

ONE

FEED

The vampire inclined her head only slightly to confirm the qualities of the man who had come to rest against the bar a little way along from her. Her eyes pierced the space around him, her ears acutely separating the differing tones of breath, heartbeat and pulse. The music in the night-club was pounding, the disco lights dazzling, shrouding, but so many things were clear to her already, more perfect than any words that could ever be exchanged between them, more insistent, even, than her hunger. His qualities were few.

His breath alone wore information like billboards as he exhaled it out before him; alcohol, odours of fermentation, nicotine, all of which indicated that he had consumed many beers and many cigarettes. Yet his breath carried more; stale food, the advancement of tooth decay, lung disease; he was there to be tasted like a book of foulness. Her nose curled slightly in disgust. Her attention drifted back out towards the dance floor again, filtering out the boom of the music, tuning in the pulse and the heartbeats of the dancers. Some had gone since she'd last looked, others had arrived. The man beside her had shifted along the bar a few inches towards her. He would talk to her, no doubt. She inclined her head briefly and captured his scents once again. Her focus shifted towards him

almost imperceptibly. Something about his nose, his nasal hairs; there were flecks of white powder adhered to them - speed, she guessed, or possibly cocaine. Her attention flickered towards his eyes. They were partially glazed, barely registering her as he gazed back at her. He couldn't know of her intense scrutiny, not even under the influence of sobriety, and the vampire simply watched his eyes swap views between her cleavage and her legs, his pupils widening frequently. It was sex he wanted, she knew full well. Good, she thought. It would things so much easier, and quicker.

She watched him turn awkwardly and set his drink down at the space on the bar between them. He leaned forward a little, a sour breath slipping from his lips as he wetted them with that coated tongue of his, and then the words came, right on cue.

"What's your name, honey?"

This was a game she had even enjoyed on occasion. With the right guy, or girl, it was sometimes even pleasurable for a while. But tonight, this man was simply disgusting, and it made her feel ill just to register his existence. He was swaying, she could see that without any study, and she wanted to just smack him to the ground right there and then. It was getting late, though, and there were other things that she wanted to pass the night with before dawn, and that one simple desire put momentum into her own words.

"Does it matter?" she replied flatly, her tone even.

The man's smile creased into a grin, his eyes straying once more to her cleavage, widening ever so slightly at the possibility of her breasts. He wanted to touch them so badly, she knew. His ultimate surrender was almost inevitable.

"Yeah, I know what you want," he breathed, the

odours coming like a plague of flies. He leant towards her a little more and placed a hand on one of her knees, his sweat-damp fingers slick as he squeezed it. Her teeth clenched in her mouth, her eyes soured to a sharp acid stare.

"And what's that?" she returned, her fury held momentarily by words.

"Let's get out of here," he urged her, his eyebrow curling as he himself rose from the bar. "It's late."

A flood of cold emotions flashed through the vampire's mind as this human laid himself at her feet. He was there for the taking, but she couldn't help a stray thought rafting inside her head. She had been watching a number of party-goers inside the club - standing, talking, dancing, drinking - and any one of them she could have left with, male or female. Such was the prerogative of the young woman, nobody would have suspected her, or indeed denied her attention. There had been a young black man moving with such rhythm and harmony that she had not been able to take her eyes off him for over an hour. She had seen through his dark silk shirt by the lights blazing above him, his muscles firm and healthy across a rigid torso. His hair had been neatly cropped, his skin unblemished and clean, and yet there had been something about him that declared more than just his weight in blood. To see this young man dance, with the coloured lights playing so beautifully across his black flesh, his hands seeming to caress the air, was intoxicating, something to be admired, and it had been enough to keep her seated at the bar, and enough to keep him alive for another night.

There had been a couple also. They had appeared briefly at the bar a little way along from her, ordering

two non-alcoholic drinks. They too were lean, more toned than muscular, and by the healthiness of their heartbeats and only a trace of sweat on their skin, she presumed a fitness agenda played a major part somewhere in their lives. That skin had seemed almost vibrant beneath the artificial lights, strong and firm, and the vampire had thought how pleasurable it would have been to puncture it. But she had not been in the mood to seduce two mortals tonight. She simply wanted to feed and be done with it, and give the rest of the night over to wandering beside the moonlit Thames.

