

A Little Night Music

by Mike Resnick

The Beatles?

Yeah, I remember 'em. Especially the little one -- what was his name? -- oh, yeah: Ringo.

The Stones? Sure I booked 'em. That Mick what's-his-name was a strange one, let me tell you.

Kiss, Led Zeppelin, The Who, Eddie and the Cruisers, I've booked 'em all at one time or another.

After awhile, they all kind of fade together in your memory. In fact, there's just one group that stands out. Strange, too, since they never made any kind of a splash.

Ever hear of Vlad and the Impalers?

I didn't think so. Hell, there's no reason why you should have. I never heard of 'em either, until Benny -- he's not exactly my partner, but we kind of cooperate together from time to time -- calls me up one day and says he's picked up a group and do I have any holes in the schedule? So I look at the calendar, and I see a couple of gigs that are open, and I say yeah, what the hell, send their agent over and maybe we can do a little business. Benny says they don't have an agent, that this guy Vlad handles all the details himself. Now, if you've ever had to deal with one of these jokers, you know why I wasn't exactly thrilled, but the lead guitarist from this futuristic Buckets of Gor band has been hauled in for possession and I don't see anyone racing to make his bail, so I tell Benny I've got half an hour open at three in the afternoon.

"No good, Murray," he says. "The guy's a late sleeper."

"Most guys in this business are," I say, "but three in the afternoon is almost tomorrow."

"How's about you two have dinner together, maybe around seven or so?" says Benny.

"Out of the question, baby," I answer. "I got a hot date, and I just bought a new set of gold chains that figure to impress her right into the sack."

"This Vlad guy don't like to be kept waiting," says Benny.

"Well, if he wants a booking, he can damn well learn to wait."

"Okay, okay, let me check his schedule," says Benny. He pauses for a minute. "So how's three o'clock?"

"I thought you just said he couldn't make it at three."

"I mean three o'clock in the morning."

"What is this guy, an insomniac?" I ask. But then I remember that powder-blue Mercedes 560 SL with the sun roof that I saw the other day, and I figure what the hell, maybe this guy's group can earn my down payment for me, so I say that three in the A.M. is okay -- and as it turns out, I could have met him at seven after all, because this broad throws a bowl of soup at me and walks out of the restaurant just because I try to play a little bit of Itsy-Bitsy-Spider on her thigh under the table.

So I go back to the office and lay down on the couch and take a nap, and when I wake up there's this skinny guy dressed all in black, sitting down on a chair and staring at me. I figure he's strung out on something, because his eyes have got like wall-to-wall pupils, and his skin is white as a sheet, and I try to remember how much cash I have lying around the place, but then he bows his head and speaks.

"Good evening, Mr. Barron," he says. "I believe you were expecting me?"

"I was?" I say, sitting up and trying to focus my eyes.

"Your associate said that I was to meet you here," he continues. "I am Vlad."

"Oh, right," I say, as my head starts to clear.

"I am pleased to make your acquaintance, Mr. Barron," he says, extending his hand.

"Call me Murray," I answer, taking his hand, which is cold as a dead fish and much the same texture. "Well, Vlad," I say, dropping his hand as soon as I can and leaning back on the couch, "tell me a little something about you and your group. Where have you played?"

"Mostly overseas," he says, and I realize that he's got an accent, though I can't quite place it.

"Well, nothing wrong with that," I say. "Some of our best groups started in Liverpool. One of 'em, anyway," I add with a chuckle.

He just stares at me without smiling, which kind of puts me off, since if there's one thing I can't stand, it's a guy with no sense of humor. "You will book my group, then?" he says.

"That's what I'm here for, Vlad bubby," I say, starting to relax as I get used to those eyes and that skin. "Matter of fact, there's an opening on a cruise ship going down to Acapulco. Six days and out. Five bills a night and all the waitresses you can grab." I smile again, so he'll know he's dealing with a man of the world and not just some little schmuck who doesn't understand what's going on.

He shakes his head. "Nothing on water."

"You get seasick?" I ask.

"Something like that."

"Well," I say, scratching my head and then making sure my hairpiece is still in place, "there's a wedding party that's looking for some entertainment at the reception."

"What is their religion?" he asks.

"It makes a difference?" I say. "I mean, they're looking for a rock group. Nobody's asking you to play Hava Nagila."

"No churches," he says.

"For a guy who's looking for work, bubby, you got a lot of conditions," I say. "You want to work with me, you got to meet me halfway."

"We will work in any venue that is not a church or a boat," he says. "We work only at night, and we require total privacy during the day."

Well, at this point I figure I'm wasting my time, and I'm about to show him the door, and then he says the magic words: "If you will do as I ask, we will pay you 50% of our fee, rather than your usual commission."

"Vlad, sweetheart," I say, "I have the feeling that this is the beginning of a long and beautiful relationship!" I walk to the wetbar behind my desk and pull out a bottle of bubbly. "Shall we make it official?" I ask,

reaching for a couple of glasses.

