“Could be a boy.” Sidestepping the issue.

“Nah. You were born to be whipped.” Unspoken: Don’t dodge my question.

There was silence, less comfortable this time. Westin placed a magnifying glass over one victim’s neck, inspecting the wounds more closely. Keeter looked as though he were contemplating quantum time. He might, however, just have been counting the holes in the boards of the ceiling. With Keeter, Westin thought sourly, you could never tell.

The sound of a door closing upstairs made the human tilt his head in anticipation. Dani, apparently giving up on her work for the night, came down the stairs, her steps light, almost skipping. The two men sat up, shoulders broadening. Fourteen years married, Dani still had that effect on the male of either species. Not for her beauty, which had never been breathtaking, or any overwhelming sensuality, but the sheer light that she emitted.

“I left a message with Julianne’s service that you were busy this morning,” she said, wrapping her arms around her husband’s neck and nuzzling into his throat, unabashed by Keeter’s presence. “If she comes by anyway, should I divert her?”

“That might be best,” Westin said, looking up at Keeter, who nodded slightly. Julianne, despite her aggressive manner, was not the vampire to include in a Hunt. She even had trouble taking blood from her human donors, preferring to let them siphon it off and store it, something most vampires did only for emergencies. Her small fridge was filled with bottles dated and labeled like some bizarre wine cellar, and it always gave her big brother the creeps.

Dani nipped at Westin’s neck, causing him to yelp and then engulf her in a strong hug that cracked several ribs satisfactorily. Belatedly he remembered the baby and gentled his hold considerably.

“Late Movie’s *Smokey and the Bandit*” she told him, ex-trading herself and straightening her nightshirt primly. “You boys get bored, I’ve made extra popcorn.”

“Doesn’t anyone around here keep human hours?” Westin wondered to the ceiling. “Thanks anyway, love, but we’ve got guy stuff to discuss.”

Dani rolled her eyes at the obvious dismissal and left the loom with a sad pout, well aware that two pair of eyes were fastened to the roll of her hips.

“Hey. *My* wife, remember?”

“Only ‘cause she has a thing for hickeys,” Keeter said dryly, returning his attention to the photographs. “So, what do you think?”

“It could be some bloodsport wannabe,” Westin said, running his fingers through the air a few inches over the images. He didn’t want to know through what arcane network of barter Keeter had acquired these.

“Could be.” Keeter wasn’t agreeing.

“Or it could be something completely unrelated—your normal garden variety murder spree.”

“Could be.”

Westin stood and paced from one end of the basement to the other, stopping in front of the small blacked-out window as though he could see the night-shrouded landscape outside. A lethal feeder. Just what this city needed. “These three the only ones?”

“The only ones the cops know about. The ferns are sisters; they lived in the apartment. The guy is a friend of the younger girl, were going to art school together.” Keeter stopped, knowing he’d just delivered the final blow.

“Art school, huh? They any good?”

“Oh, yeah.”

Westin reached up and splayed one hand on the painted window, feeling the cold through his skin, down into his veins. Damn. Artists. Painters, he would lay even odds. Some of them were hacks, technicians—draftsmen and Xeroxers. But those with talent carried something special in their blood, something sweet, something appealing. Something that would call to a vampire from across town, and make him hunger for just a taste of that deep garnet wine. Look back closely enough, and most of the great creators in human history had a patron who shunned notoriety, content merely to ensure the artist’s survival. Aesthetic appreciation was only half the equation.

But, by that same reasoning, no vampire would destroy the source of such intoxicating blood. Not if there was true talent. Not unless he—the vampire—were mad. And a mad vampire, unlike a lethal feeder, could not be reasoned with, or restrained. Like a rabid dog, there was only one solution.

He looked down at his solution-stained hands, his mind reshuffling priorities. He didn’t have time for this, not with a show so close. But there was no other option. A dayrunner—a vampire who coexisted with humans—had that responsibility to those unaware of their danger.