“So will it be my place or yours?”

The man was still there. Indulgence had let practicality slip, and her eyes flickered quickly back to him, the motion resurrecting the gut of disgust. His sweat-greased fingers left slug-trails on the bar as he pushed them between the narrowing breach between them. She felt a bile of rage begin to burn in her throat as he then used those fingers to take hold of her elbow.

“You can finish your drink later if you like,” he murmured, inclining his head yet further towards her.

He wants to go now, she thought to herself, and he hasn't even noticed that I don't have a drink. The stench of stale odours escaping his pores was becoming more unpleasant, vying against those that straddled the words suppurating from his mouth, and she realised with no pleasure that she would have to take him quickly before he simply soured her appetite. Her mind drifted back to the young black man on the dance floor, and briefly she even glanced his way, but he was gone now. She turned back to look at this man, this denizen of humanity, and gazed at the grin still attached to his face. He had no grace or charm,

nobility or rhythm. All he had was blood. She wanted him dead.

The vampire climbed down off her stool and allowed him to lead her through the night-club towards the door. On the way she noticed at least two different men watching their departure, obscuring their interest by trying to hide their emotions behind lifted drinks. Their expressions turned as she passed them; jealousy for the man holding her arm, sadness for their own indecision or reticence, but mostly anger because they thought she was leaving to have sex with him. How little they knew, she thought, and how different their emotions would be should they have known. She gave one of them a tiny smile, and enjoyed the sight of the flushing of his face, blood rushing close to the surface where his skin grew fragile. She would see him again. Maybe not tonight or tomorrow night, but he would be back to wait and watch for her. It almost seemed cruel.

A chill wind brightened her senses the instant she stepped outside onto the pavement, and he at once seemed different. His eyes were waxy and bloodshot, darkness circling the wrinkles surrounding them. His skin was more pale and neglected, and reeked of odours engrained more deeply within his pores than she had perceived inside. His breath, when he opened his mouth to speak again, seemed even more foul than it had, and she could barely manage to register his words so much did it turn her stomach. She let him walk her along the street a little, his hand finding her buttocks, his fingers seeking out the crease between them, before she tired of him altogether. It must have been at least an hour after midnight, and if she were to play this charade for much longer she knew she

would not be back on the street until gone two. Even with the remnants of the day's pollutants still lingering in the air like tainted gossamer, the breeze was sweet compared to this collection of stagnating odours. When they neared an unlit alleyway that led through the streets of Hammersmith in the direction of the river, she took hold of his trousers at the crotch and levered him into it.

"You just can't wait, can you, baby?" the man said, as he pushed his hand firmly up onto one of her breasts.

She could feel the rank sweat from his palm seep into her. Her teeth bared suddenly and a snarl rumbled from the back of her throat. He seemed to take the threat as an urgency of sexual need, and he grabbed hold of her waist with his other hand and pulled her hard against him. She was sick of this game entirely now, and snatching hold of a fistful of hair at the back of his head, yanked his skull back to expose his throat. His cry was stricken immediately, his windpipe forced closed, and his hands left her body altogether as he tried to take hold of her grasp upon him.

Her teeth were extended now, crystalline with saliva, and as her head bowed down towards him, she opened her mouth and sank them deep into his neck. She felt him clutch at her as she broke through the taut surface of his skin, his body flinching and contracting around her as the first gush of hot blood poured over the back of her tongue. The vampire sucked hard upon him as she drank, feeling neither remorse nor guilt, only contentment that such a foul creature would soon be dead.

It was dangerous for her to kill out on the streets, of course, she knew that even as she drank, but the

night was precious. Every moment brought wonders to her that other vampires had long ago tired of, the simplest things bestowing worth upon the valueless everafter. There were so many dangers now, negating that immortality. But the decision had been made, and death had joined the unclean air.

