

Thirst

Sitting in one of the many rooms within Nachtmusik, we waited for the next meeting. It wasn't scheduled to start for another hour and if it followed the pattern set by the previous meetings, half the attendees wouldn't be there until thirty minutes after the starting time anyway. Forming a whole new government wasn't turning out to be easy. To be honest, waiting for the meeting didn't really bother me much. It gave us a chance to sit and talk.

"Alright," Billy said, one of his quirky smiles firmly in place, "Here's one of those vampire topics I'd meant to ask about earlier. Tell us about the *hunger*. Is it like they say in all the books and movies? All encompassing, driving, insatiable? Or is that all more BS?"

This particular room was large and boringly plain. It had evidently been a conference room for low level officials. Nothing was particularly comfortable and the lighting wasn't quite sufficient for the space.

"It's there," Jeff began thoughtfully a moment later, "But at the same time it's not. Veronica and I are what some vampires might call 'harbored'. Basically, that means that neither of us have ever starved or been starved to the point where the thirst starts to take control. And that's what we vampires call it: the thirst. We do not allow ourselves to go without blood long enough for it to gain a hold over our instincts or thought processes."

"So it is real?" Billy pressed half asking and half stating. The rest of us watched and listened most attentively. We were just as curious about what the answers might be as Billy obviously was.

"Oh, it's real alright," Jeff stated. "For the harbored, it's not typically much of a factor in our lives. I suppose an equivalent would be you waking up hungry one morning and realizing you could walk into the pantry and get breakfast or you could turn to cannibalism for your morning meal."

"Um," Elaine began, "Let's leave cannibalism and doppelgangers out of the same sentence." She was referring to the fact that the four of us at the table who weren't vampires were all doppelgangers.

"Quite right," Veronica jumped in, "We've lived that experience already. However, that individual was never faced with starvation. At least not so far as the decisions went which led to him becoming a cannibal. He willingly chose that dark path because it led where he wanted to go. Therefore, he does not illustrate the point that Jeff is trying to make."

"Thank you, dear," he said with a quiet smile, "You are of course correct." He turned back to the rest of us. "However, for the soaked, it's an entirely different matter."

"Soaked?" Jenna asked, speaking up for the first time in quite a while, "As in blood soaked?"

"Yes," Jeff agreed sadly, "That's exactly right. There are entire vampire blood lines who soak their new members as part of their indoctrination into the world of the night. Each of them seem to have their own specific rationalization for doing so. It's not something I can easily fathom. To me it seems incredibly barbaric. Hard to believe people would still practice something like that in this day and age. Civilization all around and this sort of thing still happens." He sat there shaking his head for a moment. "Of course, there are still pockets within the shadow world where slavery is still practiced."

"And in the regular world as well. But not quite as many as there were," Billy declared proudly.

"Yes," Jeff said with a pleased grin. "Not quite so many."

After a moment, Jenna asked, “What are some of the rationalizations for doing something like that to someone who’s basically becoming part of your family. That *is* how vampires look at those people they bring over isn’t it?”

“Yes,” Jeff agreed with a small sigh. “It is akin to being family. The closeness of the relationship varies depending on how close one is in line to the maker.” Looking around, he saw a lack of understanding in us non-vampires. “Let me break that down a bit more. The vampire who brings us over into the shadow world is our maker. Within our circles, they are frequently referred to as one’s mother or father.” Seeing nods all around he continued, “Now, if I shared a maker with another vampire, that would make us fairly closely related by vampire standards... rather akin to a distant cousin among humans. Our maker is our closest relation. Our maker’s maker is the next closest. Any *liberi* we create would be as close to us as our makers are.”

“*Liberi*?” I asked.

“Children,” Jeff informed us, “In the vampire sense of the word.”

“Okay,” Jenna said, “I think we understand a bit more about vampiric familial ties. But what about the soaked? What makes someone turn on their own people like that?”

“For the Lombardi line,” Jeff began slowly, “It is a desire to have all of their people live with their instincts brought as close to the surface as possible. They believe this makes them a stronger line of vampires than the others. In fact, they’re a bit egomaniacal in their views on this. At any rate, a Lombardi begins their new life drinking as much blood as possible. So much it makes them sick. Then they drink more and repeat the process. This supposedly shows them the pleasures of drinking one’s fill. However, on their second night they have to begin hunting. Wild animals at first. There will be a few other Lombardi present to make sure they don’t go astray. Eventually, whether they succeed or not at hunting wild animals, they are taken into more inhabited lands. There they are taught to hunt all over again. Humans this time. It’s not until several months of this go by that they are taught how to feed off humans without killing them.”