“You should stay out of this,” he said, not looking over where he knew Keeter still sat, swinging his legs as though he hadn’t a care in the world. “This isn’t your fight.”

“They’re all my fight.” Cold, unemotional. But Westin heard the pain underlying the words, and flinched from them. He still owed Keeter a life, and the human’s refusal to remind him only deepened that awareness. And so they moved on, each pretending to forget, to believe that the other had forgotten.

Shoving those memories away, Westin rubbed his hands roughly against his thighs as though trying to stimulate thought. There wasn’t much time, not if the killer had targeted the artistic community. Despite the high number of people in Manhattan who claimed “artist” on their tax forms, the percentage of true talents was likely to be low. Mostly they moved out of the city, finding cheaper places to live on their

limited incomes. But they came here first to study, to attend the schools and scope the museums, and talk in the cafes until they found the city's bustle more distracting than inspiring. That would be the place to focus, then. The students. The killer had found his first victims there, and the odds were good that he would return to that source. They just had to find him before more unwilling blood was taken.

Westin knew that there would be no outcry from his kin on this—a maddened vampire was something even isolationists would not allow to exist. But they would receive no help, either. And certainly no thanks if—when—they succeeded.

“Sometimes I wish you'd grown up to be a cop instead of a prissy shopkeeper,” Westin said in mock complaint, turning to face his companion. “You'd be a lot more use if you had some official standing.”

“Deal with it, fang-boy.” Keeter sneered, ignoring the crack about his gallery. “If I were a cop, I wouldn't let you play in this game at all.”

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He could feel her watching, but every time he turned his head, she was engrossed in the book she was reading. She even turned pages at a reasonable rate. He turned back to the screen, one hand reaching for a handful of popcorn from the oversize ceramic bowl at his feet. A few unpopped kernels fell on the carpet and were crushed underneath the wheels of his chair. Westin winced guiltily, but Dani didn't look up at the noise. She was definitely ignoring him. She still had a mad on from being excluded from the conversation the morning before with Keeter. Westin gave an inward shrug. It couldn't be helped. Even if there were something she could do to help, he wouldn't endanger her now. Not with the baby to consider.

He stared at what he had typed, hearing his father's voice speak the words.

*Three days, maximum. If the blood sits longer than that, it will taste so awful you won't be able to choke it down, even if it is all that stands between you and starvation. That's why it's so important to have a network you can rely upon. At any time, you must be able to call upon a donor, if not for immediate need, then for that three-day window.*

Thinking of his own small circle, he added,

*A good donor is one who is healthy, with no addictions which would taint their blood. Obviously, drug addicts and alcoholics are out of the question. Not only is the nutritional value of their blood almost nonexistent, but you also run a good chance of acquiring their addiction. On the other hand, health nuts are not a good choice either. Your mother claims that I'm too picky, but I believe that tofu thins the blood.*

“This is starting to look more like a manifesto than a friendly letter of advice.”

Dani's voice didn't startle him, but her breath, warm on the back of his neck, made more than his hair rise. It felt like he was forgiven. Swinging around in his chair, he swept her onto his lap. “I want to make sure that I don't leave anything out,” he said seriously, hitting the save button with his free hand. The machine hummed for a second, then went silent.

“Michael. You're going to be here for Junior,” she said, leaning back *into* his embrace, accepting his silent apology and offering one of her own. “He won't need it.”

“Keeter says it's going to be a girl,” he said absently, his hands busy.

Her hands covered his, guiding them. “Keeter doesn't know everything.” Her head fell back against his

shoulder, baring the dusky skin of her neck. He bent forward to breathe softly on the sensitive flesh, feeling the warmth and blood-scent that rose off her when she was aroused. He was bred to crave that smell, to cultivate it, but the flush of affection was purely between them, something he treasured above all the other gifts in his life. Grazing teeth slowly, he drew a gentle shudder from her; then her hands were stilling his, her body withdrawing ever so slightly.