She let the body slip from her arms and watched as it collapsed into an awkward tangle of pliant limbs. He seemed almost reverent now that he was bereft of life, but he was just a meal, worth his weight in blood, and that was all. Reality checked rapidly in, however, and her focus narrowed to her own sudden predicament. It would take time to find a place to hide the body, but then what was the point? She knew that it would be found within twenty four hours anyway, whether it be by a skulker, the police or another vampire. Best to be gone now and quickly, she decided, before anyone caught the scent of the corpse on the air and found her with that same scent on both her tongue and lips.

TWO

SHOULD OLD AQUAINTANCES BE FORGOT

It was a feeling of being misplaced and a sense of not being a part of things that was the biggest difference, and it was a difference that seemed somehow to be undoing him from the inside. Jenner Hoard was sitting on the edge of his single bed, gazing out at the dismal rain-threatening sky hanging over the rooftops of Hammersmith, grey and noxious, unappealing, unwelcoming. The dull blue smoke from the cigarette burning in his fingers curled lightly towards the ceiling, a slowly writhing distraction between himself and the city, and he pulled it absently to his lips and inhaled.

There was no consolation to be had from the cigarette, no contentment, no escape, and certainly no pleasure. But it was something familiar - and God just how familiar - but even that seemed awkward in this renewed environment. It had been only hours since his release from Her Majesty's Pleasure, and he had stepped out through those old prison gates with the dream of the moment singing in his heart. The moment itself had been dead, there had been nothing to feel, but he had built that dream in the months leading up to his release, and he had told himself what freedom would mean when finally it came. Yes, he had no bars to obscure the daytime now, and no, there was no schedule anymore for his taking a shit, but it

was the rhythm that he'd dreamed of for all those months that he couldn't get into, the rhythm of his life now as a free man, and it was just eating him up like a dull gnawing pack of rats.

His flat had been untended for the two years that he'd been inside, and the smell of damp and mould hung in the air of his bedroom, along with other acrid smells that he didn't want to think about, but he had neither the strength in his limbs nor the will in his blood to reach forward and open the window to let in some of the wonderful fumes that clung to London like swamp water. His stomach ached with hunger, and he put a hand to it gingerly, pressing his fingertips into the grey paunch that had appeared over his time spent inside. He only had what money he'd had returned to him on leaving the prison, plus a few scraps left in the bank which was nothing worth drawing on, and he'd spent it all on food from the market on his way back to the flat.

Money was the source of everything, that much he knew, and even though he had next to nothing at the moment, he had at least allowed himself the luxury, after two year's abstinence, of vodka, the cheapest bottle he could find, some kind of gut-rot with a foreign label, as well as a packet of cigarettes to last him the rest of the week. They both still sat in front of him on the small wooden table, both nasty and both half empty, and he now reached out and took a draft from the bottle before pulling another of the cigarettes from the pack. Lighting it from the short stub still burning in his fingers, he lay back on his bed and watched the two columns of blue smoke entwine slowly together in their soft subtle patterns, and lost himself for a moment in their sheer simplicity.

A car door slammed outside in the street and his eyes flicked back to the window. There was a light drizzle falling now, he could see the subtle pattern of rain dropping against the grey cloud cover like needles. And then a sound came from his front door, and he inclined his head a little towards it as he listened. Easing himself up off the bed, he headed warily out into the hallway. So used to the prison guards placing everything in front of him like a scolded child, it took him a few moments to realise that it was just the sound of mail dropping onto the floor. It was only when he remembered that the postman delivered mail to the mailbox for the whole block of flats, and that it was late in the afternoon anyway, that he realised something was wrong, and moved quickly to the door.

