

What's this -- a love story on Shanville?!? Yes, I'm afraid it's true. If soppy, sentimental tales aren't your scene, you might want to give this one a miss! But fear not, Shansters -- this is but a momentary diversion in the otherwise horrific, thrill-packed world of Darren Shan. So grab a hankie, let the tears flow, have a tube of superglue ready to stick your heart back together -- then put this little love story behind you and join me on the road to Vampire Mountain, where romance is very definitely NOT on the agenda!!!

## AN AFFAIR OF THE NIGHT

Liz Carr was weeding the small garden in front of her house when the vampire attacked. The sun was setting – a warm, red evening – and she was concentrating on the weeds, squinting to find them in the dusk, determined to finish the job before night. Suddenly, two hands snaked around her waist and yanked her up into the air. A pair of lips fastened on her throat. As she opened her mouth wide to scream, her assailant growled throatily: "If you don't keep quiet — I'll give you a hickey!"

"Gavner!" Liz shrieked, shaking her head free, spinning in his arms, kissing him passionately.

"Pleased to see me?" the vampire called Gavner Purl grinned when she came up for air.

"Stupid question!" she grunted, kissing him again. Then, finding the ground with her feet, she took hold of his hands, left the weeds for another day, and dragged Gavner inside.

Later that night, they lay stretched out before a burning fire, talking softly, hugging and kissing. It had been three years since Gavner's last visit, and they'd a lot to catch up on. Liz told Gavner all about her work – she was a nurse in a nearby hospital – and he in turn told her of his exploits as a Vampire General. His stories sometimes chilled her – part of his job was finding and executing rogue vampires – but this time he had nothing unpleasant to report. They'd been a busy but unremarkable three years — no killings.

As Liz studied Gavner's scarred face and dark rimmed eyes, she found herself recalling their first encounter twenty-six years ago. She'd been a young woman, a mere twenty-three years old, while Gavner (though she didn't know it at the time) was more than eighty.

She ran into him in St Matthew's hospital, where she'd started a few months earlier. She was on the late shift, working from midnight through to the early hours of the morning. It was a quiet time, most of the patients asleep, no visitors, the corridors deserted. Liz liked it. She'd always been a bit of a loner, and she enjoyed doing her rounds alone, no distractions, with only herself for company.

She'd just checked on an elderly patient, and was coming out of his room, when she heard harsh breathing in the hallway. Glancing up, she saw a burly man propped against a wall, staring at her with dark, unfriendly eyes.

"Who are you?" she snapped, clutching her clipboard close to her chest, as though it would protect her if the stranger attacked. "What are you doing here?"

"I need . . . blood," the man gasped, then slid down the wall to a sitting position.

Liz thought about calling security, but then the man groaned feebly and her nursing instincts took over. Rushing to him, she saw that he was bleeding from a wound in his stomach. His face was white and creased with pain. She faltered at the sight of his scarred features and blood-specked jumper – she knew intuitively that not all the blood was his – but only momentarily. Seconds later she was kneeling over him,

examining his wound, looking for a compress to staunch the flow of blood.

"Hold this in place," she said, pressing a large wad of napkins over the hole in the man's stomach. "I'll go get a doctor."

"No!" the man hissed, grabbing her before she could leave. "No ... doctors!"

"I have to!" she snapped, trying to wrench free. "You'll die otherwise."

"No," he insisted stubbornly, and something in his voice made her pause. "All I need is ... blood. Get me blood. I'll take care ... of the rest."

Liz started to object, but as she stared into his eyes, her mouth closed and she said nothing. "Blood," the man whispered softly, widening his eyes, piercing her with his gaze. "Bring me blood. Don't tell anyone. No doctors."

"OK," Liz sighed, rising. As she walked to fetch the blood, she realized the man had somehow, in some way, hypnotised her. She thought she could break free of his spell if she tried hard — but she didn't bother. As menacing as he looked, she sensed no harm in the stranger, and believed the best thing would be to do as he asked and give him some blood.

When she returned with two plastic bags filled with a sloshing red liquid, the man tore them from her hands, ripped them open and drank from them like a wild animal, greedily gulping the blood down, moaning with pleasure. Finished, he rested his head against the wall a while, then bent over and dribbled spit around the wound in his stomach. Rubbing the spit in, he spat on the wound again, then again. As Liz watched incredulously, the blood stopped flowing and the wound scabbed over.

"How are you doing that?" she gasped.

"My spit has remarkable ... healing powers," the man wheezed, leaning his head against the wall again, smiling painfully.

"What happened to you?" Liz asked.

"Had a run-in ... with a group of men ... who didn't like my face," the man chuckled, then raised a rough, bloody hand. "Gavner Purl," he said.

