



An Untold Tale

# Blood Will Tell



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**This is a fantasy of a fantasy. The idea is : what might have happened at the end of Dark Reunion if Stefan had been persuaded to drink the blood of his three friends in order to be more powerful when he fought that night. It might have happened something like this...**

**Please note that the text from the actual book, Dark Reunion, is paraphrased and condensed.**

**Rating: for mature people who enjoy vampire tales.**

## Bonnie



Stefan picked up the branch of white ash, took the knife out of his pocket, and began to strip the smaller branches off, making it into a spear. "Terrific! The knight is going off to combat," Matt said. "Don't you see that you're walking right into that monster's trap?" He took a step toward Stefan. "Right. You're the vampire, but you don't drink human blood, so you're almost as weak as a human . . ."

Stefan gave him a bleak smile. "You think so? Are you sure?"

"Well, I know that there are three of us and only one of you—"

"Stop it, Matt," Meredith said quietly. "We can't stop him from fighting this murderer. All we can do is help him." And without another word, she began unbuttoning the top button of her shirt.

Bonnie was shocked for an instant—although she'd had the same idea when Stefan had first arrived in Fell's Church. She hadn't been thinking of all three of them . . . but what did it matter? She nodded and unzipped her windbreaker.

Matt hesitated a moment and then took off his T-shirt. "All for one; one for all," he said.

## Stefan

That was how it had started. The three of them so determined, united, against him. Insistent that he break his vow and take human blood. And Stefan had been walking out on it, despite the knowledge that it would help him to kill the monster preying on Fell's Church, despite the danger to all of them if he failed. He had actually walked out the door when something else had sparked in his brain.

"Wait," Bonnie had said authoritatively. "Can't you feel it? It's Elena. She *wants* you to do this. Can't you *tell*?"

Stefan had looked at her blankly. If this was some new way of manipulating him. . . . But Bonnie had been serious, her small head tilted as if listening to faraway music; her expression almost beatific.

And then he had felt it too. Like a benison from the heavens, a whisper from his golden-haired angel. *Do it, Stefan. Let them make their sacrifice for Fell's Church, let them give what they can. As you are. It will be to their credit afterward, even if they don't survive. As for breaking your vow; well, let the condemnation for that be weighed against the merit you've gained by staying to protect these humans who—many of them—hate and fear you. Beloved, you are very brave, but sometimes a little too stubborn to be practical.*

Voices from beyond? But that was Elena; that was the way she spoke, and that was the way he felt when she spoke. The next words were not just for him, and something inside him watched Matt and Meredith as they heard the voice too, Matt astonished; Meredith with her usual composure.

*This is our reunion and I give you to each other. I give my friends to you, Stefan, so that you can fight with all your combined strength. And to you, my friends, I give Stefan . . . who may be able to keep you alive. Take each other. . . and trust.*

And then trust. Aye, there was the rub. How to trust even the beneficence of heaven after what that monster-in-human-form had done to this innocent little town.

But when Elena commanded, he listened. When Elena spoke, even from the afterlife, he obeyed. He'd promised her that in his heart, long ago.

And so he had agreed, his only condition being that they do this one at a time, with the other two waiting in the car. He, Stefan Salvatore, who had given up drinking human blood so long ago, and bound himself with fearsome oaths not to do it, was going to do it. The only thing left was to determine the order, which Meredith did with three twigs from the white ash branch. Meredith. Bonnie. Then Matt.

Stefan was glad that Meredith was going to be first. Meredith would remain calm during The Last Judgment. She was a rock. He was relying on her to help steady him a little as he broke this pledge that had been his one guidance since becoming a vampire nearly half

a millennium ago.

Bonnie and Matt headed for the car. Stefan looked around the landing for Mrs. Flowers, but the landlady had disappeared. Together, he and Meredith went back upstairs.

"If Bonnie were here," Meredith said, "she'd be sure it was a good omen that Mrs. Flowers was gone."

"Fortunately, the door has a good sturdy lock. We don't have any need for good omens; it can make sure nothing human gets in, and I can keep anything inhuman out. I don't suppose I can talk you out of this right now?" Stefan spoke without changing his tone in the slightest on the last sentence.

Meredith smiled. "And flout an edict of Elena's? I'm not that dumb."

"That's what all three of you think it was? An edict?" Stefan looked at Meredith pleadingly. "I was hoping to get you to talk some sense into Matt. You'll be alone with him while I'm with Bonnie."

"Sense? Matt? Now? In the same sentence?"

"Yes. We have to get him to give this up. You have to, Meredith, because I don't think he'll listen to a word I say. It's all very fine and noble, offering your blood to make me stronger so I can fight that . . . thing. But Matt can't handle it."

Meredith's bright dark eyes were as sad as he had ever seen them, like still water in deep pools. "You don't know Matt well enough by now? He wants to save Fell's Church even if it kills him. And do you have any idea how he'd feel if you said you'd take blood from Bonnie and me, but not him?"

"I thought we could fob him off with something about the two of you being girls."

Meredith laughed shortly. "Nyet, Yvette. He knows Damon takes blood from guys. He knows about Mr. Tanner. He knows it's not a sexual thing."

Stefan groaned. "It's not. But—how do I explain?"

He studied Meredith, the quiet elegance of line of her body, the timeless beauty of her high cheekbones, arched eyebrows, and the striking features that had been the downfall of countless males in Fell's Church. He studied the way her eyelashes tangled together when she shut her eyes. And even as he looked at her he was aware that she was studying him from under those seemingly demure eyelashes. Meredith was like the abyss that looked back at you when you looked into it.

He sighed.

"Meredith—can I try to explain something to you? I know there's no time, but we have to make time for it. Unless you want one of your friends ending up in a psychiatric hospital—do you remember Vicky?"

She didn't snap off a superficial answer, pointing out that of course she knew a girl she'd gone to school for years with. He watched her face as her mind roved back over the seasons until she could picture what he wanted her to picture: Vicky, a splash of white as she stumbled down a dark country road, wearing nothing but a thin torn slip; her hair disarrayed; her eyes like two black holes to some other dreadful dimension; her mouth one long silent scream.

"I remember," Meredith whispered. Stefan could feel her shock. "But Vicky was—she was attacked and forced, and God only knows what horrible things she saw or—or felt. This is totally different—"

"Tell me that again after you've taken your turn." Stefan deliberately spoke in harsh, clipped tones, and hardly glanced at Meredith as he continued. "Vicky was forced." He stared off into a middle distance. "Matt's forcing himself. Vicky was attacked. Matt has the self-discipline to hold *himself* down. Vicky saw or experienced things that, to put it crudely, drove her crazy. And whether those things were in the mind of a supernatural creature, or in her mind, or in the world around them, I don't know and Vicky isn't saying."

He swung back toward her, letting the harshness drain out of his voice, his eyes pleading with her to understand. "Meredith, if vampire and donor are, well, friends, with no need to overcome mental or physical resistance—either by mind control or by physical force, then everything should be fine. *But it isn't, always.* There are monsters lurking in human minds scarier than anything I've ever imagined in my own nightmares. And vampires are just the sort of things likely to make them pop up."

"And you think one could pop up with Matt?"

"I'm afraid of it. I'm afraid of a lot of things, if he makes himself do this."

Meredith cocked her silky dark head, highlights running up and down the length of her hair. Then she met his eyes and nodded, once. "I'll try to talk him out of it. I'll . . . let's see . . . I'll help try to make him believe that by the time his turn comes around that you're as full as a tick and ready to burst. That will be Plan T."

"Thank you. I don't think I'll be quite as full as a tick, but I may not exactly be myself by that time. It'll be good to feel that you're backing me up."

"Oh, I'm a famous back-upper. Elena wasn't just a Big Picture Person; she loved figuring out all the grungy little details, but I was her number one backer." Meredith spoke, not with bitterness or sarcasm, nor even with the tolerance usually accorded to the faults of the recently dead, but with love. Just love. The absent love of a true friend, who has had time to learn all, know all, and forgive all. Watching her, thinking about all the years that she had known Elena while he had not—all the simple day-to-day *fun* they had had—Stefan felt a hand clutch at his heart. He had only loved Elena a few short months because he had only known her that long.

"Meredith?" He sat down and tried to keep envy, like a haggard shrieking banshee, out of his voice.

He wasn't quite sure if he succeeded. Meredith was perceptive and she was watching him. "Yes, Stefan."

"Meredith, when this starts, I'd appreciate it so much if you could . . . well . . . think about Elena. About things you did together. Stuff like the night you tried to make toffee. You did that, didn't you?"

They had. He knew. He'd read Elena's diaries before they'd been enshrined in the



library. And he had an eidetic memory.

*June 18: oh-my-god-in-the-morning: Bonnie's house. Bonnie's great-grandmother must have been a witch. I am NOT kidding. If she could make something edible out of the toffee recipe in her Simple Home Cookery Book—I'm not even saying "delicious," I'm saying simply something that a person could choke down without ruining the kitchen, setting fire to the curtains, and scalding both hands and the inside of her mouth, then she definitely had supernatural powers. We are going to need a **jackhammer** to get all that \$%^\*!! sugar concrete out of the stove burners . . . And yet it never hardened when we tried to pull it, oh, no . . . This is the end of Bonnie's candy making craze, and if she doesn't agree, the world is going to see its first Homicide By Toffee case . . . OH, GOD, WE HAD FUN.*

But knowing the words by heart wasn't the same as being there, as seeing Elena's face flushed with the heat of the stove, as counting the wisps of damp gold hair curling on her forehead; as watching her laugh and snap out orders and apologize by turn.

He wanted to see that.

"I vaguely remember. Bonnie had to have it cut out of her hair," Meredith was saying. Her eyes were mildly curious.

"I'd like to see that. Little things like that, if you can remember them. Just any little thing—"

He was repeating himself—and he was starting to break down. Meredith put a hand on his elbow, guiding him to the threadbare broken-sprung couch in this room that had been his home for the happiest days of his life.

## Meredith

Meredith was worried about Stefan. Those haunted green eyes . . . they'd used to be a brighter leaf green. Now they were dark as emerald. The tightly molded planes of his face, the beauty of his features, the soft promise of his mouth were all there . . . but still, somehow, these days Stefan managed to look like a condemned man. It wasn't just since the monster had started attacking Fell's Church. It was since losing Elena. Stefan had become the most beautiful walking shadow of his former self.

Fear assailed her suddenly, and she had to *know* about their champion. "Stefan? With human blood in your veins, and White Ash in your hands, how do you rate your chances?" she asked him.

"How can I know? All I do know is that I'll fight him with everything I have; with everything you're giving me."

With what they were giving him. A wry, mocking voice started in Meredith's head.

Making a bargain with the devil? You're going to let this lesser fiend have his way with you, breach your veins, just so he can go into a hopeless battle with a greater devil?

Yes. Oh, yes, indeed. She'd do much more than give her blood to a half-broken lost soul like Stefan if it would allow her a chance to save Fell's Church. Revenge . . . even revenge for her grandfather and Sue Carson . . . was pointless. If everyone insisted on revenge then the world would be full of maimed things: widows and orphans and gibbering phantoms. But if Stefan wasn't able to stop that monster tonight, the monster would blaze through Fell's Church, and leave it ruined in his wake. Hundreds of gibbering phantoms . . .

Grandfather . . .