On the floor was a single envelope, and Jenner stared at it for a moment before stooping to pick it up. It was sealed and he quickly wedged a thumb beneath the flap and tore it open. Inside was a note, the handwriting of which was immediately recognisable. He may have forgotten a lot of things while he had been in prison - the smell of a woman, the taste of cheap vodka on his tongue, steak, fresh air, the wind off the Thames - but the neat script of the man responsible for his criminal rise and eventual incarceration was not one of them. It took only another moment for him to pull open the front door and step out into the hallway, but the landing was already quiet. A few soiled rubbish bags littered the doorway of one of the other flats across from him, the stairwell to the right lay empty and silent, but of the messenger who had delivered the note there was simply no sign.

Wandering back into his flat, Jenner closed the door behind him before stepping through into the kitchen to look more closely at the note. It was indeed from Montague, as he had known, and he scanned quickly back over the neat lines to get to the point of the letter as he pulled the new bread and peanut butter out of the fridge with his other hand. Why he had put them in the fridge at all he had no idea, the electricity had not been reconnected, but he spread some of the peanut butter roughly onto a couple of dry slices before folding them in two and taking them back into the bedroom along with the note. Perching on the end of the bed once more, he reread it with utter disbelief.

Montague was insane. Twenty four months he had served in prison for a burglary that had gone wrong from the start. The police had been there seconds after he had entered, and they'd caught him without an excuse. Now here, just hours after his release, Montague had sent him a note asking him to contact him for details of another. It was madness, sheer madness. There was simply no other word for it.

Actually, there was another word for it, a more important word that seemed to fill his head incessantly.

Money.

The water was still connected, which was something, but without the electricity to heat it, he skipped the shower, and simply headed out into the street as he was, keen to know the score on the streets he had been away from for so long. An old acquaintance used to rent a room less than ten minutes away, and he decided to go see what the deal was. Jenner didn't know if Kole still lived there, he

hadn't heard from him while he'd been inside, but Kole had also done the occasional job for Montague, and his insights might at least be worth the visit. He was the only person he could think of that might be able to help him get out of the shit that Montague was trying to get him right back into, and might also know if there was a more reasonable way for an ex-con to make some quick money. The last thing he needed was to go straight back inside. No more burglaries, he promised himself, and no more drug trafficking.

Hurrying past the market, he started suddenly as he heard his name yelled from amongst the tangle of busy stalls. With his thoughts still wrapped inside Montague's games, his first reaction was to run. Reality kicked in almost immediately, however, and he turned his head, locating who it was straight away. It was the beautiful girl waving her arm over her head from the depths of a crowd, a leopard print hat perched elegantly on her head, a matching jacket snug around her shoulders. It was Emma, dear sweet Emma. It was a friendly face, too friendly perhaps for his first day out, and he just wasn't in the mood for the questions that he knew she would have about his life spent behind bars.

"When did you get out?" she wanted to know, throwing her arms lovingly around his shoulders as she reached him.

"This morning," Jenner told her, reluctantly accepting her overwhelming embrace, his mind still wrapped tight with the worries of making a living.

"And you didn't call?"

It was a simple enough excuse to tell her that he had no cash for a phone call, which was the truth after all, but he received the answer he thought he was

going to get; she opened her purse and offered him what notes she had. His reluctance to re-ignite their relationship was exceeded only by the grisly ache still gnawing at his stomach, and despite the guilt he felt for intentionally misleading her, a trait a convicted criminal should have long since left behind, he accepted her offer of dinner.

Sitting awkwardly at a window table at the Peking Palace, Jenner stared out at the ever-increasing traffic rushing past while Emma began talking opposite him. He had nothing to say to her, and so he let her carry most of the conversation, and watched occasionally as she put on a consoling face whenever she asked him about the awfulness of prison life.

He'd been a thief when she'd met him, and she'd found it a deeply thrilling addition to a lifestyle that was paid for by her father. All this he knew, and if it wasn't for his conscience, he would have taken her for every penny he could get his hands on. It was strange, this conscience of his, he thought to himself as he watched her grin at him over the rim of her wine glass. He could go to bizarre lengths to break into mansions or institutions and steal files or jewels, and then evade both the security and the police for just a fraction of what he could get by sitting back and letting Emma pay for everything he wanted. But then it occurred to him on each occasion that he thought this way, that she simply wouldn't look twice at him if he wasn't a criminal in the first place. He was an object to her, pure and simple. That was the truth, and that was why he felt so indifferent about her. Sure, the sex was good, and she was a beautiful woman to have on his arm and to look at, but she didn't seem interested in him in the slightest, only what he was and what he did. It made her rich friends gasp at the sheer audacity of it.