"Liz Carr," Liz replied, taking his hand and shaking it. "I'm a nurse," she added unnecessarily.

The man grinned broadly. "I'm a vampire — pleased to ... meetcha!"

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"What are you thinking about?" Gavner asked. The room had gone very quiet and Liz realized neither of them had said anything for several minutes.

"I was remembering the first time we met," she said, sitting up and running a hand through her long, light brown hair.

"That was one for the books," Gavner laughed, tickling her gently. "I never understood why you trusted me so readily. You even brought me back here once you'd patched me up — knowing I was a vampire!"

"I didn't really believe you were a vampire," Liz smiled, "not to begin with. I thought you were confused — or mad."

"But bringing a stranger home ... That was dangerous. And silly. There's no telling what I could have done."

It was true. When the man claiming to be a vampire rose and stumbled for the exit after a few minutes' rest, Liz had stopped him. "You can't leave," she said. "You're in no state to go anywhere. Stay. There are spare beds. I'll put you in one and —"

"No!" Gavner grunted, lurching towards the door. "Can't stop. Can't let medics ... examine me. If my enemies learn ... my whereabouts, I'm ... dead."

"Then come home with me!" Liz pleaded, the words popping out before she had a chance to consider them. "I have a small house several miles away, in the countryside. I live alone. I'll look after you until you're better."

Gavner paused at the door and stared back at her. "You don't mean that," he whispered. "You can't."

"I do," she insisted, stepping up beside him.

"But ... you know nothing about me. I crawl in here ... in the dead of night ... covered in blood ... tell you I'm a vampire ... and you want to take me home?!? Are you crazy?"

"Maybe," Liz smiled. "But you'd be crazy too, to turn down such an offer. Now — are you coming or not?" She held out a firm hand.

Gavner gazed silently at the fingers, then chuckled and slipped his own large fingers around them. "Guess I am," he sighed, and let her lead him out of the hospital and into the safety of the night.

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Liz called in sick that morning, and stayed home with Gavner. The two went to bed, where they slept the day away. Liz woke before the vampire in the afternoon and spent a few hours pottering around the house, waiting for him to wake. When he finally yawned, stretched and rolled out of bed, he smiled at her sheepishly. "Sorry if my snoring kept you awake," he said. It was a familiar greeting of his, one he'd used for many years, since she first complained of his bear-like snores.

"That's OK," Liz smiled, pecking his lips. "I slept like a baby." Her nose wrinkled. "Speaking of which, you smell like a baby — with a dirty nappy!"

Gavner laughed guiltily. "I washed in a stream three or four nights ago, but I haven't had a chance since then."

"In that case, the first order of the night is to get you straight into the bath," Liz said, leading him to the bathroom.

"And afterwards?" Gavner asked innocently. "Any idea what we can do to pass a long and otherwise dull night?"

"Oh," Liz replied with a fond smirk, "I'm sure we'll think of something ..."

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The next few nights were delightful. They always were when Gavner returned from his work as a Vampire General. They cooked elaborate meals, drank expensive wine, danced to old records which Liz had inherited from her mother, and spoke at great length about their lives.

Gavner had more to say than Liz, of course, since he was almost a hundred and ten years old. He'd seen more of the world and met more fascinating people than she ever would. She loved listening to his tales of the past, encounters he'd had with famous or interesting figures of history.

"You were really friends with Groucho Marx?" she asked.

"Sure. He used to say I was the greatest bloodsucker he knew — except for his lawyers!"

Liz still felt uneasy about Gavner's need for blood. She knew he only took small amounts when he drank, never harming those he fed from, but it seemed ghoulish to her. They didn't discuss it much.

It had taken Liz a long time to accept Gavner's vampire claim. As he recovered in her house and gradually told her of his true nature, she thought he was making it up. When she realized he was serious, she feared for his sanity and considered reporting him to the proper authorities. It was only when he sat outside with her for a few hours one day, and started to burn, that she began to think there might be something to his supernatural tales.

He stayed with her for almost a fortnight that first time, regaining his strength, hiding from his enemies (she later learned that they were a small group of vampire hunters, men who'd tracked Gavner through twelve different countries, hunting him for sport). There was no romance — they simply became good friends. When he left, she was sad to see him go, but not overly so.

A year later, he returned one cold night, bringing roses (he stole them from a cemetery), to thank her properly for her kindness. He'd stayed more than two weeks this time, and their friendship developed into something deeper and more meaningful. Since then, Gavner had spent as much time with Liz as his duties permitted. Sometimes he dropped in three or four times a year, for weeks on end; on other occasions two or three years would pass without contact. Liz always worried about him when he was absent — knowing he could die any time, and she'd never hear about it — but Gavner did nothing to assuage her fears.