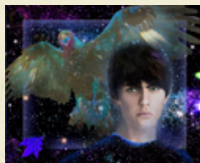
Grandfather, there's a *real* devil loose and nobody fit to stand up to him. And Damon may have—how would Stefan put it?—already played us false. He's not a very good choice of ally. But what I know is that Stefan *won't*. Stefan will hang in there until he stops that thing, even if it means he has to die.

I have to help him in any way I can.

She wondered why she was telling herself this, why she was so vehement. But the answer was too obvious. She was facing an old fear now with Stefan. Since her grandfather's—breakdown—she had a terror and a disgust for vampires. She'd been young enough to believe him and develop that. Now, was she woman enough to hold herself still and face those translucent needle-like fangs when they were hovering over *her* throat?

It was time to see.

## Stefan



Stefan thought, God help me, don't let me let her down—or Bonnie, either. If it hadn't been that Elena was in every atom of his body, every breath of air he did not take; that she was in the marrow of his bones, and in his vision, somehow always there in his side-sight no matter what desperate situation was in front, he would have mistrusted himself. The gallantry of these two girls in facing a horror all humans shared made him admire them almost too much. He had no fears of forgetting Elena for a millisecond, but both Bonnie and Meredith, in their own ways, were so dear to him, so fine in their characters and in their graceful bodies, that tonight he was close to loving them.

And what that could lead to, while he was drinking their blood . . . . .

"We're your friends," Meredith said, still helping him, as they sat. "Friends pooling their strength—out of loving-kindness—for the sake of all the ignorant people who don't even know they're in danger."

Loving-kindness, now there was an apt word. Had it been used since the days of long skirts and governesses? But it was exactly right. Meredith and Bonnie both knew the value of loving-kindness.

Then Meredith did something that would seem to offset what she had just said.

Deliberately, she snapped the lamp beside her on. This brightened the room so much that Stefan found it almost painful; Mrs. Flower's had changed his low-wattage bulb for a slightly higher one. But it also seemed to bring the matter into the sane, level ground of the daylight world. It acted as a shock and a restorative for both of them.

"I want this in the light," she said. "No vampire mind control—I won't need it. I've made up my own mind, and I'll stick to my decision; if you can believe that."

"Yes," Stefan said simply. He added, "I'll do my best without controlling your mind. I know how—uneasy—you are about anything interfering with your thoughts."

Meredith smiled, a little sadly. "That's not the only issue, my friend, and I think you know it. But if you don't mind . . ."

"I don't mind."

And then for a moment they both just sat, looking at each other in the too-bright light, searching each other's eyes, and neither of them able to think of a thing to say.

Finally Stefan said, somewhat huskily, "We should really . . ."

" . . . get started." Meredith nodded. She unbuttoned her blouse again. "Just . . . tell me what to do . . ."

Terrified. She was terrified. Stefan made himself smile warmly, and he held out an arm wide for her to rest against, but all the time his mind was racing wildly through options.

Terrified meant that she would rebel. He had promised not to use mind control. She would experience agonizing pain; she might even lose her balanced, diamond-bright mind.

He was about to put her through hell.

What could he do to help her? How could he get her past the fear that was making her rigid in his arm, with little tremors running through her? He knew what she was thinking about: the crystalline fangs with their double sting and the long, frozen moments after as her life substance leaked away.

And then he thought of something. A "Plan C," as Elena might have said.

"Meredith, could you shut your eyes for a moment?" he asked, his voice still husky. "I wanted to ask you something and it's a little embarrassing. I remember one thing Elena told me, and that was that you used to—well, to take on her discarded boyfriends for a little while, to comfort them, before turning them loose in the world again. And I was wondering—could you think of me that way?"

Meredith's eyes flew open and her held breath exploded in laughter. "You!"

"I fulfill all the requirements, I'm sure. Low self-esteem. Can't sleep, can't eat. I think about Elena night and day. I can't picture myself—ever—wanting another girl—"

Meredith laughed and laughed and the tension that had been holding her rigid broke.

"All right, all right. You're an Elena's-ex. Join the very large club. But what can I do for you?"

"Meredith, my friend, my sane, levelheaded friend . . . for a few minutes, will you pretend with me? Just for a few minutes will you pretend that everything we're doing here is not for a desperate cause?"

Meredith's eyes were dark and unreadable. "What are you saying, Stefan? What is it you want?"

Always so forthright. Stefan felt a wave of relief. Meredith was very close to full womanhood—although she had probably been that way since she was twelve or thirteen. She was not a tightly closed blossom, but a fragrant, soft rose in full bloom. He could treat her as an adult.

"Would you—would you let me kiss you? I—"

He stopped, surprised, because Meredith was laughing again, her dark eyes flashing and sparkling in a rainbow of colors. And then he realized that Meredith was actually closer to crying than merriment. The rainbow glittering was tears.

"Would I *let* you?" Meredith repeated. "Oh, my dear dimwitted friend. You're serious, aren't you? You don't know your own power, do you?"

Stefan felt himself flush a little. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Stefan, let me tell you something. I may be fond of Alaric Saltzman—and someday, *someday* I may marry him, true—but you can kiss me anytime you like. Yes, I'll pretend with you, Stefan. If I'm going to die tonight or tomorrow, I would be glad to go having a memory of comfort instead of fear."

She understood that it could be either. That was the important point. And when she rested back into the crook of Stefan's arm, her body was relaxed. Stefan didn't wait for new doubts or fears to overtake her. He put a gentle hand to her cheek and shut his eyes.

Then he bent to his first real kiss—not dream, not reverie—since Elena had died. He noted that Meredith's lips were soft and surprisingly warm—and then there was a sort of silken explosion in his mind. Meredith was opening to him, giving of herself, showing him that Elena was not the only one who could turn a kiss into a glimpse of the kingdom of heaven. Or into the garden of Eden; the garden of green valleys which Stefan could glimpse, but never again enter. Heart-stricken, he clung to her, and the kiss stretched on far longer than he had ever meant it to. It resonated like a chord so pure and beautiful that it builds and builds until everything is vibrating to its tone, until Stefan felt it in his bones and in his aching body . . . and his aching fangs.

Hazily, he sensed the thoughts of logical, practical Meredith—and found them too hazy themselves, with too great a generosity in her, too much willingness to give of herself.

They *mustn't* go straight from this into the blood-feast. Even in the daze of Stefan's desire for it he knew that much. They had to tune this down.

Stefan broke from the kiss.

Meredith made a faint, longing noise and tried to cup his head back down, only to meet in her fingers the steel of a stubborn vampire's neck. She sighed, her breath slowing.

Then she opened her eyes and he saw the rainbow sheen of tears in their darkness and the dampness on her face.

"You cannot do that to Bonnie," she said, with a tremor in her voice. "You can't."



"Bonnie's a little girl."

"You think? You'll find out. Bonnie was born a woman—in certain areas. Yes, she dots her *i*'s with little hearts. But, maybe because she's psychic, or a witch, or whatever, she's grown up in that one matter."

Stefan laughed, glad to see that they were both calming down. As for Bonnie, it wasn't even worth arguing over: giddy Bonnie of the flashflood emotions; Bonnie who was a sweet bubbly child, nothing more. "All right," he said amiably. "I won't. But before I forget"—he held Meredith's eyes and waited a beat and then said—"thank you."

"Thank *you*," Meredith returned and for one moment her eyes misted over. But she had regained her composure, although her olive skin was still flushed and her breathing still slightly unsteady. "Now I know that Elena wasn't just bragging on you."

"And now I'm embarrassed."

"You're not. You must have heard it, in all sorts of ways, from all sorts of girls. Over all sorts of centuries."

Stefan, with those dark eyes on him, felt his own skin flush. He met Meredith's gaze squarely. "I won't lie to you. It's a—tool—in the repertoire of vampire tricks. Usually. But that was . . . the meeting of two kindred souls in loving-kindness, I think. And I thank you."

Meredith gave a longer sigh. "Sometimes I wonder if anyone can catch a vampire unawares without a snappy answer."

"I've been playing this particular game for"—he smiled—"all sorts of centuries."

"And that's usually how it's started, is it? Getting the blood you need. Under the guise of romance?"

"Or straight-out mind control." He wasn't happy talking about this, but Meredith had the right to ask whatever she liked of him, as long as they got on with it soon.

"And sometimes you feel things strongly, like just now, just like a human—"

"*Almost* just like a human." Stefan could hear the undercurrent of savagery in his own voice.

Meredith ignored it. "And when you're drinking blood and you're—tempted to go too far—you're able to keep your head? The way you did a few minutes ago when I wanted to go on kissing and you wouldn't let me?"

Stefan stared at her.

It was one of the most courageous things he'd ever heard done in cold blood, Meredith asking that question.

He knew Meredith would rather not think about the bloodfeast at all, and certainly would rather not talk about it. And he knew she didn't want to think about the consequences of this particular feeding.

He shook his head slightly. He'd underestimated her again.

And now he had to face the question, too, and it didn't matter that the situation had been forced on him, against his most violent objections. Meredith was right: he had been tempted a few minutes ago.

He was tempted *now*. The memory of Meredith's blood, pulsing in the thin, soft skin of her lips; the warmth of it pulsing against his mouth—even now pulsing in the graceful olive column of her throat . . . Dear God, did she even know how she tempted him?

Her dark eyes said she did and that she was sorry . . . and frightened.

Almost against his will, Stefan put up a hand to touch her cheek again. It was wet, and that was his fault. He shut his eyes in pain, then spoke between set teeth.

"Meredith, I've been doing this for a long time. And as you said, I *was* able to control myself before. I *think* I can promise you safety, or we wouldn't even be here having this discussion. I—I never took enough to truly endanger Elena under normal conditions, and—" He winced and stopped.

"And I'm not Elena, however tempting."

"No—"

"I *understand*, Stefan. I wasn't being catty. You've comforted me. And I think we'd better start now, while I'm comforted."

"Meredith . . ."

"I remember what you wanted. To think of Elena, just in day-to-day situations from the years you never saw her. And there's something I want, if I'm allowed to ask."

"Of *course*."

"Let me hold you, Stefan. Let me think about—loving-kindness—and banish any thoughts about Grandfather from my head. I know, I can see what you're going to say—"

"It would be so easy if you would let me nudge your mind first. I could lock out any thoughts like that."

Meredith shook her head slowly but decisively. "No fiddling with my mind. You can read whatever I'm thinking about Elena—"

"Then you'll have to call to me. It should be easy enough once I've taken a little of your blood. Our minds will be separate, but close, and if you call 'Stefan!' I should hear you. Other than that, I swear, I won't even sense your thoughts. I'll put all my energy into it."

"Thank you. Truly. I'll trust to your . . . talents and to our love for Elena. This mind's the only one I've got and I don't want to mess with it."

Stefan groaned inwardly, made himself smile wanly for Meredith's sake. And then he took her into his arms.

He held her tightly. Elena had liked this, sometimes, feeling the ghost of his true strength, knowing that it could be increased a hundredfold to crush her, and that it never would.

Meredith had said she would trust to his talents. Well, given the earlier conversation, that couldn't have been plainer.

Elena, help me, Stefan prayed. This young woman was your closest living confidante. Help me not to hurt her, help me to give her what she deserves: a few minutes of safety and happiness in the middle of a nightmare.

happiness in the middle of a nightmare.

Then he trusted to instinct. With sudden boldness, he kissed Meredith, but so lightly and so briefly that it left her with her neck stretched, her lips parted to make a sound of disappointment. . .