Jenner felt her touch his hand and he realised that she'd said something that needed a response. He hadn't heard a word she'd said, but then had he ever?

"I want to know if you'll come over," she said again. "Everyone will be there."

Jenner nodded briefly. He didn't know what he was nodding for, but she smiled anyway. She was happy. It was such a stupid situation that even if he didn't turn up for anything she had planned, she just thought him even more of a rogue, and therefore more adorable. He hated her shallowness, but then she was buying him dinner, and thought that she at least deserved to have him hang around long enough to eat it.

After the meal came and went, and they were leaving the restaurant, the subject of Jenner's electricity and telephone came up, with the result that Emma offered to pay to have them both reconnected. Only once they were outside in the street, and with the dilemma of them walking their separate ways, did Emma push things further still, suggesting that she stay the night with him.

"We can be together again," she whispered. "Like we used to be."

"I don't think so, Em. I'm not feeling right."

"That's okay," she said with a mischievous grin. "You can lie back and I'll do all the difficult stuff. Just like I used to do."

Her hands were on his chest now, tracing delicate circles up across his face and then teasing through his dark hair. Jenner stepped away from her, away from her touch, but she simply stepped after him, that smile of hers still on her lips.

"Tell me we can," she said breathlessly, pressing her lips gently against his neck, her other hand tracing a

path down across his stomach to his groin, where it cupped him firmly.

"Look, Em, I don't feel like it tonight. I... I'll have to call you."

"Yeah, right," she toyed. "Like I haven't heard that one before. You say you'll phone, and then you won't, and then I'll have to come over, and beg you to let me stay -"

"I don't want you like that anymore," Jenner heard himself saying. God, why was he even saying it? He hadn't had sex for two years. "You don't love me, you never have."

"What do you know about love?" she said bluntly, her kisses still coming passionately across his neck. "I'm just some object for you to use. And you love that, don't you?"

Her hands were toying with him more forcefully now through the fabric of his jeans, and after such abstinence how could he do anything but comply?

"Don't you want to use me?" she breathed, her voice shallow, seductive.

His eyes flickered closed as he felt her fingers and lips against him, caressing him where for two years there had been nothing but harshness and rough prison laundry. Her touch was insistent, perhaps even loving, and despite his former feelings of not being a part of the world, he allowed himself the pleasure of it. His attention had been stolen entirely by her, until the blaring horn of a car somewhere along the darkened street snatched him from her affection, and his eyes flickered open, revealing to him the reality that had skipped his notice. They were stood on the pavement on a busy London street, while passing drivers watched her feel him up. He grasped her hands firmly,

instantly stopping their motions. Her eyes found his, afraid, but willing. He let her go, wanting just to be gone and away from the scrutiny of the eyes on the rainy dark street, but Emma was not prepared to be done with him just yet.

Jenner stared at her, almost helplessly, as she slowly lifted the hem of her dress and showed him the white silk knickers that she wore underneath, right in the middle of the street. It was becoming more than he could bear, and he felt the eyes of the drivers turning to watch this spectacle as they made their ways home bear down on him like some vast colossal weight. How often had he dreamed of a woman, naked and willing for sex? Every night and every day for the past two years. Now here was the beautiful Emma, offering him anything he wanted, begging him to take her, and all he wanted was to be alone. Quickly he took hold of her hand, more to be away than anything else, her dress swishing back across her thighs once more, as he hauled her along the street after him in the direction of his flat.

She giggled at his roughness, even as he dragged her across the road to the disdain of passing pedestrians. She bent to lick the fingers that held her, even as he cursed her out loud. She urged him on, even as he began to lose his temper with her and pushed her angrily against the wall of his building before dragging her upstairs to his flat.