“We need to talk about this.”

He sighed, folding his hands around her waist in surrender. “Okay,” he said, not knowing if she were referring to the Hunt or the baby.

“Nobody’s ever presented the kin with a human half-breed before, huh?” Baby, then. Good. She knew the answer already, was just making an opening gambit. But he responded anyway.

“Not that I’ve heard of, no. There aren’t many dayrunners to begin with, and damn few marry out.”

“So we don’t know that Junior—whatever his or her sex—will take after one side or the other.” She was the voice of reasonableness, and he resented it. And resented resenting it.

“And you say that for the first ten or twelve years, our child will appear to be human, no matter the eventual outcome.”

He nodded, knowing what she wanted him to say. “Dani, I can’t put off worrying until then. There’s too much that could go wrong. What if our genes don’t mix? I know the doctor said everything’s perfect, but what if there’s—?”

She slapped at his hand. “What if I get hit by a truck tomorrow? What if you pull another damn-fool stunt like last year and get caught in the sunlight?”

He winced from that. It *had* been stupid.

“So we shouldn’t borrow trouble, is what you’re telling me.”

“There’ll be enough of that soon enough.”

They swung towards the door to see Keeter leaning against the frame, a beer in one hand. Westin scowled at their houseguest, who ignored him with the ease of long practice. “Sorry. Didn’t know that this was a private conversation.”

“The hell you didn’t,” Dani muttered, and then laughed. “Oh, come in. Join the party.”

The tall human sauntered across the room to the leather chair Dani had vacated and dropped himself down onto it, moving her book to the floor and carefully balancing his beer on his stomach.

“Why worry about the kid being norm or vamp? I mean, by the time she’s five or six, you’ll have had to explain why daddy doesn’t take her to the playground, or drive her to school, or any of the million stupid parent tricks daddies do during the daylight.” He stopped, amused at the alliteration. “And then you’ll have to explain about her Aunt Jules, and all those nifty cousins who don’t want to go outside and play...”

“All right, all right,” Westin said, making a gesture of submission. “I get the picture. Thank you. You’re always such a comfort.”

“I try. I do try.”

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Dani drew the covers back over him and left the bedroom silently. He could hear her moving downstairs, the sound of dishes being moved, the rumble of Keeter's voice and the *swish-chunk* of the dishwasher starting up. Outside, he knew, the sun would be overhead. The sky would be endlessly blue, the air thin and piercing, the wind dragging smells for miles. Not for the first time he cursed his visual sense, that could carry memories from thirty years ago with such clarity. It would be kinder to forget, or to dull the senses with time and darkness.

Pulling the covers over his head, he rolled onto his stomach and tried to go back to sleep. Eventually the sounds from the kitchen faded, and he fell into a dream of being twelve, and playing baseball under the deadly rays of a June sun.

The sound of something ringing dragged him from the depths. His hand shot out and slapped the top of the alarm clock. The ringing continued, so he slapped it again. When that failed to stop the noise, he pulled the covers off his face and squinted in the darkened room. Phone. The phone was ringing.

"Yalo," he managed to mutter into the right portion of the receiver.

There was a long silence; then he dropped the receiver back into its cradle with a snort of disgust. He had better things to do than listen to some mechanical voice offer him low-interest loans. Sleep. Sleep was definitely a better thing. He, Dani, and Keeter had been up until past dawn talking over their plans, and while he could go for a long time without sleep, if need be, Westin had never seen the appeal. REM sleep was more than a necessity to him; it was a hobby. One to be indulged at every available opportunity.

A soft creak of the door opening warned him that the opportunity was slipping away.

"Good, you're awake."

"No, I'm not," he said testily. "Go away."

"I've got a lead on the victims."