Which never came. Since that first kiss his canines had been aching fiercely in his jaw, and he'd been ashamed and afraid that they were distorting his speech. Now he simply let a tiny part of his instinctive desire slip the leash, and he struck once, teeth biting deeply into the arch of Meredith's tanned throat. Meredith gasped once in pain—and then gasped once more.

## Meredith

Meredith had feared, after that kiss, that the next part would be altogether too much for her. But it was a different kind of experience entirely, and Meredith understood that she had been wrong in trying to force a romantic aspect onto the bloodfeast. For these few moments—few hours or days, as far as she could tell—she was not Stefan's sweetheart, she was not even Stefan's friend joined in loving-kindness.

*She was prey.*

Stefan was the predator and she was his victim.

Of course, Stefan was a thinking predator, and as gentle a soul as had ever had to develop a hard shell in self-defense, but he was a predator just the same.

He had successfully fought his genes so that he was *not* simply a graceful, expert killing machine every time hunger drove him to appease it. But just the same—the romance that had made him and Elena a sort of legendary modern-day Romeo and Juliet had come from another part of their selves entirely, Meredith thought. Elena had fallen in love with the beast despite the fact that he was, and would forever remain, a beast: a hunter, sniffing the wind, evaluating the odds, looking for the weak members of the herd. He was a different sort of being altogether than a human, and Meredith knew then that she could never do what Elena had done. She could never entirely trust; could never entirely relax with; and she could *certainly* never fall in love with a being like Stefan Salvatore.

And now it was Meredith's job to submit to this creature: to an intelligent being, a person, but not a human.

To try and distract herself, she wondered what name the scientists might give this variation on humanity, on *homo sapiens sapiens*. *Homo sapiens vampiris*? Oh, come on, Meredith, what was the Latin for vampire? *Homo sapiens lamius*? Maybe they wouldn't bother with tradition and would go for a word that simply denoted what the new beings were: *homo sapiens raptor*—or *homo sapiens superioris*. They would undoubtedly take over the world if they could find a way to reproduce fast enough, and to cooperate with each other. For that matter, Meredith wondered that they hadn't already taken over.

There was no question that the creatures were more intelligent than humans, quicker, stronger, higher on the food chain—oh, that was funny if you thought about it.

Anything was funny if you had to think about it in this situation. What was being demanded was perhaps the ultimate submission, that she give her very blood to one of these creatures; that she remain still while skewered like a grub on the too-sharp canines of an insectivore.

She could feel the flow of blood, yes, and she could feel a sort of pleasure in being rid of it, as if medieval theories about leaches and cupping were true and she was over-bloated with it. The warm flow was almost pleasant, relaxing. But she was far too aware of her own entire powerlessness, as if she were bound hand and foot, unable to have any say in the control of her own body. And she was far too aware of the—inhuman human—who held her. He was drinking her *blood*, for God's sake! She had been relegated to the ranks of FDA products. They could measure her blood donation in terms of nutritional value—how did you decide what made up a single serving . . . ?

I gave my word, she thought, using the last of her discipline to keep herself from screaming. I gave my word. To save Fell's Church. To save other girls from just this kind of . . . rape of their veins. Tears rolled down the sides of her face and fell into her hair, unheeded. And still she lay in Stefan's arms, unmoving.

There was no rending pain, at least, so she supposed she was not resisting enough to merit that. But the only thing remotely like pleasure was the desperate thought that soon . . . it must be soon . . . this would end.

And then . . . oh God, she would have enough to think about. Starting with how to look Stefan in the face.

*Maybe you shouldn't look at him. Maybe you should just pack up your things and run from this town . . .*

## Stefan

Meredith's blood was as complicated a flavor as the color of Meredith's eyes. Blackberry wine was Stefan's first thought. But it lingered and changed on the palate, becoming dryer, less sweet, more smoky with a hint of bramble. It ended with an aged, mature taste that was entirely individual, entirely indescribable because it was *Meredith*-flavored—and it left him yearning for more.

*And it packed quite a kick.*

Meredith's life force was *strong*. As strong, in its own way, as Elena's had been, because Meredith herself was so strong in both body and mind. She also had something vampires loved in donors, a wisdom that had nothing to do with age. All that combined in the blood to make a heady wine indeed, and tempted Stefan to drink more than he should.

He tried not to give in to temptation, but instead to make this last, this bliss that could only be given by those strong in nature, but ready, for whatever reason, to lend their strength and sweetness for a few moments to the hunter.



strength and sweetness for a few moments to the hunter.

Elena had been one of the elect. Fearless, adventurous, trusting: she had loved to love, and to "romp in Cupid's sunny grove" as one of his own dreadful adolescent poems had put it. She had liked to tease him; to taunt his canines with feather-light touches until he was half out of his mind with need, before allowing him to breach her veins. Then she would give herself entirely to him, to the experience, glorying in giving all she *could* give to him, as if she could pour herself out entirely into his veins, so that they were completely intermingled together: one. She had been an *artiste*; but not out of experience. It was entirely out of love that she had gained her inspiration. She could have made Stefan grovel before her, worship her, abase himself. Instead she had joined her strength to his strength and suffused them both with joy.

Elena. . .

. . . *was not Meredith.*

*And Meredith had not called for him.*

Later, thinking about it, Stefan would count it as one of the few times in his life when he had showed good sense, when he had resisted although every nerve and muscle and sinew inside him was begging him to ignore the gadfly of a thought that told him that something was wrong. That he was failing Meredith.

Meredith was supremely disciplined and compassionate. Perhaps no one else could have remained in the inhuman clutches of a fairy-tale monster for so long and given so much, without panicking and attacking the monster. Elena had, of course. But Meredith was not madly in love with him, in love with the idea that she could give herself to him with every drop of her blood. And Elena—had thought of him as human. Cursed, but human.

She'd been wrong, of course. Damon's desire to make her his consort, half of a mated pair of inhuman hunter-assassins, had been much more logical. But when had Elena ever been logical?

And now he was torturing Elena's best friend.

The thought came to him quite simply and, if not quite in words of one syllable, it was very simple to understand.

Meredith was too smart and too disciplined and too logical to struggle, and so he wasn't causing her agony, but it certainly was nothing like the kiss. Meredith was experiencing, in all its raw ugliness, the truth behind the mind-illusions that vampires usually used to seduce their victims.

He broke his promise about not reading her mind. He allowed himself to sense just a little of what she was experiencing.

She didn't like it.

Panting, stunned, Stefan pulled his head up.

*Oh, God. I'm so sorry. Meredith—oh, my friend, my dear, dear friend . . .*

The tie of blood was strong enough to allow him to speak without words. But, of course, that was because he was a monster.

He stared down at her, and then, in one motion, he rolled away and was on his feet, frantically licking the evidence of what he'd been doing from his lips and teeth. His canines would not retract immediately, but he put all his energy into blunting those razor-sharp tips and drawing some of their length back into his jaws.

He couldn't remember feeling so ashamed, so *caught*, since Elena had innocently stumbled upon him feeding.

He was pacing without thinking, the way that a distraught panther paces its cage. He could feel the sting of tears inside his nose and behind his eyes, but what good would it do to cry? He paced, shuddering, until Meredith had finished buttoning up her blouse. And as he did, involuntarily, from the sweet-dry aftertaste of Meredith's blood dissolving into his body, he unwillingly saw more of her thoughts.

He really couldn't help it. As the molecules from her donation fitted into place in his own oxygen receptors, random phrases bubbled up in his mind. Homo sapiens raptor. Top of the feeding chain. Why hadn't they taken over the world already?

*She could never entirely trust; could never entirely relax with; and she could certainly never fall in love with a being like Stefan Salvatore.*

He stopped his pacing; Meredith had finished with her blouse. He was conveniently near the door. He looked at her. His thoughts were tangled in such loops and knots that the only words he could force out were, "God," and "So sorry."

Meredith's cool, incisive intelligence had stripped him bare. She had put him in his place, along with the fox, the cobra, the tiger, and the shark. He knew now that she would never look at him without seeing a deadly snake in the grass and feeling, along with Emily Dickinson, "zero at the bone."

He fumbled with the lock as he heard Meredith's footsteps on the wooden floor. He had lost Elena, and now he had lost his only links to Elena; because of course he couldn't face Bonnie or Matt ever again. He opened the door for Meredith with a feeling that as he saw her back retreating from him he would see all three . . .

"Wait." It was just one word, spoken hoarsely, but it froze Stefan like a troll caught by sunlight. It took him a moment before he could compose himself enough to look back into the room.

Meredith was standing up, but she was farther from the door than before. She was standing by the window, looking out as if she were seeking answers in Mrs. Flowers' kitchen garden.

"Wait," she said again, as if to herself. "Stefan, do you think—that *he* can get into our thoughts as well as our dreams?"

Stefan felt a bound of hope in his chest, followed by the inevitable fall. "I don't know. He would have to be very powerful. And we would have to be very vulnerable—"

"—such as when I'm concentrating all my energies on relaxing and letting myself be controlled by something from the outside?"

Stefan studied Meredith for longer this time. He noticed that her eyes did not skitter

away from his gaze. She wasn't afraid to look at him.

"Is it all right if I come back in?" he asked, as if it wasn't his own room and she nodded without hesitation. She wasn't afraid to be alone with him.

But despite the warmth that kindled inside him at such signs he had to be rational. "Meredith, what you were thinking—I caught some of it. I couldn't help it. And you were *right*. I'm not human. I'm not the same species as you are. I'm a carnivore that would live only off humans if . . . if I could live with myself that way."

"And I am a . . . a xenophobe." She glanced at him as if to see if he knew the English word. "Someone afraid of aliens, that's the dictionary definition. But it really means someone afraid of humans from other countries, or people who are just too different."

Very suddenly, she put her hands to her face, which wasn't like Meredith at all. Meredith was always in control. Her voice, muffled, went on, "I'm ashamed of myself. I know you, and yet I could think all that . . . crap."

And she didn't swear, not even mildly. Stefan began to speak to her to explain that she was the one who was right, and that he was just as alien and dangerous as she had thought, when she took her hands away from her face.

"I *know* you, Stefan Salvatore. And if you say that everything I was thinking is true then I have some thinking to do. I can't help but be prejudiced on the side of ordinary humans. But I also owe an apology to the one of your . . . species . . . who is willing to die to save mine."

She walked toward him, her hand held out. Stefan stood mute. Then he took her hand, but instead of shaking it, bent and kissed it.

But he was thinking about Elena, and about just how rare she had been. Without him controlling her mind, she had accepted him. Without him controlling her mind, she had seduced him—for that had been, in truth, what had happened. Without the slightest fetter around her mind or body, she had given him her blood, and had delighted in it.

Elena had been like a force of nature: take her or leave her for the passionate, cynical, idealistic, self-centered, generous-to-a-fault, girl that had been her mortal self. A wild tropical storm in rising in a millpond. An orchid in a field of daisies; a gryphon in a herd of sheep. Elena had never been like anyone but herself. And she had absolutely gloried in the moment when she could drop all her defenses and submit entirely to the fate of the quarry caught by the hunter—because the hunter had been her heart's desire, and because in all other things he was her slave, to cherish or spurn or destroy as she pleased. And Stefan had gloried in *that*.

They had been a pair of mad little things, in love in a way that was senseless and probably hopeless from the start. First love—for he now realized that before Elena he had only experienced infatuation—on a planetary scale. But it had changed him, he would swear, from a creature who gloomily enjoyed his doom; a zombie that could only remember and remember the time of his humanity, into an approximation of a human being—for the little time that he had had her.