She stood her ground once she was inside, and leant back against the door, her fingertips slowly playing across the white silk underwear that she exposed for him once again. Then, as he watched, she asked him one last time to take her to bed. Jenner had the means in his own underwear, he could feel it

straining at the front of his jeans - how could it not be with such stimulation? - and his thoughts went briefly to Kole, and to Montague, and to the problems he still had with his money, before he snatched her up in his arms, carried her through into the bedroom, and hurled her down onto the bed.

He took her there and then, on the unmade bed beneath the yellow pallor of the streetlamps flooding in through the grimy top floor windows.

Emma was willing, of course, crying and yelping and turning her body to any device he wanted, clawing and moaning as he pleased himself of her. It had occurred to him on occasion in the past to perhaps try and pleasure her, but she had never seemed tempted to mention it, and he had never seemed interested enough before to use anything other than what he was currently using. So when finally he exhausted himself and rolled off and away from her, she uttered not one single word of complaint, not even as she wrapped her arms tightly around him, but simply let him drift into a welcome, if shallow, sleep in his own bed.

### THREE

#### SEDUCTION

The night was cool, the air less polluted than it had been, and a crisp white moon pierced the sullen sky, bathing Covent Garden in a perfect radiant glimmer of light. The small paved square heaved beneath a weight of surging bodies, the stone buildings condensing the clamour of human voices into a dull focal din, as Saturday night drew a vast crowd to the bars and clubs, each and every one of them eager to nullify their senses with alcohol, to parade themselves in desperate rituals of sexual frenzy, and to crawl blindly into the blissful arms of whoever might have them.

The vampire stood tall and motionless beside the grand white columns of the ancient monument building, hidden from prying eyes inside a veil of darkness, vigilant, preying, watching everything before him as though it were a third-world market. The human condition, he thought to himself, so frail, so ambitious, and yet so prone to distraction that it seemed almost unkind to take their pitiful fleeting lives from them. A literal paradox was what made them pitiful, so fierce were they and yet so weak, so transient and yet so fully aware of their own existence. Poor dumb creatures, one and all.

Strings of helpless mortals threaded their way through the amassing throng as he watched them,

some dressed up for the night, others dressed down for want of attention. A group of seven individuals caught his attention, less than nineteen years all of them, circling in a drunken state near to where he haunted the shadows. They were loud in both their laughter and their costumes, hugging each other and strangers alike, and dressed in little more than white cotton bedsheets. Togas, he guessed they were aiming for.

His eyes pierced the uncertain darkness between them, the moonlight overhead vying for dominance over the gaudy bright lights that flooded the square, as he inhaled the rich aromas and internal rhythms of each of their bodies. Ripe, young and fresh, their blood would be so very sweet. And it would come freely and eagerly too, flooding from their bodies in a torrent that would slip down his throat with a consummate and passionate ease. It would be bliss, too, and it would be right. One of them would die this night.

The loudest of their number was female and overweight, confident and brash, and he studied her coldly as she forced her way through the bustling crowd, leading the group to the next bar. She commanded the most sobriety, he could see, her gaze even with clarity, the most likely to put up a fight, although against his formidable strength a fight was too great a word. Two young males followed in her wake, drawn by her lavish attentions towards them, all three of them trailing so sickly a stench of hormones and sexual want that it nauseated him with its potency. There were better kills than this, and out of the four children that followed, only one of them staggered out of step with the rest, drunk to the point of incompetence.

Her eyes were glazed and uncertain as she clung

helplessly to the fluttering costumes of those that led her, her infirm body buffeted from side to side by the masses that harangued her inept and ragged progress. The vampire tracked her doggedly as the group made their cumbersome way through the clamouring crowd. It seemed almost coincidence that her face drifted up out of her stupor towards him, that uncertain sight finding him even through the shroud of darkness that he had folded around himself. The vampire stepped out from behind this cloak of shadows only marginally, enough so that the bright moonlight overhead caught his pallid features, but not nearly so much that the remainder of the crowd should suddenly see him.