That made Westin open one eye, if slowly. Peering past the sleep gunking his vision, he stared at the mirror that hung on the far wall in place of a window. His hair slicked back and his eyes heavy-lidded, the flip-sided reflection of Keeter looked like something the cat wouldn't bother dragging in. Westin felt a smug flash of gratification at that. Apparently someone had gotten even less sleep. Good. "Go make me coffee," he ordered, letting his head fall back onto the pillow. "And pour some for yourself. You look like shit."

"I hear and obey, Lord and Master." The human salaamed out the door. Westin rolled over to stare at the ceiling, frowning. Keeter was in a good mood. That meant he had found ass to kick. Terrific. Throwing back the covers, he hitched up his shorts and staggered into the bathroom to throw himself under the shower. That coffee had better be *strong*.

By the time he toweled off, Keeter was back with two mugs of finest kind Colombian roast. Standing nude in the doorway of the bathroom, Westin drained half the mug in one long pull, then put the mug down on the low dresser, and opened a drawer, rummaging for clean underwear. Keeter paced the room, taking small sips of his coffee simply because it was in his hand.

"The husks," and Westin flinched to hear the crude term coming from a human, "were known to hang out in the Village. One place in particular. A bar called The Basket."

“As in ‘going to hell in a’ ?” Westin asked, sitting on the edge of the bed and snagging a pair of socks up over his ankles.

Keeter shrugged. “Whatever. The owner’s a former teacher at the Ashkeleon School, so it could be basket weaving, all we know.”

Westin hid a grin at that. Keeter was such a snob when it came to art schools.

“So we’ve got three bodies, two of whom were studying—” Keeter paused midstride, looking into the air to his left as he mentally checked his facts—“studying *watercolours*” The word came out on a sneer. “They met the girl’s sister at ten-thirty last Wednesday night, and consumed two pitchers of Red Stripe.” Keeter’s voice was more approving now. “Then they trundled for, one assumes, the nearest subway station, since no cabbie will recall having fares to match their descriptions.”

Westin stopped toweling his hair long enough to question the wording. “You think they took a cab and nobody’s willing to say? Why?”

“I’m just naturally suspicious. But we haven’t anything to go on, so let’s say subway. The time of death is somewhere around daybreak, which figures. He’s waiting until the last minute, drawing out the danger. So somewhere between ten-flurry and five a.m. we’ve got three young’uns meeting up with our rabid batboy and getting all comfy on their apartment floor.”

“They were killed there.”

“Yeah.” Keeter finished his coffee, then looked down into the mug as though only then noticing it. “The local gendarmes are claiming not, ’cause the splatter doesn’t match the wounds. But we know the reason for that.”

The vampire got up and went to the dresser, pulling a pair of cords out of the lower drawer. He stopped, one leg inserted, and half turned.

“If he took all three on, they must have been off-guard. Drunk.”

“Probable.”

“He follows them home from the bar,” Westin plotted out loud, pulling the slacks up and buttoning them as he spoke. “Maybe approaches them outside their apartment, claims to—what? How does he get inside without alerting them?”

“Hell, how did your kind ever do it?”

Westin stopped, taken aback. “Oh, come on, Keeter. That’s a myth. Trust me, we’d have a lot larger population if taking blood were that easy. And even if you did have someone who could pull off that kind of mesmerizing, there’s no way the other two would stand still while he took the first one out. There’s not a vampire alive that has that kind of strength.”

“You sure about that?”

Westin went to the walk-in closet and disappeared into the row of shirts. His voice, when it came, was muffled. “No.”

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The night was colder than he’d expected. Three layers of clothing kept the wind out, but did nothing for

the claws of ice digging into his marrow. The street was deserted, most of the streetlights either dimmed or gone out completely. This wasn't a neighborhood that read its Neighborhood Watch booklets. Two windows were still lit, but he wasn't concerned with them. Raising the brim of his hat barely an inch, he shrugged so that the coat collar protected more of his ears. Vampire blood didn't run thin. Something more than weather made him shift from side to side, shuffling his feet soundlessly.