“That’s... pretty barbaric,” Elaine whispered into the ensuing silence.

“Yes,” Veronica agreed, “And the Lombardi are far from being the worst. Those of the *Caedes* are much worse.”

“How do you get worse than that?” Billy asked.

“Each new *Caedes* is starved for the first week of their new life. Those who aren’t strong enough, die off then and there. Those who survive the week have their closest living relative locked in the room with them.” There followed a shocked silence. “After a week, the thirst would have a very strong hold on a new vampire. The relative wouldn’t stand a chance. It’s their way of severing a *Caedes* new life from the old. That and a dose of psychological crap about being a new species. The hunter and not the prey. That sort of thing. *Caedes* are told from the moment they’re re-born that they are the wolf and humanity are their sheep. Eventually, they’re taught that every other supernatural are sheep as well. Their shocked mind latches onto this dogma like a life preserver. It is easier to believe crap like that than it is to face the realization that you killed and drank dry the person you loved most in the world.”

“Sounds like they’d make great neighbors,” I muttered sarcastically. Everyone ignored me.

“The *Wiedmann* are a collection of smaller blood lines who have gathered together to form a larger, stronger group. They prime new member for a great hunt by taking them out into the country and feeding them only a tiny taste or two of blood for their first three nights. On the fourth night they release a human for the new made vampire to hunt. Sometimes, if the others care to join in, they release several humans. Again, the poor human’s don’t stand a chance.”

“Are there many more soaked clans?” I asked after a moment.

“Vampires don’t call them clans,” Veronica explained, “Instead, they’re referred to as bloodlines or families. And to answer your question... yes. There are many more of them. Some more warped and confused than others.”

“How do you fight against that?” Billy asked, shaking his head.

“The same way you fight anything else,” Jeff told him, “With passion and brainpower. With a stubborn dedication to victory. Once you realize what the alternative is... you realize that winning is the only acceptable option.” There were thoughtful nods around the table.

“What does the thirst mean to you,” Elaine asked quietly.

Veronica sighed, “To me it is a many things. First, it is a mark by which I measure my willpower. It is a gauge of how my body is functioning. How strongly I feel the thirst tells me where my physical reserves stand.” She looked to me like she might say more but instead remained silent.

“For myself,” Jeff said quietly, “It is a fear I have faced. It remains a fear but I have conquered it before and can do so again. The thirst is a beast lurking in quiet shadows waiting for a chance to get out. When I first faced the thirst head-on, I believe I gained a much greater understanding of the Cursed. By Cursed I mean werewolves. The beast within those infected with lycanthropy must be very similar to what the thirst calls in me.”

“It sounds scary,” Elaine murmured.

“Yes,” Veronica agreed softly. “It is something that we have been forced to face because of our nature. However, all creatures have a version of the thirst within them. For them it lays dormant until it is called upon. It is the most primal of survival instincts. That’s one of the reasons sex is often tangled in with the thirst. The urges to feed and to procreate are as primal as you can get. These drives are a part of every living creature’s core identity. For vampires, the sex part is a holdover from our living days as we cannot procreate that way any longer. But the urges and the pleasures both remain. With us, drinking and sex frequently calls one to the other.”

“If you come away from this discussion with anything,” Jeff began where Veronica left off, “Then understand that while these primal demands lay within each of you, for vampires these demands have been pulled much closer to the surface. For the soaked they are much closer still so that they bubble just beneath the veneer of civilization. The soaked use the thirst as an aphrodisiac and an aperitif. They do not mind setting it loose because they do not care about what it will lead them to do. They simply are not concerned about who or what they hurt or the consequences of hurting someone. They glory in their own lack of control and that makes them very dangerous.”

“These... people,” I said, “They sound... confused.” That brought a sharp bark of laughter from Veronica.

“Confused is a start,” she said with a smile. “The cities they hold are out of control places where the strongest do as they will and chaos runs rampant. They are why we don’t do much traveling in the northeast or the west coast. The inmates have taken over the asylum.”

“Seems to me that happened before the vampires ever got there,” I muttered. The humor didn’t take though. Evidently there was something worse than unions and criminal organizations running cities. Worse than democrats even. Not that Uncle David would ever believe that.

We sat in a thoughtful silence for a while. I wondered about Jeff’s words. Specifically when he’d said there was a version of the thirst for each species. Even humans had people who willingly gave in to their dark thirsts or hungers. It was a rather frightening reminder of what depths people were willing to fall to given the wrong circumstances.