Maybe I'm insane, he thought, shame always ready to leap for his throat. I helped her—after the first time when she had it all her own way—to do those things. If what they had done equated to madness, as it would seem to, then he had aided and abetted her . . .

*Stop it, Stefan!*

The voice was so sharp it was almost like having Damon mock him, urging him to renounce the role of martyr. Stefan flushed, full of new blood, full of anger—

And then in shock, glanced upward.

There was no mistaking that voice—or that indignation. Bonnie had been right, his innamorata was here, watching over him. He looked at Meredith to see if she had heard anything and saw that she hadn't.

Who was he to flout one of Elena's edicts?

Meredith's dark eyes were on him. He said, apropos of nothing, "You rigged the drawing of the twigs. You made sure you'd be first."

She didn't admit it aloud, but he could still pick up thoughts from her mind. Rigorously, he tried to shut his own mind to it.

"You wanted to see if it was bearable."

This time she answered him. "If it would be bearable for anybody except Elena. I think Bonnie will be fine, if you control her mind, and keep it light and romantic."

"Like the kiss?"

She flinched, making him flinch. Then she straightened herself and met his eyes again directly, sparing him nothing. "A little lighter than the kiss," she suggested.

He wasn't hurt by her reaction; his mind was elsewhere. "And Matt?"

"If I can stand it—but, no, Matt isn't sensible. You're absolutely right. I've got to stop Matt even if it means hitting him over the head. He'll try to *give*—and he'll be humiliated and mortified when he can't."

Stefan looked away. "You were humiliated and mortified?"

"We're being completely honest with each other, aren't we?"

He nodded.

"Stefan—it isn't flattering."

"Tell me."

"I felt—well—disposable. As if, when you were done with me, you would crush me like an aluminum can and toss me in the waste basket. I kept wondering if I'd be evaluated by the FDA. I didn't feel like a *person* anymore."

Stefan could feel the hairs on the back of his neck rise. He wanted to cry. But that was as unfair to Meredith as anything else that had happened. She would end up comforting him, the perpetrator.

"Don't—Stefan, it's not that bad. We did it for a reason, a reason we'd both agreed on beforehand. So just saying "food" is all wrong. I guess I was thinking of the other girls—and boys—out there who saw a sudden dark shadow in the night—"



"And then found themselves being served raw. We do what we do, Meredith. We prey on your species. To us—to most of us—you *are* meat. And for a lot of vampires, you're disposable, a lot of them kill when they feed. But you've known that all along, Meredith. You knew how different we were. You knew we were that bad. How could it have come as such a surprise?"

## Meredith

Meredith thought, partly because knowing something is not the same as experiencing it. And then she thought, because I was hoping I was wrong.

"Stefan—please. Whatever your race is, *you* are not. And some of what I felt was sheer fear and unfamiliarity."

"No, you were right the first time. It's not something you should have to get used to. Under any circumstances. I'm a—"

Meredith's cell phone chimed.

Like an automaton she picked up. "Yes? Matt? Yes, we're just finishing up here. I know time is running out. We'll hurry."

She put the phone down and looked at Stefan.

"The rest of my dinner getting impatient?"

Meredith just couldn't deal with the self-hatred behind that comment. She turned away. Then, without looking at Stefan, she said, "Matt was right, you know. Time is running out."

Meredith brushed her hands together to show that she was done. Then she picked up her purse. "I have to think a little, Stefan. Then maybe we can talk again."

"Right," Stefan said dully. She knew he knew without either of them having to say it, that their relationship would never be the same. That they might not *have* any relationship even if somehow they both survived this night.

He reached to help her into her windbreaker, but she took it from his hands and put it on herself. Her eyes were ashamed and apologetic, but she did it anyway. Somehow she didn't want to be catered to by *homo sapiens superioris* right now.

"Stefan, I'm—I'm sorry. But no matter what, I've got to turn Bonnie over to you now."

Bonnie, the smallest, youngest, most fragile of any of them. Stefan opened his mouth, but Meredith was already turning to unlock and open the door by herself. She turned back to say only one thing.

"It's the biggest cliché in the human world, Stefan, but please be gentle with her. And it's not such a big cliché, but if you aren't, and we survive tonight—well, then it's going to be me coming after you. The meat bites back!

Stefan didn't smile. Silently, he nodded.

He could never have guessed what he was promising with that one small gesture.

## Bonnie

Bonnie was excited. She was devoured by curiosity, prickling with fear, too impatient to stay in the car, and . . . well, just excited.

She and Elena had taken up boys before Meredith or even Caroline had. Bonnie had been a flirt since kindergarten. And by the time they had hit puberty—well, it was *Elena*—not Bonnie—that got nicknamed "Ice Princess" for throwing away her boyfriends just before they proposed marriage. (Or, if not marriage, eternal devotion.) Bonnie wasn't an ice princess, she was a firebrand.

And she'd had been hearing Elena boast about Stefan for what seemed like years.

And now Bonnie was going to get to experience what Elena had said was the ultimate, and she was going to do it safely, for of course Stefan was safe. Stefan was safe as . . . as a deer. Sometimes he was like a deer caught in the headlights, sometimes he was like the rare wild fawns that would let you feed them because they didn't know what you were.

She couldn't wait.

She was tramping around the car for the sixty-sixth time (oh, surely they'd be done soon! Elena said it was just a matter of teaspoons-full, and Meredith wasn't the romantic kind to stretch things out—!) when she ran into something.

She'd been staring at her feet, so she had to look up to see what it was. And then she had to look up some more. And then she had to decide whether to scream or not.

"Tracking a woozle?" Damon asked her. He seemed perfectly serious. "The next time we go around, there will be seventy of them."

Bonnie was not about to be distracted—especially by Winnie-the-Pooh. "You—you—"

"Yes, it is I."

"You left us."

"I think it was more the other way round. Call it a mutual dissolution of our partnership, anyway."

"Don't try to confuse me with big words. You're a traitor; that's what you are. And because of you a girl is dead. And that makes me feel like—like—"

"Yes?" He looked curious and amused.

"Like doing *this*!" Bonnie stepped hard on his insole, wishing she was wearing her party shoes; then backed up and took a running kick at his shin and added an elbow to the ribs.

It was true that this was her method, or her opening method anyway, when she was on dates and boys misbehaved. From here on it went to broken noses, blackened eyes, and . . . well, serious dislocations of the groinal regions. When Bonnie didn't want to play Bonnie didn't play.



Unlike most of her combatants, however, Damon did not scream. He didn't even blink. And he certainly wasn't hopping around cursing, or doubled up moaning in pain. He simply stood exactly as he had been standing and looked at her as he had been looking, curious and hopeful of amusement.

Then he flashed one of his inimitable smiles, one-thirty-secondth of a second on, and then instantly *off* again, and said, "And what are you planning to do *now*?"

She looked up at him. Matt was in the car, his back to them, probably listening to music if he wasn't under some spell of Damon's. Stefan and Meredith were even farther away, and—preoccupied.

Vampires. You just couldn't trust them to feel pain like real people. Even her patented knee-to-the-family-jewels—patented because of its speed, force, and a secret second bounce she wasn't demonstrating for anyone—probably would have no effect.

She started to look at Damon again, but suddenly her point-of-view was whirling. He had picked her up as if she weighed no more than a kitten and put her down again, facing away from Matt and the house. She felt the whiplash of a bramble. When she looked back at Damon her bravado had undergone a serious change for the worse. She found herself thinking how fortunate but unlikely it would be for Stefan and Meredith to come out on the porch right this very minute. She blinked and found that she was blinking back tears.

"I'll—I'll put a spell on you," she said in a small voice.

"A spell to do what?" He reached out and touched her jaw where a jutting tree branch had caught her. "You're bleeding."

Bonnie felt her heart begin to gallop. "It's nothing."

"It ought to be taken care of."

"Not your way," Bonnie said, and she heard the oddest thing—a sort of faint echo to her voice, saying, *Not your way*.

In any case, Damon looked around. "So the hero has admitted he's just like the rest of us raptors at last," he said, eyeing the window to Stefan's attic room from which surely, any minute now, Stefan and Meredith would be starting downstairs.

"I don't know what you mean."

"Neither do I really. Except that Stefan couldn't keep his vow, could he? He knows he needs to have human blood."

"We *made* him do it," Bonnie said fiercely. "Matt and Meredith, and, yes, even Elena told him that he had to. And me."

Something sparked in Damon's eyes. "So the lovebirds are having conversations at will now?"

"Elena talked to him, to order him to do it," Bonnie said, stretching a point.

Again, the feeling of rushing through the air, being lifted like a doll, and this time, ending up pinned against a tree. Her arms and legs were much too heavy to try any of the usual self-defense in her repertoire. And of course there was no chance of screaming.

Damon's face was close to her. There floated back to her a memory of a much more immature Bonnie saying that it would be so romantic to be killed by someone this handsome. She'd been a little *idiot*, that's what she had been. God, if she could get her hands on that younger self of hers now . . .

"So you made Stefan take your blood," he said, "but I'm still just a poor outsider, forced to stalk you for your own good."

"I haven't done it yet," Bonnie said, knowing that she sounded like a kitten spitting rage with all its fur fluffed up. But then she thought of something else.

"Elena is watching you," she said, combining what she was sure was the truth with the guess of the next question. "Elena wants to know what you're going to do tonight. You said you were watching us for our own good. Are you going to help us? Help *him*? Or just watch?"

"I really haven't decided," Damon said, and Bonnie, looking into those black-as-obsidian eyes, felt that this was the simple truth and all bets were truly off with him.

And, although tears flooded her eyes and down her cheeks, she wouldn't look away from him. She wouldn't give him the satisfaction of seeing her break down entirely and whisper, "But we're goners without you . . ."

"You'd be goners with me, too." He plucked her thought out of the air. "You must know that. What you're challenging isn't beatable. That's the truth, maybe not in words of one syllable but as simply as I can put it without resorting to sock-puppets. Do we understand?"

Bonnie was beyond being distressed over personal things.

"It's the town I'm worried about. Fell's Church—"

"Kingdoms rise and kingdoms fall. When you've seen enough of them as I have you develop an indifference. And this miserable place is hardly a dot on the map, anyway."

Bonnie looked up angrily but he had already turned on his bland face and his purring, persuasive voice.

"If you have blood to give to little brother, then you have blood to give to me," he said, looking at her with last-puppy-in-the-shop-eyes. "It doesn't take much, you know. And maybe it will persuade me . . ."

There was a word for this kind of exchange, or at least for the closest human equivalent, but Bonnie didn't care. Despite the sharp thought, *No!*, that flashed across her mind, she looked up at Damon with eyes that were just as round and innocent as he'd made his, and cornflower blue to boot. "Really? It might persuade you to stay and fight on our side?"

"It certainly would provide incentive, even if I don't think we'd have a chance."

"And you'd truly stay? You wouldn't break your word a—"

"Little human, I have never broken my word."

Bonnie didn't take time to puzzle over this. She looked into Damon's eyes—endless darkness there, unpierced by any ray of light—and she told herself firmly that she wasn't going to faint. Damon was very different from Stefan, but what did it matter?



going to faint. Damon was very different from Stefan, but what did it matter?

"Then do it," she said hastily. "But do it quick, and somewhere Stefan won't see it."

The back of my neck, maybe?"

She caught Damon staring at her. "You'd—"

"I'd do anything to help Fell's Church. The people here are like my family. I've grown up with them. And this seems to be the only way I can try to help them."