The girl found him beneath the pale moonlight more readily now, and as the vampire beckoned her towards him with a simple motion of his hand, he watched with a cruel seductive satisfaction as her hand slipped the guiding rein of the friend she trailed and came, unquestioningly and with a coy smile, up the wide stone steps and into the shrouded sanctity of the vampire's powerful darkness.

Guiding her away from the sight of her friends behind one of the tall white pillars of the monument building, the vampire moved so very close to her that they were almost touching. Her scent bewitched him immediately with a natural perfume of health and youth, even through the stagnating odour of sweat and alcohol that reeked from her pores and sought to sicken him. Her bloodshot eyes betrayed the confidence she was trying to create for this stranger, uncertain and dilating, but the vampire saw through it all with an eye practised at bringing death. She could not cheat him. He would soon open her veins and

taste her blood.

"I think I've had a bit too much to drink," the girl confessed, swaying inside the cradle of his arms.

"Alcohol will do that to you," the vampire said simply.

"My name's Shiri," she went on, her smile blossoming helplessly into an inebriated, if uncertain, grin. "I go to one of the colleges here. Is that where you go?"

"No."

Distilled from the corruptive odours, the aroma of her body was still alluring, blissful even, and the vampire inhaled her intoxicating scent appreciatively as she spoke. He studied her with a practised eye, distantly but still entranced, even as she pushed a mop of unruly sweat-damp hair out of her eyes to try to see him better, staggering back against the pillar from the suddenness of the motion. It seemed to partially embarrass her.

"My friends are just over there," she continued, with a giggle and a vague movement of her hand. "Why don't you join us? You're more than welcome. We're having a bit of a celebration tonight."

The vampire did not answer her, and he watched as her grin faltered for a moment. She was weak, and would be so easy to prey upon. He held her face with one hand, delicately.

"I saw you," he whispered to her, "and I thought we felt a connection. I thought you maybe felt it too. Is this not the case? I think, perhaps, that if I have made that mistake, then I have embarrassed us both."

She looked at him, uncertain of how to respond.

She tried to smile.

"You feel as though you're more of a solitary

person than your friends, don't you? You feel as though they don't understand you. You're different, and you spend much of your time on your own."

"How do you know that?" she suddenly yearned to know, her smile dropping.

"We share that loneliness, Shiri. The heartache, the pain of feeling misplaced, of being isolated. We are different from other people. We share that pain. That is what I thought we felt."

The girl stared at him, her smile waning further beneath the weight of his words.

The human condition.

It was so very frail.

So very predictable.

"It hurts," she agreed, her eyes flickering with sadness now.

"You're too beautiful to feel such pain, Shiri," the vampire continued breathlessly, his face almost brushing against the sweet smoothness of her skin. "Someone like you should never have to feel alone. Neither of us should."

Her hair literally shimmered with youth, so fragrant and so warm. He wanted to touch it, to grasp it, to feel it against his cheek and neck as he imagined biting down into her throat and taking her life.

"When was the last time you were told that?" he whispered, restraining himself from taking her there and then.

She shook the notion away, tears welling swiftly.

Despair seemed close, so readily close.

There would be no fight.

"You should be told that," the vampire continued, "because you are. You are beautiful, Shiri, so very beautiful."

"You're messing with me now," she told him. "I'm going back to my friends."

"No, Shiri," he took up her hand now, clasping that smooth resilient skin. She was perfect. So fresh. So very young. "I want you here. With me. Say you will."

"Let me go. I want to go back to my friends now."

"Do you?" he exclaimed, intensely. "Do you really want your friends? Do you want them even though they won't tell you how beautiful you are? Do you want them even though they can't hold you and tell you how much they care about you? They don't care, and they don't love, and they haven't even stopped to come back to look for you. But I'm here, Shiri. I'm offering myself to you. I'll do anything you ask me, and I'll never complain. Just come with me, and I will make it all alright. I promise I will make it all go away."