"If I phoned or wrote letters, it'd only make you think about me more," he said when she pressed him on the subject. "I'm a creature of the night — you're not. Our lives are too different to ever fit together neatly. Let's cherish the moments we share — and try not to think about each other when we're apart."

She'd sometimes thought of becoming part of his world — if he'd blooded her, she could have explored the night with him, as an equal — but Liz didn't want to become a vampire, and Gavner never asked her to abandon her humanity for him — his was a hard life, and he didn't wish it on her.

And so they'd continued for twenty-six years, on-and-off lovers, united by the night, divided by the day.

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Liz prepared breakfast (vampires called their first meal of the night breakfast), while Gavner shaved in the bathroom. The vampire normally didn't shave very often, but his bristles were extremely tough and irritated Liz's skin, so she made him lather up and shave them off every night when he stayed with her.

While she scrambled eggs, she found herself studying her reflection in the mirror on the shelf near the cooker. She was forty-nine years old, and though she'd aged well, there was no denying the traces of time evident in the lines around her eyes, the grey hairs at her temple, the dry skin around her throat. Liz Carr was getting old — that didn't worry her; but Gavner had hardly aged during the quarter of a century she'd known him — and that had been gnawing away at her for most of the last decade.

"Admiring yourself again?" Gavner murmured, sneaking up behind her and kissing her neck.

"There's a lot to admire," Liz grinned.

"There certainly is," Gavner agreed, then dipped his fingers in the saucepan and scooped some egg into his mouth.

"Wait your turn!" Liz snapped, slapping his fingers with her fork.

"I'm hungry," he complained, sliding away from her, licking his lips.

"No wonder," Liz snorted. "You get more exercise snoring than most people get jogging!" She lifted the saucepan from its ring and emptied the eggs on to a pair of matching plates.

"That's always the way," Gavner sighed. "When I first arrive, my snoring doesn't bother you and you cling to me tightly. By the time I leave, you can't stand it and are ecstatic to be rid of me!"

"I guess love deafens me for a while — but only a while," Liz laughed. Then, as she handed Gavner his plate, her features softened and she said quietly, "Will you be leaving soon?"

Gavner nodded, tucking into his eggs. "Tomorrow. I have to go to Vampire Mountain — we're having our great Council in a few months."

"Another Council?" Liz tutted. "You almost died trying to get to the one before last. I don't know why you bother."

"Tradition," Gavner smirked. He stuck his left foot out and wriggled the three toes on it at her — he'd lost the other two twenty-four years ago, on his way to the Council she'd referred to.

"You'll be gone for quite a while then," Liz said, staring down at her food, not touching it.

"A few months to get there, two or three months in the mountain, another month or two to return. I'll try and drop in on the way back."

"So this is our final night together," Liz noted glumly.

"For a while," Gavner agreed. He paused. "Are you OK? You seem a bit down."

"I'm fine," Liz smiled thinly. "Just sad at the thought of you going."

"It won't be for long," Gavner reassured her. "Six months — maybe less. I'll be back before you know it."

"I'm sure you will," Liz said, then smiled firmly. "Hurry up and eat your eggs. I want to make the most of our last few hours together."

"That's what I like," Gavner chuckled, wolfing down the last of his food. "A woman who knows her mind ..."

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The sun had set when Gavner awoke. "Sorry if my snoring ..." he began to mumble, then stopped when he realized Liz wasn't there. Stretching, he scratched under an armpit and sighed happily. She was probably outside, tending to the garden, or else she'd popped into town to buy some supplies. He'd cook a meal for her, have it ready when she walked in. Their last meal of this visit. It would have to be something special, something she loved.

Gavner was thinking hard about the food when he walked into the kitchen and saw the parcel and card on the table. He frowned, strode to the table and studied the objects with suspicion. The parcel was small, carefully wrapped in Christmas wrapping paper, with a label attached, on which was penned: "For you — the love of my life." The card was standing upright, half open, and he could glimpse Liz's handwriting inside.

He knew instantly that something was wrong, and it was more than a minute before he reached out, picked up the card, opened it, and read:

"Gavner, my love — it's over. There's no easy way to put it. I've been thinking about it for months — no, years — and I haven't been able to come up with a more artful way of phrasing it. So I'll say it again, as plainly as before — it's over.

"These twenty-six years have been magical, my love. You've enriched my life in wonderful ways. There have been disappointments — I wish we could have been together all the time, and that we could have had children — but I won't remember those when I think about our relationship in the lonely years to come — I'll recall only the great times, the nights you held me close, the amazing stories you graced me with, the love we shared which has given meaning to my life (and, I believe, yours).