Damon lifted her in his arms and turned her so that she faced away from him. But he did it slowly, as if fighting his way through molasses.

"You're sure?" He seemed unable to believe, that after years of wooing Elena and her friends; after courting them and terrorizing them in turn, he had actually won the game.

"Yes," Bonnie said. "Just be quick. Please." What Bonnie was afraid of now was that Stefan and Meredith would finish too soon. Damon had hauled them into a little private clearing, so maybe there might be some excuse to make—but the whole thing would look bad. Boys made things so complicated.

"All right. I'll make it quick," Damon said in a dazed way. Then: "This will sting at first."

"I know, I know." Bonnie felt Damon's breath on the back of her neck. He was holding up her hair, exposing her neck to the darkness. She shuddered, not because it was cold. Then she felt the touch of his lips there on her spinal cord, cooler than she would have imagined. He kissed her lightly and a wave of feeling went through her.

***Damon, you let that girl go right now!***

It was a voice from above like all the cliché's for heavenly voices. It was otherworldly, like faraway bells, like silver. But its command was unnecessary. Damon had already dropped Bonnie and caught her, still falling, this time facing him.

Elena didn't want them to.

*Bonnie . . . over to . . . house . . . Damon . . . be ashamed!*

Elena was fading but her meaning was clear. Damon however, did not look in the slightest ashamed.

"You're still a baby, baby," he told Bonnie lightly, and flicked her nose with his finger in a most insulting way. "Actually," he went on, "I had already decided not to before she even spoke. You're not ripe yet. Blood always tells, and I can tell you're not ready from here. Still—" He leaned over and graceful as a cat, licked the tiny wound on Bonnie's chin. She felt his tongue as a strong silkiness, not at all raspy like a cat's tongue, leaving a coolness behind it that turned to warmth.

Bonnie groped for some response. It had to be a good one, since she'd just been rejected. But while she was still fumbling for swear words bad enough, Damon winked and said, "Don't burst a blood vessel trying to make me too mad. After all, some day you *will* be ripe. And I've got a good memory." And then, while Bonnie was still groping for some response, he took a step back and was gone, blending in with the darkness.



## Stefan

"Bonnie? Bonnie!"

She appeared almost immediately, on her own two feet, and looking entirely unharmed. Well, maybe not entirely. She'd been crying.

"Where is he?" Stefan caught her shoulders and almost shook them. "Damon!"

"He appeared, made some scary noises and then he left. Elena's voice shooed him away."

"I don't believe you. You've been crying."

"Oh, well—you know Damon. He always manages to say the exact thing that hurts most."

Stefan gritted his teeth. "Why did I let him come over here? I could have stopped him on the other side of the Atlantic—"

"That's all past," came Meredith's voice from behind Stefan, and when Bonnie heard it she got a shock. Meredith's voice was . . . different. Meredith's aura, when she stepped into Bonnie's view, was different, too.

He didn't—he couldn't have made her a vampire in that short a time, Bonnie thought—could he? But that wasn't it. Meredith's aura wasn't at all like Stefan's, or Damon's, either, it was still human. But it had changed in some fundamental way. Meredith was even cooler, more rational—more distant than she had ever been before.

She'd received a shock, Bonnie could tell that. And she was thinking about it.

Bonnie wanted to run to her and hug her and hug her until her warmth made its way through the thin layer of ice that seemed to coat Meredith's body. Had Stefan done this to her? Stefan's aura was certainly sorrowful, but Meredith wasn't angry with Stefan. What had happened between them?

"Next shift," she said, in the high light voice of someone trying to distract them all. She took Stefan's arm in hers and started toward the light of the door, almost dragging him along. She couldn't help being playful and ditzzy, but she allowed her personality full rein. And her anatomy only helped: diminutive stature, that mop of strawberry-blond hair; not to mention her heart-shaped face with its delicate features and those huge cornflower colored eyes.

And she seemed younger than the rest—or she could seem young. If she wore loose sweaters to cover her blossoming young femininity, and chattered in a quick, high voice without ever censoring a thing that came into her head, people forgot how old she really was and were tempted to muss up her curls while saying that she really was charming or adorable—and entirely forgetting that she was over eighteen.

But there was another Bonnie beneath that one, and even another still beneath the

But there was another Bonnie beneath that one, and even another still beneath the Bonnie that liked fast cars and fast boys, and that was the one her friends would recognize the most easily. It was this deepest Bonnie who had envied Elena and Stefan, not for their fairytale relationship, but for the stability that she could sense in it. A Bonnie who was, at heart, a woman, and who had been one for a long time.

And Damon had just thrown a challenge to the womanly Bonnie. She could feel the hurt, hot rage burning inside her as she walked with Stefan up the staircase, his arm in hers. *Elena?* she called. She was furiously calculating if the plan that had just occurred to her might possibly hurt anyone.

*Elena?*

Silence.

*Can you hear me?*

Silence.

*Elena there's a Plan B I want to try with Stefan, but I don't know if you'll be mad. I'll forget about it right now if you'll be mad.*

Nothing. Bonnie tried to think other colors and forms in her mind, to "change channels." Sometimes it worked.

*Elena, if I don't hear from you I'm going to try it. I can't think of anyone else that it might hurt, and it might do Stefan some good.*

Still no "presence" from Elena.

Bonnie's heart sank suddenly. *Are you leaving this entirely up to me?* That would be just like you and Meredith. *You would say it would help me grow up to know what I want.*

Silence all around her. No one present except herself and Stefan—alone together, as they said.

*All right, then. I'm taking you all on. This is my responsibility, and only mine.*

Which was all part of being a woman.

Stefan was watching her. He had seemed startled by her eagerness from the beginning, but probably putting it down to wanting to get it over with.

But now, with the door shut and locked behind him, he was watching her, with distinctly worried eyes. As she walked around the room and ended up on the worn, creaky old couch, his aura was burning a puzzled yellow. She wondered whether to feign nervousness, and then decided she didn't have to feign it. She looked up at him, with her still-wet, still-cornflower-blue eyes at their widest.

Plan B was what the girls called a *blitzkrieg* plan.

"I tangled the tie of my windbreaker before, and now I can't see to untie it," she said. And that's the absolute truth! she thought. Yes, if you don't ask exactly when 'before' was.

He untangled it, necessarily standing close to her. All boys were tall compared to Bonnie, but Stefan was just the right height for leaning her head against his shoulder, and so straight and slim and somehow pliant—like a ninja or a panther or something that had to be ready to move in any direction at once. And he smelled wonderfully good. That was one of the most important things to the deepest Bonnie: smell. And another, which he also had, was voice. Stefan was a virtuous knight, faithful to the memory of his Elena—but he also had a voice that could melt butter right out of the refrigerator.

Yes, we have no problems here. I'm attracted to him. But—could he ever be attracted to me?

Bonnie slid off her windbreaker, and then, watching Stefan under her eyelashes, undid the one big button of her jade green sweater, and began to pull it over her head.

Stefan—as expected—made an incoherent noise of protest. That was one advantage she had. She was a gabbler. She could talk the hind leg off an elephant given the chance, and Stefan was a polite listener who didn't like to interrupt.

"It's okay, silly, I've got another top on underneath it," she said and finished shrugging the sweater off.

This was technically true. She had a camisole on underneath it; a very pretty cream colored one, with knots of ribbon and lace decorating the bodice. She usually wore it with a sweater when the weather could change suddenly and she could whip on a lighter top over it. She just hoped that Stefan didn't know enough about modern women's underwear to recognize it as not-exactly-outdoor-wear.

Especially when the only thing under the camisole was Bonnie.

It seemed that Elena had neglected this area of his education. Bonnie mentally wiped sweat off her forehead.

"It's a pretty top," Stefan said. "But the evenings are chilly up here—"

"It shouldn't take long. And we'll keep each other warm," Bonnie said. Oh, Lord, had she just said that? From Stefan's expression she had.

"Bonnie—it isn't—"

He didn't even stand a chance against lips that had kissed the Blarney Stone.

"I know it isn't," she said. "But before we—before you take my blood"—it was good to get that in here at the beginning, to remind him of the debt he owed her—"I was wondering if we could—just sit together for a minute or two. So I could get used to you. That's the problem with Damon. He just looms and then grabs, and there's no question about what he wants and when he wants it."

That's it! she cheered herself mentally. You've got him on the ropes; keep socking him!

The last thing Stefan wanted to be was to be like Damon.

"Of course," he said, switching off the too-bright lamp, and sitting down beside her. The memory of Damon's Don Juan maneuvers at the pensione, bringing in a new girl every night, sitting close to her on a soft, deeply-upholstered couch, and looking deeply into her eyes, while talking in a cat-velvety voice about this and that, all slid right out of his mind. He was with Bonnie, little Bonnie, and he was making her comfortable before she did him the greatest favor a human could do a vampire.



Bonnie was looking up at him with eyes—while not Elena's blue-violet—were a marvelous color all of their own. Pure, innocent eyes. She edged a little closer to him, still looking up. She seemed to find something fascinating about his face.

"Stefan?" she said softly. "While we're—while you're—you know—then we'll be able to talk with our minds, won't we?"

"We should. But I understand perfectly if you don't want me to read your mind at all."

"But I do—for a special reason."

She was wearing some scent—or maybe it was just the scent of her skin. And that skin! Even more transparent than Elena's; even less tanned. Stefan could spend all night tracing the blue, pale and darker of the veins that wandered beneath her skin. He was especially mesmerized by the veins in her throat; but he also found somehow that it struck him to the heart to see the blue lines at her temples, throbbing in rhythm with her heart. He knew he would never forget this moment, watching the utter vulnerability and utter trust he was being shown.

"Having been a telepath for—well, probably all my eighteen years," Bonnie was saying (and chalking up another point to herself for having gotten her age in so neatly and unforgettably), "I've learned one or two things. And one is that I'm very good at visualizing. I was thinking that while we were joined by sharing blood, I might think of some pictures of Elena, some things we did, things that happened before you came along."

He hadn't responded. Bonnie felt an awful plunge from her heart literally to the soles of her feet. Her pulse was suddenly hammering. What if he already had all he needed of Elena? What if old memories would only bring him pain?

But then she looked at his face. He was gazing down at her as if he were about to kneel on the ground before her. He lifted fingers to his lips, and she realized, tears rushing to her eyes, that it was to keep his upper lip from trembling.

He probably doesn't want me to look at his face just now, Bonnie thought. She looked at her own lap instead, and at the four or five dark splotches teardrops had made on her jeans. She sniffled.

And then she felt pain, a crushing pain in each arm, as Stefan took hold of her arms.

"You'd do that for me? You'd let me read your mind—maybe even go a little deeper and watch the pictures like movies? I swear I wouldn't be reading *your* mind. I'd be looking through your eyes and your ears at Elena. She's the only thing I—" Stefan broke off and said something in Italian.

"Sorry?"

"I said . . . I was a clod. Only I can't repeat a more exact translation. Bonnie, please tell me you know what I mean. Tell me it's all right."

"It's all right—I suppose," Bonnie said slowly.

Stefan stared at her, obviously wanting desperately to fix things, not knowing how to begin to go about it.

"I'd like," Bonnie said, feeding him his lines, "to think that you cared *something* about me. And not just as Elena's friend, either. As Bonnie—as myself."

No one could have mistaken Stefan's fervor. "I do, I do care about you." His voice was muffled against the top of her head. "You are one of the few, the dearest friends that I have, and I *love* you."