The girl stared up at him, helplessly, and he watched with a cold and unfaltering gaze as the despair and the confusion that racked her poor tortured heart blossomed rapidly inside her. He would have that heart too, he promised himself. He would puncture it and tear at it, and suck the last of her blood out through it even as it beat its last dying rhythms. He would kill her without guilt, without remorse, and he would leave her still corpse behind him as if she had never lived at all.

"Yes," she finally uttered quietly to him, breaking the silence between them.

"Do you want me to take you away from all this?" the stranger asked.

"Yes," she murmured again.

"And you want me to love you?"

The girl could only manage a shallow nod this time.

"Then let us go, my love. It is late."

And so they left Covent Garden swiftly and without attention, with the din of human voices harrying the air behind them, and the stench of stale alcohol and human sweat on the breeze like a rancid cloud at their backs. Beside him, the girl was already sniffing back the progress of her tears, swallowing that loneliness down inside her body where it had lingered for so many years already. Through his touch upon her skin, the vampire could feel her chest shudder with despair, and he knew that he would have to be quick in his despatch of her, lest she open up completely and bring attention to those who might do him harm.

He guided her effortlessly away from the square and out into a darkened thoroughfare, his arm now clasping her shoulder firmly. Leading her up the cold grey steps to a small sheltered doorway, he heard a brief but pitiful sob, and then he grasped the back of her head quickly with one hand and exposed her taut young throat to the unfeeling blackness of the night. He paused momentarily at the sight of her pale bare skin, his teeth already lengthened into fangs and slick with saliva, inhaling her heady scent like a potent drug as the smell of her youth overtook him. She was beautiful, this girl, intoxicating, and a wave of conflicting emotions suddenly broke over him even as he sank his teeth deep into her throat and punctured her skin. The girl struggled only briefly, her arms flinching as a fragile gasp skipped somewhere inside her. The vampire held her solid in his strong restricting grasp as he forced himself down even harder upon her, crushing her tiny body as he drank, and drawing the hot sweet fluid out of her body.

Her arms dropped to her sides even before he had drunk his fill, her white cotton toga unravelling and

falling open to expose her small young breasts. The vampire gazed down upon her nakedness almost indifferently, and realised the irony in his seduction, promising her love and devotion, but ignoring her body now that it was offered, even in death, for him to play with if he so chose.

He gazed down upon her upturned face now. So beautiful she truly was, this girl no more than nineteen years old. Her dark hair flowed back from her brow like a rich silken veil, her eyes still open to the creature that had killed her, but now they stared up vacant and hollow, no thoughts present behind their cold dull sockets. He watched her for a few moments as he weighed her tiny frame in his arms, so tender and so young, a vessel of blood that would now only rot and decay. She would have parents, he presumed, who would grieve and berate whatever god they prayed to, for allowing their precious daughter to perish so early on in her years. But what was her life anyway? Just a passing moment, a receptacle for transferring one form of energy to another. She had been born from the combined potential of two adults and had cultivated it into a form that he could use himself. He had chosen to take it all, however, to use up all that potential and leave nothing in its place. She was dead now, a corpse that would wither over time, until the earth rotted her bones and used whatever it could to nourish itself. Was he not simply doing the same thing? Playing his part in the cycle of things?

Mortality.

It was a shallow promise indeed.

To offer so much but give so little, and all with ungodly conditions.

The vampire let her body slip down into the small

sheltered doorway, and he stood gazing down at her bare breasts and her dull vacant eyes one last time, before gliding down the cold grey steps and off into the tangled depths of the moonlit night.

The smell of blood was in the air once more, and death filled the night like a clinging shroud of cold wet muslin. The hunters would come, he knew. Perhaps not quickly, and perhaps not until daybreak, but they would come.

And when they came and found the body of the dead young girl, they would ask their questions, and they would gather their weapons, and their fury would increase tenfold as a vengeance for his head would become insurmountable. A battle would become inevitable one night, he knew, and on that night it would be interesting to see who would finally stand the victor, and who would finally turn to dust.