"So — why the dramatic farewell? It's simple — I'm getting old. I don't think you've seen that yet — in your eyes I'm as young as I was when we first met — but it wouldn't be long before you did. In another five or six years, I'll be in my mid-fifties, but you'll still look like a man in his early thirties (albeit one who's had a hell of a rough ride through life!).

"I don't want you to see me growing old, Gavner. If you were ageing too, it would be different — we could wrinkle together, and take comfort in each other's fading glory — but you aren't. You're a young man, and will be for many decades — centuries! — to come, long after my body's crumbled and my spirit's passed on.

"This is the right time to call it quits, while I'm in my (almost!) prime, while our love's as strong as it's ever been, before I grow old and spoil it all. I can't bear the thought of having you around when I'm stooped with age and preparing for death — too messy; too painful. It will be hard for you, I know — and just as hard for me — but it's the right thing to do. I'm convinced of that.

"You'll see that too, I think, but not straightaway. You don't leap to conclusions as quickly as I do — I guess because you've got so much more time than me to weigh up all the various options. If I'd discussed this with you, face-to-face, you might have talked me round to your way of thinking, and convinced me to stay and let you back into my life — and that would be wrong. If we don't break now, sharply and cleanly, we never will — and our lives will be all the more painful because of it.

"So I'm going, my love. I'm leaving. I won't return to the house until you've left for Vampire Mountain — and don't try to trick me by pretending to go, then doubling back, because I'll know! When I do return, it will only be to gather my belongings and sell off the house. I'll move to another town — maybe another country — and start afresh. You never know — I might even find a new man to share my final years with! (I'm open to any sort of man, except vampires — one of those per life is enough for any woman!)

"I'm weeping as I write this, my love, and this is only the start of the waterworks — I might be wailing for years to come! But I know in my heart I'm doing the right thing. What we've shared was beautiful, but now it must end and we must go our separate ways — back to our own worlds.

"I've left a little present for you. You'll hate it, I'm sure — which is why I picked it! I'd much rather you winced every time you looked upon my gift and thought of me, than burst into tears. Make good use of

my gift, Gavner — and thank your lucky stars every time you gaze upon it that you got rid of me when you did, before I kitted you out with any other monstrous designs!!!

"Anyway (big sigh!), I could go on forever (and ever and ever), but what's the point? I love you and always will (even if I find some other man to grow old with), and I wouldn't swap any of our nights together for all the glories of this world or any other. But the time has come to part — so part we must. I hope we meet again in Paradise or Heaven, or wherever it is mismatched lovers go when they die — but not any time soon!

"A toast, my darling vampire: to long lives (yours will be longer than mine, of course!), lots of luck — and a universe of love.

"Goodbye, Gavner. I love you. X."

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Gavner read the message twice. Three times. Four. On the fifth occasion he stopped halfway through, laid the card down, and picked up Liz's parting present. He was cold inside, colder than he'd ever been, and although his head was full of desperate thoughts — that he'd run after her, find her, and wipe these foolish ideas from her mind — on a deeper level he knew that he'd never see her again, that she'd made her decision and it was his duty to respect it.

He turned the parcel around several times, delaying the moment when he had to open it, wishing she'd waltz through the door, yell "Fooled ya!" and kiss him like she had so many times before. When that didn't happen, he finally ripped the paper off the present, shook it free of the last few strips, and held it up to the light.

Boxer shorts. Bright yellow. With tiny pink elephants stitched into the lining.

"You've got to be kidding!" he gasped aloud. These were awful! The most deplorable, loud, ridiculous shorts he'd ever seen! If she thought he was going to wear these, she must be —

He stopped, recalled her line in the letter about wanting him to wince every time he gazed upon her farewell present, rather than sob. A weak smile flickered across his lips, and he knew he'd wear the boxers, wear them until they fell to shreds. And though he'd think of Liz every time he pulled them on or off, he'd have to smile at the memory of the ghastly present, and as great as his sense of loss would be, he'd be able to bear it.

"Nice one, Liz," he grunted, turning the shorts around, grimacing as he spotted more pink elephants on the back. Balling the shorts up, he read through the message one final time, then unballing the shorts and studied them again, running a rough, scarred fingertip over one of the tiny, smiling, pink elephants.

And then the Vampire General clutched the shorts to his chest, perched against the table, closed his eyes, whispered her name — "Liz!" — and began to slowly and lonesomely cry.

**End**

[for Gillie and Zoe -- now you know why Gavner wears those boxers!!!]