A noise made him swing carefully to his left, one hand automatically reaching for the camera not at his side. A pigeon cocked and bobbed disdainfully, indifferent to his presence. Reaching into one pocket, he tossed the filthy bird the rind of his sandwich.

Four figures came around the far corner, laughing and gesturing, coats open despite the weather. More than hemoglobin was warming them tonight. One figure peeled off, staggering to a wall and facing it, stood there for a moment.

The acrid smell of urine shot through the still, cold air, assaulting Westin's nose. Lovely. He couldn't have waited?

The group staggered on, unaware that they had lost one of their members. Coming to a doorway that still maintained a fading grasp on respectability, one figure struggled with a key, then swung open the door with a flourish, waving the rest of the party inside with a wide-armed gesture.

Westin tensed, feeling his tendons ache with the need to leap. He'd fed the night before, but the availability of so much ready prey was a fang-tease if ever he'd seen it.

That, of course, was the whole idea.

Three times, Keeter had swept down upon unsuspecting groups of struggling artists, buying them drinks and praising their works. His cachet as a gallery owner was enough to make them all but bare their throats in submission, making them perfect goats, ready to be staked out as bait.

In his defense, Keeter had drawn up plans for two of them to have student exhibits—they truly were talented; otherwise they wouldn't have been targeted. And the others had come out of the setup with nothing worse than a splitting headache from booze Keeter had paid for and a vague sense of disgruntlement that they hadn't been singled out for fame and fortune. But despite dangling the perfect feeders, their rogue vampire hadn't so much as nipped. And he—or she—would need to feed again soon. Even a relatively somnolent vampire needed to replenish every three or four nights, and it had been over two weeks since the bodies had been found. Where was he hiding?

Their quarry might have moved out of the area, but Westin doubted it. Once a vampire began lethal feeding, it rarely stopped of its own accord. Even if there were vampires casual enough about their existence to allow such a headline-grabbing killer to run through their community, the news wires would have picked up the story. The grisly triple murder earlier that month had gotten enough airplay in the New York markets to ensure that.

The door slammed shut behind them, and Westin sagged against the cold brick wall, letting the tension flow out of his body. Another night wasted, and he didn't have any suggestions to make that might bring better results.

Feeling the pinch of his fangs against the sensitive skin on the inside of his mouth, he opened his mouth wide, flexing his jaw. Canker sores were a side effect of fangs that no one ever seemed to consider in vampire fiction. Pushing himself off the supporting wall, he was about to head for his car, calling it a bad Hunt, when something wafted on the air, into his still-open mouth.

Westin froze, tilting his head in a pose of alert listening. Spinning, he was too late to avoid the arm crashing into his face, knocking him backwards and opening a flow of blood from his nose. A flash of bone-colored skin passed in front of him, a wave of inhuman speed. Snarling, Westin got to his feet, fangs in full view now.

His opponent stood still long enough to taunt him. “You. *You* thought you could stop me? You thin your blood with wine before you take it!”

With that insult, the speaker dodged away from Westin’s lunge, chuckling on a wheezy exhale. “You’ve weakened yourself, fouled yourself, feeding from your tame humans. But I’ll put an end to that. I’ll teach you to turn your back on what you are.” The eyes were all pupil, hard and cold. There was nothing that might pass for human in those eyes.

A setup. Westin blinked, trying to keep track of the dervish taunting him. Not a maddened vampire—a setup. If he died here, Keeter would never forgive himself. And if he survived, he was going to *kill* that damn obsessed human for letting them both be manipulated so easily!

Drawing his emotions under control, he slipped into a crouch, moving in time to the figure play-stalking him. The isolationist was in the mood to scuffle, it seemed. Tough. It had been a long night, he was hungry, and Dani would be waiting for him at home. Westin wasn’t in the mood to play. Not when there was human blood to settle between them.

Fangs bared, he thrust his upper body towards his opponent, arms reaching as though to grab him by the throat.