"I don't drink ... champagne," he says.

I shrug. "Okay, name your poison, bubby."

"I don't drink poison, either."

"Okay, I'm game," I say. "How about a Bloody Mary?"

He licks his lips and his eyes seem to glow. "What goes into it?"

"You're kidding, right?" I say.

"I never kid."

"Vodka and tomato juice."

"I don't drink vodka and I don't drink tomato juice."

Well, I figure we could spend all night playing Guess What The Fruitcake Drinks, so instead I pull out a contract out of my center drawer and ask tell him to Hancock it.

"Vlad Dracule," I read as he scrawls his name. "Dracule. Dracule. That's got a familiar ring to it."

He looked sharply at me. "It does?"

"Yeah," I say.

"I'm sure you are mistaken," he says, and I can see he's suddenly kind of tense.

"Didn't the Pirates have a third baseman named Dracule back in the 60s?" I ask.

"I really couldn't say," he answers. "When and where will we be performing?"

"I'll get back to you on that," I say. "Where can I reach you?"

"I think it is better that I contact you," he says.

"Fine," I say. "Give me a call tomorrow morning."

"I am not available in the mornings."

"Okay, then, tomorrow afternoon." I look into those strange dark eyes, and finally I shrug. "All right. Here's my card." I scribble my home number on it. "Call me tomorrow night."

He picks up my card, turns on his heel, and walks out the door. Suddenly I remember that I don't know how big his group is, and I race into the hall to ask him, but when I get there he's already gone. I look high and low for him, but all I see is some black bird that seems to have flown into the building by mistake, and finally I go back and spend the rest of the night on my couch, thinking about dinner and wondering if my timing is just a little bit off.

Well, Pride and Prejudice, the black-and-white girls' band that ends every concert with a fist fight, gets picked up for pederasty, and suddenly I've got a hole to fill at the Palace, so I figure what the hell, 50% is 50%, and I book Vlad and the Impalers there for Friday night.

I stop by their dressing room about an hour before show time, and there's skinny old Vlad, surrounded by three chicks in white nightgowns, and he's giving each of them hickeys on their necks, and I decide that if this is the kinkiest he gets, he's a lot better than most of the rockers I deal with.

"How's it going, sweetheart?" I say, and the chicks back away real fast. "You ready to knock 'em dead?"

"They're no use to me if they're dead," he answers without cracking a smile.

So I decide he's got a sense of humor after all, though a kind of dull, deadpan one.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Barron?" he goes on.

"Call me Murray," I correct him. "The PR guy wants to know where you played most recently."

"Chicago, Kansas City, and Denver."

I give him my most sophisticated chuckle. "You mean there are people between L.A. and the Big Apple?"

"Not as many as there were," he says, which I figure is his way of telling me that the band wasn't exactly doing S.R.O.

"Well, not to worry, bubby," I said. "You're gonna do just fine tonight." Someone knocks on the door, and I open it, and in comes a delivery boy carrying a long, flat box.

"What is that?" asks Vlad, as I tip the kid and send him on his way.

"I figured you might need a little energy food before you get up on stage," I answer, "so I ordered you a pizza."

"Pizza?" he says, with a frown. "I have never had one before."

"You're kidding, right?" I say.

"I told you once before: I never jest." He stares at the box. "What is in it?"

"Just the usual," I say.

"What is the usual?" he asks suspiciously.

"Sausage, cheese, mushrooms, olive, onions, anchovies..."

"That was very thoughtful of you, Murray, but we don't -- "

I sniff the pizza. "And garlic," I add.

He screams and covers his face with his hands. "Take it away!" he shouts.

Well, I figure maybe he's allergic to garlic, which is a goddamned shame, because what's a pizza without a little garlic, but I call the boy back and tell him to take the pizza back and see if he can get me a refund, and once it's out of the room Vlad starts recovering his composure.

Then a guy comes by and announces that they're due on stage in 45 minutes, and I ask if he'd like me to leave so they can get into their costumes.

"Costumes?" he asks blankly.

"Unless you plan to wear what you got on," I say.

"In point of fact, that is precisely what we intend to do," answers Vlad.

"Vlad, bubby, sweetie," I say, "you're not just singers -- you're _entertainers_. You got to give 'em their money's worth ... and that means giving 'em something to look at as well as something to listen to."

"No one has ever objected to our clothing before," he says.

"Well, maybe not in Chicago or K.C. -- but this is L.A., baby."

"They didn't object in Saigon, or Beirut, or Chernobyl, or Kampala," he says with a frown.

"Well, you know these little Midwestern cowtowns, bubby," I say with a contemptuous shrug. "You're in the major leagues now."