"Not really."

"Yes, *really*."

"You're hurting my arms."

"Oh, God, I'm so sorry." She was taking a chance here: he might try to rub the pain away, or he might even have run off to find some homemade cure for aches'n'pains'n'therumatiz. But instead he took her into his arms, exactly on cue, and Bonnie did the rest by shifting her weight so that she was sitting on his lap instead of beside him.

## Stefan

What a cuddly bunny she was, this little lass that he could pick up with one hand. And how *kind*.

And what a witch.

He knew that Meredith could not have told Bonnie what it was he wanted. Damon couldn't—even if Damon could somehow find out, the last thing he would want was for Stefan to get ahead of him that way, to have even more intimate memories of Elena than he did.

That left Elena, and Bonnie would have told him if it had been Elena's idea. Scratch that, if Bonnie had *known* it was Elena's idea. There was a core of bright warmth at Bonnie's center that burned away any kind of black falsehood.

Maybe that was what kept her so warm. Here she was, dressed in less than he was, really, but radiating heat like a contented, purring cat. That last thought gave Stefan pause. It didn't seem right, for him to be dressed in his T-shirt while she was wearing only a camisole.

He had been startled when she'd taken off her sweater. But the next moment he had seen the gesture for what it was, a sign to convey familiarity and trust. The girls wore them all the time outside in the summer, it surely couldn't be improper here.

He could never be sure whether his next move was the kind of noble gesture like that of the Victorian host throwing down knife and fork as a savage guest began eating with greasy fingers, or whether it was from far more human needs. He pulled back slightly and stripped off his own T-shirt.

Bonnie looked at him with wet, wondering eyes. He smiled a little and said, "It seemed I was overdressed with you just in the camisole. I can get an undershirt if you like—"

but I promise you, in the name of all I hold dear—that nothing else is going to come off."

She nodded and shut her eyes, putting her head against his shoulder. Then she reached up and lightly ruffled his hair. "I always wanted to do that, from the first day I saw you," she said. "And—this, too." She stretched herself tall in his lap and lightly, softly kissed him on the mouth.

It took him a little by surprise. She was flushed, the blood glowing in her skin, radiating warmth, soaking from her into him.

When she shut her eyes and tilted her head back he didn't need anyone to prompt him. He found that this cuddly kitten was also a very kissable young woman.

Moments flowed and floated. And then Bonnie said, rather short of breath, "Do it now. Don't ask if I'm sure. Right here, now."

And then there was a long time of pure rapture. Bonnie's blood was sweet as honey and strawberries, and she wasn't afraid or controlling herself, or holding anything back. She was giving the blood he needed for life itself without any confusion or doubt or anger. She even remembered—how could she remember anything?—to think about Elena, horseback riding, at a birthday party, gliding gracefully up to become Queen of some or other school function. More, she gave him the key; the mental combination, to her master memories about Elena. Now, whenever the two of them agreed, she could enter trance and he could rummage through her memories of Elena as he liked.

It was almost too much. It was too much. It enticed him to linger and linger, to let the strawberry-honey liqueur he was lapping, tipling, keep running down his throat.

"S-stefan?"

*Dearheart.* Bonnie-dearheart, he qualified, as if to show that he knew her.

*Stefan-dearheart . . .*

*How can I ever thank you enough? Bonnie, I'll go to my death happily tonight. I can never make it up to you, but I can certify that you're already an angel.*

*I made you happy, then.*

*Can you have any doubt? This is what it can be when two . . . well, I won't say lovers because we aren't, not in the conventional sense. But this is what it can be when there's no fear, only love.*

*And—you don't think I'm just a little girl?*

*If I'd thought that you'd never have gotten your sweater off. You're a woman, even if you're still a girl. Some girls are. And some women of fifty are still girls.*

She sighed and lapsed back. "I'm glad," she whispered. "And you be sure that Damon knows it, too."

*What does Damon have to do—he began and then sensed something more urgent.* He felt wonderful, yes, but when he calculated how much of her blood he had taken he nearly panicked.

"Bonnie?"

*Let's not talk just now, Stefan.*

*Bonnie, my titian-haired angel, we have to. I've done something awful. I took far too much of your blood. It can make you seriously ill, and there's only one thing I can do to help you—if you consider it help.*

There was a sluggish response.

He shook her. *Bonnie, Bonnie dearest, don't go to sleep!*

Stefan kissed her on the mouth, hard, hoping that indignation or some other emotion would wake her. But Bonnie's lips were soft and warm—and parted—under his.

Oh, no—not now. He had to wake her up—

Or maybe not.

Maybe it would be easier while she was still half-asleep. Stefan used the fastest means of opening one of his own veins; a still-razor sharp canine drawn up his forearm. Blood trickled from the wrist and he held it to Bonnie's lips while her eyes were closed. Bonnie swallowed, and then her hands came up like a baby's and she held his arm herself, drinking the only remedy Stefan knew for what he'd done, other than a full-scale human hospital's transfusion.

Bonnie swallowed again, greedily. Stefan, in trying to calculate how much she needed, realized he had perhaps panicked unnecessarily. He hadn't taken enough to really put her in danger. And Bonnie didn't need all that much.

Her blue eyes opened, then opened wide. There was surprise in them, but not—thanks to any gods that were—revulsion. After another moment he began the gentle struggle to get his wrist back. Elena had described to him once what vampire blood did to humans after their first prejudice had been overcome, and he was able to understand why it was a struggle to get his arm back from Bonnie. But she was no match for his strength. He stopped the bleeding with a thought and turned back to her.

*Bonnie? I'm so sorry that was necessary. I took too much—I think. I'm pretty sure. I'm a little confused right now—*

*Don't worry about it,* Bonnie answered simply, and he was astounded to hear triumph in her voice. *If you did, well, then I win.*

*You win? Win what?*

*A bet I made with myself. Sanctioned by Elena—I think. I bet myself that I could make you forget—just for tonight. Since it may be the last night. Damon told me I was a baby—*

"So I became a bet between Damon and you?"

*No! Stefan-dearheart, no, no, no, never! I told you it was a bet I made with myself. I bet that I was a woman, and that you would treat me like one. Please don't be angry.*

*I don't know whether to be angry, or . . . oh, Bonnie what you gave me! Those memories . . .*

*And you gave me the knowledge that I'm not a baby. Plus all the fireworks that Elena promised. She said that no one would be afraid if they'd never shared blood with a*



*Elena promised. She said that no one would be afraid if they'd never shared blood with a vampire before. She told the truth. So if I you did take too much, I win, and if you didn't . . . well, I still win. Bonnie hugged herself for pure ecstasy.*

"But how did you know? What a vampire does when he miscalculates?"

*Shocked? Girls talk. Maybe more than guys do; I don't know.*

*I don't either. Are you shocked?*

*It's quite an experience, waking up to find you're drinking blood. But I was half prepared for it. And now I feel like wrestling elephants.*

He couldn't help but smile. She was amazing, but telling her that, here, now, was not a good idea.

## Matt

Matt had to find his own way up to Stefan's crow's nest room.

The room was dim, and it was hard to see more of Stefan than a silhouette in profile. He seemed to be looking at the dusty window.

It was disconcerting, to say the least, to know that Stefan could see perfectly in this semi-darkness.

It was even more disconcerting when Stefan spoke.

"Ave, Matt! Morituri te salutant," Stefan said cheerfully.

"Huh?"

"S'joke. A joke," Stefan said, enunciating more carefully. "Latin. Hail, Matt. We who are about to die salute you. Salude!"

Matt stared.

"Mer'dith thought it w's funny."

"Meredith knows Latin?"

"Yeah. Mer'dith"—Stefan held up one finger. It was hard to know whether it meant "don't interrupt" or "let me tell you a few things, starting with . . ." and Matt didn't think he could stand still for a long speech. His heart was already pounding. Damn. Stefan could probably hear that. Probably? What would a vampire be more attuned to hearing than the muscle that pushed around the blood of its prey?

Does he know my mouth is dry, too? And that I want to run? Probably, Matt thought, bitterly. They've got senses that make humans look like those worm things that can only tell light from dark. Does he know what that makes humans feel like doing to vampires?

Vaguely shocked, he thought, how long have I wanted to punch him in the mouth? Just once. Just once to see a fist and a vampire falling flat on his ass. Because of a real human person. Not me. Any real human.

But Matt could feel the tingling in his own fist clenched tightly.

Stefan had been talking for a while and Matt's brain helped him catch up by providing echoes of what he'd missed.

"Mer'dith knows a lotta things. Very smart. Bright. Ha. That's a joke, too. Ssee? Because she's dark. You know? You don't wanna know. She's dark 'but comely.' Humans"—again that exaggerated hiss on the sibilant—"have so many prejudishes. Back in . . . not long ago, you know . . . your basic beautiful woman hadda be fair. Blond. All your lingwy—lingwa—language stuff showss how—"

Matt's hand unclenched. His mind trolled blindly.

"You're drunk!"

"Of course not." The silhouette straightened and tipped its chin up aggressively. Stefan spoke with the exaggerated dignity and precision of the truly smashed. "Vampiress don't get drunk. It's just a brief physi—fizzy—fizheo—" The silhouette began shaking with silent laughter.

Amazement and anger gave Matt all the excuses he needed to do what he was already doing. He grabbed Stefan's dim arm and shook him, then bounced him off the dimmer wall.

"What's wrong with you? Are you crazy? You're supposed to be fighting the fight of your life—"

"Stop it."

"How did you even—?"

"Stop it."

"What kind of—"

"Matt. Stop it."

There was something in the voice that spoke directly to the human brainstem, like a dark shadow overhead telling a baby chick to freeze.

Vaguely, Matt looked down at his hands. He had Stefan by the shirt and upper arm and he'd been banging him against the wall. His right hand was gripping Stefan's bicep. It practically went all the way around it. Vampire muscles were flat and lean, their strength was of the slight and wiry sort. It gave the illusion almost of delicacy, sometimes, but now that Stefan had decided not to be bounced against a wall anymore, he was as still as a marble statue and Matt knew that a human would have about as much luck trying to move him.

Hazily, he made his fists unclench and dropped his arms. His brain was trying to process too many things at once, but on the top level was shame that made his face burn.

That was panic, he thought. I just attacked a vampire because I was scared. And while another part of his mind said, "A vampire? Your *friend*," a bigger part was asking, "Am I dead now?"

"It's a—physiological reaction." Stefan was making an effort, but he still didn't sound quite right. "It hits right after feeding, and it goes away, but the energy stays."

Matt stared at the floor. His eyes were adjusting a little.

"It happens more often when different types of blood are mixed. Every human has a different kind of life-energy. Sometimes vampires do it deliberately just for the buzz."



different kind of life energy. Sometimes vampires do it deliberately just for the buzz.

"Yeah? Oh. Humans do that with alcohol."

"Yeah."

He's trying to not embarrass me. Matt's teeth were clenched. He still couldn't look up from the floor.

"But I probably should have warned you about it. I wasn't thinking. And it's been . . . a long time since . . ."

Matt looked up, and then down again. A long time—since Elena basically, in other words. Stefan sounded normal now. Normal for Stefan, anyway, especially these days when every sentence echoed as if it were coming from miles away, from somewhere where Stefan was alone in a white room with nothing but his memories.

And he was practically giggling before. How many times have I ever heard him laugh? In my whole life?