The other vampire dodged easily, stepping in closer to the dayrunner and curling long cold fingers around his shoulders. Even through his heavy wool coat and army-issue sweater, Westin could feel the newly fed strength in those muscles. His head turned, and he sank fangs into the other man’s hand, letting his canines come down in a secondary crunch. The taste was bitter, too much salt present in the skin, and his gorge rose, urging him to gag.

His attacker hissed, a long, silibant sound, and wrenched his hand free, spinning Westin and sending him to his knees on the sidewalk.

Not bothering to rise, Westin wrapped his arms around the other’s legs, raising his hatted head into the groin area above him. His opponent buckled, and Westin let himself grin, a serpent’s grin of white teeth and tongue. And so all men were created equal, he thought, taking advantage of the moment to push the vampire backwards onto the pavement and get a good look at his assailant’s face. He saw an unfamiliar face, now covered in shock. Obviously, this stranger-kin had believed his own words, that willing blood weakened the taker.

“Idiot.”

With that one word, Westin reached down and tore his opponent’s throat out.

*There are those who would say that might is right, that those who can, should. And there will be moments, deep in the uncomfortable areas of your soul, when you will agree with them. We were created to be predators, to feed off others, and humans are our preferred targets. Come to terms with this. Accept it. Deal with it. Anything else, any denial of your essential nature, and you will end up maddened.*

His fingers curled into his palms, hands falling onto the powder-blue foam wrist rest. The words mocked him, stirring eddies of emotional dust that clouded his thought process, clogged his mental gears. Did one

ever really come to terms with it? Or was it all an illusion, a hypocrisy of good deeds to whitewash his essential nature?

Swearing, he pushed himself away from the keyboard, rolling the chair across the room with the force of his movements. The wheels squeaked softly on the hardwood floor, and Westin was suddenly struck by a burst of energy, as though he could run up the side of a mountain. A creative flash, and he knew that staying inside was beyond impossible. With a guilty glance at the clock, to ensure that Dani would be in class for several hours yet, he went to the door and looked down the long hallway to the window at the far end. The light coming in was grey and muted, the after-weather of the snows that had begun two days before.

“Live dangerously,” he told himself with a grim, determined smile, his feet finding the path to the stairs and out the door as though by their own accord.

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The snow clustered in his hair, thickening the strands into wet clumps. Westin moved along the unplowed road, snow-shoes making soft noises in the overcast afternoon gloom. A series of clicks captured the vista of frozen pond melting into snowbank. The cacophony of greys was disquieting, too much, an overload of calm after his recent frenzy. It gave him the beginning of a headache. Letting his arms relax back to his side, he looked up to observe a vee of late geese swing overhead, heading east. It was a rare occasion, the heavy layer of clouds making daytime safe for a little while, and he wanted to soak every moment allowed him.

Leaning forward, he continued down the road, letting the unaccustomed afternoon air hit his face. He couldn't have said the differences between day and night breath. Something about the quality of stillness, perhaps. Or maybe it was all in his mind. He'd have to remember to ask Dani. Now that Keeter had gone home, she was actually talking to him again. In between bouts of throwing up.

Moving to the far side of the pond, he raised his lens to scope the tree line, scanning for something to trigger his instinct. Life slowed to an easy drawl, his breathing in tune with the pulse in his forehead, all concentration centered into that sphere of vision. Nothing. A heavy sigh—then he chuckled. A chance to take daylight photos, and he couldn't find a thing worth shooting. Pitiful.

A faint scuffling made him swing around, camera rising to eye level in an instinct he swore he'd been born with. The viewfinder settled on the ground where the road would have been. A crow sat, hock-deep in snow, and picked at the carcass of something that might have been a rabbit.

The *bird* raised its beak and stared directly into Westin's eyes. A shiver crawled down the photographer's back. *Dead eyes, staring at him. Dead eyes in a corpse. Dead eyes still open as he and Keeter slid it into the snow-lit waters of the East River. The dead eyes of an animal.* Then the moment was gone, and he snapped the picture.