"We will wear what we are wearing," he says, and something about his expression tells me I should just take my money and not make a Federal case out of it, so I go back to my office and call Denise, the chick who dumped the soup on me, and tell her I forgive her and see if she's busy later that night, but she has a headache, and I can hear the headache moaning and whispering sweet nothings in her ear, so I tell her what I really think of no-talent broads who just want to get close to major theatrical booking agents, and then I walk into the control booth and wait for my new act to appear onstage.

And after about ten minutes, out comes Vlad, still dressed in black, though he's added a cloak to his suit, and the three Impalers are in their white nightgowns, and even from where I'm sitting I can see that they've used too much lipstick and powder, because their lips are a bright red and their faces are as white as their gowns. Vlad waits until the audience quiets down, and then he starts singing, and I practically go crazy, because what he's doing is a rap song, and worse still, he's doing it in some foreign language so no one can understand the words, but just about the time I think the audience will tear the place apart I realize that they're sitting absolutely still, and I decide that they're either getting into it after all, or else they're so bored that they haven't got the energy to riot.

And then the strangest thing happens. From somewhere outside the building a dog starts howling, and then another, and a third, and a cat screeches, and pretty soon it sounds like a barnyard symphony, and it keeps on like that for maybe half an hour, every animal within ten miles or so baying the moon, and then Vlad stops and bows, and suddenly the kids jump to their feet and begin screaming and whistling and applauding, and I start thinking that maybe it's Liverpool all over again.

I go backstage to congratulate him, and when I get there he's busy giving hickeys to a couple of girls who snuck past the security forces, which isn't as bad as sharing a snort with them, I suppose, and then he turns to me.

"We will expect our money before we leave," he says.

"Out of the question, snookie," I say. "We won't have a count until the morning."

He frowns. "All right," he says at last. "I will send an associate of mine to your office to collect our share."

"Whatever you say, Vlad bubby," I tell him.

"His name is Renfield," says Vlad. "Don't let his appearance startle you."

As if appearances could startle me after twenty years of booking rock acts.

"Fine," I say. "I'll expect him at, say, ten o'clock?"

"That is acceptable," says Vlad. "Oh, one more thing."

"Yes?" I say.

"That scarab ring you wear on the small finger of your left hand..."

I hold it up. "Yeah, it's a beaut, isn't it?"

"I strongly advise you to take it off and hide it in your desk before Mr. Renfield makes his appearance."

"A klepto, huh?" I say.

"Something like that," answers Vlad.

"Well, thanks for the tip, sweetheart," I say.

Then a Western Union girl enters the room and unloads a bushel of telegrams on Vlad.

"What is this?" he asks.

"It means you're a hit, baby," I said.

"Oh?"

"Open 'em up and read 'em," I encourage him.

He opens the first of them, scans it, and drops it like it's a hot potato. Then he backs into a corner, hissing like he's a tire losing air.

"What's the problem?" I say, picking up the telegram and reading it: I LOVE YOU AND WANT TO HAVE YOUR BABY. LOVE AND XXX, KATHY.

"Crosses!" he whispers.

"Crosses?" I repeat, trying to figure out what's bugging him.

"At the bottom," he says, pointing to the telegram with a trembling finger.

"Those are X's," I say. "They stand for kisses."

"You're sure?" he asks, still huddled in the corner. "They look like crosses to me."

"No," I say, pulling out a pen and scribbling on the telegram. "A cross looks like this."

He shrieks and curls into a fetal ball, and I decide that maybe he snorts a little nose candy after all, or that he just doesn't know how to handle success, so I kiss each of the girls goodbye -- their cheeks are as cold as his hand, and I make a note to complain about the heating system -- and then I go home, counting all the millions we're going to make in the next couple of years.

Well, Renfield shows up the next morning, right on schedule, and I wonder what Vlad was so concerned about, because compared to most of the heavy metal types I deal with, he's actually a mild, unprepossessing little fellow. We get to talking, and I find out that his hobby is entomology, and I can see that he's really into his subject because his homely little face lights up like a Christmas tree whenever he discusses bugs, and finally he takes the money and leaves.

Right about then I am figuring that a Mercedes is really too small and I am seriously considering getting a Rolls Royce Silver Spirit instead, but the fact of the matter is that I never see Vlad and the Impalers again. Pride and Prejudice makes bail, and Buckets of Gor beats their rap on a technicality, and suddenly the only thing I've got for my new superstar is a gig sponsored by a local church group, and he turns it down, and I call his hotel to explain, and he's checked out with no forwarding address.

I check Variety and Billboard for the next year, and I see that he's shown up in some minor league towns like Soweto and Lusaka, and the last I hear of him he's heading off to Kuwait City, and I think of what a waste it is and how much money we could have made for each other, but I never did understand rock stars, and this guy was a little harder to understand than most of them.

Well, you'll have to excuse me, but I gotta be off now. I'm auditioning a new group -- Igor and the Graverobbers -- and I don't want to be late. The word I get is that they're talented but kind of lifeless. But, what the hell, you never know where lightning will strike next.

-- The End --