"Matt." Stefan just sounded tired now. "I told you before. This isn't a good idea."

"I remember." Matt made an effort. "Yeah? It's not just your fight, you know. It's everybody's."

"I do actually realize that." The edge to Stefan's voice was a little promising. "I'm breaking . . . a promise, you know, by taking human blood at all. It wasn't my idea. And the girls are both strong."

Matt's head jerked up. "What?"

"Meredith has a strong personality, a very strong life-energy. And Bonnie's psychic abilities give her—"

"No. I know that. But you're saying what?"

"I'm saying it's enough. As you pointed out, I'm already . . . affected."

"You're telling me to fuck off?"

"Don't try to make me angry, Matt. I'm tired—"

"That proves you're *not* strong enough—"

"I am tired of dealing with human *emotions*," Stefan said raggedly. "I've got enough of my own to deal with, especially here. In this town. With her friends." He turned away, leaning against the wall and added almost inaudibly. "I'm tired of having people wonder if I'm going to rip their throats out."

*Her* friends. People. No mention of the fact that Elena's friends had once been his friends, that he and Matt had been friends. That once he'd asked favors of Matt, things that didn't make any sense at the time, like "Can you drive me to find this particular kind of flower?" That Matt had risked his own life to help Stefan when everyone else thought he was a monster.

And Stefan was still trying to be kind; Matt could hear it. The way you're kind to a kid.

"I didn't know," Stefan went on, even more indistinctly, "how much you hated me."

Oh *hell*, oh *hell*, oh *hell*. "So now you're reading minds?"

"That's what human blood does—but, no, in fact. Even before you hit me all I was reading was your body-language."

I hit you? Matt squeezed his eyes shut hard. It didn't do any good; he could feel wetness on his eyelids. "*I'm sorry.*"

Silence.

"I'm sorry, all right? I was *scared*. You used to understand 'scared.'" *Before you lost everything.*

With a sound like letting out breath, Stefan turned. There was another moment or two, as if he were thinking—or listening. "I still understand it, Matt. I still remember everything that happened here. Thank you."

Matt had turned away so he could rub at his eyes angrily—not that it made any difference which way he turned, probably. "Can you understand how humans feel around you people? Is there anything you can't do? Is there *anything* we're better at?"

"We're not people."

Matt opened his mouth, shut it again. A little while ago we were all ready to fight the monster that's killing the girls I went to school with. Could I have screwed this up any worse if I'd planned it?

He plucked at his T-shirt wearily. "Can we just . . . get this over with?"

"I told you, it was enough."

"If you think I'm gonna let *Bonnie* do something and then run away from it . . . think again."

"Bonnie wasn't as scared." Before Matt could unfreeze long enough to really hit him, Stefan added, "And I don't care as much about what Bonnie thinks of me. Bonnie was Elena's friend."

"Just suck up my blood, all right?"

"I don't want to hurt you."

"Damn!" Matt waved a hand, his brain stalling. He *knew* Stefan knew how many times he'd been injured; that was part of the game. "Do I have to tell you about how I broke my arm when I was five and nobody knew for about a week because—"

"You really don't understand, do you? At least, not consciously. Taking somebody's blood when they're resisting *hurts*. More than anything you can think of."

"I'm not resisting."

"You will be."

"Just quit with the mind-reading or the psychoanalysis or whatever. This could've been over by now."

Matt's eyes had adjusted enough by now that he could make out some features in the dim figure that faced him. He could see Stefan's mouth twist grimly as well as hear the little sound of exasperation.

"Fine. You don't have to take that off. There's a vein in the wrist that works just as well."



Meredith and Bonnie had both been holding a hand to the side of their necks; Bonnie a trifle absently. Matt looked at his dim arms.

"If there's any kind of fighting tonight I'm going to need these."

"Fine. Sit."

Matt looked at the bed, then the chair. "I have to sit?"

"No. You can fall if you want. Your choice."

"You really are a bastard, you know? You're *trying* to scare me."

"Yes," Stefan said, with a terrifying lack of expression. He leaned in. "I am trying to scare you because I would rather scare you than hurt you."

"I don't care if you hurt me!" This was crazy. Matt sat on the bed, tipped his chin back, and shut his eyes like someone awaiting lethal injection. He made his mind as blank as possible.

It seemed a long time before Stefan said, in that same clipped, expressionless voice, "Fine. Your funeral."

"You know something? From a vampire, that isn't funny."

"I wasn't trying to be funny."

Matt felt him sit on the bed. And then cool fingertips were gripping his jaw, adjusting the angle of his head with the precision and unemotional professionalism of a surgeon. Blank, blank, blank, he thought. His hands were clenched into fists by his sides.

How did Bonnie and Meredith do this? How do you hold still and wait for the snake to bite? Bonnie's frightened of thunderstorms; she cries if she cuts her finger. How could they possibly have been better, stronger, more courageous about this?

God, you're dumb, something in his brain informed him, and then turned its back on him and refused to say anything else.

The pain wasn't nearly as bad as he'd been imagining. Vampire canines were sharp. And, after all, Stefan knew what he was doing; he did this all the time.

Damn, that's *it*? I got myself all worked up over *that*? The last time I had bloodwork it hurt way more than that; that idiot doctor couldn't even *find* a vein. No wonder . . .

He felt cool-warmth on the side of his neck and the world exploded in agony. He couldn't breathe. His soul was being ripped out of his body while it was still alive.

It stopped.

Matt's mind caught up with the fact that he wasn't dying anymore a few minutes later. He was doubled over, arms wrapped around himself, trying not to sob.

"I . . . told you," Stefan's voice said. Stefan's voice was shaking with anger; he could feel Stefan shaking with anger, and strain—and something else. Grief, maybe. Self-hatred. But Stefan's hand was still locked in Matt's hair.

"I'll tell you . . . something else," Stefan said, and Matt could hear the diamond-bright edge of fury twisted back on itself in his voice. Stefan leaned down to speak directly into Matt's ear, softly and with a venom Matt had never heard before. "It's . . . not *good* to offer your blood to a vampire and then expect to back out. We are not . . . nice creatures. We get a certain desire to rip your arms and legs off and—"

He stopped. Matt felt the fingers in his hair unclench and let go. Stefan stood. Stefan was walking away.

"Wait." It was only one syllable, but Matt impressed himself by getting it out.

"I'm leaving now," Stefan said distantly. It was still a voice designed to raise the fine hairs on the back of a human neck.

"*Wait*." Matt scrubbed his cheeks with a shrug of both shoulders. It didn't hurt to do that. The wound in his neck was barely trickling.

I was right. It's not the snake thing, the needle thing.

"Listen to me, you—*human*," Stefan said. It was as if he couldn't find a stronger expletive. He came back and leaned down, deliberately putting one hand on the bed on either side of Matt, invading Matt's personal space. Matt couldn't look up without looking directly into that shadowed face. "You have pushed me . . . far enough. If you push me any farther . . ."

"I know! I'm dumb, all right, but I figured it out. I didn't understand." He shook off what was going to be Stefan pointing out that he had told him and told him. "I didn't get it. I do now. I can do better than that."

"You are *really* pushing it, Matt. Take my advice, will you? If you are unlucky enough to run into another vampire, do not use this tactic. Ever."

"Try it again."

"How can you be so stubborn? Is it really worth it to prove that you're braver than Bonnie?"

"I know what I was doing wrong."

"You're not going to like it any better if you do it right."

"Just stop *talking*."

Stefan whirled and sat down heavily. He sounded dazed. "I give up. Some people have to learn the hard way."

Matt straightened up, hands open on his knees, and tilted his head. He felt again the precise, unemotional fingers on his jaw, but they weren't as cool as before.

And he could feel the almost imperceptible shaking.

Matt's thoughts, already, confused and in conflict, were now jumping from idea to idea like a frog in a red-hot frying pan.

I was right. I knew I hurt him. More than it hurt me, maybe. And I don't know any way to make him understand about humans . . . why doesn't he already know that? I bet Damon knows it. No, I'm stupid. Human blood; he doesn't drink human blood. And maybe a vampire wouldn't get it anyway. To them it's feeding, it's eating. How are they supposed to understand the stuff it gets mixed up with in a human brain? Or that it's different with a guy than a girl, that the whole thing sets off some kind of panic impulse with guys? Here he's trying to save Bonnie and Meredith and everybody, when I'm completely useless, and

the only way I can help him is to make him stronger so he has a chance. Not even a chance of living, but a chance of stopping that monster. And what do I do? I hit him. All I needed to do was relax and not hate him, but I couldn't even do that. The girls could do that, but not me.

He opened his eyes. Had he missed it? No, Stefan was just sitting there.

"What *now*? I told you I was sorry. You still think I'm gonna back out and make you rip my arms off?"

Stefan let go. "No, but . . ."

"I told you, I get it. Come on; it's getting late." He could hear the difference in his own voice; he was still embarrassed, but he was talking to a friend, not a demon.

Stefan was shaking his head. "Humans . . ."

"Will you just—"

This time, when he felt the double-needle sting, he pushed away thoughts of snakes and scorpions. He thought about the first time he'd seen Stefan, standing up to old Tanner to defend Bonnie. He thought about the always-shadowed, always-lost look in Stefan's eyes back when Matt had invited him to join a team of humans, and the doubt and confusion turning slowly into belief there. Stefan had wanted to join the human race, but he hadn't expected anybody to welcome him into it. Matt had been the first one to do that.

He kept thinking the same way when he felt Stefan's mouth on his neck, drawing out his blood. He tried not to think of Elena because that was something that hurt uniquely—his own pain was bad enough, but seeing Stefan's eyes afterward . . . God, nobody should be hurt like that. Matt didn't want to imagine what it took to make somebody's eyes look like that. Back in the days when they tortured people, maybe, there were lots of eyes, on the rack, on the Wheel—no, don't think about that. But to see that in somebody you cared about . . . and not to be able to do anything . . .

He heard his own breath break. What was . . . This wasn't . . .

He was breathing as if he'd been running hard. He could feel his heart, too, but it wasn't from the fear that had made him so angry when he'd walked in here.

Wait . . .

*You won't like it any better if you do it right.*

The world exploded differently.

There was still pain, sharper pain in a way, but it was mixed with an even sharper feeling, that was totally unfamiliar. Stefan was sucking his blood out hard, and holding him in place, too, or Matt might have fallen right off the bed. He was pierced to the soul. But somehow that was what he wanted, and all he could think was that he wanted to give more even than he was giving. He didn't want to stop giving and he was aware, vaguely, of the feeling of not being able to breathe. He knew he was flying, and then soaring, and then everything went still, and he writhed like a victim on a sacrificial altar, pierced by a thousand little vampire teeth. And then a single ray of light pierced him body and soul, and he was giving everything he could, everything he was, pouring himself in a greedy frenzy into the darkness of the vampire. And then darkness took his vision.

## Stefan

Stefan was waiting for the backlash.

He knew it would come. Matt had been in no way ready for this, and, despite his assurances, wouldn't be able to distinguish it from sexual activity. And Stefan had in no way planned to tap Matt's veins. Even in the end, when Matt had proved so stubborn that Stefan's vampire anger had been provoked to teach him a lesson, he hadn't expected Matt to last beyond the first stirrings of pleasure.

But Matt was . . . stubborn. And a born giver, and all he'd been thinking about when Stefan had pierced him was giving. And about Stefan.

And I'm . . . not myself, Stefan, thought, licking his lips and probing for copper sweetness around his canine teeth. It's been so long, and I was so careful with the girls . . .

Through the mindlink that sharing blood always enhanced, he had been swept back through Matt's visions of the old days, Matt's perception of him. And that . . . had been a mistake. The deep, illogical fondness Matt had for him, the—the caring, had been something that Stefan had needed more than he realized it. He'd been shaken by how much . . .

Can't say it? Too wrapped up in human prejudice? Or is it just the lingering cedar-salty edge of testosterone you've drunk? His mind was a chorus of mockery.

It made him angry in turn, and angrier to realize that he'd drunk more of that testosterone-laced blood than he'd ever meant to, even when basking in the sunlight of Matt's feelings for him.

I can say it, he told the voices coldly. He loved me once. I had a friend. And now . . . I've made my friend hate me. When he wakes up, he's going to despise me, and himself, and it isn't going to matter a bit that he's got all his clothes on, and not even a mortal stain except on his neck. He's going to loathe me . . . and himself . . .

That hurt, a lot. Stefan fumbled for his sunglasses, even though the evening light was no threat to his now hyper-sensitive eyes. The room was almost dark, but he could hear Matt's breathing perfectly, changing from the slow regularity of sleep to the lighter, quicker, sounds of a sleeper about to waken. He could turn on the light, leave Matt alone to recover, to—react to this. Maybe that would be kinder.

And certainly a lot more convenient. You really are a coward, aren't you? his mind scoffed. Sometimes his subconscious sounded a lot like Damon.

He already had his strategy in line. Sit, don't stand, but at least a couple of body-lengths away. Out of punching distance, not because Matt could hurt him, but because the automatic lunge that Matt was going to make as soon as he woke would hurt Matt. He might even pass out, from rising too quickly—and from lack of blood, Stefan's mind added guiltily. He hated to admit it, but he'd taken that much. And even if he'd thought Matt would be interested in the slightest in the only panacea—to take some of Stefan's blood in return, as



interested in the slightest in the only panacea—to take some of Stefan's blood in return, as Bonnie so calmly had—well, Matt had been unconscious by the time it had occurred to Stefan had to offer it.

Some friend you are.

Shut up. He'd probably have been sick all over both of us.

His strategy included his expression. Cool, clinical, in keeping with the doctor-images that Matt's own mind had generated. Authoritative. He was planning to use mind-control anyway, to keep Matt on the bed long enough to listen, he might as well implant as deeply as he could the ideas that he was the authority here.

He had his litany down, too. He didn't want to imagine the rage, and bright sickness in Matt's eyes that he'd have to be facing, but he knew what he was going to say, and how he was going to say it.

I told you so was both cruel and necessary.

But then:

"You don't want to talk about it?" Matt wouldn't want to talk about it. "You don't have to. But somewhere, underneath, you're wondering what it all means." And if Matt tried to argue, "If you're not wondering now, then you will be. I was in your mind deep enough to be sure of that."

That would shut him up, all right.

"What it means, then. What it means is that you can never tell what's going to happen with humans and vampires, especially if they have any kind of emotional connection. Like our connection with Elena."

And that, he considered, was truly a master stroke. Because it was true. The only problem was whether he could get it out without choking over Elena's name.

"What it doesn't mean may be more important to you." It would be, since Matt would be finished with him by then.

"It doesn't mean you're gay." That was true enough. So far, as far as he could tell, Matt's sexual response had been confined solely to females. He hadn't found any of the conflict in Matt's mind that the tortured, lonely homosexual teenager always had. The need to conform to the norms of a human society that changed its norms every time a vampire looked, and over every national border a vampire crossed.

"It doesn't mean that anything like this will ever happen again." He was pretty sure of that. Matt's own reaction would ensure it, and unless he fell into the grasp of a truly twisted vampire, Matt's only issue would be how to forget.

"You've probably heard the cliché that most boys go through some kind of a homoerotic phase during adolescence. You're older than they usually are, which is just more proof that this isn't normal for you." And all that was true, too.

"And, finally, if it was anybody's fault, it was mine. I knew what might happen, even though I thought your hatred of me"—*would* Matt be hating him by then—"might prevent it. And I still went ahead."

Because I didn't think you would, a lonely little voice inside Stefan went on. Because I didn't know I needed it so badly.

But that was the end of his litany, and he knew that Matt wouldn't even want to hear that much.

I've made a friend hate me, Stefan thought again, even as the chorus mocked him for wallowing in self pity. He shut it up by summoning all the coldness he could muster, which surprised him. It was, in fact, pretty damn icy cold.

I've made a friend hate me—and I don't care, he thought, and he could practically feel the blizzard blowing around the thought. I'm going to use what made him hate me to save his life.

## Matt

"Hnuh?" Matt came awake with a sort of half-snort, half question. It was dark. He was lying flat on a hard bed, with some kind of lukewarm cloth on his forehead.

"Wha—?" That was a better question. And then memory came back, not all at once, but in puzzle-pieces, and fuzzy ones.

"There's a Coke on the floor beside you. You might want to drink it for the sugar. But it's best not to sit up yet."

That was Stefan. As for how you drank a Coke without sitting up, he didn't want to try to deal with trying to explain to a vampire. Then he found out two more things. There was something, a jacket, propping his head up, and the Coke had a straw. His hands were a little shaky, and a little damp.

"You've got your own refrigerator," he said, more because in the darkness and silence he felt somebody had to say something, than out of any surprise. He was still trying to fit puzzle pieces together.

"I have some juice, too. It's better for you, really. I took more blood than I meant to and it'll help you recover."

Blood . . . yeah. That's what he was doing here. Being a donor. Because Stefan had to fight a monster . . . and dumb Stefan was planning to do it without any preparation. So they'd all offered . . .

"Where're the girls?"

"Meredith took Bonnie down to the car. She was pretty sleepy."

Sleepy. A vampire drinking your blood made you sleepy. Yeah. And it made the vampire . . .

"Hey, you're not drunk anymore."

There was a pause, as if Stefan was waiting for something more, or uncertain about something. Then Stefan said, "No. I told you; it burns off pretty quickly."

"Yeah." Despite the Coke, he was still feeling muddled. The darkness and silence when they weren't talking didn't help. Maybe Stefan didn't remember that humans needed

when they weren't talking didn't help. Maybe Stefan didn't remember that humans needed light. Dumb Stefan, he thought, vaguely but affectionately.

"Why're you . . . all the way over there?" He squinted in the approximate direction of the voice.

"Because . . ." Stefan suddenly sounded much less cool, which made Matt realize how cool Stefan had been sounding in the first place. He could hear, sense Stefan coming a little closer.

"Matt, how much do you actually remember about what happened?" Now he sounded—torn. Sort of sharp, but puzzled.

"Um." Matt tried to think, turning the puzzle pieces around and around. "You mean about how—stupid I was in the beginning?"

"No. I mean about what *happened*."

"I remember . . . it didn't hurt as much as I thought. Not when I figured out how to do it." Cautiously, Matt sat up, feeling the piece of damp cloth fall away from his forehead. He was a little dizzy, but not sick. He could remember the pain and . . .

Suddenly, he was sharply aware of the *and*.

"Jeez."

No wonder his hands were shaky. His *gut* was shaky.

"Stefan?"

"Yes."

"We . . . we . . . didn't . . ."

"No." Stefan sounded much more like himself.

"Oh. Okay."

"Okay? That's all?"

Matt felt defensive. "Well, what do you want me to say? Thanks a lot for drinking my blood?" He made an effort. I appreciate the Coke."

Stefan dropped his face into his hands. "I thought you would hate me."

"Because of . . . but you warned me, didn't you? I figured it was probably like that. Like—like symbiosis or whatever it is. In biology, where the plant makes nectar so the bee gets pollen on it and takes it to the next plant. Right?"

## Stefan

"Well—well . . . not exactly. Vampires and humans aren't natural symbionts. They haven't evolved together and all too often the human ends up—" He realized he should shut up. Telling Matt that humans usually ended up dead or as vampires too was just the opposite of a good strategy.

"Oh," Matt said again. Stefan was too drenched in relief to find any fault with the conversation. He was gradually realizing that Matt didn't have the fears for his masculinity that made overcompensation necessary. Matt knew he was male and straight the way he knew he was human and an omnivore that ate certain foods and didn't eat others. He could force himself to take a bite of grass, or even, if the circumstances were drastic enough and survival was at stake, a bite of human flesh. But he wouldn't worry afterward about becoming a horse or a cannibal for life.

Besides, Matt was a giver. Just as Elena had been. Something inside them compelled them to get involved in any situation, to try to make it better. What Meredith had seen in the naked light of logic, and compelled herself to accept, what Bonnie had been able to follow as an adventure, Matt saw as an act of friendship, and an obligation between friends. Elena had always fulfilled her obligations, even to the undead. Stefan was not human, but inhuman or not, he was Matt's friend.

Matt was talking again. "Look," Matt said. "You didn't want to do this tonight. We made you. And maybe there was something . . . somewhere that made us."

Involuntarily, Stefan glanced up. Yes, he'd had the strong feeling of her presence here tonight, too. Elena. Still scheming from the spirit world. Elena couldn't help him any longer with her blood, but that wouldn't matter to her. She had three humans that she could still influence, and that was fine. It wouldn't matter to her that Meredith got a bit of a shock or that Bonnie might be playing with fire, or even—well, she wouldn't have done anything to destroy his friendship with Matt, but he hadn't known that before.

Matt was going on. "But even though we did force you, you did everything you could for each one of us: three different personalities. No, don't try to figure out if Meredith or Bonnie talked. I could tell. And Meredith is going to be a tough one for a while, isn't she?"

There were some things gentlemen didn't talk about. But . . . "Meredith is tough," Stefan said. "She'll figure things out for herself and then I'll do whatever she wants. Assuming," he added dryly, "I survive past tonight."

"What do you think about your chances—now? Our chances, I mean."

Stefan shook his head, both to convey his opinion about his chances, and his opinion about Matt getting involved. But he tried to think about the question. Matt deserved that.

"I don't know, but a lot better than before," he admitted slowly.

"So if Elena did influence things, it might really make a difference."

It had better, Stefan thought, remembering Meredith and the naked fear in her eyes—in Meredith's eyes!

"Well, there," Matt was saying. "If Elena is behind it all, then it's another of her little victories. Everybody did the best they could. You had to try to fit yourself to each person, and we had to face our fears—"

He paused and they spoke in unison. "—except maybe Bonnie."

Matt snorted. Stefan could sense him looking at him.

"I don't want . . . to lose a friend. My best friend, I guess you could say, even though I don't see much of him," Matt said finally.

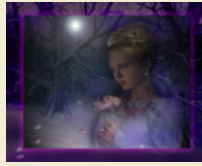
Now that took courage, Stefan thought. Overcoming the stereotypes of the culture you were born into, trying not to be defensive, or to run away.



"I'd be proud to have a best friend like you," he said, and Matt smiled, then ducked his head and started fussing with his shoe, his tolerance for "mushy type stuff" undoubtedly exceeded.

Each of them had done their best. Matt was still his friend. For Meredith, maybe the day would come when she could look at him and not think "inhuman"—or at least not think it immediately and constantly. Maybe Bonnie, the moth, would be able to stay away from the unholy flame. Now, there was something to worry about. He could all too easily see Bonnie taking a walk on the very wild side with Damon. His brother had a soft spot for her already, she knew. But if either of them had a problem, he already knew what he had to do to find a plan for a solution.

Just look up.



The end.